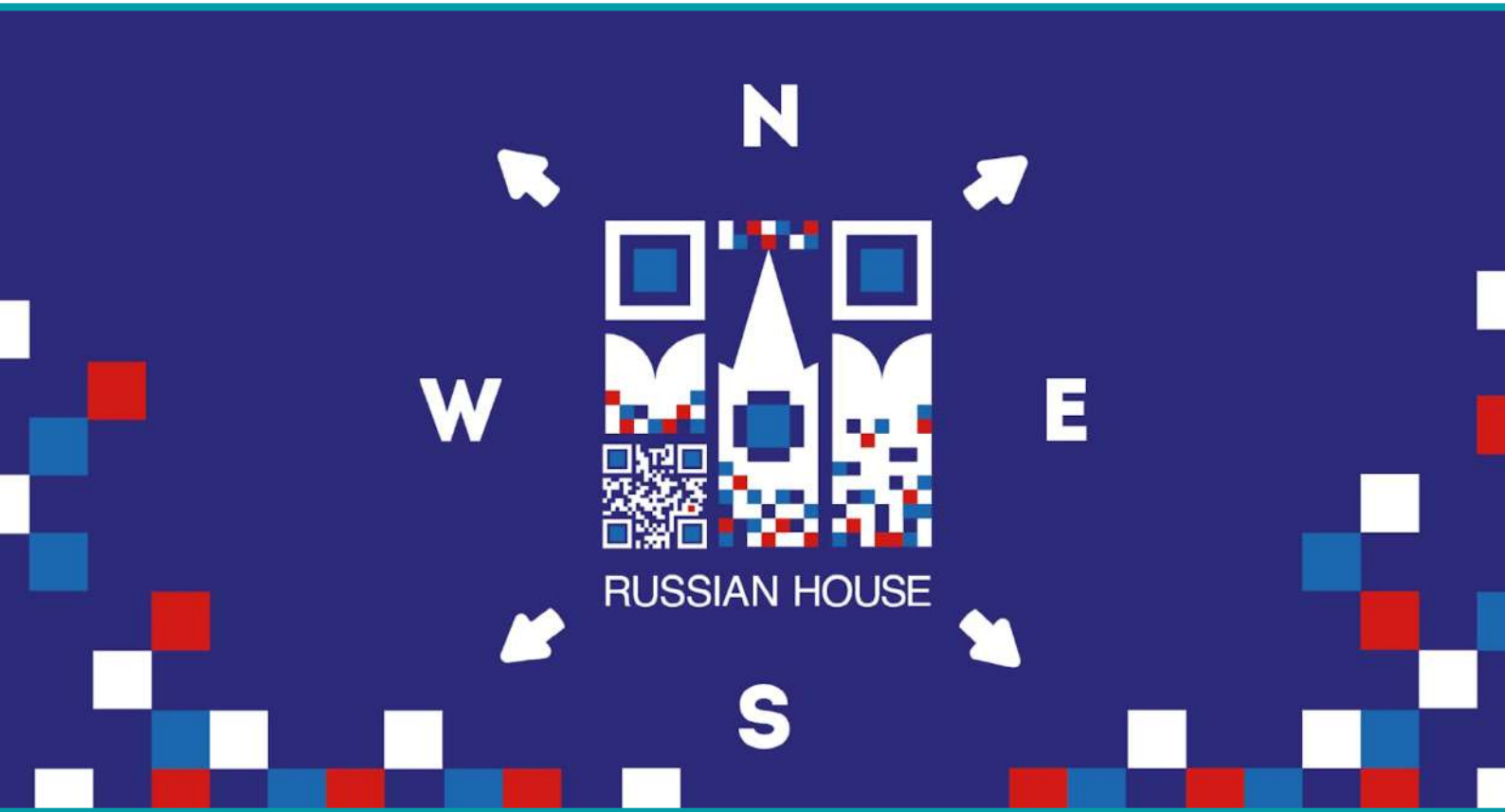


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Soft Power Under Pressure: Continuity, Adaptation, and the Emerging Role of the Gulf in Russia's Soft Power Policies

Research Paper

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Content Structure

Introduction and Theoretical Framing

I. Russia's Soft Power from a Historical Perspective

- 1) Early Image Projection Efforts in Pre-Revolutionary Russia
- 2) The USSR Period and the Development of Image Projection Instruments

II. Formalization of Russia's Soft Power Approach on the International Stage

- 1) Institutionalization of Soft Power Policies

Media

Expert and Knowledge-Based Diplomacy

Cultural and Humanitarian Diplomacy

- 2) Conceptualization of the Soft Power Approach

Conceptual Formalization

Ideological Foundations

III. Russian Soft Power in the Face of New Challenges

- 1) The Challenge of International Sanctions
- 2) Evolving Stance of Traditional Partners

IV. Strategic Adaptation of Russian Soft Power

- 1) New Conceptual Framing in a Changing Political Context
- 2) Adaptation and Reorganization of Russian Soft Power Efforts

Sports

Popular Cultural Venues

Russian Classical "High Culture"

Media

Cultural, Education, and Humanitarian Diplomacy

V. The GCC as a New Focus Area of Russia's Soft Power

- 1) Russia's Public Diplomacy toward the GCC
- 2) Tourism as the Main Cooperation Sector

Conclusion: Opportunities and Challenges for Russian Soft Power

Introduction and Theoretical Framing

The notion of soft power took time to enter the conceptual, methodological, and practical vocabulary of Russian foreign policy. The term *soft power* was theorized by Joseph Nye in his foundational 1990 work *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* and further developed in subsequent writings, notably in his 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. The book, among other important points, offers an overview of the relationship between soft power and public diplomacy,¹ a topic that is further clarified in the 2008 article “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power.” The article explains that soft power, defined as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment,” requires intentional efforts to be effective. In this regard, public diplomacy stands as the main instrument that mobilizes soft power resources, namely culture, values, and policies, to convey them to a global audience. Acting as the main instrument of soft power projection, public diplomacy remains, however, a broad and evolving concept that encompasses a set of different practices aimed at communication with foreign publics.² These may include, but are not limited to, cultural diplomacy (which may incorporate artistic and sports diplomacy), education diplomacy, media outreach, and other tools helping to promote narratives, ideas, and images about an actor.³

As can be seen, the development of Nye's soft power concept was unfolding during a period when the newly independent Russian state was experiencing profound political challenges and undergoing the process of redefining its identity and its role on the global stage. Moreover, Nye's theorization of soft power was grounded in the case of the United States (US) and the established dominance of its political, cultural, and ideological paradigms, the global diffusion of which contributed to the narrative of a US victory in the Cold War. In addition, some experts⁴ have pointed out that the ideological underpinnings of Nye's concept influenced how it was initially received in post-Soviet Russia, a society emerging from the influence of a specific ideological model that had shaped both its internal and external political behavior.

Russia's approach to soft power began to take shape in the early 2000s, shaped by a combination of internal developments and external dynamics. In particular, shifts in the international political context prompted Russia to adapt its soft power to changing circumstances. The outbreak of the Ukraine conflict in February 2022 also brought about the need for adjustment to the new political landscape. At the same time, alongside these adaptation efforts, a certain continuity can be observed with earlier phases of post-Soviet development and broader historical legacies. Situating them within this wider context enables a more comprehensive understanding of Russia's evolving approach to soft power.

This article aims, first and foremost, to demonstrate how Russia has adapted its soft power in response to the current international context. It will begin by outlining Russia's use of soft power tools from a historical perspective. Second, it will analyze the conceptual approach to soft power in contemporary Russia's foreign policy and examine the key soft power instruments the country employs on the global stage.

1 Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), Chapter Four, 99–125.

2 Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (March 2008): 94–109, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996>

3 Nicholas J. Cull, “Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (March 2008): 31–54, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25097993>

4 Fedor Loukianov, “Les paradoxes du soft power russe,” *Revue internationale et stratégique* 92, no. 4 (2013): 47, <https://doi.org/10.3917/ris.092.0147>.

Building on this, the article will explore the adaptation of both the approach and the tools of Russian soft power in light of the political changes that have followed the outbreak of the 2022 conflict. Subsequently, the article will consider the Gulf region, specifically the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as a case study to reflect on the new opportunities for cooperation emerging from both the evolving nature of Russia's soft power strategy and the regional political dynamics in the Gulf. The paper concludes by outlining both the opportunities that may enhance the global reach of Russian soft power and the structural, conceptual, and contextual challenges that may constrain its long-term effectiveness.

The focus of this article is specifically on the tools and approaches used by Russia in the realm of soft power, aiming to assess their potential without attaching analytical or ideological labels. Thus, terms such as *soft power*, *cultural diplomacy*, and *humanitarian policy* are adopted here as analytical categories to study the instruments and strategies Russia frames as referring to soft power. This approach contributes to the academic analysis of Russian soft power, a topic still relatively underexplored, and offers an assessment of the scope and potential of Russia's soft power repository within the broader landscape of its foreign policy.

I. Russia's Soft Power from a Historical Perspective

1) Early Image Projection Efforts in Pre-Revolutionary Russia

Culture, in all its diverse expressions, stands at the heart of soft power and its promotional instrument, public diplomacy. It exerts a broad and lasting influence in shaping international perceptions and preferences. As can be seen in Nye's works, culture can influence others subtly, voluntarily, and thus effectively, which enhances its potential as a soft power resource.

In this regard, although the term "soft power" only gained widespread use in the 1990s, Russia has historically exhibited forms of symbolic and cultural appeal consistent with the concept. In the imperial era, Russia's image abroad benefited from what was often regarded as the distinctive Russian cultural tradition, expressed through literature, music, and thought. Figures such as Aleksandr Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Ivan Turgenev, or Anton Chekhov contributed to the image of Russia as a creative, culturally rich, and profound nation among European cultural elites, even as the country could be seen as less advanced in economic and social development compared to Western Europe.

