



Media Culture

Russia's soft power in the Baltics: media, education and Russian world narrative

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Abstract. The article is focused on the current Russian soft power strategy in the Baltics. Taking into account energy dependence of the Baltic states from Russia, which Russian government had frequently used as an instrument of hard power, authors have studied the increasing role of Russian soft influence in the region. Authors highlight the success of Russian media in the Baltics as a soft power instrument. Both Russian experts and local authorities acknowledge the influence of Russian TV, newspapers and web-sites on the Baltic societies. Moscow has successfully influenced internal politics in the Baltic states through the active collaboration with local political parties. Russia has included human rights and anti-Nazism narratives in its diplomacy and persistently promoted them on the main international forums in order to achieve one of the main Russian foreign policy goals – defense of the Russian minorities' rights in the Baltic states. Russian NGOs – soft power agents - such as Russian centers of Russian World foundation have been operating actively in the region. Russian government also has fully supported pro-Russian local NGOs, which have served Russian interests in the Baltics.

Foreign experts acknowledge success of Russian soft power strategy in the region. In the same time, they stress the danger of Russian soft influence. They consider Russian soft power strategy filled with the ideology of the Russian world as a potential threat to national security and even territorial integrity of the Baltic states.

Keywords: Russian foreign policy, soft power, diplomacy of influence, Russian world, compatriots, Baltic states, post-soviet space, CIS.

Introduction

Crimean spring 2014 has opened a new page in relations of Russia and the nearest abroad. Baltic states, where anti-Russian sentiments remain strong, have been sensitive to the events which took place in March 2014. According to the 2015 report of Latvian institute for international relations, Russian adventurism in Ukraine has dented mutual trust between Russia and the Baltic states and reintroduced into their dialogue such terms as hybrid war, manipulative war and militarization of soft power [The Different Faces of "Soft Power".... 2015, p.7].

However both Russian and foreign experts agree that for the past years Russian government has significantly improved and bolstered Russian soft power in the region. Since 2009, when current president Dmitry Medvedev first mentioned soft power instruments and stressed out its effectiveness for foreign policy goals [Borisova, 2015, p.7], Russian government has elaborated respective legislative basis, established special institutions and organizations, empowered scientific discussion on the topic. According to Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, post-soviet space including CIS and Baltic states is a region of a special interest for Russian foreign policy, therefore Russian government put special on soft power projection in the region.

Since post-soviet era Baltics states have been a challenge for Russian diplomacy. Current cooperation is overburdened by the common past, which is perceived extremely differently by ex-members of the USSR. Russia is using Soviet heritage for both hard pressure and soft influence on its Baltic partners.

Materials and methods

Article is based on theoretical works on soft power (J. Nye, Gallarotti, Leonova etc) and practical studies of current Russian soft power strategy in the Baltic regions. Both Russian and foreign reports provided meaningful insights and data for the article. Official documents of Russia and the Baltic states (such as Russian foreign policy strategy, Estonian police reports and Latvian Constitution Protection Bureau) were included in the analysis.

Institutionalist and constructivist approaches were basic for the article methodology.

Discussion

Media, compatriots and ties with political parties as Russia's soft power instruments in Baltics. Energy resources remain the most powerful leverage of Moscow in its cooperation with the Baltics states. All three republics – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – are dependent on Russian oil by 90% and on Russian gas on 100% [Grigas, 2012, p.3]. Gasprom has ensured it monopoly by participating in national gas companies (Eesti Gaas, Latvijas Gaze, Lietuvos Dujos) with a control block of shares. Additionally Gasprom has been closely cooperating with main distribution companies in the Baltic region – Itera, Dujotekana, Stella Vitae, Vikonda. Having a privileged position on the regional energy market, Russia has resorted repeatedly to hard power instruments in order to achieve its foreign policy goals. According to experts, in 2000-2006 Russia has used energy blackmailing on its foreign partners approximately 40 times, primarily on CIS countries, but also on Central and Eastern Europe countries. For instance, in 2003 Moscow cut off gas supplies to the Latvian port Ventspils Nafta, in 2006 – to the Lithuanian company Mazeikiu Nafta, in May 2007 Russian government set up a boycott to Estonia. Mostly energy blackmailing stemmed from political reasons: in 2003 it was a failed Russian-Latvian deal on the Ventspils Nafta, later on the purchase of Lithuanian Mazeikiu Nafta by Polish PKN Orlen, in 2007 political crisis over Bronze soldier in Tallinn provoked a gas cut off in Estonia.

