

DISCUSSION PAPER

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Introduction

With the rise of globalisation and rapid technological developments, nation branding has become a key success factor in the international arena. States have increasingly emphasised the development of their soft power capabilities. The concept of soft power – to attract, rather than coerce, another state to achieve foreign policy objectives – has been predominantly associated with liberal democratic states. Gradually, the growing importance of soft power has persuaded authoritarian governments, such as those in Russia and China, to adopt soft-power strategies in order to achieve their foreign policy goals. However, despite efforts to cultivate a softer image abroad, the authoritarian character and aggressive foreign policies of Moscow and Beijing have limited their soft power capabilities. Nevertheless, as populism continues to rise around the world, the appeal of authoritarianism has increased, creating a more receptive audience for Chinese and Russian soft power.

Soft Power: A General Overview

Soft power may be defined as the attainment of desired goals by attracting another state rather than coercing it by threats. Its power lies in a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. Conversely, hard power depends upon a country's ability to force others through coercion and payment. Although the concept of soft power was first introduced by international relations scholar Joseph Nye in the late 1980s, in practice, it has been in use throughout history (Nye, 1990).

Unlike hard power, soft power's use is not only limited to states. International institutions, non-governmental organisations, and enterprises also deploy soft power to further their respective interests. Nye notes that the soft power of the United States is predominantly driven by civil organisations such as Hollywood and universities, rather than the state itself (2013). Hollywood productions attract audiences throughout the world and increase positive perception towards the American way of life. Moreover, American universities, with their outstanding reputation, attract academics and students from all around the globe. These soft power tools have contributed to the US' leading position on the world stage.

Public diplomacy, foreign aid, media, cultural institutions, and schools also contribute to soft power. Governments utilise these aspects of soft power to extend their visibility abroad, aiming to attract positive attention from governments and societies the world over. However, the establishment of reliable soft power is a long and expensive process. For example, during the 19th century, many of the leading European powers such as France, Germany, and Italy opened primary and secondary schools in major cities of the Ottoman Empire. These schools sought to enrol both Christian and Muslim subjects of the Ottoman provinces, in part, to attract students to their way of life and enhance their respective images amongst the population.

Although these schools were effective in increasing the attractiveness and popularity of the European

powers among their students and families, as political issues and conflict between the Ottoman Empire and its European counterparts erupted, their contribution to soft power diminished. Soft power initiatives can be disrupted by political issues economic crises, as well as inter-state conflict. Another example of state action that disrupted soft power influence was the US' 2003 intervention in Iraq. Although there was no major change in the instruments of American soft power, the military intervention diminished the US' attractiveness in Arab and Muslim countries as it was regarded as an aggressor.

Nye argues that a country's soft power is dependent on three sources: its culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 1990). Although every nation's culture has some values that may be attractive to other nations, democratic countries have advantages in the soft power race as their political values and foreign policies are usually considered less aggressive and threatening. However, as demonstrated by the US invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, even democratic countries may experience setbacks in their soft power due consequences resulting from foreign policy. Nonetheless, democratic countries remain on top of soft power rankings. China and Russia, countries with authoritarian governments, are listed as 27th and 30th respectively in Portland's Soft Power 30 Report. As small countries such as Switzerland, Sweden, and the Netherlands are among the top 10, it should be noted that there is no direct correlation between a country's soft power and hard power, such as in the economic and military domains (Mcclory, 2018).

The interconnectedness that has come with technological developments and free trade has brought more attention to soft power. The perception of other nations has become more important for a country's international reputation. In recent years even countries which take a realpolitik approach to international relations have given more attention to their soft power in attempt to amplify their attractiveness. Even as Russian power has once again been on the ascent and China's rapid economic development in the past decade has made it the second-largest economy in the world, both have placed special emphasis on soft power. However, due in large part to their authoritarian outlooks, their understanding and use of soft power have differed from its traditional understanding conceptualised by Nye.

Russia: 'Protector of Russians and Christian Europe'

The rise of American and European influence with the 'Colour Revolutions' in post-Soviet spaces has demonstrated to Moscow the importance of soft power. Growing Western influence in former Soviet countries, such as Ukraine and Georgia, which Russia deems as part of its sphere of influence, has given rise to fears in Moscow of being encircled by the West. To balance this perceived threat, Russia has begun to resort to soft power combined with traditional methods in its foreign policy.

In 2010, Russia included soft power in its Foreign Policy Concept as a tool to achieve its foreign policy objectives. In the 2016 version of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, soft power was explained as follows: "In addition to traditional methods of diplomacy, 'soft power' has become an integral part of efforts to achieve foreign policy objectives. This primarily includes the tools offered by civil society, as well as various methods and technologies – from information and communication to humanitarian and other types" (Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, 2016).

