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Russia's Soft Power Agenda and Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Baltic States

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Executive summary: *Russia's soft power agenda and public diplomacy campaigns have raised considerable concerns across the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. This policy memo argues for the importance of assessing the influence of Russia's soft power agenda on minority policymaking in target states. Drawing largely from examples and lessons learned in the Baltic States, it concludes with recommendations for combating Russia's information campaigns.*

Russia's Soft Power Agenda and Public Diplomacy

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of new borders left 25 million ethnic Russians, and 36 million Russian-speakers, who identify Russian as their mother tongue, stranded outside of Russia.ⁱ The protection of the Russian diaspora emerged as a central feature of Russia's foreign policy in the early 1990s culminating in the adoption of an official compatriot policy in 1999. Russia's compatriot policy serves as a justification for Russia's interventions in other countries, legitimizes Russia's status as a global leader, and supports the narrative that Russia is needed and welcomed outside its borders.ⁱⁱ Russia uses "harder" and "softer" mechanisms against former Soviet Republics (FSRs) in the name of ostensibly defending Russian-speakers living there. This has raised considerable security concerns across the region, particularly after Russia's military interventions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. Russia often links the situation of Russian-speakers to other political and economic issues, including trade, energy, citizenship and visa policies, the settlement of borders, and the admission of countries to NATO and the EU.

Russia began to focus more on developing its soft power resources after the color revolutions toppled entrenched regimes and brought to power reform-minded governments in Georgia ("Rose" 2003), Ukraine ("Orange" 2004) and Kyrgyzstan ("Tulip" 2005). These events were a wake-up call for Russian elites, who recognized the need to increase Russia's influence in the post-Soviet region. The entrance of CEE countries into NATO in 1999 and 2004 also necessitated greater attention to the cultivation of soft power resources and public diplomacy throughout the region. Inherent in *soft power* is "an act of persuasion" whereby states make culture, values, or foreign

policies appear more attractive to other states in order to induce favorable behavior.ⁱⁱⁱ Public diplomacy is the means of cultivating and projecting soft power by sending messages to the “people” of another country.^{iv}

Russia’s soft power agenda aims broadly at maximizing the economic benefits of its relationships in CEE, weakening the credibility and moral authority of the EU and NATO, elevating its own model of governance as an attractive alternative to the liberal democratic West, and reducing social cohesion in target states.^v Russia pursues its soft power agenda through the media, cultural initiatives and coordination with NGOs, and has developed institutions of public diplomacy to support its soft power agenda, such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation and Rossotrudnichestvo.^{vi} Russia coordinates its activities and the allocation of funding to minority NGOs in target countries through Coordination Councils of Russian Compatriots, whose leadership is appointed and run through Russian embassies.^{vii} Alongside the cultivation of soft power resources, Russia has also modernized its hard power arsenal, and typically deploys hard and soft power simultaneously in target states. In addition to using military force and threats of military force, Russia also uses its business ties and the energy dependence of other countries to influence policies to its advantage.

Russia’s conceptualization of soft power shares many similarities with Western notions, however, Russia’s application of soft power through public diplomacy differs from Western practices. Russia’s usage is based far less on the notions of “win-win” strategies and persuasion inherent in the original concept, and far more on antagonism and manipulation, especially in FSRs.^{viii} This is evident in the use of disinformation campaigns and the “manufacturing of enemy images” onto target countries,^{ix} with the goal of refuting negative images of Russia and creating a network of friends and organizations that can be used to achieve specific foreign policy goals.^x

The popularity and availability of Russian media in FSRs creates opportunities for Russia to disseminate disinformation, which is then amplified through social media by both trolls and everyday users of Russian social media networks.^{xi} Russia’s use of “hybrid tactics” in Ukraine, which combine military force with information campaigns designed to confuse and misinform the

adversary,^{xii} raised considerable concerns among Baltic elites over whether its own Russian-speakers could be mobilized against the state.^{xiii} Much attention focused on the northeastern region of Estonia and southeastern region of Latvia; areas with large concentrations of Russian-speakers that border Russia.^{xiv}