Furthermore, at the turn of the 20th century, the activities of Sergei Diaghilev, a Russian *impresario*, cultural entrepreneur, and artistic organizer best known for founding and leading the *Ballets Russes* (Russian Ballet) company, further demonstrated the potential of Russia's cultural appeal. At the beginning, Diaghilev led the art association *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) and edited a monthly journal with the same name (publications between 1899 and 1904). The movement embodied the ideals of symbolism and modernist arts, and contributed to creating the intellectual and cultural environment in which emerged what would later be known as the *Russian avant-garde*, a cultural phenomenon covering diverse movements (Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism, Constructivism, Rayonism, etc.) now represented in leading museums and galleries around the world, with artists such as Kazimir Malevich, Vasily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, Mikhail Larionov, and Natalia Goncharova among its key figures.

Initially focused on organizing exhibitions of European artists in Russia, Diaghilev soon shifted his attention to presenting Russian art in Western European capitals. To market the presentation of Russian culture, first through visual arts, then opera, and especially from 1909, ballet, Diaghilev launched the term *Russian Seasons*. His innovative approach to ballet through integrating music, choreography, costume, and scenographic design, combined with a modern artistic vision, revolutionized ballet performance and continues to shape its development today. Diaghilev's productions introduced new talents such as Vaslav Nijinsky or Anna Pavlova, who became world-renowned "ambassadors" of Russian culture, and involved close collaboration with Russian avant-garde artists (such as Igor Stravinsky for music, Natalia Goncharova for costume and scenographic design), as well as fostered intercultural exchange through cooperation with figures like Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel or Pablo Picasso.

The term *Russian Seasons* thus became closely associated with Diaghilev's legacy, whose activities abroad extended after the 1917 Revolution, until the late 1920s, projecting cultural narratives and patterns outside the official Soviet framework. In the 21st century, Russia revived the *Russian Seasons* brand as part of its cultural diplomacy initiatives. Meanwhile, the foundational marketing and vision of its creator, Sergei Diaghilev, remain one of the key elements contributing to the success of the *Russian Seasons* as a symbol of Russian cultural outreach.

Together with Diaghilev's cultural initiatives, several aspects of the Russian Empire's early 20th-century foreign policy also contributed to enhancing, or at times restoring, its international image, particularly in the aftermath of diplomatic setbacks such as the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). Among these efforts were Russia's initiatives in convening the *Hague Peace Conferences* in 1899 and 1907, which sought agreements to limit armaments, the development of humane norms for warfare, and the promotion of peaceful conflict resolution. Personally promoted by Tsar Nicholas II, these efforts helped portray Russia as a peace-seeking international actor. To illustrate, Nicholas II was referred to as the "Peacemaker" and received a nomination for the *Nobel Peace Prize* in 1901.⁵ Besides, Russia's role in initiating, organizing, and advancing the work of these conferences continues to stand as one of the bases for highlighting Russia's historical contribution to the development of international humanitarian law.

5 The Nobel Prize, *Nomination Archives*, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://www.nobelprize.org/nomination/archive/show.php?id=5945>.



2) The USSR Period and the Development of Image Projection Instruments

The subsequent political transformation of the Russian state also brought about a change in the mechanisms of influence directed at international audiences. Communist ideology and the international communist movement, first through the *Communist International* (Comintern, until 1943), and later via the *Communist Information Bureau* (Cominform, established in 1947), became central to shaping the image of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) abroad. However, the Soviet discourse promoting peace, peaceful coexistence of nations, and global social justice could also be interpreted as echoing, to a certain extent, the initiatives of pre-revolutionary Russia to present itself as a peace-promoting international actor.

International organizations aligned with Soviet foreign policy objectives, such as the *World Peace Council* (WPC), established in 1949 to promote peace and nuclear disarmament, as well as the *Soviet Friendship Societies* (including the *Soviet-American Friendship Society*), which aimed at fostering intercultural exchange, or the *Communist Youth Leagues* (CYL), engaged in youth exchanges through educational and cultural initiatives, all formed part of the Soviet Union's soft power instrument repository. These platforms sought to portray the USSR as a cooperative, peace-oriented, and globally relevant actor.

With its discursive emphasis on equality and social justice, socialist ideology resonated with segments of the intellectual and academic elites in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, while also gaining traction among national liberation movements in Africa and the Arab world. This ideological appeal translated into political alliances and fostered regimes sympathetic to, or directly inspired by, the Soviet model. Besides, since the 1960s, Moscow further sought to highlight the achievements of the USSR's Central Asian republics, with their Muslim majorities, as a means of strengthening its image across Islamic countries. Political and religious elites from Arab and Muslim states were invited to visit cities such as Tashkent, Samarkand (Uzbekistan), and Baku (Azerbaijan), where developments in education, healthcare, and the expanding social role of women were presented as examples of progress. However, these initiatives often faced challenges of continuity and credibility, and in many cases met with religious or intellectual resistance to the Soviet model.

Besides, these Soviet soft power instruments were predominantly state-led, government-sponsored, and officially supervised, marking the absence of non-governmental, private, or civil society participation in the projection of soft power. In addition, while the messages of peace and international cooperation could be perceived as of a universal nature, their practical geographical and political orientation and resonance were constrained by the realities of the Cold War. Moreover, the state-centric nature of such initiatives could also affect the scope of their reception by foreign publics.

At the same time, "high culture" remained a prominent element of Soviet cultural diplomacy. For instance, beginning in the mid-1950s, the Bolshoi Theatre became one of the Soviet Union's most prominent cultural ambassadors. Its state-organized international tours, especially in Western countries such as France, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US, were aimed not only at showcasing the artistic excellence of the USSR but also at counterbalancing negative narratives about the USSR abroad and demonstrating the sophistication of Soviet culture and society.⁶

6 David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 468–505.

In the meantime, international broadcasting and cinema emerged as additional key platforms through which the Soviet Union sought to project cultural achievements, shape international perceptions, and address competing narratives. For example, launched in 1929 and progressively enlarging the scope of languages of broadcasting, *Radio Moscow* became one of the major symbols of the USSR's public diplomacy. In cinema, the release in 1925 of *Battleship Potemkin*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein, gained international acclaim for its revolutionary filming techniques and narratives, positioning the USSR as a reference point in the global film industry. Later, *War and Peace*, directed by Sergei Bondarchuk and based on Leo Tolstoy's novel, became a key point of Soviet cinematic diplomacy when it was awarded the Academy Award (Oscar) for Best Foreign Language Film in 1969 during the *détente* period, which highlighted the intertwining of cultural, strategic, and political considerations.

Another prominent tool enhancing the USSR's international standing was space diplomacy. The successful launch of *Sputnik* in 1957, followed by Yuri Gagarin's triumph as the first human in space in 1961, served to promote the USSR's scientific and technological advancements on a global scale in the framework of whole-scale competition with the US. In parallel, the strength of "communist ideals" that were shaping the "communist citizen" was also projected through sports diplomacy, culminating in the 1980 *Moscow Olympic Games*. Despite being partially boycotted, the event was intended as a major global statement by the USSR. Supported by carefully curated symbolism of the Games, including the warmly smiling, welcoming "*Misha*" the Bear mascot, the Games aimed to contribute to reshaping international associations linked to Soviet/Russian identity and imagery.

Overall, the historical outlook demonstrates that both pre-revolutionary Russia and the USSR employed various instruments of what can retrospectively be described as soft power to shape their image on the international stage. The USSR possessed a broader and more structured range of such tools, fueled by the global ideological and political competition of the Cold War, which necessitated and encouraged their further development. However, as demonstrated, certain instruments (high culture) and foundational messaging (peace promotion) can be traced back to the pre-revolutionary period. This continuity in substance and evolution in means may suggest a degree of historical consistency in Russia's approach to international image projection, while also highlighting its capacity to adapt to changing political circumstances.

II. Formalization of Russia's Soft Power Approach on the International Stage

1) Institutionalization of Soft Power Policies

The formalization of soft power and its components within the framework of Russian foreign policy started gaining ground in the early 2000s. This process departed from a growing awareness of the "underutilized" potential represented by Russian and Russian-speaking communities abroad. Particular attention has been directed toward those designated as "compatriots" ("*sootechestvenniki*"). This term, however, remains broad and somewhat ambiguous, encompassing Russians who, after the dissolution of the USSR, found themselves outside the borders of the newly established Russian Federation (general numbers usually provide an estimation of around 25 million individuals),⁷ as well as earlier and later waves of Russian migrants. At the same time, in political discourse, the term may take a more elastic and

⁷ Fedor Loukianov, "Les paradoxes du soft power russe," 25.

instrumental meaning, extending to Russian-speakers, cultural affiliates, and individuals identifying with Russian heritage, regardless of ethnicity. Thus, in 2001, the inaugural *World Congress of Compatriots* was convened, where, during its opening, Russian President Vladimir Putin for the first time publicly articulated the concept of the “Russian World” (*Russkiy mir*),⁸ stressing that being a compatriot is a matter of personal spiritual self-determination, and that the notion of the *Russkiy mir* “had historically extended well beyond the geographical borders of the Russian state or even well beyond the Russian ethnicity.”⁹

In parallel, the integration processes were intensifying within the post-Soviet space, a region that Russia refers to as “near abroad,” a term that carries both strategic and cultural implications. In 2000, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan formed the *Eurasian Economic Community* (EurAsEC). The further development of the idea of the “common space” resulted in the creation of a Customs Union between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in 2010, which subsequently, in 2015, transformed into the *Eurasian Economic Union* (EAEU), aimed to establish a single market, with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan also joining the Union in the same year. Regarding the post-Soviet space, Russia’s soft power continues to draw upon shared historical experience, institutional continuity, and a cultural and linguistic legacy. Following the Soviet Union’s disintegration, the Russian language maintained its position as the regional *lingua franca*, dominating in the fields of commerce, employment, and education.¹⁰ The economic interdependence forged during the Soviet period, including trade structures within the “single economic complex” oriented toward Moscow, continued Russian subsidies to some post-Soviet states (especially in terms of energy), and Russia’s stronger economic capacity in the region’s comparative perspective, further contributed to maintaining the important status of the Russian language and the overall Russian influence in the post-Soviet space.¹¹ As Nye has pointed out, economic resources, when demonstrating economic success and thus a successful economic model, can also become elements of soft power.¹²

At the same time, a growing recognition emerged regarding the necessity of engaging with foreign publics in order to shape Russia’s international image. In July 2001, President Putin tasked the Russian diplomatic corps with strengthening efforts to cultivate a positive image of the country abroad.¹³ Meanwhile, the global financial crisis of 2008 also underscored the need to adjust the existing political approach. The crises revealed the vulnerabilities of the Russian economic model, particularly its dependence on energy exports. However, a prevailing negative image of Russia in international media, often portraying it as a non-modernized and economically uncertain partner, was seen as detrimental to its ability to attract foreign investment, critical in the context of economic difficulties.¹⁴

8 The concept of the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) represents an ideological construct that also served as the basis for the establishment of the *Russkiy Mir Foundation*, an institution tasked with promoting the Russian language (see below).

