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RUSSIAN SOFT POWER AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INFLUENCE ON BELARUS

ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of the specific ways in which the Russian Federation has made use of soft power in its relations with Belarus beyond 1991. Since then, in the wake of the recent presidential elections, there has been remarkable progress in the development of Russian soft power instruments, both in terms of their diversity and the innovativeness of their distribution channels. Concurrently, however, the number of groups for whom Russian soft power would be a compelling and competitive alternative to Western soft power is rapidly diminishing as a result of the evolution of identity processes, a shift in media preferences, or an influx of political refugees. The primary research question is as follows: what are the principal axiological and institutional sources of Russian soft power applied in Belarus, and what instruments fall within its scope? The methods employed in this study included qualitative and quantitative, historical, systemic, literature analysis and criticism, and content analysis.

KEYWORDS: soft power, hard power, Belarus, Russian Federation, the Union State of Russia and Belarus

Introduction

Since its inception, the Russian Federation has exerted various forms of influence and pressure on its neighbours in order to ensure its security and advance its interests. Initially, it appeared that the military potential, largely inherited from the Soviet Union, would be the primary instrument of influence. It was also a logical choice, given the post-communist scarcity of ideological tools and the reduced role of the Orthodox religion (with its institutional resource, the Orthodox Church) in the post-Soviet states. This is a characteristic Russian approach to international relations. Depending on the situation, Russia presents various arguments, such as cultural diplomacy, resource diplomacy, and vaccine diplomacy (during the Covid-19 pandemic).

With the passage of time, it has become evident that the objectives of Russian foreign policy include the implementation of integrative and reintegrative projects (partially serving as ideological substitutes) leading to the economic, political, or cultural expansion of the Russian state. A crucial aspect of this activity has

been the dissemination of Russian culture and the models and solutions applied in its domestic policy. This has facilitated the preservation of the post-Soviet states within the Russian sphere of influence, thereby realising a key component of Russia's increasingly articulated neo-imperial plans. In summary, through the promotion and launch of successive projects (whether political, economic or cultural), Russia is attempting to recreate the regional and even global reach that the USSR had (Domanska 2013, 173). It is important to note that the limited impact of the implementation of projects of a political, economic or cultural nature that compete with Russian integration projects (e.g., European Cohesion Policy, Eastern Partnership) suggests that Russia continues to affect the political, economic, and social space of a number of countries in the region (Chodubski 2012, 15).

Since 1991, Russia's soft power strategies have varied considerably, depending on the target in question (e.g., the international community, Western countries, Latin American countries, and individual post-Soviet states). Nonetheless, the fundamental and overriding objective has remained consistent: to create a positive image of the Russian Federation and to expand its sphere of influence in the political-economic or socio-cultural space. This paper argues that Russian soft power can be conceptualized as a kind of complementary political, economic and cultural ecosystem. The Russian Federation uses a range of influence instruments in order to increase the effectiveness and reach of its resources, which significantly hinders the assessment of the impact of individual instruments. Therefore, it should be noted that the term "soft power", as it is used in the classical sense and in line with Joseph Nye's concept, defined as a form of non-economic and non-military influence, seems too narrow when applied to Russian soft power (Nye 2007).

The objective of the study is to examine the specific characteristics of the Russian soft power instruments, with a particular focus on those used against Belarus. The primary research question is as follows: what are the main institutional and axiological sources of Russian soft power applicable in Belarus before and after 2020, and what instruments fall within its scope? In order to facilitate the study, the author hypothesises that Russian influence in Belarus is based on a strong axiological foundation of easternization and is implemented through a well-organised network of organisations (governmental and non-governmental) performing numerous project-based tasks.

It is evident that the influence on the post-Soviet states has been significant for over 30 years. However, its intensity, scope and instruments have varied over time. From a political standpoint, the most significant aspects are the provision of financial and other forms of support to pro-Russian politicians and political parties, the overt obstruction of democratisation transitions, the stimulation of an atmosphere of hostility between national and ethnic groups, the dissemination of disinformation in order to make room for Russian initiatives and so forth. Nevertheless, some of these activities remained in a grey area, and Russia never acknowledged them.