Russia tries to influence public opinion in Estonia and Latvia through narratives that portray them as neofascist countries and failed states that discriminate against Russian-speakers. Populations are susceptible to Russia's narratives because Russian media is both available and popular among older generations, while social media is an increasingly important source of information for young people.^{xv} Through both the media and the Russkiy Mir Foundation, Russia has supported Russian-speaking parties and politicians, as well as political agendas that run counter to state policies. For example, Russia has provided funding to the Latvian Russian Union (LKS), and has supported demonstrations against the transition to Latvian-only language instruction in minority schools, as well as the failed 2012 referendum to make Russian a second official language.^{xvi} Russia's support for the referendum has been used to justify neo-militant reforms aimed at limiting the participation of pro-Russian forces in Latvian society. These include reforms to make it more difficult for individuals to initiate referendums and the inclusion of a new preamble to the Latvian constitution that defines the "inviolable constitutional core" of the state in ethnic Latvian terms.^{xvii}

Reassessing the Influence of Russia's Soft Power Agenda: The Case for Policymaking

Researchers have predominately used surveys and focus groups to evaluate Russia's ability to attract and mobilize Russian-speakers through its soft power strategies.^{xviii} Russia's inability to reorient Russian-speakers in the Baltic States away from a primary sense of belonging to their resident state, to mobilize large numbers of Russian-speakers around compatriot initiatives, or support for separatism in border regions,^{xix} has led some to declare Russia's soft power agenda a "failure" in these countries.^{xx} Furthermore, surveys commissioned by Ministries of Defense after the annexation of Crimea reveal that a significant portion of Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia

are willing to actively defend their state in the case of an armed attack.^{xxi} On the other hand, Russian-speakers who consume Russian media also express stronger support for Russian narratives and have different worldviews than those who consume media in local languages.

What is missing from existing studies is a consideration of how Russia's soft power agenda affects policymaking toward minorities in target states. Russia's soft power agenda is a key context in which policies affecting Russian-speakers are made.^{xxii} Russia's soft power strategies not only help to set the policy agenda, but arm policymakers with new and persuasive frames that influence policy outcomes. Policymaking is an important field for assessing Russia's influence in target states because minority policies have the potential to affect the claims that Russia can make, and therefore its ability to attract Russian-speakers through its soft power strategies.

Russia's Soft Power Agenda and Policymaking in Latvia

Latvia's recent education and naturalization reforms are useful case studies for demonstrating how Russia's soft power strategies affect policymaking processes. The passage of a bill to end granting non-citizen status to children born in Latvia after January 2020 was preceded by an education reform requiring all secondary schools to teach entirely in Latvian, thus ending the bilingual compromise that had been in place since the late 1990s.

Debates over the education reform, passed in 2018, took place in the context of growing concerns over Russia's ability to coopt Russian-speakers through the concept of "Russkiy Mir," to shape public opinion through the Russian media, and to support opposition movements both politically and financially. Policymakers justified the reform as necessary for combatting Russia's soft power strategies because it would strengthen Latvian language proficiency among minorities and create a common information sphere. However, those opposed to the amendment argued that the reform would serve Russia's soft power agenda of destabilizing interethnic relations, discrediting democratic institutions, and making Latvia less attractive to Russian-speakers.

The 2019 naturalization reform was justified as a mechanism to combat Russia's soft power agenda by making Latvia more attractive to Russian-speakers and promoting their political loyalty, thus mitigating the potential alienation that could result from the education reform. At the same time, nationalist MPs used securitizing frames highlighting the connections between Russian-speakers and Russia to defeat proposals for a more inclusionary reform that would extend to all Russian-speakers born in Latvia after 1991.^{xxiii} As these examples demonstrate, Russia's soft power strategies have been used to justify more inclusionary and exclusionary policies toward Russian-speakers.