9 Translated from Russian into English by us, from Vera Ageeva, “Russian ‘Soft Power’: Between Eurasia and Russian World,” *Krasnoyarsk Science*, no. 1 (2016): 14, <https://doi.org/10.12731/2070-7568-2016-1-8-24>.

10 Andrei P. Tsygankov, “If Not by Tanks, Then by Banks? The Role of Soft Power in Putin’s Foreign Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 7 (November 2006): 1083–84, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20451289>; Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Moscow’s Soft Power Strategy,” *Current History* 112, no. 756 (2013): 260, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2013.112.756.259>.

11 Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Moscow’s Soft Power Strategy,” 260.

12 Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 85.

13 Dmitry Efremenko, Anastasia Ponamareva, and Yury Nikulichev, “Russia’s Semi-Soft Power,” *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 109, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48622937>.

14 Fedor Loukianov, “Les paradoxes du soft power russe,” 148.

Media

As a result, since the beginning of the 2000s, soft power has started to acquire a more institutionalized approach within the Russian political framework. Among the most visible instruments of this effort was the launch, in 2005, of *Russia Today* (RT), a 24/7 English-language news channel sponsored by the Russian government. Initially broadcasting in English, the channel subsequently launched Arabic programming in 2007, Spanish in 2009, and Russian in 2014. In 2015, it further expanded to include German and French services, while also localizing its Anglophone content for UK and US audiences.¹⁵ According to its official website, the channel “is now available to more than 900 million TV viewers in more than 100 countries around the globe,” and as of 2024, had accumulated over 23 billion online views.¹⁶

As is usually pointed out, the development of the RT network has seen two principal phases. From 2005 to 2008, the channel sought to improve Russia’s global image by emphasizing modernization narratives and promoting Russian culture. This first phase remained largely Russia-centric, and its success was limited.¹⁷ Following the August 2008 conflict in Georgia, the channel was rebranded in 2009 as *RT*, adopting a more “neutral” logo intended to broaden international appeal and downplay the reference to Russia in its title. With this new phase, RT repositioned itself as a platform for “alternative perspectives,” frequently going against mainstream “Western” media narratives, with a more critical tone with regard to “Western” policies. The content was not turning around Russia or its politics but encouraged “Western” audiences to engage with topics relevant to their own countries, often through “Western” presenters and journalists. By making the promotion of alternative points of view one of its brand’s features, encapsulated in its slogan “Question More,” RT has managed to expand its global audience and establish itself as one of the largest international news outlets originating outside the Anglophone world.¹⁸

As this trajectory illustrates, the conflict in Georgia and the ensuing negative media coverage of Russia in the “West” prompted a recalibration of communication strategies to promote a Russian understanding of world politics and present alternative discursive frameworks to global audiences. Overall, government funding for Russia’s media-oriented public diplomacy instruments increased significantly following the 2008 conflict, driven by the perception within Russian official circles that the international media coverage of the conflict had been biased with regard to the actions of Russia and detrimental to the country’s interests.¹⁹

In 2014, the media instrument of Russia’s soft power strategy was further expanded with *Sputnik*, a multilingual international news agency and radio broadcaster. Adopting a similar editorial orientation and tone to RT, the agency, as its website notes, produces content in over 30 languages, including English, Spanish, French, German, Arabic, and Chinese, and has established regional offices across the world, from Washington to Beijing and Cairo.²⁰

15 Dmitry Efremenko, Anastasia Ponamareva, and Yury Nikulichev, “Russia’s Semi-Soft Power,” 109-114.

16 RT, “About Us,” accessed July 22, 2025, <https://swentr.site/about-us/>.

17 Maxime Audinet, “Diplomaties publiques concurrentielles dans la crise ukrainienne : Le cas de RT et Ukraine Today,” *Revue d’études comparatives Est-Ouest* 2, no. 2 (2018): 182, <https://doi.org/10.3917/receo1.492.0171>.

18 Dmitry Efremenko, Anastasia Ponamareva, and Yury Nikulichev, “Russia’s Semi-Soft Power,” 109-114.

19 Maxime Audinet, “Diplomaties publiques concurrentielles dans la crise ukrainienne : Le cas de RT et Ukraine Today,” 181.

20 Sputnik, “About Us,” accessed July 22, 2025, <https://sputnikglobe.com/docs/index.html>.

Expert and Knowledge-Based Diplomacy

In the realm of science diplomacy, the creation of the *Valdai Discussion Club* in 2004 marked an important step. Designed as a platform for dialogue between the Russian and the international expert community, Valdai provides informal channels of communication and analysis. However, a key factor in its visibility has been the participation of the Russian President, offering an opportunity for direct interaction with the Russian head of state.²¹ In the same vein, the *St. Petersburg International Economic Forum* (SPIEF), originally launched in 1997, gained renewed momentum in 2006 when it started to be held under the auspices of the Russian President.²² These major annual forums serve as venues for image-building and prestige diplomacy, projecting Russia's openness to dialogue, economic and scientific partnership, and global engagement, while the participating high-level international delegations signal Russia's international relevance. Thus, together with offering an official environment in which Russia can present its policy positions, showcase economic and academic potential, and underscore its cultural strength, these platforms contribute to branding the Russian state as a stable and globally integrated actor.

In 2010, further institutionalization of soft power instruments continued with the establishment, by a presidential order, of the *Alexander Gorchakov Fund for Public Diplomacy* (also known as the *Gorchakov Fund*, named after one of Russia's most prominent diplomats of the 19th century). Presenting as one of its missions "to support the creation of a public, political, and business climate abroad favorable for Russia,"²³ the Fund's activities span several main sectors. According to its official presentation, the Fund's flagship programs include expert meetings, dialogues, and workshops, as well as research schools and programs, all focused on thematic and regional priorities. In addition, the *Gorchakov Fund* provides grants to Russian and foreign non-profit (NPO) and non-governmental (NGO) organizations engaged in international projects, thereby playing a coordinating role in Russia's public diplomacy. The grants are allocated in line with the Fund's priority areas, which, for 2026, as stated on its website, emphasize cooperation with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, and Middle Eastern, African, and Latin American states, as well as multilateral formats in these regions, thereby coinciding with Russia's broader shifting foreign policy priorities. Furthermore, coordination and support for NPOs and NGOs is pursued through Fund-organized courses for leaders and international project managers of Russian and foreign NGOs. Another significant area of activity is the organization of "internship programs for foreign specialists." Alongside these initiatives, the Fund regularly hosts its own events, including conferences, roundtables, forums, expert discussions, public lectures, and the allocation of Russian specialists to universities in Russia and abroad to deliver lectures on Russian foreign policy. One of its major projects, organized annually from 1999 until 2021, was the Potsdam Meetings, a Russian-German conference addressing issues related to politics, economics, and society in bilateral relations. This forum brought together high-level participants held under the patronage of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries. Overall, the activities of the *Gorchakov Fund* seem to be particularly aimed at fostering relationships with scholarly, expert, and diplomatic communities, especially among younger generations, which indicates the intention to build a lasting international cooperation network.

21 Dmitry Efremenko, Anastasia Ponamareva, and Yuri Nikulichev, "Russia's Semi-Soft Power," 102-103.

22 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), "About the Forum," accessed July 22, 2025, <https://forum-spb.com/en/about/?lang=en>.

23 Gorchakov Fund, *Mission and Goals*, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://en.gorchakovfund.ru/portal/page/2902cca9-09f4-4a53-b9ed-868b5977a57b>.

In addition, among other important institutions, in 2011, a Russian presidential order established the *Russian International Affairs Council* (RIAC), a new think tank created to foster intellectual exchange with international expert communities, with one of the main aims, as stated in its Statute, to promote public opinion, both in Russia and abroad, supportive of moving beyond confrontational approaches in international relations.²⁴ Meanwhile, the Council was founded with the participation of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science, indicating convergence of policy and expertise within the RIAC's purview.

Cultural and Humanitarian Diplomacy

The establishment of the *Russkiy Mir Foundation* in 2007 and the revitalization of the previous Soviet mechanism for working with foreign audiences to transform it into *Rossotrudnichestvo* in 2008 marked another phase in the consolidation of Russian cultural diplomacy.

