


Nov 04, 2016 by *Stanislav Budnitsky*

Russia to Embrace Soft Power ^[1]

Just over two decades after Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power”, Russia is set to officially introduce the phrase into its foreign policy vocabulary at the highest echelon. It was recently announced that, starting in 2013, Russia will jump on to the soft power bandwagon by making the highly demanded concept the focal instrument of its new foreign policy strategy. The development, in keeping with the rich traditions of Russian theater, unfolded in three key acts.

Act I

On May 7th, 2012, Vladimir Putin, the recently (re)elected president of Russia, issued a  decree “on measures of implementing foreign policy agenda of the Russian Federation”. The second to last of the roughly twenty points directed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to “present a new draft of the project of The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation before December 2012”.

The Concept is a foundational document of Russia's foreign policy, outlining the country's key directives outside its borders. The first Concept under Putin guided Russia's foreign policy for two presidential terms, from 2000 to 2008, when, in a political maneuver of Byzantine audacity, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev became the country's third president, while Vladimir Putin resigned himself (only temporarily, as we were to learn four years down the line) to the humble post of a prime minister.

The Concept was then altered to correspond to the geopolitical changes that had taken place over the eight years of Putin's presidency and to reflect President Medvedev's vision. For the first time public diplomacy became one of the notions – albeit, not yet of particular prominence – informing the document. Thus, a subsection entitled “Information support of foreign policy activities” states:

“In public diplomacy, Russia will seek its objective perception in the world, develop its own effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad, strengthen the role of the Russian mass media in the international information environment providing them with essential state support, as well as actively participate in international information cooperation, and take necessary measures to repel information threats to its sovereignty and security.”

Act II

On July 7th, 2012 Vladimir Putin held a customary biannual meeting with all Russian ambassadors in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs headquarters, one of the famous Seven Sisters towers – imposing 1940s-1950s skyscrapers of mixed Russian baroque and Gothic styles, often referred to as Stalinist architecture.

In his address to the esteemed audience, Russia's president voiced his vision of the country's foreign policy for the years to come. Seemingly, no revolutionary statements were made.

Neither were they expected. Following the meeting, most political commentators noted the continuity of Russia's foreign policy agenda. Yet, the president redux managed to subtly introduce the concept of "soft power" as a desired direction for the country's forthcoming international relations efforts:

"Our diplomacy has mastered familiar methods of international work fairly well, if not perfectly, but there is food for thought with respect to employing new technologies, for example soft power. As of now, we must admit, Russia's image abroad is formed not by us, therefore it is often distorted and does not reflect the real situation in our country."

Act III

As directed half a year earlier, in December 2012 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs presented a new version of The Foreign Policy Concept for the government's consideration. It has not yet become available to the public, but the Russian media report that the primary idea is the conceptualization of Russia as an "island of stability" in an "increasingly unpredictable" and "turbulent" world. Soft power is seen as a key instrument in achieving this goal.

As part of the broader foreign policy shift, a separate document was presented to the government the same month, specifically addressing soft power initiatives. Serving as a textbook example of bureaucratic lingo, the document bears the lengthy title of "The plan of measures of the government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of activities in the spheres of international humanitarian cooperation and assistance to international development on the basis of Russian centers of science and culture abroad in 2013-2015".

While the plan is being reviewed by the government, Russian media, which managed to get hold of the document's draft, report on its main points. Kommersant, one of Russia's two most respected business dailies, outlines several of these:

- Extensive development of the network of Russian Centers of Science and Culture (RCSC), of which there are only 59 at the moment. The centers, among other services, would provide diverse information on Russia, offer educational programs, broadcast live premiers of films and plays, and serve as meeting points for local alumni of Russian universities.
- Closer engagement with the Russian diaspora and foreign youth. In 2017, Russia is planning on hosting a World Festival of Youth and Students, like it did in 1957, when it opened up the iron curtain for the first time, and in 1985, when it globally advertised the advent of perestroika. Various special programs will be designed to increase the number of foreign visiting students and to bring younger social, political, and business activists for short-term visits.
- Promotion of Russian language, coordinated by a specially created state fund for the support of Russian language abroad. RCSCs would provide testing facilities – much like various American and British centers worldwide with regards to TOEFL and IELTS.

Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938), a legendary Russian theatrical pedagogue and creator of the internationally renowned method of acting, would exclaim ""*Ne veryu!*" (I don't believe it!") every time one of his actors failed to deliver a natural and believable performance. With the international image of Russia in the recent months defined by the Pussy Riot case and inhumane anti-adoption legislation, the country will have to master Joseph Nye's phrase and the underlying concept exceptionally well in order to avoid hearing the phrase coined by Stanislavski.

