

# **Power in International Politics: Does the World Go Hard?**

Ivanchenko V., Khromakov D.,

Margojev A., Sukhoverkhov K.

HSE-MGIMO group

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## **I. Introduction**

Increased tensions between Russia and “the West” have restored parallels with the Cold War times in minds of experts and officials. Russian expert on international relations Fyodor Lukyanov (“Огонёк” Коммерсантъ, 2014) described it as follows: “The line of a great division ceased to exist a quarter century ago. Anyway, it was believed to be so. And all of a sudden, the line appears to be drawn again. Today, there is no term more popular than ‘Cold War’. Everyone can not help discussing Cold War: it either has resumed, or is about to do that, or has never interrupted.”

This provoked a discussion on the changing ratio between soft and hard instruments of projecting influence in international relations. The Ukrainian crisis, mutual sanctions, and the results of the elections in the United States would suggest that states are gradually coming back to power politics. In this paper we study how the USA, the European Union and Russia view the role of soft power in international relations, the ratio between hard and soft power in their foreign policies, the current situation and challenges in this field.

The study illustrates the differences in perception and use of soft and hard power instruments in the USA, EU and Russia, reflects the theoretical and practical evolution of soft power (both generally and within particular actors) and explains the general trends. With this goal in the study we use researches of American, European, Russian scholars and observers. Challenges of the modern world and reviving confrontation between Russia and the Western countries arose new questions about the future of soft power and nature of foreign policy instruments.

## **II. From Hard to Smart: the Evolution of Power**

Over centuries, the term ‘power’ has been understood mostly in its original fashion. The evolution concerning methods and rules of its application were influenced by new technologies and evolution of morality and just war tradition.

‘History of the Peloponnesian war’ by Thucydides was one of the first attempts to conceptualize the term of power, where he recognized it as foundation of intergovernmental relations. For states power became a substance of security and possibility to prevail. In 20th century Morgenthau (1955) defined ‘national interest’ in terms of power. According to Nye and Keohane which kept developing the term (1977), power is ‘the ability of an actor to get others to do something they otherwise would not do’.

The term ‘soft power’ was coined in 1990 in a book ‘Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power’ by Joseph Nye. According to the author, ‘soft power’ is the ability to “affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or

payment". Joseph Nye revised the traditional understanding of 'power' and excluded the elements of coercion - military, economic, legislative, and even diplomatic - to explain new and more effective methods of influence which the USA might need (Nye, 'Soft Power: The Origins and Political Progress of a Concept' 2017). In other words of Nye, soft power is 'the ability to get what you want through attraction' (Nye 'The Means to Success in World Politics', 2004). Hard power, on the contrary, means 'traditional' power with use of coercion and force. In 2004 Nye offered a 'smart power' approach - strategy of 'smart' and effective combination of soft and hard power.

Today soft power concept consists of three components - culture, political values, and foreign policy (Naumov, 2010). It works effectively when culture enjoys popularity abroad, political values are shared by other states, and foreign policy is approved, or at least is not opposed to. To use soft power a state should have enough resources and 'attraction capital'. For example, it is ambiguous to project its influence for those countries which lack viable economic and political models, degrade technologically and educationally, or have serious social problems. And very often it takes states years to gain and enhance their soft power, and to become a role model and leader for others.

The concept of soft power has overcome a few waves of popularity in the USA, Russia, the EU, China and India (Chiharev, Stoletov, 2015, p. 37). Its propagation was spurred by globalization, informatization of economic and political process, development of communications and technologies. The post-Cold war world granted new opportunities for applying 'soft' political instruments. But soft power cannot be a panacea to all foreign threats, thus it is unable to substitute hard power instruments.

Although the concept of soft power is not so popular today as it was in the 2000-s, there still exist different popular ratings on soft power. One of the most well-known in Europe is Soft Power 30 index created by the Portland Communications, a well-known British consultancy and PR agency ([softpower30.com](http://softpower30.com)). UK magazine 'Monocle' as well holds its soft power survey. Many related surveys are conducted by Pew Research Center, a 'fact' tank in Washington D.C. However, objectivity of such ratings is still arguable, while the monopoly of estimating others may be an effective political instrument.

