

Cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool in EU-Russia relations

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Russia and the European Union, as the former European Commission President Romano Prodi observed, go together like "vodka and caviar".¹ Indeed, Russia, as a country of prevalingly European culture, is committed to universal democratic values, including human rights and freedoms. Russian resources are important for Europe, while Russia looks for European know-how, technologies and investment.

Russian map full of stereotypes

Western public opinion polls show a very cautious attitude from a large number of Europeans towards their giant neighbour. Fantasy maps of Europe drawn by Bulgarian painter Yanko Tsvetkov illustrate prevailing stereotypes about Russia. In his "Europe according to Italians", Russia is represented by huge gray space with the above inscription – GAZPROM.²

It is no secret that national stereotypes are prevalent everywhere because people are first of all concerned about their well-being. Europeans are scared by the imaginary "Russian bear" who might stop fuel supplies in the midst of winter. The European imagination is also excited by media allegations about "Russian mafia" and corruption in the Russian ruling mafia-like elite. In their turn, many people in Russia are more than skeptical about Western "political correctness" and distrust European multicultural tolerance.

Russia-EU relations are subject to being politicized

Since 2008 Russia and the European Union have been negotiating a new agreement on partnership and co-operation; by now twelve negotiation rounds have been conducted. However, progress on this path is sluggish. The future of the visa-free regime also seems to be uncertain. Despite joint declarations a number of

¹ <http://newsru.com/russia/21may2004/prody.html>.

² http://www.corriere.it/cronache/10_settembre_21/tortora-mappe-luoghi-comuni_24ab6bc0-c57b-11df-b273-00144f02aabe.shtml;
<http://alphadesigner.com/mapping-stereotypes/>

EU Member States insist on the principle of consensus, claiming that visa relaxation policy should follow improvements within the Eastern partnership.³

Meanwhile bilateral relations with some EU members are going better than those between Russia and the EU as a whole. There is a visible stagnation in the development of relations and, as the programme director of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) Professor Ivan Timofeev says, “we should think about new targets for our relationship in those areas that are underrated”.⁴

Humanitarian/cultural co-operation as a "soft power" instrument

The EU working languages (English, French, and German) use the word “humanitarian” when they speak of actions against human rights abuses or in case of emergency situations (food supply, medical services, clearing-off battle fields, etc.). We should note that in Russia the expression “humanitarian co-operation” is quite a polysemic term. It covers the area of cultural, inter-civilization relations, dialogue and discussion between civil societies, as well as relations with compatriots abroad.

The new Russian Foreign Policy Doctrine states: "An integral part of the contemporary international politics is ‘soft power’, that is a comprehensive tool kit relying on civil society resources, information and communication, humanitarian and other approaches alternative to classical diplomacy and its skills”.⁵

In the European sense of the word “humanitarian”, our relations are developing successfully. We strengthen co-operation in such fields as migration, fighting organized crime, drug trafficking, financing of terrorist organizations and cybercrime. Russia stands for creating a common European legal space, as well as a unified system of protection of human rights under the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

(<http://www.russianmission.eu/ru/intervyu/vystuplenie-vachizhova-na-slushaniyakh-v-gosudarstvennoi-dume-federalnogo-sobraniya-rossiis>).

The European Union as social and cultural project

There is no doubt that the image of Russia heavily depends on its internal and external politics. Anyhow cultural co-operation is also intended to be an important

³ <http://www.vz.ru/politics/2013/2/25/621884.html>.

⁴ http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=1477.

⁵ <http://news.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d447a0ce9f5a96bdc3.pdf>.

tool for improving the image of Russia abroad and increase its cultural and educational influence.

The Rossotrudnichestvo (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation) worked out the Governmental Action Plan for international humanitarian co-operation and assistance for Russian Science and Culture.⁶ The Plan deals with bilateral initiatives realized through Russian centers of science and culture established abroad. The so-called "crossed years of culture" are also supposed to be an efficient promoter of Russian language and culture. Surely, such tools give a great contribution to cultural co-operation, but bilateral initiatives cannot substitute the "humanitarian/cultural co-operation" with the EU as a whole.

We should keep in mind that the EU is not only an example of economic, political and legal integration but represents an unprecedented social and cultural project. No wonder that Russian politicians favour the European model of integration while developing their own project of Eurasian Union. In the age of the primacy of economics and finance the Europeans emphasize that "culture lies at the heart of human development and civilization. World-wide cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue have become major challenges for a global order based on peace, mutual understanding and respect for shared values, such as the protection and promotion of human rights and the protection of language"; the EU documents state that "the EU is, and must aspire to become even more, an example of a 'soft power' founded on norms and values such as human dignity, solidarity, tolerance, freedom of expression, respect for diversity and intercultural dialogue, values which, provided they are upheld and promoted, can be of inspiration for the world of tomorrow".⁷

In practical terms, the European Commission sets the task to disseminate knowledge of European identity in countries outside the EU with particular emphasis on European values. Culture is seen as a promoter of creativity and innovation. In 2012, the European Commission sets out projects on culture as a new way for democracy and economic growth. The total budget is 22.2 million Euros. The list of countries and territories that have the right to participate in the competition includes countries of the European Partnership, but Russia can take part in the competition as well.⁸

Mutual distrust and parliamentary diplomacy

⁶ http://rs.gov.ru/sites/rs.gov.ru/files/plan_na_sayt_0.pdf.

⁷ "European agenda for culture in a globalizing world" http://eur-lex.europa.eu/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexapi!prod!DocNumber&lg=en&type_doc=COMfinal&an_doc=2007&nu_doc=0242&model=guicheti.