Consequently, it is challenging to determine the true impact of Russian soft power. However, it is evident that Russia has been able to influence the internal policies of the post-Soviet states through the use of these tools (Czajkowski 2011, 89). Another approach to partially measure the strength of Russian soft power is to assess the growth dynamics of Russian governmental organisations and openly or implicitly pro-Russian NGOs allocated to the post-Soviet states (Kiseleva 2015, 319). The interdisciplinary research methodology in this paper encompasses a range of methods: qualitative and quantitative, historical, systemic, literature analysis and critique, and content analysis.

1. The concept of “Easternization” as a key element of Russian soft power

In 2013, the Russian Federation adopted the Concept of Foreign Policy, which for the first time explicitly stated that the challenges of foreign policy compelled Russia to adjust the instruments for pursuing its national interests. In order to reinforce the international position of the state, it was necessary to implement a number of complementary activities. These embodied the promotion of the Russian language, the strengthening of the global position of the Russian media, the development of Russian tools to influence public opinion abroad, and the intensification of the Russian information policy in the field of promoting culture and science. The Strategy for Countering Extremism in the Russian Federation until 2025 (adopted in 2014) claims that linguistic extremism (manifested, for instance, on the Internet) and whose actions could target the Russian language could pose a threat to state security. The above position was elaborated by the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (2015), which saw the declining global role of the Russian language as a sign of a threat to state security. Therefore, in order to mitigate the risk of the Russian language becoming less attractive, it was assumed that measures would have to be taken to increase the export of Russian educational services. Similarly, the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation aims to strengthen Russia’s global role by promoting the teaching and use of the Russian language and by consolidating the Russian diaspora. It is also worth noting that the Russian Federation has developed a whole network of institutions (e.g., the Association “*Russkij Dom*” and the Foundation “*Ruskij Mir*”), which, in theory, should help the diaspora to maintain contact with the homeland and assist in possible repatriation. In practice, however, these organisations play a significant role in the dissemination of Russian soft power in the post-Soviet space, along with Belarus, among others. In the 21st century, the doctrinal documents additionally included the task of communicating the Russian point of view to the international community and enhancing the position of the Russian media in the global information space.

In the same year, the Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation was adopted, which stipulates the need to combat overt and covert discrimination against the Russian media. In the next phase of aggression against Ukraine, another 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation' was approved on 31 March, 2023, according to which Russia opposes Western neo-colonialism, and journalists. In contrast, a year after Russia moved to the next phase of aggression against Ukraine, on 31 March 2023 another 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation' was adopted, according to which Russia will oppose Western neo-colonialism, hegemonism, and revisionism through hard and soft power instruments. The approval of the above documents was in response to the growing demand for modern forms of communication between the Russian state and the outside world. This situation was influenced not only by the globalisation of the infosphere, of which the Russian-speaking space is a part (Trenin 2001, 22), but also by Russia's perception of international relations in terms of the so-called new geopolitics, which describes the activity of states holistically and emphasises the need to expand the catalogue of non-military instruments of influence (Potulski 2010, 137-160).

Russia's efforts to maintain its position as a political and economic hegemon in the post-Soviet space are aimed at ensuring the possibility of virtually unlimited use of the phenomenon of diffusion of one of the soft power tools, such as the promotion of the concept of the so-named RUSSIAN WORLD (Efremenko | Ponamareva | Nikulichev 2021). At its core is the assumption of a deepening dichotomy between the Western and Eastern worlds, resulting in the emergence of the post-Soviet space of constant multi-vector civilizational confrontation. While promoting its own political, cultural and communication standards, which differ markedly from those of the West, Russia simultaneously resists the promotion of liberal values and undermines the demands of civil society (Potulski 2008, 144). By presenting a Russian vision of the world, the state is therefore pursuing a systematic policy of multifaceted EASTERNIZATION: it hinders democratisation tendencies in the region and the promotion of Russian and Russian-speaking education, science and culture. It is also committed to expanding the Russian-speaking infosphere, strengthening the Russian Orthodox Church and brandishing Russian sport. Simultaneously, Russia is creating its own axiological space, sidelining ideological proposals branded by the Euro-Atlantic world, fighting against moral liberalisation and promoting the fashion for conservatism in a wide range of areas of social life. In short, easternization in Russia is modernisation without democratisation, on the Russian model and under Russian auspices.