Although officially a non-governmental organization, *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) was created by presidential decree, represented a joint initiative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science, and together with private funding, receives public support.²⁵ The foundation was primarily tasked with the promotion and preservation of the Russian language and cultural heritage within Russia and abroad,²⁶ and was modeled after the experience of other cultural diplomacy institutions such as the *Goethe-Institut*, the *British Council*, and the *Alliance Française*. Formally, *Russkiy Mir* has established a network of "Russian Centers" and smaller "Russkiy Mir Cabinets" on every continent. However, many of these representations are modest in size and often embedded within local educational institutions.²⁷

In this context, the *Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation* (*Rossotrudnichestvo*), a governmental agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has emerged as a central institutional actor in the Russian soft power landscape. Created by presidential decree in September 2008, *Rossotrudnichestvo* was also aligned with efforts to address reputational setbacks in the aftermath of the military conflict in Georgia, especially in the post-Soviet space. The agency formulates its main mission as the "strengthen[ing] of Russia's humanitarian influence in the world." While its primary geographic focus is defined by the Commonwealth of Independent States, *Rossotrudnichestvo* now operates 87 overseas official offices in 71 countries. Since 2021, these representations have been labeled as "Russian House."²⁸

24 Российский совет по международным делам [Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)], *Устав* [Statute], accessed July 22, 2025, <https://russiancouncil.ru/about/regulations>.

25 Russkiy Mir Foundation, *About Russkiy Mir Foundation*, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://russkiymir.ru/en/fund/index.php>.

26 Idem. _

27 Fedor Loukianov, "Les paradoxes du soft power russe," 152.

28 Rossotrudnichestvo, *About Rossotrudnichestvo*, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://rs.gov.ru/en/about-foiv/>; Rossotrudnichestvo, *Activities*, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://rs.gov.ru/en/activities/>.

Together with “promoting international development,” *Rossotrudnichestvo*’s core spectrum of activities includes the “promotion of Russian education, science and culture,” “support for compatriots abroad,” and “strengthening the positions of the Russian language.” The apparent intersection and occasionally overlapping mandates of *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the *Ruskiy Mir Foundation* have generated a degree of ambiguity in the delineation of institutional roles. Meanwhile, such an intersection of ideas can also be observed in the ideological underpinnings of Russia’s soft power doctrine.

2) Conceptualization of the Soft Power Approach

Conceptual Formalization

The *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* is a strategic document guiding the country’s external policy. Adopted for the first time in 1993, it has been periodically reviewed to reflect changing strategies of the country’s policy. The 2008 version, for the first time, explicitly emphasized the importance of public diplomacy, where it stated that “Russia will seek its objective perception in the world, develop its own effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad, [and] strengthen the role of the Russian mass media in the international information environment by providing them with essential state support.”²⁹

29 Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the International Organizations in Vienna, “The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation,” July 15, 2008, https://viennamission.mid.ru/en/news/15-07-2008_the-foreign-_bb-328f6a31a9e4cdf767438942b1108d/.



THE CONCEPT OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

2023

The further consolidation of the presence of a distinct term of “soft power” within the official foreign policy discourse became more visible with the return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency. The term was notably employed in his 2012 programmatic (for the upcoming 2012 elections) article “Russia and the Changing World,”³⁰ where soft power was defined as “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.” In this context, institutions such as *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the *Russkiy Mir Foundation*, and “leading universities [that] recruit talented students from abroad” were referred to as institutions similar to “agents of influence from big countries.” The 2013 edition of the Foreign Policy Concept (FP Concept) further institutionalized the term by formally integrating it into a strategic policy document for the first time.³¹ The subsequent version, published in 2016, pursued this trajectory by describing soft power as “an integral part of contemporary international policy.”³²

On the one hand, this conceptual articulation of soft power in official doctrine reflects a growing awareness of its importance in Russian foreign policy. It aligns both with the intention to mitigate reputational costs associated with the 2008 conflict in Georgia and the need to attract investment into the Russian economy. In this regard, the preparations for hosting major international sporting events, most notably the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, exemplified the most notable concrete efforts to promote a renewed and positive image of Russia on the global stage. It is also important to mention that since the early 2000s, sports diplomacy has become one of the notable tools of Russia’s international image-building strategy. The *Rapid Growth Markets Soft Power Index*, developed in 2012 by the Moscow-based Skolkovo Institute for Emerging Market Studies (SIEMS) in collaboration with Ernst & Young, is particularly illustrative, as the index included the number of Olympic medals won by a country among its variables.³³

On the other hand, the official language of these programmatic foreign policy documents also reveals a more “hard” and confrontational approach to the concept of soft power, implying the intent to counter, what the 2013 edition of the FP Concept states as, the “unlawful use of “soft power” and human rights concepts to exert political pressure on sovereign states, interfere in their internal affairs, destabilize their political situation, [and] manipulate public opinion, including under the pretext of financing cultural and human rights projects abroad.”³⁴

Indeed, this reactive approach can trace its origins to the early 2000s with the unveiling of the so-called “color revolutions” in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), which Moscow perceived as being encouraged by the US and the European Union (EU) in an effort to extend their influence in Russia’s “near abroad.” The conflict in Georgia and the “Western” media coverage, considered by Russian

30 Vladimir Putin, “Russia and the Changing World,” Valdai Club, February 27, 2012, https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir_putin_on_foreign_policy_russia_and_the_changing_world/. Originally published in *Moskovskiye Novosti* (The Moscow News).

31 Russian Embassy in China, *Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 2013*, https://pekin.mid.ru/en/countries/rossiya/kontseptsiya_vneshney_politiki_rossii/.

32 Translated from the original text in Russian, Президент России [President of Russia], Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 30.11.2016 г. № 640 Об утверждении Концепции внешней политики Российской Федерации [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 640 of November 30, 2016, On Approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation], accessed July 22, 2025, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41451>.

33 Ernst & Young and The Moscow School of Management SKOLKOVO, *Rapid-Growth Markets Soft Power Index*, 2012, accessed July, 22, 2025, https://www.skolkovo.ru/public/media/documents/research/SIEMS_Monthly_Briefing_2012-06_eng.pdf.

34 Russian Embassy in China, *Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 2013*.

officials to have been one-sided and favorable to Tbilisi, further reinforced this dynamic.³⁵ Subsequent events, such as the “Arab Spring,” also left their mark on Russian perceptions of the evolving international information and ideological landscape. These uprisings once again underscored the pivotal role of media and social networks, while highlighting the influence of values-based discourse in political mobilization. In this light, both the 2008 and 2013 editions of Russia’s FP Concept advanced the assertion that “global competition takes place on a civilizational level.”³⁶

This reactive posture was further reinforced by the 2014 events in Ukraine, which, from Russia’s perspective, stemmed from external interference by the US and the EU. The subsequent negative portrayal of Russia in international media, along with the imposition of sanctions, was seen as further evidence of the difficulties Russia faces in shaping the global narrative in its favor. This heightened perception of information asymmetry and strategic pressure deepened the sense of urgency to protect its image and to counter external narratives more actively.

Ideological Foundations

At the same time, the term “civilization” has begun to appear with increasing frequency in the political discourse of Russia’s senior leadership, serving as a framework to express Russia’s distinctiveness and to “articulate a system of internal values as a latent element of soft power.”³⁷ Within this discourse, Russia is portrayed as a “unique,” “multiethnic civilization with Russian culture at its core.”³⁸ Notably, while the 2013 FP Concept, despite articulating a worldview grounded in value-based rivalry, still referred to Russia as “an integral and inseparable part of European civilization,”³⁹ the most recent version of the FP Concept, adopted in 2023, presents a significant shift. In its opening “General Provisions,” the document refers to “Russia’s special position as a unique country-civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power that brings together the Russian people and other peoples belonging to the cultural and civilizational community of the Russian world.”⁴⁰

This civilizational framing of identity, however, brings together different ideological underpinnings. On the one hand, Russia is described as a “Eurasian” power. On the other hand, the idea of “Russian civilization” encompasses the broader, as per the text, “civilizational community of the Russian World.” Indeed, the two ideological constructs of *Eurasianism* and the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) stand among the principal discursive axes of contemporary debates on Russian identity, with direct implications for the country’s foreign policy orientation. The intellectual roots of both of these ideologemes can be traced back to the 19th century, particularly to the debates between proponents of *Westernism*, who emphasized

35 Maxime Audinet, *Quel soft power pour la Russie?*, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (Ifri), August 1, 2017, <https://www.ifri.org/fr/articles/quel-soft-power-pour-la-russie>.

36 Russian Embassy in China, *Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 2013*.

37 Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Moscow’s Soft Power Strategy,” 262.

38 Vladimir Putin, “Russia: The Ethnicity Issue,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 23, 2012, archived on the official site of the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation (2008–2012), <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/17831/>.

39 Russian Embassy in China, *Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 2013*.

40 *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, approved by Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 229, March 31, 2023, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/.

Russia's belonging to a shared European civilization and its alignment with Western values, cultural and political models, and the *Slavophiles*, who underscored the unique nature and identity of the Russian people and Russian culture, promoted the idea of a distinctive path for Russia's development, different from Western Europe, together with assuming a central role of Russia in a distinct civilizational project.

Drawing inspiration from these historical debates and further ideas, both *Eurasianism* and the *Russkiy Mir* concepts re-emerged with renewed prominence in the 2000s. They converge on the idea of a "special path" for Russia, the central role of religion in Russian culture and society, and the foundational importance of traditional values as the core of societal organization. At the same time, in the context of shaping a coherent ideological basis for Russia's foreign policy course, the question arises as to whether these two frameworks can be complementary, as they emphasize different aspects of Russia's identity. A particularly notable point concerns the religious dimension. While both frameworks acknowledge the multi-layered nature of Russia's cultural and confessional identity, the *Russkiy Mir* concept places particular emphasis on the interrelationship between the "Russian World" and Orthodox Christianity as integral components of an "authentic Russian civilization." Within this vision, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is considered one of the principal agents of identity formation. Meanwhile, although both can be observed through a geopolitical lens, *Eurasianism* has a more explicitly developed and theorized geopolitical aspect. In this vision, "Russia-Eurasia" is apprehended as a continental power center, playing a key role in shaping the global geopolitical landscape. Various integration projects across the Eurasian space, such as the *Eurasian Economic Union*, can be interpreted as practical manifestations of Eurasianist ideas. Hence, the question of integrating these two concepts into a coherent identity narrative represents one of the main challenges in the development of Russia's soft power strategy.⁴¹

Thus, in the evolution of Russia's post-Soviet soft power policy, it is possible to trace, among other aspects, a clear continuity in the perceived need to respond to the image of Russia constructed within the "Western"-dominated global information sphere, and to articulate a counter-narrative to prevailing interpretations of global affairs. At the same time, there is a discernible sequence in efforts to construct an independent ideological narrative aimed at reinforcing a distinctive positioning for Russia on the global stage that corresponds to Russia's perceived unique role in international affairs, one that, in its view, is either neglected or denied within mainstream global narratives.