⁸ <http://www.rus-eu-culture.ru/news/2622/?returnto=0&n=1>.

The lack of confidence should be overcome on a mutual basis. Parliamentary diplomacy can contribute to mutual confidence growth. The main institutional tool is the Parliamentary Cooperation Committee (CPS) which involves members of the Russian Federal Assembly and members of the European Parliament. In addition the State Duma factions and deputy groups of the European Parliament exchange their political experience.⁹ EU parliamentary diplomacy acquires particular importance since the European Parliament increases its role in the framework of the Lisbon Treaty. At the same time the representatives of both parliaments accuse each other of all kinds of sins. That is why more positive developments are desirable in the field of Parliament diplomacy.

Public diplomacy and the image of Russia in Europe

In our cultural co-operation an important role belongs to public diplomacy carried on by governments and non-governmental organizations, groups and individuals. The Russian International Affairs Council and the Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Endowment are quite efficient in this field. In 2008, in Brussels, the EU-Russia Centre was set up as independent information and expertise resource with the goal of promoting closer ties between the EU and Russia.¹⁰ The Russian head representative to the EU, Ambassador Chizhov claims that Russian NGOs, including those in opposition to the Russian Government, are taking part in the Brussels dialogue.¹¹

Little knowledge about Russia

A significant role in cultural co-operation belongs to the expert community. My teaching experience in Europe, as well as the experience gathered by many Russian colleagues, shows that, despite the great interest which students usually show, their knowledge of Russia is far from being complete. For improving the image of Russia, the Federal Government also adopted a package of measures named the Russian Language Program for 2011-2015.¹²

The promotion of the Russian language is important in itself, but that is not enough. The image of Russia is highly dependent on how familiar Europeans, and above all, European youth are with Russian history, culture and politics. For accomplishing this task there should be a more dynamic presence of Russian scientists, teachers and experts in the European educational space. That can be facilitated by online chats and distance teaching.

⁹ <http://www.russianmission.eu/en/node/112>.

¹⁰ <http://www.eu-russiacentre.org/we>.

¹¹ <http://www.russianmission.eu/ru/intervyu/vystuplenie-vachizhova-na-slushaniyakh-v-gosudarstvennoi-dume-federalnogo-sobraniya-rossiis>.

¹² <http://rs.gov.ru/taxonomy/term/184>.

One of the soft power tools is educational exchange. The so-called Bologna Process represents a quite successful example. In 2006 the European Studies Institute was established at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. It is a joint Russia-EU project. The main objective of the European Studies Institute is to assist in promoting partnership and co-operation between Russia and the EU, exchanging ideas and overcoming differences caused by the specific cultural gap. The Institute offers to Russian civil servants and people from the business sector post-university training and retraining programmes in EU and Russian law, politics, economics, diplomacy, etc. The Institute is an example of the implementation of a new forward-looking approach to co-operation between Russia and the EU based on equitability and mutual benefit. The spirit of true partnership permeates the entire teaching process as the Institute employs top lecturers from renowned universities and research centres.

How to bring Russia and Europe together?

Alongside genuine exchange of ideas intercultural dialogue needs more discussion on joint initiatives. An example of such teamwork is the exchange program called “Europe through the eyes of Russians, Russia through the eyes of Europeans,” promoted by Vladimir Tarnopolski, a well-known composer and professor of music at the Moscow Conservatory. This project received EU sponsorship and the support of cultural centres and educational institutions in France, UK, Italy, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Austria, Bulgaria, and Latvia. A group of nine European composers wrote music related to Russia, its culture and history, while the same number of Russian composers dedicated their compositions to nine European countries in order to “bring together Europe and Russia”.¹³

With a due reciprocal initiative, Russia could take part in a number of cultural events in the European Union. For example, the Europeans are planning special events dedicated to agrarian communities’ heritage.¹⁴ Russia is rich in folklore to share with Europe. There are a lot of other cultural events offering space for co-operation.

The regions of the Russian Federation are taking an active part in promoting humanitarian cultural co-operation programmes. Heads of the Russian regional authorities gathered in Moscow in November 2012 discussed regional activities aimed at developing their relations with 35 countries.¹⁵

EU public diplomacy is well represented in the field of regional co-operation. In recent years the EU delegation to Russia has been promoting the “Day of Europe” in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan and Arkhangelsk. There are meetings and

¹³ http://www.cmm.ru/03archive/press/reviews/2011_March_14_nezavisimaya.pdf.

¹⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/culture/documents/page35_brochureculture_en.pdf.

¹⁵ <http://rs.gov.ru/node/34920>.

discussions designed to open new opportunities for Russian companies to participate in scientific research programmes of the European Union. In 2010, the EU Delegation to Russia, together with diplomats from several European embassies, launched the “European Schools” project in order to discuss feasible scenarios of European integration. The programme started in Kazan.¹⁶

The developments of Russia- EU relations belong to the global interdependence agenda. That’s why it seems that constructive partnership with countries included in the European Neighborhood Policy and in the Eastern Partnership programme as well as qualitative improvements of Russia-US relations should be an important precondition for successful advancement in the Russia-EU co-operation. In this context cultural co-operation as an important “soft power” tool goes to the forefront as one of the priorities of Russian foreign policy and diplomacy. It is clear that advancement in this direction requires considerable efforts, political will and, last but not least, adequate funding.

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¹⁶ <http://www.antat.ru/index.shtml?1631>.