Together with hard power instruments, Russia has been actively using soft power instruments in cooperation with its Baltic partners.

Before studying Russian soft power in the Baltic region, it is important to provide a theoretical framework and clarify what is soft power in political sense? Harvard scholar Joseph Nye, inventor of soft power theory, gave numerous definitions to this phenomenon: from short one in 1990 - “soft power is the ability to get your partner want what you want” [Nye, 1990, p.167] to a developed one in his book “Future of power” in 2011 – “soft power is the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes”. Nye also defines three crucial resources of soft power – culture, political values and foreign policy [Nye. 2004, p.11]. Subsequently researchers elaborated typology of resources by dividing them into domestic and international resources. Domestic resources are coming from culture (pronounced social cohesion; elevated quality of life; freedom; sufficient opportunities; tolerance; alluring lifestyle) and from political institutions (democracy; constitutionalism; liberalism/pluralism; a well functioning of government). International resources are: respect for international laws, norms, and institutions; fundamental reliance on multilateralism, and disposition against excessive unilateralism; respect international treaties and alliance commitments; willingness to sacrifice short-run national interests in order to contribute toward the collective good; liberal foreign economic policies. Resources typology is described in J. Gallarotti [Gallarotti, 2011], and O. Leonova [Leonova, 2013] studies.

Joseph Nye didn't define an exact set of concrete soft power tools. Talking about them, he mostly mentioned public diplomacy, scientific and cultural exchanges, international broadcasting.

The latter is widely acknowledged as a bright success of Russian soft power in Baltics. Recently Russian broadcasting has significantly expanded in Baltic media both TV and internet. Alongside with Russian international channel RT, a range of local Russian-speaking channels were launched: First Baltic (ПБК), RTR Planet, NTV Mir, Orsent TV (Estonia), TV3+, Muz-TV. Currently over 30 Russian newspapers circulate in Estonia, 4 out of 30 are the most popular ones in the country – “Youth of Estonia”, “Business news”, “Day by day”, “Estonia”. Russian newspaper “Linnaleht” is quite popular in Tallinn, “The City” newspaper is well-liked among Narva residents. There are also special newspapers for Russian compatriots such as “Wide range”, supplement to Komsomolskaya Pravda “Compatriot” etc. Russian newspapers don't benefit any financial support from local authorities.

Russian radio is also quite popular in Baltics. Estonians and Latvians listen with interest “Radio 4” and “Russian radio”. Russian media have been embracing cyberspace. International and local news in Russian are delivered to Balts via news web-sites Delfi and Russian version of Regnum. Additionally, Russian business has ginned up significant assets in Baltic media: for instance, Russian bank “Snoras” owes 34% of Lietuvos Rytas media group, which includes the main Lithuanian newspaper, TV channel and news web-site.

In the meantime, Russian media in Baltics are often criticized for a biased approach. Estonian Security Police 2007 cites an example of Russian journalist Galina Sapojnikova working for “Komsomolskaya Pravda”. As follows from their investigation, Sapojnikova's coverage appeared to be politically biased and partial [Estonian Security Police, 2007, p.15]. Foreign experts often consider Russian media as a Moscow foreign policy tool and a horn of Russian state-run propaganda. Some of them even insist that Russian media are responsible for acceleration of tensions in Estonia during Soviet Soldier statue conflict in 2007. Report “Legacies, Coercion and Soft Power: Russian Influence in the Baltic States” issued by Chatham House refers to the fake news spread by Russian media about statue demolition by Estonian authorities [Grigas, 2012, p.10]. On another hand, Russian media are seen in Baltics as instrument of influence on internal politics. For example, First Baltic channel by Kremlin's order allegedly lobbied Harmony Center party during election campaign in Latvia in 2010.