III. Russian Soft Power in the Face of New Challenges

1) The Challenge of International Sanctions

Since February 2022, comprehensive international sanctions imposed on Russia have had a pronounced impact not only on its economy and political structures but also on its instruments of soft power. These measures have significantly affected the country's cultural diplomacy, international influence platforms, and global symbolic presence. One of the immediate repercussions was what Russian officials and public figures referred to as a "cultural boycott" or the "cancellation of Russian culture,"⁴² whereby Russian cultural figures and state-affiliated cultural institutions faced exclusion from foreign and international platforms.

41 For a closer look at the theoretical debates around the two concepts in Russian ideological discourse, see: Vera Ageeva, "Russian 'Soft Power': Between Eurasia and Russian World."

42 Павел Панов [Pavel Panov], Россия ответила на культурный бойкот Запада [Russia Responded to the Cultural Boycott of the West], *URA.RU*, March 24, 2023, <https://ura.news/articles/1036286495>.

To elaborate, in February 2022, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) suspended Russia from participation in the *Eurovision Song Contest*. Meanwhile, ballet, one of the major pillars of Russia's cultural diplomacy, also faced limitations. Scheduled international tours and performances by Russian state ballet theaters were cancelled. One of the examples is the cancellation of the Bolshoi Theatre's planned summer season performances at the *Royal Opera House* in London in 2022.⁴³ Simultaneously, in the cinema industry, a number of major international film festivals, including Cannes, Venice, and Berlin, imposed restrictions on the official representation of Russian cinema, banning state-supported delegations and productions. The participation was only open for individual filmmakers "opposed to the current regime in the country."⁴⁴

In parallel, Russian athletes and teams were suspended from participating in international competitions, including those organized under the auspices of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), FIFA (*Fédération Internationale de Football Association*), UEFA (Union of European Football Associations), or Formula 1. The Executive Board of the IOC further recommended⁴⁵ that all international sports federations refrain from inviting athletes from Russia and Belarus. These measures excluded Russia from the majority of the international sporting arenas, thereby narrowing one of its most prominent soft power channels.

Another important area in which Russia's presence has been significantly affected is the international scientific sphere. While person-to-person academic interactions were not formally restricted, several European countries, including Germany, France, and the UK, as well as the US and Canada, decided to freeze official institution-to-institution research projects with Russia and suspend dual-degree programs and other cooperative initiatives. In addition, the European Commission terminated funding for Russian research in the framework of its Horizon 2020 program.⁴⁶ At the same time, the growing number of "Western" research institutions and think tanks designated by Russia as undesirable organizations, owing to their stance on Russia, has further complicated collaboration between Russian scholars and these bodies.

These measures have inevitably led to a decline in research ties between Russian and "Western" institutions, reflected in, among other indicators, a drop since 2022 in the number of joint publications between Russia and, for example, the US, the UK, Germany, and Japan. Furthermore, sanctions affecting logistics, software, computing, banking, and technology imports have also contributed to Russia's reduced participation in the global academic sphere, adding to travel difficulties and limiting access to laboratory equipment. A decline in the participation of Russian experts at international conferences represents another visible manifestation of the retreat from the scientific arena trend.⁴⁷

43 Nadia Khomami, "The Show Can't Go On: Russian Arts Cancelled Worldwide," *The Guardian*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/01/the-show-cant-go-on-russian-arts-cancelled-worldwide>.

44 Tom Grater, "Venice Film Festival Will Not Boycott Russian Filmmakers 'Who Oppose Current Regime,'" *Deadline*, March 22, 2022, <https://deadline.com/2022/03/venice-film-festival-not-boycott-russian-filmmakers-who-oppose-current-regime-1234968846/>.

45 Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC), "IOC EB Recommends No Participation of Russian and Belarusian Athletes and Officials," February 28, 2022, <https://www.anocolympic.org/olympic-movement/ioc-eb-recommends-no-participation-of-russian-and-belarusian-athletes-and-officials/>.

46 Olga Krasnyak, Pierre-Bruno Ruffini, "Science Diplomacy and Scientific Sanctions against Russia," *Russian in Global Affairs*, No. 3 (July/September, 2025), <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/scientific-sanctions-krasnyak-ruffini>.

47 David Matthews, "News in depth: Russian researchers disappear from academic conferences as isolation bites," *Science|Business*, November 14, 2023, <https://sciencebusiness.net/news/international-news/news-depth-russian-researchers-disappear-academic-conferences-isolation>.

The media sector became one of the main fields for imposing restrictions with regard to Russian influence platforms. As Russia terms them, these “foreign reprisals against Russian journalists and media” were enacted by countries of the EU, NATO, the Council of Europe, and other countries close to them, such as New Zealand, Australia, and Japan, as well as, in some instances, countries of the “Global South” like Colombia and Uruguay. These measures targeted state-funded broadcasters, primarily *RT* but also *Sputnik* and its parent organization, the international media group *Rossiia Segodnya*. Other affected outlets included the government newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and national television channels such as *Channel One* and *Rossiia 1*. These outlets faced bans or suspensions, revocation of broadcasting licenses, asset freezes, and, in several cases, individual sanctions or the withdrawal of press accreditations for their personnel.⁴⁸

In addition to traditional broadcast restrictions, major digital platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Meta (formerly Facebook), YouTube, Google, TikTok, App Store, Spotify, and others, implemented various algorithmic suppressions or bans on content linked to Russian state-affiliated media, government communications, or officials’ accounts. Among these, YouTube’s restrictions were particularly extensive. They included the blocking of RT and Sputnik affiliated channels in Europe, the shutdown of Spas (a television channel of the Russian Orthodox Church), and the closure of Duma TV, the official channel of the State Parliament. A major point of criticism raised by Russian officials and media figures has been YouTube’s broader blocking of state-affiliated TV channels and personalities’ accounts, which has significantly reduced Russia’s ability to reach audiences abroad, including its diaspora.⁴⁹ This move from YouTube has served as one of the justifications for shutting down the platform in Russia, but also led to a Russian court issuing a fine of \$20 decillion (two undecillion rubles) against Google to make the US tech company “pay attention to this and correct the situation.”⁵⁰

These restrictions extended beyond the countries implementing the sanctions directly, affecting third-party states whose media providers rely on European or EU-regulated signal distributors. One of the examples is the MultiChoice Group, Africa’s largest paid-TV provider, which halted RT broadcasting after EU sanctions prevented its signal distributor from continuing service.⁵¹

48 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Reprisals against Russian Journalists and Media since the Start of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine (as of May 7, 2025),” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, accessed July 22, 2025, https://mid.ru/en/press_service/journalist_help/repressions/.

49 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Reprisals against Russian Journalists and Media since the Start of the Special Military Operation in Ukraine (as of May 7, 2025).”

50 Agence France-Presse, “Russia Says \$20 Decillion Fine against Google Is ‘Symbolic,’” *The Guardian*, October 31, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/31/russia-20-decillion-fine-against-google-symbolic-youtube-ban-pro-kremlin-media>.

51 Bloomberg, “Banned in Europe, Kremlin-Backed RT Channel to Set Up Hub in South Africa,” *Daily Maverick*, July 24, 2022, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-07-24-banned-in-europe-kremlin-backed-rt-channel-to-set-up-hub-in-south-africa/>.

At the institutional level, several organizations central to Russia's cultural diplomacy were subjected to direct EU sanctions, including *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the *Russkiy Mir Foundation*, and the *Gorchakov Fund*.⁵² In particular, in its sanctions description, the EU characterized *Rossotrudnichestvo* as a "network of agents of influence spreading Kremlin narratives."⁵³ As a consequence, "unfriendly steps towards Russia and increased control by national regulators over compliance with the sanctions regime led to the fact that Russian Houses in Romania and Slovenia were forced to suspend work indefinitely, in Bulgaria, Denmark, Moldova, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic – to significantly limit their activities, and in North Macedonia, Croatia and Montenegro – completely stop working," as per *Rossotrudnichestvo*'s statement from May 2025.⁵⁴

According to the agency, "most of the restrictions are related to the implementation of financial and economic activities." Nonetheless, as the legal and practical application of EU regulations varies across member states, *Russian Houses*, as of mid-2025, in Austria, Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary, Germany, Denmark, Greece, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Finland, France, and the Czech Republic continued operating,⁵⁵ albeit often under constrained conditions and reduced-scale activities. Moreover, their ongoing presence may also face a risk of closure, with France as one of the most pronounced cases, where in February 2025, the bank accounts of the *Russian House* cultural center in Paris were frozen, suspending its operations. However, in May 2025, authorities permitted the resumption of only "life-supporting" transactions. Similarly, in February 2025, Moldova announced its intention to initiate the closure of the *Russian House* in its capital, Chisinau, leaving the center in a state of legal and operational uncertainty while awaiting the final decision.⁵⁶

2) Evolving Stance of Traditional Partners

As the case of Moldova illustrates, another major difficulty that Russia's foreign policies face in the current political environment concerns changing attitudes of several post-Soviet states, with traditionally close ties to Russia, toward Moscow in general and its soft power instruments in particular. A number of these countries have adopted a more critical or cautious stance, reflecting both domestic political dynamics and evolving foreign policy orientations.

