

Russia, the West and the Rest: Foreign Soft Power in Ukraine

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As one of the key countries in the new Eastern Europe, Ukraine is, in many ways, typical of the region.

The region including Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and perhaps Russia, the new Eastern Europe, is not a popular subject to study these days. The region has not had much influence on global policy since the end of the Cold War, and, in addition, the political processes taking place in Eastern Europe are of little interest from a theoretical point of view. Despite this, a number of important theoretical and practical issues can be identified in the region, including the existence of an identity crisis, an issue that is commonplace in academic papers and media articles about the region.

With regard to the political and cultural situation in the region, the concept of soft power¹ is highly relevant..²

On the whole, Ukraine identifies very strongly with European foreign policy.³ However, within society, the situation is quite different. Ukrainian society is divided into two main communities: the Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking populations, in broad terms. More precisely, there are two rather small core communities and a huge grey zone between them.

It is not surprising that the Russian-speaking community perceives itself as a minority, but it is even more interesting that this perception is shared by the Ukrainian-speaking majority. Both groups feel that they are facing an existential threat.

One of the clearest indicators of this is the ongoing discourse on issues of information security, which is rife with paranoia. In Ukraine, the notion of information security concerns the mass media, particularly television, not the security of IT systems like in Western countries.

Since 1991, but particularly since the Orange Revolution of 2004, public institutions in Ukraine have been weak and dysfunctional, which is partly the result of a conscious strategy on the part of the Ukrainian establishment. The country is still rather closed, as little as 32 per cent of the population have passports for travelling abroad, and only 12 per cent have been to the EU since 2008, while some 25 per cent have visited the CIS, mostly Russia, during this period.⁴ Only a small percentage of Ukrainians speak English.

Nonetheless, Ukrainians enjoy relatively free access to information from abroad. Citizens of the United States, European Union countries, Russia, and several others can visit Ukraine without a visa. Ukraine's economy is open and export-oriented.⁵

In Ukraine, there are five main soft-power actors, including Russia, the European Union, and some European countries, particularly Poland, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and others, as well

¹ Joseph Nye, *The Future of Power* (PublicAffairs, reprint edition, 2011).

² It should be noted that, in Russia, the concept of soft power is generally understood to be quite different from Nye's understand. In Russia, it is closer to the concept of political warfare, or propaganda, or, more precisely, the "active measures" (*aktivnye meropriyatiya*) that were widely used during the Cold War. See the Concept of Russian Foreign Policy 2013, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/6D84DDEDEDBF7DA644257B160051BF7E.

³ Kateryna Shinkaruk, *Formuvannya zovnishnopolitychnoi identychnosti Ukrainy*, Kyiv, 2011.

⁴ *Specproekt Ukrainy – hto my*,

http://www.ratinggroup.com.ua/products/politic/?action=search&filter=0&ub_themes=&ub_types=30&type_ub_types=in&type_ub_themes=in.

⁵ <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/ukraine/indicators>

as the United States, China, Turkey, and several Middle Eastern countries. Someday soon, India, Brazil, and Japan may join this group.

We are trying to analyse the soft power that these players wield according to the following scheme: the main message and special features or milieu, the main channels or instruments, and the infrastructure that maintains this power. This scheme allows us to demonstrate the main features of the relevant country's soft power.

In the below analyses of soft power, "the message" for each country is the author's interpretation while "the milieu" refers to features of the Ukrainian context in which each country's soft power is exercised.

Russian Soft Power⁶

The message

We Russians have had a glorious past, we were great, and this is the main reason why we are great today.

The milieu

Russian soft power is a special case. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which could be seen as simply a new formulation of the former Russian Empire, Ukraine and Russia have been competing for political, economic and cultural resources.

In order to understand Russian soft power in Ukraine, the following must be kept in mind: Russian émigré thinkers Ivan Illin,⁷ and others, had a significant impact in terms of shifting the Russian perception of Ukraine from the Soviet point of view, when Ukraine was considered as a separate but brotherly nation to that of the early-20th-century Empire, when Ukraine was regarded as an inherent part of a unified Russian nation.