A characteristic feature of the Russian soft power toolkit is that it makes relatively little use of development and humanitarian aid (approximately 0.03% of Russian GDP is allocated to support developing countries). Russia considers cultural and humanitarian cooperation as separate foreign policy activities

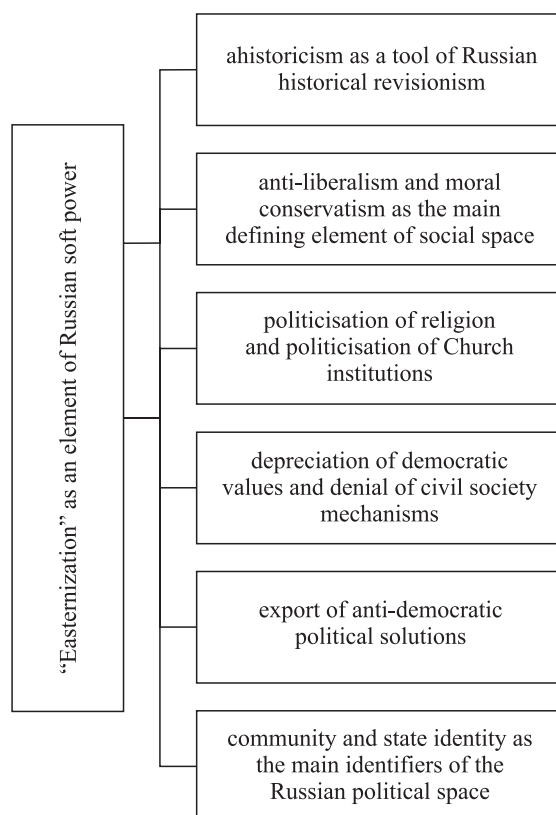


Fig. 1. Easternization as an element of Russian soft power
 “Easternization” as an element of Russian soft power

not included in aid expenditure reports. In 2007, the first concept for Russia's participation in international development assistance was approved. One of its objectives is to give Russia influence over the global processes that shape a stable world order. Assistance should also enable the development of good neighbourly relations with Russia's neighbours and the strengthening of the authority of the Russian Federation. The concept was updated in 2014, when assistance to the CIS states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and other states with good neighbourly relations with Russia was identified as a priority regional activity. Remarkably, an important vector of development aid is the free education of students from developing countries at Russian state universities (this amounts to approximately 15,000 foreign students per year, which is approximately 6% of the global number of foreign students). The vast majority of them are citizens of post-Soviet countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Contrary to the OECD methodology, Russia includes the remittances from migrants to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan or Moldova in its international development assistance. However, the main beneficiary of the

various instruments of Russian development assistance is Belarus, which receives support not only in the form of income repatriation but also investment in migrant workers, foreign trade preferences and state loans (Klysinski | Zhochovsky 2016).

In the course of time, the use of sport to promote a positive image of Russia in the region and globally has also proved to be highly effective. Competition in sport has been an essential part of mass culture, and the marketing exploitation of success in winter sports (figure skating, hockey), boxing, athletics, or tennis is only one part of a wider campaign to build a positive brand for the Russian Federation. Equally noteworthy are the high-profile sporting events held on Russian territory, which are used to create a global image of a modern country that attracts tourists and also competes with the Western hosts in organizing major events (e.g. the 2013 World Championships in Athletics held in Moscow, the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, the 2018 FIFA World Cup). However, Russia's ability to use sports for soft power purposes has been severely limited by the subsequent doping scandals and, as a consequence, a severe reputational impact from sports sanctions.