To elaborate, Azerbaijan has increasingly sought to position itself as an emerging regional power with an independent foreign policy, especially in the aftermath of the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Tensions between Baku and Moscow intensified further following the crash of an Azerbaijan Airlines flight *en route* from Baku to Grozny (Russia) on December 25, 2024. In particular, in early February 2025, Azerbaijani authorities ordered the closure of the local *Rossotrudnichestvo Russian House*. Notably, this decision coincided with the decision to stop operation of the *United States Agency for International Development*

52 EU NEIGHBOURSEAST, "EU Expands List of Sanctions against Individuals and Entities Supporting Russian Aggression against Ukraine," July 22, 2022, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/eu-expands-list-of-sanctions-against-individuals-and-entities-supporting-russian-aggression-against-ukraine/>.

53 Reuters, "German Prosecutors Investigate Russia Culture Body," January 23, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/german-prosecutors-investigate-russia-culture-body-2023-01-23/>.

54 Izvestia, "Russian Homes Have Completely Stopped Working in Several European Countries," May 16, 2025, <https://en.iz.ru/en/1887078/2025-05-16/russian-homes-have-completely-stopped-working-several-european-countries>.

55 Izvestia, "Russian Homes Have Completely Stopped Working in Several European Countries."

56 Izvestia, "Pay for Payment: France Unblocked the Account of the Russian House in Paris," May 16, 2025, <https://iz.ru/en/node/1886745>.

(USAID), both closures justified on the grounds of “concerns of foreign influence,” presenting agencies as unnecessary, given that “Azerbaijan itself has become a donor nation and no longer needs external aid.”⁵⁷ However, the parallel drawn between *Rossotrudnichestvo* and USAID was met with public disapproval from the head of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, Yevgeny Primakov.⁵⁸ Furthermore, amid negotiations on the reopening of the *Russian House* in Baku, Russia’s new, harder stance and scrutiny over labor migrants led to another point of tension with Azerbaijan. Namely, following the deaths of two Azerbaijani nationals during a police raid in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg in June 2025, Azerbaijan responded by cancelling all cultural events planned by Russian state and private institutions on its territory, refusing official Russian visits, launching investigations into the activities of *Sputnik Azerbaijan*, and detaining several journalists associated with the outlet.⁵⁹

Azerbaijan is not the only Central Asian state that has exhibited a hardening attitude toward Russia’s soft power infrastructure. In April 2025, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, members of the Eurasian Economic Union, took some legal action affecting Russian influence platforms. In Kyrgyzstan, an employee of the local *Russian House* was taken into custody on suspicion of recruiting locals to join the Russian military effort in Ukraine (released later in June 2025). In Kazakhstan, authorities initiated an investigation into *Sputnik Kazakhstan* over alleged content glorifying mercenary activity.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, another member of the EAEU, Armenia, is demonstrating a recalibration of its foreign policy, particularly following the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The deterioration of bilateral relations with Russia has manifested in Yerevan’s decision to freeze its participation in the major security-related integration project in the post-Soviet space, the *Collective Security Treaty Organization* (CSTO), and to adopt legislation formally initiating the process of accession to the European Union. These moves affect Russia’s attractiveness as a regional anchor and its ideological and symbolic leadership by leading the integration processes.

In parallel, general sanctions, not specific to the soft power realm, by the “unfriendly countries” (a term used by the Russian leadership), also indirectly but tangibly constrained Russia’s soft power capabilities. On one hand, sanctions-imposed barriers challenged both the material and symbolic basis of Russia’s soft power, targeting Russia’s appeal as an economic and investment partner, but also creating obstacles for Moscow’s funding and sustaining soft power outreach. On the other hand, the prolonged conflict and worsening relations with “Western” states reduce Russia’s attractiveness as a tourist destination for citizens of these countries, while exclusion from international financial systems, limitations on Russian airlines, and retaliatory restrictions by Moscow on foreign carriers have created practical barriers to overall global tourism and intercultural exchange.

57 Akbar Novruz, “Azerbaijan Ends Co-op with ‘Rossotrudnichestvo’ over Concerns of Foreign Influence [UPDATED],” *Azernews*, February 6, 2025, <https://www.azernews.az/nation/237421.html>.

58 Россия – Исламский мир [Rossiya – Islamskiy Mir], “Примаков: Россотрудничество не вмешивается в политику других стран” [Primakov: Rossotrudnichestvo Does Not Interfere in the Politics of Other Countries], April 7, 2025, <https://russia-islworld.ru/main/primakov-rossotrudnichestvo-ne-vmesivaetsa-v-politiku-drugih-stran-2025-04-07-48375/>.

59 Reuters, “Azerbaijan Arrests Journalists at Russian State Outlet as Tensions with Moscow Rise,” June 30, 2025, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/kremlin-condemns-azerbajians-move-cancel-russian-cultural-events-following-2025-06-30/>.

60 Eurasianet, “Russian Soft-Power Entities Embroiled in Controversy in Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan Investigating Russian Activities,” April 24, 2025, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://eurasianet.org/russian-soft-power-entities-embroiled-in-controversy-in-central-asia>.

In sum, since the onset of the February 2022 conflict, Russia's soft power projection, particularly across the "Western" sphere, has faced a range of challenges. Cultural, media, and symbolic platforms that had been central to Russia's soft power strategy have come under pressure from sanctions and shifting foreign policy dynamics in the post-Soviet space. This evolving political context has led to a rethinking of the instruments, priorities, and narratives underlying Russia's soft power policy.

IV. Strategic Adaptation of Russian Soft Power

In the aftermath of the February 2022 Ukraine conflict, Russia's soft power adaptation efforts took a twofold approach. In conceptual terms, Russia proposed a new framework dedicated specifically to its soft power strategy. In practical terms, just as Russia sought alternative markets for its energy exports, it also reoriented its public diplomacy efforts toward new directions, primarily the "Global South," together with reorganizing its instruments to reflect new geographic and ideological priorities.

1) New Conceptual Framing in a Changing Political Context

In September 2022, in the aftermath of the conflict-prompted "massive and unprecedented sanctions against Russia," as the EU describes them,⁶¹ Moscow adopted a new *Concept for Russia's Humanitarian Policy Abroad*. The document stands out as the first formalized effort to codify soft power under a dedicated policy umbrella. While earlier policy-related documents, as mentioned previously, occasionally referenced soft power, the new Humanitarian Policy Concept represents the first comprehensive policy document explicitly outlining a strategic framework for Russia's soft power projection.

Although the title of the document uses the term "humanitarian policy abroad," its intent and content remain soft power-focused. The Concept itself refers to the term "soft power" throughout the text and encompasses "main directions" such as (in order of appearance): forming an objective perception of the Russian Federation abroad, promoting traditional Russian spiritual and moral values; promotion of the Russian language; Russian culture promotion; promotion of Russian education and science abroad; international sports cooperation; cooperation in the sphere of tourism; youth cooperation; support to compatriots abroad; heritage preservation; usage of media and modern technologies; humanitarian cooperation; and intercultural and interfaith dialogue.⁶² Outlining both objectives and key initiatives, the new Humanitarian Policy Concept marks a transition toward a more systematic and structured vision of influence-building abroad. As the document proceeds, it places particular focus on post-Soviet states and BRICS countries, as well as countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and on Russian-speaking communities abroad.

61 European Council and Council of the European Union, "EU Sanctions against Russia," accessed July 22, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/>.

62 Here and hereafter, the passages from the Concept are translated from Russian into English by the authors, as no official translation by the Russian government has been published to the moment of the research preparation: Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation], *Концепция гуманитарной политики Российской Федерации за рубежом* [Concept of the Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad], September 14, 2022, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/1829856/.

The Humanitarian Policy Concept also adopts a defensive cultural posture. It underscores the importance of a broader effort to promote Russia's image abroad, especially amid "the increase in the number of attempts to belittle the importance of Russian culture and Russian humanitarian projects, to disseminate and impose a distorted interpretation of Russia's true goals of familiarizing the global community with its cultural heritage and achievements in various humanitarian fields, to discredit the Russian world, its traditions and ideals, replacing them with pseudo-values" (Article 9 in General Provisions).

Within this framework, the protection and promotion of "traditional Russian spiritual and moral values" is positioned at the heart of national interests (Article 13), objectives (Article 15), and principles (Article 16) of Russia's policy in the humanitarian field. Among the values for which Russia is "increasingly perceived as the guardian," the document highlights the "priority of the spiritual over the material, protection of human rights and freedoms, family, norms of morality, humanism, [and] clemency" (Article 19). Other values presented as ingrained in the "Russian mentality" and national character include "mutual assistance, collectivism, [and] faith in goodness and justice," along with "respect for foreign culture, faith, and customs" (Article 19). A contrast is drawn with what is described as the "aggressive inculcation of neoliberal views by a number of states" (Article 19).

Among the soft power directions identified in the Concept, it is noteworthy that "international cooperation in the field of tourism" is emphasized as a separate area of humanitarian policy, essential for the formation of an "objective perception" of the country. In this vein, the presented increasing attractiveness of Russia as a tourist destination is seen as a tool to "disseminate first-hand information about Russia."

Thus, in the context of growing challenges to its soft power projection, Russia has sought to consolidate and systematize its soft power efforts through the adoption of a comprehensive strategic document. The *Concept for Humanitarian Policy Abroad* illustrates this systematization, while also confirming the continued importance of shaping Russia's international image and addressing external perceptions within its broader foreign policy approach, even amid the use of military tools.

2) Adaptation and Reorganization of Russian Soft Power Efforts

Sports

As demonstrated above, leveraging sports as a means to project national prestige and foster international partnerships stands as one of the particularities of Russia's public diplomacy. In response to restrictions on its participation in international sports arenas, Russia has pursued the development of alternative platforms. For example, during its 2024 BRICS presidency, Russia hosted the annual (since 2016) BRICS Games in Kazan in June. The promotion of the event required additional effort, as the Games coincided with the *UEFA Euro 2024* and took place ahead of the *Paris Summer Olympics*. Thus, organizers drew comparisons⁶³ of their preparations with the Olympics, emphasizing the "level of services" and asserting the superior quality of the event preparation.