Soft power instruments are more available and fit for use than 'hard power' tools. An attractive image let such states as France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan and other 'average' countries, concerning their territory and population, have a high level of economic and political influence (Michael, Hartwell, Nureev).

Soft power in practice enables a 'target' approach - it should be applied individually according to historic, cultural and societal context in each country. And it is easier to enable 'soft'

instruments among friendly states. Among ‘adversary’ states, it is often applied in an ‘attacking’ way - using disinformation, manipulation, intelligence nets. In that case the recipient state tries to block any active influence of a non-amicable country: to restrict or prohibit activity of ‘enemy’ NGOs, education programs, foreign mass-media broadcasting.

Both soft and hard power can be passive (unintended influence) and active (intended influence). Passive soft power means that just possession of soft power elements is enough to affect others, while active soft power implies action, use of soft power instruments and institutions (The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power, 2017, p. 454).

Now we are going to focus on how soft and hard power concepts are understood and engaged in the USA, the EU and Russia.

### **III. USA: Leadership and Dominance**

US soft power is a complicated system based on US unique history of creation and development - it was intentionally invented as a ‘free country’, region of perspective and successful future. That became a crucial part of the ‘American dream’ concept. In the 19-20th centuries, the attractive basis turned out to be the lighthouse for migrants from all over the world and foundation for American passive soft power which by-turn became a rich resource for US government.

The end of ‘Cold war’ caused active and wide spread of Western liberal democracy and market economy in the 90-s and beginning of the 2000-s. It was time of US unipolar moment (Krauthammer, 1990) and, respectively, triumph of its soft power. And, what is noteworthy, because of that the United States obtained ‘carte blanche’ to use hard power in its foreign policy, and other actors approved or just offered no or little resistance to US actions in the international arena. But as the configuration of the world has changed, the USA has lost its monopoly right for hard power projection and active interventions provoked serious damages to reputation. Political establishment had to find a new global foreign policy concept. At that time ‘smart power’ (Nye, 2004, Nossel, 2004) became one of the core components of foreign policy discussion in the USA, and Obama’s Administration tried to put it in action.

According to the report of CSIS (Armitage, Nye, 2007), smart power implies use of cultural, values, economic and non-violence tools. Main directions for the US were described as relations with allies (especially, NATO allies), global development, public diplomacy, economic integration, technologies and innovations. Multilateralism and cooperation within the UN were also regarded as a means to increase US smart power (Mendelson-Forman, 2009).

Events of Arab spring are often described as an effect of US soft power. Attraction of Western liberal democracy together with use of Western digital technologies granted the opportunity to mobilize big masses of people within short period of time (Stoletov, 2015). But smart power in such cases becomes instrumental: the US supported and financed opposition forces in Libya and Syria which they defined as democratic. During the development of protests and internal struggle between authorities and protesters it further led to hard power engagement and caused civilian wars which have not ended by now. The Middle East case discredited smart power concept, caused negative attitude to the USA in the Arab societies, and the US required further revisions of its use.

Today US foreign policy is combination of soft and hard power instruments. US soft power policy is also closely connected to its foreign policy priorities which are US overseas presence and operative projection of power in any spot on the planet.

Soft power of the United States comprise a huge variety of 'encouragement' instruments. Here we can mention public diplomacy instruments (academic exchanges, cooperation with civil society of other states, cultural diplomacy), a huge think-tanks net; powerful media system which translate liberal values and Western perception of international affairs; humanitarian aid and conflict resolution assistance; lobby institutions and NGOs. There is no country in the world possessing such resources for projection of active 'soft power' as the USA does. It is a part of active 'soft power'

Passive soft power of the USA comprise the 'American dream' mentioned above, accessible pop-culture (as Hollywood and developed music industry), liberal values, leadership and authority, might and dominance in many aspects of world politics. The United States remain one of the most magnetic states in the world for migrants, scientists, professionals and many political elites.

Trump's victory in 2016 elections turned out to be a serious challenge for US soft power (McPhillips, 2017, O'Sullivan, 2017). Trump was negatively accepted by the Western world and quite positive accepted by non-Western society at the beginning. But incapability to keep promises led to reputational losses. For example, failure to 'reset' relations with Russia and the diplomatic scandal caused disappointment in the Russian society.