Foreign experts highlight that Russian media deepen an information gap between Balts and Russian-speaking compatriots, who seem to live in a separate media landscapes [Russian Soft Power in the 21st Century... 2011, p.16]. For instance, polls show that Russians in Estonia discredit Estonian media (49% and only 18% trust). Estonians in their turn have mirror viewing of Russian media.

Ban, imposed on Russian TV channels by local authorities in spring 2014, proves a significant Russian influence on Baltic societies. During March 2014 RTR-Planet, NTV-Mir (both in Lithuania) and Russia-RTR (Latvia) broadcasting was stopped by local governments in order to not let Russian media impact public opinion in Baltics. In the same time, PBK channel was under pressure of Latvian government who initiated an investigation against the channel [Zapret rossiyskih kanalov... 2014]. Officially declared reasons were provocative programs and comments, inciting hatred and calling to arms, spread by Russian channels.

Russia has elaborated and since then been implementing a strategy aimed at meddling in internal political processes in Baltics. Experts agree that “political systems remain marred by institutional weaknesses such as fragmentation and commercialization” in Baltics [Grigas, 2012, p.2]. Baltic states are still largely exposed to Russian influence due to their weak economics, corruption, lack of transparency in politics and export and energy dependence. Both local and Russian business have been largely involved in politics and political lobbying in the interest of Kremlin. This influence is especially strong in Latvia and Lithuania.

For example, it's well known, that Latvian party "Harmony Center" lobbying interests of Russian minorities could gain 1/3 of seats in Saeima thanks to Russian support. Nils Ushakovs, leader of Harmony Center and Riga's mayor since 2009, is closely associated with Russian government. Western media are used to call him Kremlin's agent and even mini-Putin [A Russian in Charge in Riga... 2013].

We can find a similar situation in Estonia, where Center Party, which is very popular among Russian compatriots, plays a key role in country's political life. Edgar Savisaar, its leader, also holds Tallinn's City Hall. According to the Chatham House report, Center party signed an agreement with Russian leading party "Russia United" in 2004. Some sources state that Estonian Center Party and personally Edgar Savisaar have been financed by Russian government for a long time. Estonian Security Police report provides information about investments of 1.5 mln euros from Russian Railway company to the Center Party election campaign in 2011. Responding to these accusations, Savisaar claimed that these funds were used for construction of the Orthodox Church. Still Estonian publics remained suspicious about this incident. Alongside with Center Party, Moscow has been supporting other political parties in Estonia. Constitution Party is one of them [Russian Soft Power in the 21st Century...2011., p.19].

Russia also seeks to exercise influence on internal politics in Baltic states from outside. It organizes regularly conferences and seminars with participation of young leaders from Baltics. For example, Gorchakov foundation for public diplomacy invites on a regular basis representatives from CIS and Eastern Europe to participate in annually events such as Dialogue for the Future, Baltic Dialogue, Diplomatic seminar. Recently Gorchakov foundation has set up an alumni network (Friends Club), bringing together former participants of conferences and mighty partners. Today young leaders and NGO activists from Baltic states are members of the Club: for instance, Mustve city mayor (Estonia), Maardu Parliament member (Estonia), member of Youth city council [Klub друзей...].

Kremlin's strategy aimed at meddling in internal affairs in Baltic states resulted in 8th European-Russian forum in European Parliament, organized by Russkiy Mir Foundation. Forum was devoted to the "second cold war" and was held in Brussels on December 01, 2014. It brought together participants from Russia and Europe, including MP from European Parliament from Baltic states [Otchet o deyatelnosti Fonda «Russkiy mir» za 2014 god, 2014, p.8].

Moscow puts emphasis on the theme of uprising of Nazi ideas and human rights in the dialogue with Baltic states. By doing this, Kremlin has twofold purposes. On one hand, Russia seeks to protect its compatriots and WWII veterans, on another – to influence internal and external policy of Baltic states. It is new for Russian diplomacy to use narratives of human rights an fight against neo-nazism and experts say that it makes Kremlin soft power more sophisticated [Russian Soft Power in the 21st Century...2011., p.19].