⁶³ BRICS Games 2024, "BRICS Games Conclusions Drawn in Kazan," July 1, 2024, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://bricskazan2024.games/tpost/eziobiddil-brics-games-conclusions-drawn-in-kazan>.

Meanwhile, plans to host the *Summer Friendship Games* in Moscow and Yekaterinburg in September 2024, as well as the *Winter Friendship Games* in Sochi in 2026, have faced different obstacles. The initiative is a revival of the *Friendship Games*, first held in 1984 when several socialist states boycotted the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Initially scheduled for September 2024, the Games were postponed to 2025 to avoid Olympic-year scheduling conflicts and to “maximize athlete and official availability,” with organizers affirming that they had received applications from nearly 2,500 athletes representing 127 countries.⁶⁴ However, in March 2024, the IOC released a formal statement referring to the Games as “politically motivated sports events” and urging “all stakeholders of the Olympic Movement and all governments to reject any participation in, and support of [such events],”⁶⁵ which complicated the process of attracting participants. Consequently, the Games were postponed “until further instructions,” as per the official statement of the Russian president.⁶⁶

At the same time, Russia is pursuing efforts to re-establish its full participation in the international Olympic movement. According to November 2024 statements by the Russian sports minister, dialogue with the IOC is ongoing “non-publicly, through various channels and on neutral territory.” He emphasized that “we need to stop with accusations, insults, we need to start moving towards softening the IOC’s position towards our athletes.”⁶⁷ The election of Kirsty Coventry, a former Olympic swimmer from Zimbabwe, as IOC president in March 2025 has been viewed in Russia as a potential opening for “positive developments” on the issue of the reintegration into the IOC.⁶⁸

Popular Cultural Venues

For years, the Eurovision had been part of Russian cultural diplomacy. While Russia voiced various criticisms of the song contest, it continued to participate in the competition, recognizing its potential to showcase Russian culture and convey national values to a broad international audience. Notably, hosting the Eurovision in Moscow in 2009 contributed to promoting a renewed image of Russia as a modern, open country with a wide international outreach, particularly important in the aftermath of the 2008 conflict in Georgia.

64 Reuters, “Russia’s World Friendship Games Postponed to 2025, Report Says,” July 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/sports/russias-world-friendship-games-postponed-2025-report-says-2024-07-03/>.

65 International Olympic Committee (IOC), “Declaration by the IOC against the Politicisation of Sport,” March 19, 2024, <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/declaration-by-the-ioc-against-the-politicisation-of-sport>.

66 Rich Perelman, “RUSSIA: Putin Declares World Friendship Games to Be Postponed Indefinitely,” *Sports Examiner*, December 2, 2024, <https://www.thesportsexaminer.com/russia-putin-declares-world-friendship-games-to-be-postponed-indefinitely/>.

67 Rich Perelman, “RUSSIA: Putin Declares World Friendship Games to Be Postponed Indefinitely.”

68 Sports.ru, “Дмитрий Свищев: «Избрание Ковентри президентом МОК – уникальная возможность для всего российского спорта»,» [“Dmitry Svishchev: ‘Koventry’s Election as IOC President Is a Unique Opportunity for All Russian Sport’”], June 18, 2024, <https://www.sports.ru/athletics/1116787410-dmitrij-svishhev-izbranie-koventri-prezidentom-mok-unikalnaya-vozmozhn.html>.

The exclusion from Eurovision in 2022 provided Russia with new impetus to promote alternative cultural platforms, most notably through the revival of the *Intervision Song Contest*. Originally launched during the Cold War as a counterpart to Eurovision, *Intervision* was held in Czechoslovakia (1965–1968) and later in Poland (1977–1980), featuring occasional participation from the countries of the Western bloc.⁶⁹ In August 2008, a first revived version took place in Sochi, primarily involving countries from the post-Soviet space. However, with organizational hurdles and the withdrawal of Tajikistan as a prospective host for the 2009 edition, the event did not establish a regular presence. A further attempt in 2014 to organize *Intervision* in Sochi with expected participation from China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan was similarly postponed and ultimately cancelled, due to the “political situation.”⁷⁰

In a renewed effort to institutionalize the platform, Russia organized a new edition of the *Intervision Song Contest* in Moscow in September 2025. Around twenty countries have confirmed their participation. These span groupings such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS members, including Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, China, India, South Africa, and Russia; Latin American countries, including Cuba, Colombia, and Venezuela; some Arab states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE); as well as Serbia, Vietnam, and notably, the United States.⁷¹ However, the US ultimately withdrew from the competition just before it began.

Russian Classical “High Culture”

The international projection of Russian classical culture has long served as a cornerstone for shaping the country’s image abroad. Framed as a demonstration of artistic excellence and spiritual depth, these cultural exports have functioned both as expressions of national pride and as instruments for engaging global audiences with Russian mentality and values.

In 2016, the Russian government and the Ministry of Culture reintroduced the *Russian Seasons* festival as a comprehensive cultural project offering a diverse program that features ballet, opera, classical music concerts, theater productions, film festivals, museum and art exhibitions, educational initiatives, lectures, master classes, and other cultural events spread across multiple cities in each host country.⁷² As demonstrated previously, the relaunch corresponded with growing concerns over Russia’s international reputation and was consistent with the appearance of the soft power term in the 2012 and 2016 Foreign Policy Concepts. The inaugural renewed edition of the *Russian Seasons* took place in Japan in 2017, followed by successive editions in Italy (2018), Germany (2019), France, Belgium, Luxembourg (2020), and South Korea (2021).

69 Dean Vuletic, “The Intervision Song Contest: Popular Music and Political Liberalization in the Eastern Bloc,” in *Music and Democracy: Participatory Approaches*, ed. Marko Kölbl and Fritz Trümpi (Vienna: mdwPress / transcript Verlag, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839456576-006>.

70 Anthony Granger, “Intervision: 2014 Contest Is Cancelled,” *Eurovoix News*, September 1, 2014, <https://eurovoix.com/2014/09/01/intervision-2014-contest-is-cancelled/>.

71 TASS, “Names of Participating Countries at Intervision Song Contest Revealed — Organizers,” June 12, 2025, <https://tass.com/society/1972279>.

72 Deutsche Welle, Anastassia Boutsko, “‘Russian Seasons’ Festival Kicks Off in Berlin,” *DW*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-little-peace-russian-seasons-festival-kicks-off-in-berlin/a-47010993>; Russian Seasons, *Russian Seasons Official Website*, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://russian-seasons.com/?lang=en>.

The 2022 Concept of Russia's Humanitarian Policy Abroad identifies *Russian Seasons* as one of the practices lying at the "basis for promoting Russian culture abroad" (Article 33). Meanwhile, its geographical orientation shifted in subsequent years. The 2023 edition was held in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, followed by Brazil in 2024. Notably, the initiative was expanded in 2024 to include the *Days of Russian Spiritual Culture in Foreign Countries*, which was organized in Belarus, Brazil, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Cuba, with events aimed at highlighting Russian values, traditions, and popular arts and crafts.⁷³ The step reflects the practical implementation of the 2022 programmatic document and aligns with a more assertive articulation of the stance on traditional values within Russian political discourse at national and international levels.

Throughout 2025, for the first time, *Russian Seasons* is being held in Gulf countries, in both Bahrain and Oman simultaneously,⁷⁴ signaling a notable extension of Russia's cultural diplomacy into the Arab world. The inclusion of major Russian artistic institutions and figures to participate in the festival demonstrates the importance attributed to the initiative held in these countries. In particular, the opening of the festival in Bahrain in January featured the *Mariinsky Symphony Orchestra* conducted by Valery Gergiev, while the November program includes gala performances by the *Vaganova Ballet Academy*. Oman's program features exhibitions from leading Russian museums, such as the *State Hermitage Museum*, the *State Tretyakov Gallery*, and the *Moscow Kremlin Museum-Reserve*. The program appears particularly designed to showcase Russia's cultural richness and diversity with the inclusion of elements that may resonate with regional audiences. For example, one of February's key events in both states featured performances by the *State Academic Honored Dance Ensemble "Lezginka"* from Dagestan, one of Russia's Muslim republics in the North Caucasus, highlighting Russia's multicultural composition and the potential for cultural dialogue.

In addition, since 2023, Russia's most renowned ballet company, the Bolshoi Theater, has conducted annual tours to China. This shift from the previous occasional engagement to a more regular presence underscores the increasingly strategic nature of Russia's cultural diplomacy with regard to China.⁷⁵

Media

In response to sanctions and the subsequent restrictions placed on Russian state-affiliated media, outlets have intensified efforts to expand into new markets. One of the most prominent illustrations of these efforts is RT's growing presence in Africa. Following the rupture of its broadcasting to African audiences via digital satellite TV in 2022, RT moved to establish its first African bureau in South Africa, positioning it as the English-language hub for the continent.⁷⁶ Beyond this, RT has adopted a multifaceted approach to audience engagement in Africa, which includes the launch of localized television programming across different African countries and the forging of partnerships with local media networks to facilitate the co-production and dissemination of content.⁷⁷

73 Russian Seasons, "Schedule," accessed July 22, 2025, <https://russian-seasons.com/schedule/?lang=en>.

74 Russian Seasons, "'Russian Seasons' — 2025," accessed July 22, 2025, <https://russian-seasons.com/raspisanie-2025/?lang=en>.

75 Chen Nan, "Renowned Ballet Troupe Returns to China," *China Daily*, May 10, 2025, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202505/10/WS681e88f7a310a04af22be79f.html>.

76 Bloomberg, "Banned in Europe, Kremlin-Backed RT Channel to Set Up Hub in South Africa," *Daily Maverick*.

77 Kate Bartlett, "Kremlin-Backed TV Channel Woos Africa," *Voice of America (VoA)*, August 5, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/kremlin-backed-tv-channel-woos-africa-7730946.html>.