2. Specificity of the Russian soft power instruments in Belarus

Russia's political, economic and cultural attractiveness remains high three decades after the independence of some post-Soviet states, although the circumstances are dynamic (Hill 2005, 1-16). Political orientations or cultural preferences are changeable, as exemplified by the condition of Ukrainian society after the Revolution of Dignity or the Belarusian one after the events of August 2020 show. It should also be noted that soft power is an activity that is largely complementary to traditional diplomacy, and when Russia's interests are somehow limited, it still willingly resorts to hard instruments, as in the case of Belarus, with particular emphasis on military tools and energy. Paradoxically, their use can reduce the long-term effectiveness of soft power, as Russia destroys its image as a state that creates a Russian world through methods of peace and dialogue, for instance through direct military confrontation. In the case of Russian-Belarusian relations, Russia has employed a variety of soft power instruments in Belarus effectively and in the long-term. According to Bickaускаite, the aforementioned actions were of a hybrid nature, with the primary aim of DEBELARUSIFICATION of Belarusians and the promotion of Pan-Slavism and Great Russian ideology (Bickaускаite 2019). The perception of Belarusian statehood as a direct and natural continuation of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was promoted, in line with Lukashenka's concept of the primacy of political identification over national identity. For a considerable period of time, Russia's attractiveness to Belarus and Belarusians was significant, primarily due

to the shared linguistic heritage, cultural family ties and the opening of the Russian labour market to Belarusians, of whom approximately 300,000 found employment in the Russian Federation.

The use of the Russian language as a basic instrument for the dissemination of Russian soft power in Belarusian society is a highly complex issue. It involves not only Russian-language media and education (including the prestige of Russian and Russian-language education), but also the use of Russian as the primary language for public (including official) and private communication. It is, therefore, understandable that Russian and Russian-language media are a significant element of the Russian soft power architecture in Belarus. Of particular note are Russian TV channels (Russia TV and NTV), available widely in Belarus, and Belarusian TV channels, as well as Belarusian TV channels and programs produced for Russian TV channels. In the printed press (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Argumenty I Fakty*), the content of popular Russian titles was typically supplemented by Belarusian topics prepared by Belarusian editors. By the year 2020, Russian influence was also evident in electronic media, such as social media. At that time, Belarusian Internet users' preferences were clearly pro-Russian, and the most popular websites in Belarus were either Russian, with strong links to Russia, or clearly pro-Russian.