To buttress international support Moscow founded International human right organization "World Without Nazism" (WWN) in 2010 in Kiev. More than 360 delegates of 136 organizations from 28 countries (including Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Moldavia, Finland, Poland, Baltic states, Israel, Germany, Italy, USA and others) participated in the foundation conference. WWN holds on a regular basis International school of young scholars-historians from CIS states, Baltic states and Georgia, International children and youth contest "We want to live in peace", Youth league conference "World without Nazism", Open lecture "World without Nazism". WWN monitors uprising and spread of Nazi ideas: last annual report on Neo-Nazism and right radicalism by V. Engel was published in 2011. Despite large international participation in the WWN executive board (USA, Germany, Estonia, Latvia etc), foreign experts have no doubt about its close ties with Russian government (see Constitution Protection Bureau of Latvia (SAB) 2013 Report) [Constitution Protection Bureau of Latvia Report, 2013]. The figure of the chairman of WWN proves these doubts to be right. Boris Spiegel served on various positions in

Russian government (Federation Council) and was awarded with diplomas from Russian president. WVN is seen in Baltics as the propaganda instrument of Russian government. In abovementioned Latvian report WVN activity is defined as a potential threat to security of Latvia [Ibid].

Russia has repeatedly spoken out about abuse of Russian-speaking minorities civil rights in the Baltic states. Kremlin has continuously filed claims to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Yet ECtHR nor UN Human Rights Council haven't found any civil rights abuse in the Baltic states. Only Amnesty International in the 2010 report acknowledged the fact of violation of Russian-speaking minority in Estonia in employment and education. Moscow actively cooperates with The Legal Information Center for Human Rights (LICHR), one of the most respectful human rights organizations in Estonia. According to the Estonian Security Police, Russian government and FSB provide funding for LICHR [Russian Soft Power in the 21st Century...2011, p.15].

Both Russian and foreign experts agree that Russian-speaking diaspora is the most powerful instrument of Russian soft power in the Baltics. Russian-speaking minority consists over 30% of population in Latvia and Estonia. Being a third of country's population, Russian diaspora appears a potent resource of Russian influence on internal and external policy of Baltic states.

For a long-time Kremlin has been ignoring a potential of Russian diaspora living abroad. During Soviet Union émigrés were treated as traitors and "enemies of the people". Only in 1990s new government of Russia woke up to the importance of Russian diaspora abroad and perceived it as a congeneric sociocultural world, which has a potential to strengthen Russian influence abroad [Batanova, 2009, P.13]. In 1999 Russian Duma adopted the first law on state policy towards Russian compatriots living abroad. Shortly afterwards Kremlin founded a range of compatriots' organizations both state-run and public aimed at uniting Russian diaspora, its support and protection – foundation "Russkiy Mir" (Russian World) (2007), The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo) (2008), Foundation for support and protection of compatriots' rights (2012), Foundation for cooperation with Russian-speaking media (2014). Additionally, Russian government has been continuously supporting local NGOs for Russian compatriots in the Baltics.

Russian World foundation mostly focuses on Russian language promotion and protection of Russian culture as two main constituents of Russian compatriots national identity. In 2014 Russian world held a set of special events for representatives for the Baltic states (First Teachers' Forum "Russian language in a modern school" (Sochi), First Historical and Cultural Forum in Velikiy Novgorod, 6th Russian language summer school for young Russianists (Varna). Besides that Foundation has been providing a direct financial support for Russian schools in Baltics.

Its main annual event is Russian World Assembly (held since 2007). Every year more than 800 participants from 80 countries, including Baltic states, come to participate in it. Russian senior officials (including President V. Putin, PM Dmitry Medvedev, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov etc) regularly send their official greetings to the conference.

Russian World's offices (Russian centers) operate in all three Baltic states: at the Daugavpils University and Baltic International Academy in Latvia, at the Lithuanian Educational University and at Shaulay university in Lithuania, and at the Pushkin University in Estonia.