Russia has employed pop-culture, television series,

media outlets, and the Russian Orthodox Church as a means to developing its soft power capabilities, particularly in the post-Soviet geography (Hill, 2006; Petro, 2015). In this way, Moscow aims to safeguard its dominant position in the region. Although these soft power initiatives have been successful in gaining the support of Russian-speaking minorities and some Slavic populations in countries such as Serbia, they have been largely ineffective in winning over a wider audience. One explanation is that Russia is perceived as an aggressive power with hegemonic ambitions in the region. Russia's relations with these countries is highly vertical, where Russia views itself at the top of the hierarchy. Russia's recent military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 served to highlight these concerns, which in turn have further hindered its soft power capabilities.

In the Balkans, one of the most important pillars of Russia's great power identity, Moscow faces a similar dilemma. The region's predominantly Slavic Orthodox countries, such as Serbia and Bulgaria, have traditionally retained close relations with Russia. In these states public perception toward Russia is highly favourable, based in part on a shared sense of ethnoreligious identity. However, Moscow's aggressive opposition to NATO enlargement in the region has caused setbacks in its influence. For example, since its independence in 2006, Montenegro has received large amounts of Russian investment and has become one of the top destinations for Russian tourists (Tomovic, 2016, 2018). These factors, together with historical ethnoreligious ties, have gained Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, high popularity in Montenegrin society. However, Russia's strong objection to Montenegro's NATO membership, which culminated in support for a coup attempt in 2016, caused ruptures between the two countries (Gadzo, 2019).

It is worth noting that, after the coup attempt, the Montenegrin government began to take measures to control the influence of Russia and its allies in the country. The recent law on religious property, which aims to weaken the Serbian Orthodox Church by transferring most of its property to the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, is an example of how this is being pursued via policy mechanisms (Keşvelioğlu,, 2020b). The Serbian Orthodox Church, which has close relations with its counterpart in Moscow, has traditionally been the staunchest supporter of Russia, both in Serbia and in Montenegro. The Montenegrin Orthodox Church, however, has been aligned with the Montenegrin state.

Russia's use of soft power is not limited to the post-Soviet or Slavic geography. In recent years, Moscow has been concentrating on its soft power tools to expand its visibility in the West. One of the most important aspects of Russia's soft power strategy has been its attempt to cultivate relationships with both the European far-left and far-right based on common opposition to liberalism. Şener Aktürk argues that the left's relations with Moscow can largely be identified with their ideological path dependence because of Russia's Communist Soviet past (Aktürk, 2019). On the other hand, for the European far-right, Russia, and President Putin in particular, has been seen as the protector of European culture against globalisation and immigration.

The German political party Die Linke offers an example of Russia's close relations with the European radical left. Recently, Die Linke called for the dissolution of NATO and the formation of a new European security organisation, which would also include Russia (Sanders, 2017). Contrary to the German government and the Western world in general, Die Linke also supported Russia's annexation of Crimea (Shekhovtsov, 2015). Moreover, its leaders visited the Russian-supported, self-proclaimed Donetsk Republic in Ukraine and delivered humanitarian aid to Russian separatists in the region.

An example of the European radical right's close relations with Russia is the French National Rally. It was revealed that the party received a 9 million Euro loan from the Kremlin-affiliated First Czech Russian Bank, which is headquartered in Moscow (Gatehouse, 2017). National Rally's president, Marine Le Pen, who has

praised Russian President Putin as the saviour of European Christian Heritage (Polyakova, 2014), also sided with Russia in the Ukraine crisis. She stated that Ukraine was a consequence of the West's new Cold War against Russia (Pretince, 2014).

It is considered that the main audience of Russian soft power in the West are Eurosceptic far-right and far-left groups. Moscow aims to form close relations with these groups and persuade them to act in ways that protect Russian interests in Western political circles. Moreover, another aim of Russia is to divide public opinion in the West and to increase societal polarisation. This plan, in turn, may lead to increased factionalism in European politics and inhibit Europe from standing against Russia collectively.

Russian media outlets such as RT and Sputnik are considered to be key tools in Russia's soft power arsenal. These media organisations, which have more than 30 foreign language editions, are some of the most vocal propagators of the Russian worldview. They are also useful in terms of diverting public opinion in favour of Russia in international matters. These Russian media outlets are seen as an alternative to European mainstream media, which is highly criticised by both far-left and far-right segments of European society.

China: 'A Responsible Global Power?'