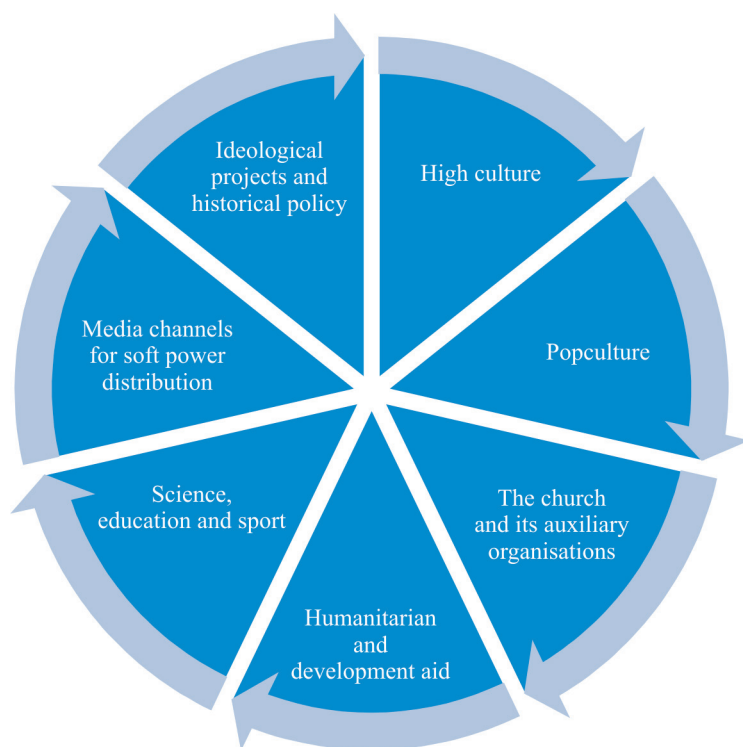


Fig. 2. The architecture of Russian soft power in Belarus

Russia actively used a range of different instruments of influence and manipulation, some of which were targeted at specific recipients. According to Viačorki, organisations involved in Russian soft power activities are strategically positioned in western Belarus, mainly in proximity to the borders with Lithuania and Poland. Non-state actors also play a significant role in the distribution of soft power, such as the GONGO or the Orthodox Church. In addition to its obvious religious and cultural function, the Orthodox Church works has been working to promote the so-called RUSSKIJ MIR, in particular since the inception of the Russkij Mir Foundation (Russian World Foundation), established in 2007. It is officially supported by the Russian Orthodox Church (Curanović 2010, 195). Concurrently, a number of organisations were engaged in Russian culture and language, including the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation “Rossotrudnichestvo” (Minsk Centre, Brest Branch, Gomel Branch). The Russian Foundation for Public Diplomacy named after Alexander Gorchakov, the Foundation for the Support and Development of the Russian Language, the Russian Centre for Science and Culture in Belarus and the Belarus-Russia Friendship Association were instrumental in spreading the notion of Russia’s attractiveness. According to Viačorka, the four principal instruments of Russian soft power in Belarus are precisely the mass media (Russian cultural centres, Sputnik or Rossiya-Segodnya), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Orthodox Church and political think tanks.

Furthermore, the Russian Federation provides substantial financial support to a multitude of Russian-Belarusian cultural initiatives, including festivals, competitions, cultural exchanges, and Russian-Belarusian round tables). The largest event with such a thematic profile is the International Art Festival “Slavic Bazaar” in Vitebsk. However, there is an increasing number of similar initiatives, including the International Literary Competition “Slavic Kaleidoscope”, the International Competition of Belarusian Poetry and Song at the Moscow House of Nationalities, the projects “Slavic Wreath: Historical and Cultural Unity of the Slavic Peoples” and “Russia and Belarus: Historical and Spiritual Community”. The Belarusian-Russian Youth Symphony Orchestra is successfully operating. The number of joint scientific initiatives, including conferences, joint research and popularisation projects, exchanges of scientific staff, publications, and the activities of the Russian Virtual Library *rvb.ru*), is rising dynamically as well. In addition, there has been a notable increase in the number of educational initiatives, such as scholarship systems, youth exchanges, the activity of Russian teachers in Belarusian schools, and a system of Russian language and literature Olympiads). A plethora of activities have been designed for children and young people, among others the project “Youth for the Union State”, the joint “Educational Avenue” at the 29th International Forum of Information and Communication Technologies TIBO-2023, the popularisation of the Russian Language Day and Year and the Day of Unity of the Peoples of Belarus

and Russia. Minsk also celebrates St Petersburg Days and Russian-Belarusian projects are also conducted by the Leo Tolstoy Institute of Languages and Cultures and the International Slavic Centre Konsonans. The 'Winter University of the Union State Engineering Schools' will also be operational in 2023, while the "Belarusian-Russian Centre for Inclusive Education" and the "Russian-Belarusian Technopark Initiative" are scheduled for 2024 to 2026. In the light of the exclusion of all Russian and Belarusian universities from the Bologna process, the Congress of Young Scientists of Belarus and Russia and the Belarusian-Russian University, with its own Eurasian Studies Centre and the Pushkin Centre (created in cooperation with the Pushkin Institute of the Russian Language) provide numerous opportunities for the use of the Russian soft power. Furthermore, Russian and Belarusian youth organisations are engaged in extensive collaboration, exemplified by the signing of a cooperation agreement between the Belarusian Republican Youth the Union and Belarusian National Pioneer Organization and the All-Russian State Movement of Children and Youth, also known as the "Movement of the First". The most notable outcome is the World Youth Festival, scheduled to be held in Russia in 2024, where the Belarusian delegation is expected to be one of the largest in attendance.

In addition, tourist exchanges between Russia and Belarus are becoming more frequent. It is anticipated that joint cross-border tourist routes will be developed in the near future. During official speeches, Oleg Andreichik, the Deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism of Belarus, has emphasised that the Russian Federation is Belarus' main partner in the field of tourism. In the previous year, 96% of the tourists visiting our country were Russians. This accounts for 97% of export earnings from tourism services"¹. A significant proportion of Russia's soft power initiatives also encompasses sport, both professional and amateur. Belarusian athletes participate in competitions organised in Russia and Russian athletes in events organised in Belarus. Furthermore, joint sporting events represent a political response by the Union State to the exclusion of Belarusian and Russian athletes from numerous international competitions due to doping scandals and the attack against Ukraine.