All in all, the United States has a wide range of soft and hard power instruments. American scholars conceptualized 'soft', 'hard' and 'smart' power issues and to some extent 'monopolized' its interpretations. But it does not prevent the USA from applying its power disproportionately and 'unsmartly'.

#### **IV. EU: Success Story Postponed**

There are two levels of soft power in the EU - supranational (at the level of the EU) and national (at the level of EU member states).

The main components of EU soft power are its welfare system, common market, 'European quality', good image in environment protection and authority in human rights promotion (Dempsey, 2012). Moreover, the European Union managed to ensure peace for its members after centuries of wars and bloodshed, and showed the effectiveness of the initial idea.

Both the EU and its member states have branched institutional system of soft power. Any academic, think-tank, civil society, state-promoted (British Council, Goethe Institute, La Francophonie etc.) institutions can be regarded as soft power (more precisely - public diplomacy) agents. Soft power institutions as well may be party-financed foundations, as, for instance, they are in Germany (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Friedrich Naumann Stiftung, and others).

EU soft power works in accordance with EU rules and laws (Dempsey, 2012): if a state or a company wants to work with the EU, it must comply with its legislation. Europeanization process in whole can be interpreted as soft power effect.

The EU started as an efficient and attractive project which accumulated soft power potential of its influential member states. The European Union became a success story and inspiration in political, economic, and humanitarian dimensions, but euphoria resulting from integration achievements and grand expansion in 2004 was replaced by disagreements on the euro crisis, anxiety and disappointment caused by other crises (migration, terrorism, demography, unity and solidarity crises, Brexit, Ukrainian conflict). Today the EU faces many challenges which gradually undermine its 'soft power' and increase with every year. Weakness of EU hard power is blow to soft power. Ineffective EU army and, generally, the Common Security and Defense Policy make the EU less persuasive and influential in the international arena. It becomes especially obvious when the EU is not able to fight such serious internal and external challenges as terrorism or to keep order in refugee camps. But, at the same time, it does not mean that the EU does not have any other 'coercion instruments'. Economic restrictive measures, which the EU employs, still remain efficient. Such state of things coincides with the concept of the EU as a 'civilian power' (Duchêne, 1973, p.19) - less focus on arms, more focus on economic leverages.

The Ukrainian crisis showed another serious problems of projection of EU soft power outside. The Eastern partnership offers no perspective of joining the EU, and at some point it just stops working and attracting its recipients. EU grants its financial and consulting assistance to its

Eastern partners on reforms instead of accepting the EU 'acquis communautaire'. But, as the Ukrainian case showed, expansion of EU norms and europeanization did not imply creating area of stability and peace. 'Zero-sum' competition with Russia in the Post-Soviet space and Ukraine (Karaganov, 2013) in particular led to war and serious political degradation in Ukraine. EU behavior turned into more pragmatic and tough in the period of 'Maidan' events that, in what follows, sparked the confrontation within Ukraine and confrontation with Russia. Europeanization today does not guarantee peace and prosperity, and it is a serious blow to the European soft power.

Hard power tools i.e. restrictive measures used against Russia have not reached their goal and did not change the political regime in Russia. The EU does not use coercion tools to make Ukraine more active with reforms or with the Minsk process. And it only underlines a very strong disproportion between soft and hard power in the EU and incapability to adopt the smart power approach.

Trump's victory in the US elections raised the question of the EU leadership in maintaining and promoting Western values. However, it is not Brussels who can take the role of a 'leader of the free world', but Berlin (Hundal, 2017, Moller, 2016, Noack, 2016). The global shift of Western values representation can become crucial for EU soft power as the European Union places its values in the core of European integration.

Another recent EU trend is fight against 'Russian propaganda', which is perceived in Russia as an attempt to restrict Russian active soft power, especially its informational component. The European Parliament approved a special non-legislative resolution to protect EU from 'hostile propaganda' projected from Russia and the Islamist terrorist group (European Parliament, 2016). In terms of realist international relations theory it can be understood as attempt to win a competition in soft power and to expel the adversary.

In general, EU soft power is based on its values, successes, high indices of standards of living. EU soft power prevails over hard power, but absence of strong army and police weakens EU capabilities and, thereafter, attractiveness, especially, in times of unexpected challenges and deep crises.