Ukraine's Russian-speaking population are receptive to Russia's cultural influence and form a crucial target group for Russian soft power. In 2012, Russian President Vladimir Putin personally signed an article in which he argued that the Russian language and Russian culture are powerful forces for promoting Russia in global markets, particularly in the former Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe.⁸ For the older generations throughout the CIS, Russian remains the main lingua franca, functioning in a similar fashion to English in much of the rest of the world.

Instruments and infrastructure

Nowadays, Russia's popular-culture industry, show business, and the media, particularly television channels like RTV, NTV, First Channel, and so on, are very important levers in terms of soft power.

The Russkii mir (Russian World)⁹ Foundation, which was established by President Vladimir Putin in 2007 and is currently headed up by Vyacheslav Nikonov,¹⁰ and the Russian Co-operation

⁶ For a deeper understanding of Russian soft power in Ukraine, see Alex Bogomolov, Oleksandr Lytvynenko, "A Ghost in the Mirror: Russian Soft Power in Ukraine", <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/181667>, 28/10/2012.

⁷ Fionna Hill, Clifford G. Giddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Brookings Focus Book, 2012).

⁸ "Rossiya i menyayushchiysya mir", <http://putin2012.ru/#article-7>.

⁹ Russkii mir, <http://www.russkiymir.ru/russkiymir/en/>.

¹⁰ It is interesting that Nikonov is the grandson of Molotov, Stalin's Foreign Minister.

Agency Rossotrudnichestvo¹¹ support Russia's soft-power activities abroad. The so-called Runet, the Russian-language segment of the Internet, is becoming an increasingly influential environment and tool for Russia's soft power.

Both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are still efficient levers for Russian soft power.

The Russian Embassy in Kyiv plays quite an important role in Russian soft power. Since 2010, the Embassy has been organizing so-called Embassy Evenings that, among other cultural and political events, are particularly influential. Russian cultural diplomacy is rather strong in Ukraine.

In recent years, Russians have managed to create a comparatively small but loud pro-Russian faction that is sufficiently active in the Ukrainian expert and journalist communities. In Ukraine, particularly in its eastern and southern parts, there is quite a large network of pro-Russian political and cultural NGOs, from neo-Cossacks to Russian cultural groups.

There is an interesting Russian media project in Ukraine, polit.ua, a branch of the Russian liberal media polit.ru, that is worth noting. This website has close ties to Rinat Akhmetov's (the richest businessman in Ukraine) Foundation for the Development of Ukraine.

In Crimea, there are about 10 universities that are branches of prominent Russian universities.

In recent years, new Russian restaurants, e.g., *pirogovye* (pie restaurants), have opened in Kyiv and Ukraine's other main cities.

Soft Power of the European Union and other European countries

The message

Heaven on Earth not only exists, but you (Ukraine) can join it.¹² Continued EU expansion is vital for Ukraine's future. The message gleaned from the fact that many former socialist countries have already joined the EU is, "They managed to do it, why can't we?"

The milieu

For most Ukrainians, Europe, even Poland and the Czech Republic are an alien world.¹³ Everything and everybody, even the Ukrainians who have left for Europe, are different there. Hence, foreign countries are attractive and pose a threat at the same time.

English is a language of modern culture and success. However, only a small portion of Ukrainians have sufficient command of English good enough to understand television programmes or to read articles on the Internet.

Instruments and infrastructure

¹¹ "O Rossotrudnichestve", <http://rs.gov.ru/node/28132>.

¹² This slogan for joining the European Union was very popular from 1991 through 2005. The idea was that the entire country of Ukraine should emigrate to the EU. While naive, this idea is still shared by many influential Ukrainian politicians and intellectuals.

¹³ Galina Yavorska, Oleksandr Bogomolov, *Nepevnyi ob'ekt bajannya. Yevropa v Ukraiskomu politychnomu dyskursi*, Kyiv, 2010.

As a direct source of information, European media are not particularly important in terms of influencing Ukrainian public opinion. However, the BBC, CNN, and others are the most essential sources of international information for the Ukrainian media and elites.

For Western Ukraine, people going to the EU to work are a crucial factor for European soft power.