In particular, the Russian Federation supports initiatives aimed at building a common historical memory space and mythologising selected aspects of the Russian-Belarusian past (Ławniczak 2022). It is directly related to the core of the project of the so-called Russian world, i.e. the need for political consolidation, which can be achieved through the use of formal-legal, institutional, media and symbolic instruments (frequently actions combining the above elements). A perfect example of the implementation of this task is the long-running multi-element campaign dedicated to the cultivation of the memory of the Great Patriotic War. As part of the struggle against "Western revisionism", Russia is conducting a range of activities

¹ <https://www.belta.by/society/view/minekonomrazvitija-industrija-turizma-posposobstvuet-ekonomicheskomu-sotrudnichestvu-belarusi-i-rf-561132-2023/> (accessed: 23.12.2021).

in Belarus to promote its own “historical truth” and present a positive image of Russia and Belarus as the historical and ideological heirs of the anti-fascist coalition. The most popular thematic action is the patriotic ‘Remembrance Train’, which has become an annual event.

Furthermore, the recent restructuring of the media landscape in Belarus is likely to reinforce the country’s reliance on Russian influence. Indeed, the Supreme Council of the Union State has established a media holding company with its headquarters in Moscow and a representative office in Minsk. The project will incorporate the union’s existing media resources, including three newspaper titles, the BelRos TV channel, a radio station, internet portals, channels and profiles on the Telegram and Vandeia social networks. Zen, channels on the YouTube and RuTube platforms and the State of the Union news and analysis portal <http://www.soyuz.by> will also be taken into consideration. An initial allocation of approximately USD 11 million has been made to the holding company.

It is noteworthy that A. Lukashenko has already signalled the need to coordinate for media policy of the union state from 2021. The objective of the project is to create and disseminate a positive image of Russia and Belarus in the region and beyond. A key component is the establishment of a Content Production Centre to oversee the creation and distribution of digital content in line with the interests of Russia and Belarus. It will encompass a range of materials, from propaganda to disinformation, tailored specifically for digital media platforms, with a particular focus on social networks.

Summary

The socio-political crisis that unfolded in Belarus after 9 August 2020, affecting almost the entire nation, has left a lasting impact not only on the country’s internal and external situation, but also on its position in its relations with the Russian Federation. The dissemination of content promoting deeper integration within the union state, the facilitation of access to new or wider distribution channels, and the emphasis on the media apparatus controlled by the official Minsk have significantly strengthened Russian soft power towards Belarus. The basis of the Russian narrative is the emphasis on the assumption that closeness to Russia is so natural for Belarus and its inhabitants that there is no alternative.

This trend has been further exacerbated by the deterioration of relations between Belarus and the West (also as a result of the sanctions policy against Belarus), rendering prospects for economic cooperation virtually nil. This, in turn, has reinforced the strength of Russia’s economic soft power, with Russia accounting

for approximately 90% of Belarusian exports by 2023². In 2022 alone, the trade balance between the two countries exceeded USD 50 billion and, as A. Lukashenko himself has declared, there are “no barriers and restrictions in contacts” between Russia and Belarus³.

Currently, the effectiveness of Russian soft power instruments used in Belarus should be assessed not only in light of the post-election protests, but also through the prism of two key turning points in Russo-Belarusian politics. The first is related to the momentous events of August 2020 and their manifold consequences, and the second, equally important, is Russia’s attack against Ukraine and Belarus’ role in Russia’s military actions. Despite Belarus’s growing economic, military, political, and propaganda dependence on Russia, the impact of social resistance to the Lukashenko regime and the wave of repression that engulfed Belarusian society after 2020, combined with Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, has significantly affected Russia’s ability to implement soft power instruments in Belarus. The findings of a study published by Chatham House that the pro-Russianism among Belarusians weakened after Moscow’s support for Lukashenka in 2020 (Astapienia 2020). However, it should be remembered that the post-election protests in Belarus were not clearly anti-Russian in character, and that some of Lukashenka’s opponents in the presidential elections had a clearly pro-Russian electoral programme. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that by 2020 part of Belarusian society had already become resistant to Russia’s soft power instruments, yet, this does not mean that it had rendered itself passive in this regard. In a short period of time, the union state has been able to unify its propaganda message, as an examination of the dominant narratives in Russian and Belarusian propaganda shows. In turn, Belarus has lost significant human resources since 2020, as the process of brain drain has accelerated due to labour emigration and political exile (Babizkij 2019) among the instruments of Russian soft power that today have minimal or no influence. Moreover, after 2020 trust in both the Belarusian state media and the Russian media declined⁴. The mechanically replicated political technology of the Russian media is no longer as effective in Belarus as it is in Russia. Among Belarusians who are becoming more digitally literate, the popularity of social media is growing (in particular of FB, Telegram, NEXTA, and Instagram)⁵ compared to the previously dominant VK.com and Odnoklassniki. However, a partial change in Belarusians’ media preferences took place before 2020. According to data from the Belarusian Ministry

² Source: National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus.