Russkiy Mir web-site statistics demonstrates that Foundation reaches out to its target public. The most active web-site visitors come from CIS and Baltic countries, including Estonia and Latvia [Otchet o deyatelnosti Fonda «Russkiy mir» za 2014 god, 2014, p.28].

The main officially declared goal of Rossotrudnichestvo is the support of Russian diaspora abroad. In ongoing activity Rossotrudnichestvo focuses more on integration in Eurasia. In 2014

it organized only one event for representatives of the Baltic states (Video-conference “Study and comparative analysis of social status and social support of WWII veterans in CIS and Baltic countries (April 24, 2014).

Rossotrudnichestvo has difficulties with opening its offices (Russian centers of science and culture) in the Baltic states. So far only one office operates in Lithuania within the Russian Embassy. Konstantin Kosachev, head of Rossotrudnichestvo in 2012-2015, spoke without disguise about political reasons of this problem as local authorities were wary of potential threat to the state stability [Kosachev, 2011, p.16].

In 2000s Kremlin included in its toolset a follow through support and creation of local compatriots’ organizations in the Baltics, designed to be a separate political power. These organizations actively participated in the conflict around Soviet soldier statue in 2007 in Tallinn, when local authorities decided to move it from the city center to the cemetery outside the city. Over 1500 Russian compatriots took part in demonstrations, headed by Night Watch and Ours (Nashi) organizations.

Estonian Secret Services report provides evidences about cooperation of abovementioned organizations and Russian diplomats in Tallinn. It also revealed Russian traces in Central Party behavior during this conflict. It opposed to local authorities actions and thus supported pro-Russian activists. Eventually demonstrations didn’t result into political earthquake and government resignation. Moreover local authorities received even more of public support. In a while Russia resumed oil supplies to Estonia.

In 2009 organization “Youth Word” (Molodoe Slovo) was founded in Estonia. It operated as a branch of Night Watch and cooperated closely with “Ours” (Nashi). It organized youth exchanges, sporting and culture events, summer camps. In 2011 it held an international youth camp on the Chudskoye lake with financial support of Anti-Fascist committee. In 2009-2013 organization was on target: it held conferences, meetings camps, radio broadcasts. All events were devoted to the historical memory of the Great Patriotic War and fight against rewriting its history. It organized Memory Watches, children’s drawing contest “I remember and I’m proud”, conference “For courage and martial prowess (May 19, 2013, Tallinn). Youth Word, even being officially independent, is often seen by foreign experts as Russian foreign policy instrument and potential uniting platform for Russian compatriots especially in case of potential conflict with Russia.

Compatriots and Russian diaspora is an integral part of Russian world political concept, which has been in avant-guard of Russian foreign policy recently. Since the end of 1990s Russian world concept has evolved from the communities network of Russian-speaking and Russian-thinking compatriots (definition by P. Tschedrovistky and E. Ostovsky) [Ostrovskiy, Shchedrovitskiy] to a larger interpretation, suggested in 2000s. Today Russian world is a global social and cultural phenomenon, which is able to unite Russian-speaking compatriots of all nationalities, who perceive themselves as Russians and who is spiritually connected with Russia and care about its fate (definition by O. Batanova)) [Batanova, 2009, p.14]. In 2014 Russian world concept went through a dramatic transformation and merged into international politics. Crimean spring of 2014 opened a new page in its history. Experts (M. Laruelle [Laruelle, 2015], N.Petro [Petro, 2015], F. Lukyanov and I. Zevelev [My vytolknuli Ukrainu... 2015], A. Bocharov [Bocharov, 2014]) state that during the joining of Crimean peninsula to the Russian Federation Russian world concept was used for the first time to justify Russian foreign policy actions. In its official speech devoted to “the Crimea’s return to home” on March 18, 2014 Russian president V. Putin declared that the peninsula has also been the part of the Russian world therefore its return back to Russia is an historical reunification of Russian world [Obrashcheniye Prezidenta..., 2014].