## **V. Russia: Struggle for Soft Power**

Russia is traditionally regarded as a country which relies primarily on hard power. This could be explained partly by its foreign policy resources. For instance, the Russian army is one of the most advanced in the world. Besides, the relationship between the government and the individual has been rarely built on government's efforts to win public support in open political

competition. Instead, government has often used power to strengthen its legitimacy and social order.

However, the current situation in the world makes Russian diplomats directly engage population in other countries. The Ukrainian crisis was a tough lesson for Russia: the legitimate government of Ukraine was deposed mostly due to active involvement of pro-European forces. Notwithstanding a significant proportion of Ukrainian population which was skeptical about European integration, pro-European citizens turned out to be more organized and enjoyed full-fledged logistical support, which had a decisive impact on the outcome of the Euromaidan protests.

Euro-sceptic (not necessarily pro-Russian) activists were helpless and did not receive enough support. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow has preferred to deal with Ukrainian government and business elites rather than to develop Russia-friendly communities among the local population. Conversely, the EU and the USA have invested huge resources in promotion of a positive image for “the West” through multiple foundations, NGOs, cultural and educational exchanges. There was simply no consolidated power within the Ukrainian society that would support pro-Russian or pro-Eurasian direction during the demonstrations that took place after suspension of the negotiations on the EU’s Association Agreement.

The American concept of soft power was introduced in Russia with a delay. The discussion on this topic at the highest political level and among experts began merely 10 years ago. Moreover, there is still no official document in Russia regarding this issue. However, in his pre-election article “Russia and the Changing World”, Vladimir Putin described the way he and his government understand the concept (Putin, 2012). According to the article, Russia’s approach has two features:

1. “Soft power... implies a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence”;
2. “There must be a clear division between freedom of speech and normal political activity, on the one hand, and illegal instruments of soft power, on the other. The civilized work of non-governmental humanitarian and charity organizations deserves every support. (...) However, the activities of "pseudo-NGOs" and other agencies that try to destabilize other countries with outside support are unacceptable”.

These principles are not only declared but have also formed a basis for practice. Since the mid-2000s, information management has been dominating in Russia’s soft power. RT, the Moscow-operated news network, was established in 2005 and still remains one of the cornerstones of Russia’s efforts to influence global public opinion. Margarita Simonyan, RT editor-in-chief, said the following about her mission: “We are a part of soft power of the Russian people. We try to tell



the world about our values, we communicate Russia's opinion on different world events, we do our best to express our point of view" (Simonyan, 2015).

Also a number of public diplomacy institutions have been established in the recent years. In 2007, the Russkiy Mir Foundation was set up in order to promote the Russian language and culture.<sup>1</sup> In September 2008, immediately after the Russo-Georgian War, the Rossotrudnichestvo was established as an agency under the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to develop cooperation primarily with the citizens of neighbouring countries. For instance, in 2014 the number of annual scholarships for foreign students (covers full tuition) reached 15 000.

In 2010, the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund was established to distribute grants to NGOs on a competitive basis. In 2011, the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), modelled after prominent Western think tanks, was created. Today it actively participates in public debates and has invited many leading experts to Russia thus strengthening communication between IR specialists. The improvement of Russia's image abroad was also mentioned as one of key objectives of major international events, such as the Petersburg Dialogue (since 2001), the Valdai Discussion Club (since 2004), the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

The second feature of Russia's attitude towards soft power is suspiciousness. However, this was not always the case. In the 1990s American soft power faced hardly any opposition in Russia — even in its most direct forms. In 1992, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) opened its Moscow office. It is now almost forgotten but President Boris Yeltsin supported the establishment of the Carnegie Moscow Center in his presidential decree (Decree of the President of Russia № 873, 1992). When in 1995 the "Open Society Foundations" run by George Soros launched operations in Russia, many accused it of promoting a brain drain. However, an official position was different. After conducting an investigation, the parliament's committee on education presented a letter of commendation to Soros (Chernykh, Polous, 2015).

During the last two decades, the world has changed. The predominance of economic rationality that was almost universally accepted in the 1990s has taken a back seat. Countries increasingly explain their policies by security concerns and ignore economic costs. When Crimea and Sevastopol joined the Russian Federation, Moscow was aware of risks for its cooperation with the European Union. In turn, the West introduced harsh restrictive measures despite the protests of many entrepreneurs that have close business ties with Russia.