Lessons Learned and the Role of the West

The Baltic States are not the only countries susceptible to Russia's public diplomacy campaigns, however, important lessons can be learned from countries that have been on the frontlines of Russia's soft power agenda. While a "Ukraine scenario" is unlikely to play out in the Baltic States because membership in European institutions decreases the incentives that Russian-speakers have to mobilize violently against the state,^{xxiv} ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine demonstrates how the mobilization of a relatively small number of activists can have serious security implications. Policy analysis in Estonia and Latvia demonstrates that commitments to European norms and European recommendations are no longer powerful frames for pushing minority policymaking in a more inclusionary direction, and that Russian frames have a greater influence in policy debates.^{xxv}

Treating the policymaking process as a category of analysis draws our attention to how policymakers can appropriate Russia's soft power strategies to influence policy debates and policy outcomes in target states. Russia's soft power strategies have been used to justify more inclusionary and exclusionary policies toward Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia, demonstrating that Russia's policy influence depends to a large extent on how policymakers in

target states frame Russia's agenda to serve their own political ends. Recent neo-militant policies aimed at restricting the influence of pro-Russian forces in Latvian society are largely framed in terms of safeguarding Latvia's sovereignty, identity and territorial integrity from external threats, as well as from those who would help external actors to undermine Latvian democracy from within. However, this approach not only alienates Russian-speakers, but provides traction for Russia's narratives about discrimination. A more productive path forward may lie in building societal resistance to extremism, disinformation, and propaganda, and encouraging citizens to play an active role in defending democracy.

Baltic elites have taken several steps to combat Russia's information campaigns, which are instructive for other countries. In 2015, Estonia made the decision to launch a new state-run Russian-language Television station (ETV+). While Russian-speakers in Estonia are still consuming more Russian media, the increase in viewership and trust in ETV+ are positive developments toward the creation of a common information sphere.^{xxvi} Latvia and Lithuania have allocated more funding to state-owned bilingual stations and have imposed temporary bans on Russian-owned media for knowingly disseminating false information.^{xxvii} In 2017, the Lithuanian parliament passed a law restricting media content produced in Russia on Lithuanian TV.^{xxviii} Despite such measures, Russian narratives can still work their way into public discourse through pro-Russian media outlets in the European Union, or via social media. Here, societal resilience in the form volunteer armies of "Baltic Elves" who seek to counter Russian narratives and the work of Russian trolls, provide useful models for other states in the region.^{xxix} There is also recognition among Baltic elites that combatting Russia's media influence will depend, at least in part, on increasing media literacy through education programs aimed at various sectors of society.^{xxx} Efforts that focus on creating societal resilience to disinformation are likely to be more effective than policies aimed at restricting the participation of pro-Russian forces in society.

The West also has an important role to play in responding to Russia's soft power agenda and public diplomacy campaigns in the region. NATO founded the "Strategic Communications Center of Excellence" in Riga to detect information threats and to inform the public and the media, as well

as the “Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence” in Tallinn. The EU East Strategic Communications Task Force also raises awareness about Russia’s information campaigns, disseminates information on EU policies, and supports independent media in the region.^{xxxi} However, countering Russia’s influence in the region will also require the EU and NATO to project their own clear messages about the advantages of membership in these organizations, as well as the purpose of NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic States and Poland.^{xxxii} In addition, the EU should also support local media in member states and encourage them to produce their own Russian language content. Local interest stories are a strong counterweight for attracting audiences away from media produced by Russia. Finally, the EU should support organizations that are already engaged in the training and informing both journalists and the public about media literacy, such as the Baltic Center for Media Excellence.^{xxxiii} While the EU already supports some projects on digital and media literacy, more support is necessary given the millions of Russian-speakers that live in the EU and the fact that some countries may have difficulty finding funding to support the production of Russian language content by local media and programs to support media literacy. This will build social resilience to Russia’s information campaigns, which is likely to be more effective over the long-term than engaging Russia in open-ended information wars.

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