Both European and American universities are the most prestigious destination for education.

European cities such as London, Paris, Berlin, and others are preferable travel destinations for Ukraine's upper- and middle-class families. For many reasons, particularly economic, London is a vital world capital for Ukraine, as well as for Russia.

For Kyiv, Odesa, Lviv, Donetsk and Ukraine's other main cities, activities carried out by European embassies are significant. For example, European embassies have been organizing cultural events such as the French Spring. There is a special Europe Day, which has become a flagship event in late May.

Euro 2012, the European Football Championship in 2012, was a breakthrough event, where many Ukrainians saw ordinary Europeans in their cities.

Many European states have set up special cultural centres in Ukraine, including the UK's British Council, Germany's Goethe Institute, the Polish Institute, etc.

Big Ukrainian businesses are trying to implement European corporate culture and use European business facilities such as the London or Warsaw stock exchange, among other things.

One of the most interesting levers of European soft power is the Catholic Church and its Ukrainian branch, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church.

Most Ukrainian NGOs adhere to a pro-European position, particularly of the majority of analytical and expert centres.

Last but not least, European integration has been proclaimed the official strategy of Ukraine.

US soft power

The message

The American Dream is alive: a democratic and liberal society of equal opportunities exists.

The milieu

English as a language of success and modern international culture and business was discussed in the previous section above.

The United States is world's only superpower and a country with a prominent influence on European political and economic processes. The United States' military, economic, and cultural superiority is a strong and robust basis for its soft power in the modern world.

Instruments and infrastructure

The US Embassy in Kyiv is an important lever for US soft power. Its activities, particularly among Ukrainian elites, are a significant factor in the political process. US cultural diplomacy is a flexible and important tool of US soft power.

Hollywood film production is another pivotal mechanism of American soft power in the modern world. From 60 per cent to 90 per cent of the movies in Ukrainian cinemas are produced in the United States.¹⁴

American donor organizations have played a crucial role in Ukraine's development, particularly with respect to civil society. Since 1992, USAID alone has granted more than \$1.7 billion to Ukraine.¹⁵ There are a few other donor organizations providing grants to Ukrainian NGOs. At the bottom, Ukrainian civil society and intellectuals consider themselves Western-oriented people.

It is rather interesting that the vast majority of fast-food chains in Ukraine are American ones. The first and maybe the most significant example is McDonald's.

Soft power of other countries

Among other countries, China has the largest potential to use soft power in Ukraine. Its rapid development; ancient and rich culture; and economic, political, and military power shape the foundation for its effective use of soft power. In Ukraine, there is a so-called Chinese myth that represents China as a country with a unique and extremely rich culture that could be an alternative to European civilization.

China is becoming an important source of foreign direct investment in Ukraine. Chains of Chinese restaurants can be found in Ukraine's biggest cities.

In addition, Brazil, India, Japan, Turkey, and others also have some potential to exercise soft power in Ukraine.

Conclusions

Since Ukraine became an independent country in 1991, there have been many debates concerning its geopolitical choices. Politicians, academics, and journalists have been arguing that Ukraine must choose either Europe or Russia as its main direction for development. Though this discourse has been going on for more than 20 years, no choice has yet been made.

Today, this discussion is again heating up, but similar situations were observed in Ukraine's recent history, e.g., in 1992-1994, 2002-2004, and so on. On those occasions, a choice seemed to have been made, but a few years later it became clear that Ukraine was still in the grey zone between Russia and the West (the EU). The Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine is apparently the best real solution for today.

This problem may be artificial, and perhaps the real choice was already made in 1991, when Ukraine became independent. A much more serious and even a pivotal issue is finding a balance of influences in Ukraine. Such a balance is a precondition for stability, security, and prosperity in Ukraine. And foreign soft power plays a key role in shaping and maintaining this balance. However, that is the subject of a different article.

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¹⁴ V. Bakalchuk, *Ukrainskiy kinoprokat. Stan ta perspektivy rozvytku*, <http://old.niss.gov.ua/Monitor/oktober08/3.htm>.

¹⁵ For USAID, see: <http://ukraine.usaid.gov/content/about-usaid-en>.