From 1980 to 2019, China's GDP per capita rose from approximately $200 to roughly $10,000 (China / The World Bank Data, n.d.). During this period, the concepts of 'peaceful coexistence' and 'peaceful rise' have defined Beijing's foreign policy. In order to continue receiving foreign investment and to maintain stability, China has followed a careful foreign policy aimed at preventing crises that would harm its international reputation and outlook.

It could be argued that this strategy represents an attempt to extend influence via soft power as it seeks to increase China's attractiveness as an international actor and fend off claims that China's rise would be a threat to international stability. At the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, the country's then-leader, Hu Jintao, stressed the importance of soft power for China's global posture. He said, 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will definitely be accompanied by the thriving of Chinese culture' (Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 17th Party Congress, 2007). Chinese officials have often expressed that China's rise would be a stabilising factor rather than a threat to international peace, drawing on the country's Confucian culture, which is often associated with seeking to cultivate a political culture based on peace and harmony.

On the other hand, in the last decade, as China has become the second-largest economy in the world, it has begun to follow a more assertive foreign policy. While continuing its discourse of peaceful coexistence, Beijing has become more active in international issues and has expanded its international footprint, particularly in Asia and Africa. In addition to opening its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 (Headley, 2018), Beijing has followed a more aggressive strategy in disputed areas of the South China Sea (Why Is the South China Sea Contentious?, 2016). China has also strengthened its military presence in the region by establishing military bases on disputed islands.

China's efforts to become an attractive Great Power continue. In 2014, Beijing started the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a massive development programme aimed at enhancing trade and connectivity, particularly in Eurasia, through massive infrastructure projects (Kommenda & Kuo, 2018). While these projects enhance China's international relations, they also help

Chinese firms develop their international reach. The initiative also serves China's peaceful coexistence discourse as it presents the country as a responsible international actor, integrating the developing world into international trade. Moreover, another purpose of the initiative is to increase connectivity among societies with tourist, student, and professional exchanges to allow for the sharing of common knowledge and the promotion of understanding (Baltensperger & Dadush, 2019). While primarily an economic project, the BRI is crucial for China's soft power strategy as it facilitates Beijing's efforts to demonstrate the success of its unique model of economic development.

Confucius Institutes represent another aspect of China's strategy to develop its soft power (Przychodniak, 2019). These institutes are non-profit organisations administered by China's Ministry of Education, which aim to promote Chinese language, art, literature, and culture. They are mainly located on university campuses and run in coordination with host universities. Confucius Institutes, which share similarities with the United Kingdom's British Councils, Germany's Goethe Institutes, and Turkey's Yunus Emre Institutes, have more than 500 offices worldwide: 135 in Asia, 61 in Africa, 138 in America, 187 in Europe, and 20 in Oceania. Beijing is planning to raise this number to 1,000 in the near future (Jakhar, 2019). These institutions have been an important tool for China to expand its visibility in academic and intellectual circles around the world, especially in the West.

Similar to Russia, international media outlets have also been a useful tool for China to exert soft power. Media organisations such as Xinhua, CGTN, China Daily, and China Radio International, which are controlled by the Chinese state, have various foreign language services throughout the world. These outlets present Beijing's point of view on key issues and aim to appeal to an international audience.

In recent years, the Chinese film industry has also become a source of Beijing's soft power projection as it has begun to expand its viewership internationally. Recent examples include movies such as Operation Red Sea, in which the Chinese Liberation Army evacuates 600 Chinese civilians from Yemen during the civil war, thereby casting Beijing in a positive light, something not often seen in Hollywood productions.

Authoritarian Soft Power: Does it Work?

Despite their differences, Russia and China's deployment of soft power shares one key point in common, namely that they both take a top-down, state centric approach. Since civil society is not as vibrant or effective as it is in the West, its contribution to soft power is limited. As noted by Nye, the West's soft power lies mainly outside the state's direct control and is largely driven by civil society (1990). Hence, in the absence of a vibrant civil society, the basis of Russian and Chinese soft power strategy is state propaganda, which arguably weakens its impact.