Leaders of Baltic states paid special attention to politization and securitization of Russian world concept. A short film produced by BBC “World War Three: Inside the War Room”

reveals deepest fears of the Baltic states [World War Three... 2016]. Film tells a fiction story about Russian compatriots riot in Latvia which leads to a Russian intervention and subsequent joining of NATO and beginning of the World War Three. Obviously, Baltic states learned well the Crimean lesson. Foreign governments began to see Russian world concept as a dangerous foreign policy ideology, which Russian governments intends to use to justify its action aimed at both protection of Russian-speaking communities and meddling in internal affairs of other states.

Results

Baltic states remain one of priorities for Russian foreign policy. To ensure security of its western borders and stability Russia needs to increase its influence in the Baltic region. Despite a significant dependence on Russian gas and oil, Kremlin needs a more sophisticated long-term strategy than a primitive energy blackmailing. In the meantime, it's obvious that a functional political dialogue between official governments of Russia and Baltic states is impossible. Current relations are overburdened by complicated common past with pending political dilemmas.

Therefore role of the soft power instruments within Russian strategy towards the Baltic states is significant. Russia has remarkably succeeded in expanding its media presence in the Baltic states: a range of Russian-speaking TV and radio channels broadcasting in Baltics are quite popular among Russian compatriots, Russian journals and newspapers are read, news web-site are well-known. Local authorities often accuse Russian-speaking media of propaganda and political cooperation with Kremlin. The fact that they regularly undertake attempts to cut off Russian-speaking media broadcasting proves that local governments are aware of its influence both on Russian compatriots and locals.

Besides media, Russia successfully uses other soft power instruments within cooperation with Baltic states. In order to protect Russian minorities Kremlin provides support on a regular basis to local political parties such as Harmony Center in Latvia and Party of Center in Estonia. Moscow skillfully uses narrative of human rights and fight against uprising of Nazi ideas on international forums and thus draws attention to alien status of Russians in the Baltic states. Russian government repeatedly filed claims to ECtHR and UN Human Rights Council, but with no success. Only International Amnesty acknowledged existing problems with Russian minorities in Baltics.

Russian diaspora living in Baltics is the most powerful and effective instrument of Russian soft power. Kremlin elaborated official documents, founded special agencies and organizations, and eventually created an ideology of Russian word. Role of Russian diaspora has significantly increased thanks to Russian world foundation, Rossotrudnichestvo, Foundation for support and protection of compatriots' rights, Foundation for cooperation with Russian-speaking media and local organizations such as Youth World and others.

Russia's soft power has also produced an opposite effect in the Baltic states. It has contributed for greater influence of Russia but also engendered fears of a imaginary Russian threat within Baltic societies. Some foreign experts even claimed that therefore Russian soft power isn't really soft power in its pure sense. In the Chatham house report 2012 it is stated that Russia's soft power is different from European one: it seeks to separate and ПРОБУЖДАТЬ страхи instead of uniting and brining peaceful collaboration [Grigas, 2012, p.13]. In Estonian report on Russian Compatriot Policy Russian soft power is defined as a synthesis of Soviet hard cultural propaganda and popular foreign policy tools of 21st century [Russian Soft Power in the 21st Century... 2011, p.14].

Conclusions

Russian world concept which got political power since the Crimean spring of 2014 and therefore has been used as a justification for Russian foreign policy decisions and even military operations has elevated wide-spread fears in the Baltic states. BBC fiction film about potential

Russian compatriots' riot and subsequent NATO intervention and World War III, Latvian Constitution Protection Bureau report, which defines Russian compatriots' network as a threat to the national security, problems with Rossotrudnichestvo offices in Latvia and Estonia provides bright examples for that.

There is no doubt that image of aggressive empire doesn't match to the Russian foreign policy goals. That's why along with active support of Russian compatriots' network Moscow should also strive to neutralize wide-spread fears and lead its Baltic partners to a functional and fruitful dialogue. So far Russia hasn't used such soft power instruments as persuasion and positive attractiveness, which are crucial, according to Nye, to be successful in the globalization era.

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