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Oct 11, 2019 by [Eriks Varpahovskis](#)

## **Non-Russian 'Russian World'** <sup>[1]</sup>

The concept of “Russian World” (“*Ruskiy Mir*”) started being used by Putin almost 20 years ago. The initially cultural and civilizational concept was introduced as a component of political rhetoric in 2001 when the newly elected President of Russia mentioned it at the World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad. Since that time, “Russian World” was the concept within which Russia promoted its language and culture across the globe and established relations with diasporas and communities that have a Russian cultural background. Further, within the “Russian World” concept Russia developed public diplomacy instruments which included the establishment of the “*Ruskiy Mir*” Foundation aiming to promote Russian language and culture, and the *Rosstrudnichestvo* federal agency which supports humanitarian cooperation and seeks to improve the perception of Russia by publics abroad. Through the work of these two organizations, Russia was planning to enhance its soft power. At the later stages, the concept was heavily politicized and was used to legitimize the annexation of Crimea for the sake of protection of Russian-speaking people who are part of the “Russian World.”

Currently, the “Russian World” is the driving concept under which Russia is trying to conduct public diplomacy, gain soft power across the world and persuade its citizens of the legitimacy of the foreign affairs activities Moscow undertakes.

Nonetheless, the “Russian World” concept is not universal. Moreover, it is not universal for internal politics as well. Russia incorporates several national republics that have their own distinct cultures, languages and religions. For populations of these republics, it might be complicated to associate themselves with unity under the Russian civilizational approach. Despite being culturally distant from Russians, the diversity of cultural backgrounds can be a source for additional tracks of Russia’s public diplomacy.

Among national republics that can serve as additional sources for public diplomacy, the Kalmyk Republic, Chechen Republic, Tatarstan and some others can be considered. However, the substantial cultural distinction of these mentioned republics can undermine Russia’s overall foreign affairs approach as well. Below I discuss three republics that have strong potential to contribute to Russia’s public diplomacy efforts; as you will see, the realization of this potential can vary.

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The first case that I discuss is Tatarstan, which adds to Russia’s public diplomacy through a variety of measures. Kazan, capital of Tatarstan, brands itself as the third capital of Russia (after Moscow and Saint-Petersburg) and often hosts sport mega-events such as the FIFA World Cup in 2018, FINA Water Sports Championships in 2015, and the Summer Universiade in 2013. There is the World Tatar Congress, through which Tatarstan employs Tatar cultural ties to engage with the Tatar diaspora living in other parts of Russia and outside Russia. Also, unlike other Russian federal subjects, Tatarstan actively and creatively employs youth diplomacy, and Kazan often hosts a variety of youth forums attended by young people from different countries (e.g., European Youth Parliament and the Global Shapers Community). In November it will host the first model Organization of Islamic Cooperation. So Tatarstan tries to distinguish itself from Russia’s foreign affairs, and uses its cultural potential and geographic location to brand itself as a bridge between the West and East of Eurasia.

It is hard to blend Islam-related narration with the “Russian World” rhetoric. Hence Russia’s Islamic diplomacy was instead delegated to subjects of the Federation like the Chechen Republic. The Chechen Republic is a subject of the Federation that is located in the European part of Russia, where the majority of the population are Muslims, and where recently the biggest mosque in Europe was opened. Furthermore, the Chechen Republic permanently engages in foreign affairs on its behalf while serving Russian foreign affairs interests. For example, Chechnya often welcomes various religious leaders of the Islamic World at conferences (e.g., 2010, 2014, 2016, 2019), Chechens reconstructed a mosque in Syria and

built a new mosque in Israel. An extremely controversial figure in Russian politics and the head of the Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, tours around the Middle East to attract investments to Chechnya represents Russia in talks with leaders of the respective countries. He attempts to construct the image of Chechnya as a regional player and a bridge in negotiations between Russia and the Muslim World.

The Republic of Kalmykia is the only region on the European continent where the majority of living people are Buddhists. Here is where, very recently, the biggest Buddha statue in Europe was erected, and is where more than 40 khuruls (Buddhist monasteries, shrines) are located. Notably, this region was visited several times by the spiritual leader of Buddhists, Dalai Lama XIV (1991, 1992, 2004). This recognition of Kalmykia as a center of Buddhism in Europe could have been used by Russia to establish a relationship with the public that follows this religion, but Russia is limited in this opportunity. Dalai Lama XIV for many years has continuously been denied a Russian visa because he was a leader of the Tibetan government in exile until 2011, and remains the spiritual leader of Tibet. China's official position defines the Dalai Lama as a separatist who wants to cut off Tibet from China. Russia at that current stage has to choose between a good relationship with China and the development of a Buddhist diplomacy vector. The choice is obvious.

For Russia, having national republics can serve as an additional instrument of soft power. By using unique cultural features of these republics, Russia can conduct outreach to hard-to-reach publics by applying the "Russian World" rhetoric. After the introduction of sanctions against some Russian citizens as a response to the Crimea annexation, relations between Russia and some Western partners have severely worsened. Having federal subjects with specific cultural and ethnic features can serve as a diplomatic link in relationships with partners with whom ties have deteriorated. For example, since the beginning of the 21st century, Canada and Russia have run several inter-regional social programs fostering cooperation between indigenous people living close to the North Pole living in both countries. There is huge potential for a cultural diplomacy project, for example, on the protection of intangible cultural heritage that the people of Canada and Russia share.

It is a challenge for internal politics when subjects try to increase own influence in other bordering regions (like the Chechen Republic in North Caucasus region), when local ethnic groups protest cultural policies imposed by the federal government, or, like with the Kalmyk Republic, when a foreign affairs activity (like inviting Dalai Lama) may create unwanted consequences to Russia-China strategic relations. Even though national republics-driven paradiplomacy is a useful tool to expand Russia's influence, it cannot be easily integrated into the "Russian World" concept. From their view, the policies of subjects should not threaten the concept and should not be allowed too much autonomy. Thus, it is fair to expect that republics' activities will be further monitored and orchestrated by Moscow, but they will not be allowed until the moment they produce soft power or public diplomacy benefits, or at least do not risk Russia's overall foreign policy agenda.

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