³ <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/videoobrashchenie-na-plenarnom-zasedanii-x-foruma-regionov-rossii-i-belarusi> (accessed: 22.12.2023).

⁴ <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/11/16/perelomit-oppozitsionnyenastroeniya-v-belarusi-dolzhen-desant-rossiyskih-polititnologov-nu-i-kak-poluchaetsya> (accessed: 24.02.2021).

⁵ https://baj.by/sites/default/files/event/files/2020/report_media2020_rus.pdf (accessed: 24.12.2021).

of Communications, the number of households with Internet access has increased significantly, from 61% in 2016 to 82.5% in 2020. The number of Internet users in 2020 amounted to 5.4 million.

Despite the above data, Lukashenka continues to publicly advocate for the creation of a media holding company for the Union State, and in the near future, this project may become the flagship, the most prominent, unilateral instrument of Russian influence on Belarus. According to the data of Sociolytics, only in the period August-September 2020 trust in the state in Belarus significantly decreased (54% of Belarusians prefer independent media, and only 29% for the state media), 43.3% of Belarusians declared that they never watch the pro-government TV channels ONT, STV, Belarus 1 or Belarus 2. Due to their thematic specificity and the way the content is prepared by Russian and Belarusian editors, some traditional media, such as television or the printed press, can even be perceived as an inherent part of the Russian infosphere. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the positive image of Russia in the Belarusian media is not only promoted through strictly political programmes. Relevant elements of Russian soft power are also implemented through pop culture: films and series, entertainment programmes or the activities of pro-Russian celebrities. The study thus confirms a hypothesis that has persisted for more than 30 years. At the same time, the prestige of Russian-language education has been cultivated, and the Russian and Russian-language media had a significant impact on Belarusian society, as claimed by the Deputy Chairman of the Council of the Republic, Valery Belsky,

[...] neither Belarusians nor Russians can be separated. We love Russian songs, Russian culture and we complement and enrich it with our output. We do not feel alien on Russian soil, and Russians do not feel alien on Belarusian soil⁶.

Only the next phase of the war with Ukraine (from 24 February) has radically changed the Russian Federation's ability to use soft power tools. This is amply demonstrated by the results of the Global Soft Power Index 2023, which show that Russia is simultaneously the only country in the world whose reputation has declined to such an extent that it escapes the clear identification of Russia as an AGGRESSOR STATE. It has lost its place in the top ten⁷. In the case of Belarus, Russia continues to take a number of measures to compensate for the loss. On the one hand, it is intensifying hard power projects (as part of the context of deepening the military cooperation with the union state). On the other, it is developing an extremely wide range of proposals in the fields of culture, education or sport, aimed at strengthening the power and reach of soft power instruments. Nevertheless, the

⁶ ...<https://www.belta.by/society/view/belskij-o-sojuze-belarusi-i-rossii-my-vzaimno-drug-druga-obogaschaem-558875-2023/> (accessed: 20.12.2023).

⁷ ...<https://brandirectory.com/softpower>

Russian Federation can maintain influence over Belarusian society for a considerable period of time through the use of hybrid influence, specifically given the protracted nature of the conflict and Belarus's limited military involvement in the war. Even if there is a systematic decline in Russia's sympathisers among adult Belarusians and in the new Belarusian diaspora, there will still be tremendous opportunities for the use of Russian soft power instruments among children, adolescents and young adults, to whom a substantial proportion of Russian-funded educational, popular science and cultural initiatives are directed. The key question, therefore, will be whether it will be possible to build a common identity for the citizens of the Russian-dominated union state. In the event of the youngest Belarusians, the battle for control of their minds is most definitely being fought on the Internet, and if for some reason they do not leave the Runet, Russia will slowly build a pro-Russian reality for them and with them.

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