Russian and Chinese soft power initiatives have not been, for the most part, fruitful in attracting large societal buy-in overseas. Furthermore, its impact is largely limited to segments of society that share ideological affinities with their respective outlooks. Besides the propagandistic nature of their soft power strategy, their authoritarian character, and often aggressive foreign policies also negatively affected their soft power capabilities. These two countries have poor human rights records, and they restrict civil society and political movements (Vásquez & Porčnik, 2019). While such

Comparison of Favourable Public Opinion Towards Russia, China, the United States and the European Union (%)

	Russia (Huang & Cha, 2020)	**China** (Silver et al., 2019)	**United States** (Wike et al., 2020)	**European Union** (Devlin, 2019)
Russia	-	N/A	29	**37**
China	N/A	-	N/A	N/A
United States	18	26	-	**51**
Canada	30	27	51	**69**
Mexico	39	**50**	36	45
Brazil	34	51	**56**	47
Argentina	36	**47**	41	43
United Kingdom	26	38	**57**	54
France	33	33	48	**51**
Germany	35	34	39	**69**
Italy	43	37	**62**	58
Sweden	12	25	45	**72**
Hungary	35	40	66	**67**
Bulgaria	73	55	57	**77**
Greece	**58**	51	54	53
Turkey	**39**	37	20	34
Ukraine	32	57	73	**79**
Israel	45	66	**83**	51
Lebanon	43	**68**	39	61
Tunisia	42	**63**	33	50
Nigeria	41	**70**	62	53
Kenya	38	58	**60**	52
South Africa	33	46	**50**	42
India	49	23	**60**	N/A
Indonesia	39	36	42	**45**
Philippines	56	42	**80**	70
South Korea	42	34	77	**80**
Japan	25	14	**68**	60
Australia	26	36	50	**58**
	2	5	9	12

Figure 1 – Source: Pew Research Center (pewresearch.org), 2019-2020

movements are heavily pressured in Russia, China is governed by a one-party rule with hardly any room for opposition. Discrimination against minorities, such as China's crackdown on Uighurs, has also drawn a reaction from the international community, and this has, in turn, been consequential for China's soft power. Moreover, as can be observed in Russia's recent intervention in Ukraine and Georgia, and China's actions in the South China Sea, their foreign policies are primarily based on coercion. Thus, due to their aggressive foreign policy strategies, Russia and China are generally considered coercive rather than attractive actors.

However, it should be noted that as an authoritarian tide rises around the world, Russia and China's chance of increasing the impact of their soft power strategy is likewise rising. In recent years, Russia and China have been increasingly admired by governments with authoritarian tendencies and have been commenced to be regarded as alternatives to the US and the EU. For example, although Hungary is a member of NATO and the EU, and Serbia is an aspiring EU candidate, their relationships with Russia and China have made rapid progress in recent years (Keşvelioğlu, 2020a; Lee, 2019). While the governments of these countries have been criticised by the West because of their authoritarian leanings, they have gained the political and economic support of Russia and China.

This trend is also visible in segments of society which are experiencing setbacks in their living standards due to the perception that the liberal order has become the main cause of their economic and social grievances. In France, the pro-Russian populist National Rally's leader Marine Le Pen won 33.9% of the vote and came in second in the presidential election of 2017 (Clarke & Holder, 2017). Moreover, in the 2013 German federal elections, Die Linke became the main opposition by gaining 8.6% of the vote after CDU/CSU and SPD formed a coalition (Official Provisional Result of the 2013 Bundestag Election, 2013). In 2015, during the Greek Debt Crisis and resultant social unrest, the far-left Syriza, which has close relations with Russia, won national elections and ruled the country until 2019 (Johnson & Trindle, 2015). Although Greece is a long time NATO and EU member, Russia is considered the most favourable international actor by Greek society (Figure 1). This favourable view of Russia can in part be linked to the historic Orthodox Christian ties between the two societies. However, the Greek public also distrusts the West, based on the view that the West has abandoned Athens vis-à-vis its maritime problems and the Cyprus issue against its main competitor and NATO ally, Turkey.

The main difference between Russia and China's soft power is that, while Russia's soft power relies on political tools, China mostly relies on economic influence. The main explanation for this is that Russia's economic resources are limited in comparison with China. Russia also has more historical, cultural and political linkages with many countries in which it seeks to enhance its attractiveness. For its part, China is a new actor in the international arena with a political system that does not match the popularity of liberal democracies. China thus heavily relies on its economic resources in its soft power strategy.

Who wants to be like Russia and China? The answer to this question displays the limits of Russian and Chinese soft power strategies. The five countries that have the most favourable opinion towards Beijing are geographically distant from China and have relations based primarily based on economic ties, while a favourable opinion towards China is low in its vicinity. Correspondingly, only Greece and Turkey exhibit strong favourability towards Russia and, as explained above, this is largely due to mistrust in the US and the EU rather than solid bonds with Russia. Overall, unless Moscow and Beijing conduct domestic reforms which would enable civil society to flourish, their state-centred propagandistic soft power strategy will be limited in shaping a genuine and sustainable attraction among large segments of society around the globe.

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