Attitudes toward soft power have changed as well. Governments have become suspicious of foreign soft power agents largely due to mass protests in the 2010s that were openly supported

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<sup>1</sup> "Russky Mir" is "Russian World" in English.

by the West and often led to a regime change. Examples include the Arab Spring in the Middle East and Northern Africa, the 2011–2013 Russian protests, Euromaidan in Ukraine in 2013–2014. The latter was an especially sensitive case for the Kremlin since it concerned Russia’s most vital interests in the post-Soviet space.

In order to prevent similar developments in Moscow, the Russian government started to restrict instruments of America’s soft power. In 2012 USAID was ordered to shut its office in Russia. Russia’s foreign affairs ministry explained back then that this development agency “tried to influence political processes via its grant programs including elections at various levels and civil society institutions” (Bekbulatova, Barabanov, et. al., 2012). The Carnegie Moscow Center is regularly criticized by pro-government experts and activists whereas the Soros-funded “Open Society Foundations” and “Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation” were classified as “undesirable” organizations and banned.

The Russian “foreign agents” law increased formal and informal barriers for NGOs that receive financing from Western sources. In 2014, Russia pulled out of the annual Future Leaders Exchange, or FLEX, program that allowed high school students to spend an academic year in the United States. State-owned media outlets produce documentary films about “agents of foreign influence” (VGTRK, 2016). Even if we do not discuss the proportionality and reasonability of these actions, it is obvious that soft power of other countries raise growing concerns in the Russian elite.

To sum up, Moscow today faces a serious dilemma. On the one hand, the Kremlin understands that public opinion is given a greater voice in international relations than ever. Even Crimea’s incorporation into Russia would have been impossible without strong public support on both sides. On the other hand, Russia’s public diplomacy experience is rather weak, and many officials mistakenly equate soft power with propaganda. And all this becomes far more complex when foreign soft influence is blocked instead of offering own alternatives.

## **Conclusions**

Russia, the European Union, and the United States represent three different approaches to the balance between hard and soft power. In the United States, methods of traditional diplomacy and hard power are widely and frequently applied. But during decades Washington as well actively developed its soft power component. As a result America possesses the richest arsenal of foreign policy instruments - from high-technology weapons to wide net of public diplomacy agents.

The European Union is stronger in its soft power, but lacks hard power instruments. It is connected with the nature of the political entity as there is no EU army. Armies are in the competence of Member States. The key power source is the attractiveness of the European Union

and its success story. It became the core of its Europeanization strategy, expansion of European norms and standards. In 2000s actions of Brussels began to transform into more pragmatic and tough. ‘Battle for Ukraine’ between the EU and Russia illustrates it.

Russia in its foreign policy had to launch many activities from the scratch. Of course, Russia inherited the USSR military experience, diplomatic schools and schools of negotiations. But ideological work applied in the USSR quickly turned out to be outdated in the modern world. In the recent years, Russia has tried to adapt soft power concept to its foreign policy and to become more active in public diplomacy track.

So, the new confrontation wave between Russia and the West narrow the space of soft power, but does not fully exclude it. Conclusions coined by Joseph Nye are still relevant and interdependence mentioned by him keeps growing. But in today’s world soft power as well can be quite easily restricted by other actors. On the contrary, projection of soft power needs much more resources and efforts than restricting it.

	USA	EU	Russia
Proportion of hard and soft power	Equally strong soft and hard power	Strong soft power Weak hard power	Strong hard power Limited soft power
Key objective(s) of soft power	Leadership and dominance in the international relations	Area of stability and peace across the borders + allies in the world. Expansion of EU norms and rules	National security: Active defense against anti-Russian media campaign. Defense against agents of coloured revolutions
Practical implementation of soft power	Wide range of mechanisms (via leadership concept, media, public diplomacy etc.)	Mix of normative, economic and public diplomacy mechanisms	Informational mechanisms; Legislation against NGOs - “foreign agents” and “unsolicited organizations”

Position in Portland rating	3	14,8 <sup>2</sup>	26
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<sup>2</sup> Arithmetic mean calculated from Top-30 of Portland rating (18 EU countries out of 28 including the United Kingdom).

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