The strategic media pivot toward Africa was underscored by President Putin at the *Russia–Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum* in Saint Petersburg in July 2024. In his remarks, he noted efforts “to open offices of the leading Russian media outlets in Africa: TASS news agency, Rossiya Segodnya [media group, which includes RIA Novosti and Sputnik], RT television channel, the All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, [and] Rossiyskaya Gazeta [newspaper],”⁷⁸ signaling a coordinated approach to institutionalize Russian media infrastructure across the continent.

In addition, Russia has launched new media platforms targeting African audiences. One such example is *African Initiative*, a news outlet designed to “mutually expand the knowledge of Russians and Africans about each other,” where the “neo-colonial legacy that African countries have been struggling with” is one of the main topics of coverage.⁷⁹ Indeed, neocolonialism emerged as one of the central themes of Russia’s strategic narrative, which contributes to the geographic expansion of its media presence on the continent. It leans upon tracing the historical continuity with the Soviet anti-imperialist commitment, criticism of Western “neocolonial interventionism,” and projection of discursive and ideological convergences of values and objectives.⁸⁰

Beyond Africa, RT is also expanding its Arabic-language segment. In late 2023, it opened a new office in Algeria and launched a TV program titled *Bridges to the East*, aimed at presenting Russia’s broad cooperation with Arab countries.⁸¹ Besides, RT has pursued fostering partnerships with regional media companies, such as Jordan’s *Roya Media Group*,⁸² and has increased its engagement across social media platforms, where it seems to outperform outlets like the *BBC*, as well as regional sources such as *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya* in terms of reach.⁸³

Similar trends can also be noticed in India, where RT has introduced Hindi-language content through its social media platforms, supplementing its English-language services.⁸⁴ The launch, in 2024, of a new India-focused show, *Let’s Talk Bharat*,⁸⁵ also aligns with RT’s broader editorial positioning on nationalistic narratives and its ongoing efforts to strengthen its presence in that part of the world.

78 Daily Sun, “RT, Sputnik and Other Russian Media to Open Offices in Africa – Putin,” July 28, 2023, <https://www.daily-sun.com/post/702901/RT-Sputnik-and-other-Russian-media-to-open-offices-in-Africa---Putin>.

79 African Initiative, “About Project,” <https://afrinz.ru/en/about/>.

80 Maxime Audinet, “« À bas le néocolonialisme ! » – Résurgence d’un récit stratégique dans la Russie en guerre,” Étude 119, *IRSEM*, octobre 2024, 11, https://www.irsem.fr/storage/file_manager_files/2025/03/etude-119-audinet-russie-et-n-ocolonialisme-v2.pdf

81 Broadcast Pro, “RT Arabic Expands Presence with New Regional Office in Algeria,” December 8, 2023, <https://www.broadcastprome.com/news/rt-arabic-expands-presence-with-new-regional-office-in-algeria/>.

82 Broadcast Pro, “Roya Media Group and RT Arabic Strengthen Media Collaboration,” March 10, 2025, <https://www.broadcastprome.com/news/roya-media-group-and-rt-arabic-strengthen-media-collaboration/>.

83 Ilan I. Berman, “The Middle East As Informational Battlefield,” American Foreign Policy Council, April 11, 2025, <https://www.afpc.org/publications/articles/the-middle-east-as-informational-battlefield#:~:text=Outreach%20to%20the%20Middle%20East,terms%20of%20social%20media%20engagement>.

84 Huma Siddiqui, “US Pressures India to Silence Russian RT amid Accusations of Propaganda,” *Financial Express*, September 17, 2024, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/us-pressure-india-to-silence-russian-rt-amid-accusations-of-propaganda/3613161>.

85 Business Standard, “Anupam Kher to Host New, India-Focused Show on RT Starting March 11,” March 11, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/content/press-releases-ani/anupam-kher-to-host-new-india-focused-show-on-rt-starting-march-11-124031100711_1.html.

Overall, the growing emphasis of the Russian government and media diplomacy on the articulation of traditional values, national discourse, and anti-colonial narratives has allowed Russian media to expand its presence in regions where such themes resonate with cultural perceptions and societal views.

Cultural, Education, and Humanitarian Diplomacy

To start with, transcending beyond the religious domain, the *Russian Orthodox Church* (ROC) has increasingly positioned itself as a key contributor to Russia's outreach in new geographic areas, leveraging cultural, linguistic, and value-based engagement to support broader influence-building efforts. In particular, the ROC has been actively growing its presence on the African continent. On December 29, 2021, shortly before the conflict broke out and following a prolonged period of tensions with the Patriarchate of Alexandria over its recognition of the *Orthodox Church of Ukraine* (OCU), the ROC announced the establishment of the *Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa*, covering all African countries.⁸⁶ Consequently, "acting in close cooperation with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, *Rossotrudnichestvo*, of course, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [the ROC is] developing large-scale projects for Africa," including humanitarian and educational initiatives. The head of the Exarchate of Africa further remarks that "Africans see us as friends, like they did in Soviet times" and indicates the unleashed canonical potential of the continent, which provides further opportunities for the development of cooperation.⁸⁷

To continue, *Rossotrudnichestvo* is another soft power entity that is working on a new network of presence. In particular, alongside its fully-fledged "*Russian Houses*," the Russian agency established a "flexible work format...when non-profit organizations, businesses, alumni associations and others can sign an agreement with *Rossotrudnichestvo* by opening a partner "Russian House"...to receive information and organizational support."⁸⁸ By the end of 2024, the agency had expanded its network of partner *Russian Houses* to 20, spread throughout the Middle East, South America, and Southeast Asia, but most of all in Africa (with 11 locations). According to the agency's head, "Dozens more candidates from various parts of the world are currently in line for consideration of applications, for example, Argentina, Brazil, Burundi, DRC, India, Indonesia, Colombia, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, and others."⁸⁹ Thus, the less formal framework contributes to the expanding geography of the *Russian Houses* and widens the reach of various projects of student and scientific exchanges and promotion of Russian culture, language, and views.

At the same time, the network of traditional official *Russian Houses* also continues to expand geographically, with, as of mid-2025, a new center planned in Angola, discussions ongoing with Mali, and preparations underway for the opening of one in Algeria.⁹⁰ Simultaneously, *Rossotrudnichestvo*'s announcement in

86 Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, "History of the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa," *Russian Orthodox Church*, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://exarchate-africa.ru/en/history>.

87 Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa, "Metropolitan Leonid of Klin: We Have Very Good Prospects," *Russian Orthodox Church*, June 23, 2023, <https://exarchate-africa.ru/en/news/metropolitan-leonid-of-klin-we-have-very-good-prospects>.

88 *Rossotrudnichestvo*, "Rossotrudnichestvo Responds to a Public Request from Friends in Africa," September 16, 2024, <https://rs.gov.ru/en/news/rossotrudnichestvo-responds-to-a-public-request-from-friends-in-africa>.

89 *Rossotrudnichestvo*, "Partner Russian Houses to Open in Côte d'Ivoire, Oman, Thailand and Turkey," December 20, 2024, <https://rs.gov.ru/en/news/partner-russian-houses-to-open-in-cote-divoire-oman-thailand-and-turkey>.

90 African Initiative, "Three New Russian Houses Are Planned to Open in Africa," May 22, 2025, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2025/05/three-new-russian-houses-are-planned-to-open-in-africa>.

April 2025 of plans to open three new branches in Armenia⁹¹ can be seen as an attempt to mitigate rising tensions and re-establish closer ties through soft power instruments. The growing number of Russian expatriates in Armenia may represent another factor contributing to this decision. Moreover, although, as was mentioned above, *Rossotrudnichestvo* has previously expressed reservations about direct comparisons with USAID, its head, Yevgeniy Primakov, stated in a July 2025 interview with a Russian media outlet that the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is working on a draft law on international development, which, according to him, is aimed at creating a framework broadly analogous to that of USAID.⁹²

The academic sphere represents another important dimension of engagement. The number of international students attending Russian universities, particularly from Africa, has seen a consistent increase. In 2024–2025, approximately 40,000 African students were enrolled, compared to 35,000 the previous year and a threefold increase over the past 13 years. Scholarship allocations also increased from 4,746 in 2024–2025 to 4,816 in 2025–2026, reflecting ongoing investment in educational soft power on the continent.⁹³

At the same time, the post-Soviet space, especially Central Asia, where the presence of Russian soft power entities has recently been challenged, has also attracted the attention of Russian education diplomacy. To illustrate, Russian universities have strengthened their presence in the region by opening new branches, with examples in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.⁹⁴ As of 2025, there are 27 branches of Russian universities operating across Central Asia, 14 of which are located in Uzbekistan.⁹⁵ In addition, the 2023–2024 academic year also witnessed a slight increase in the quotas allocated to students from Central Asian countries.⁹⁶

In the domain of science diplomacy, in response to the limited opportunities for collaboration with European and other Western research institutions, Russian academia has increasingly turned to cooperation with China and India. This shift is reflected, for instance, in the growing number of joint publications between Russian scholars and their counterparts in China and India since 2022,⁹⁷ demonstrating an adaptive approach to research collaboration that aligns with broader trends in Russia's foreign policy orientation.

Overall, the adaptation of Russia's soft power policy and its actors to the new international political context involves the development of new operational mechanisms and the refocusing of geographic orientations. This dynamic creates opportunities for deepening cultural cooperation with new regions, which may lay the ground for potential strategic outcomes.

91 ArmInfo, "Rossotrudnichestvo to Open Three New Branches in Armenia – Primakov," April 7, 2025, https://arminfo.info/full_news.php?id=90462&lang=3.

92 RBC, "МИД подготовит закон о создании альтернативы USAID в России" ["The Foreign Ministry Will Draft a Law on Creating an Alternative to USAID in Russia"], July 8, 2025, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/08/07/2025/686c15ac9a-794768950cee88>.

93 Wagdy Sawahel, "Russia increases scholarships for students from Africa," University World News, November 21, 2024, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20241120142700110>.

94 Посольская Жизнь (EL) [Embassy Life (EL)], "The Russian Foreign Ministry reported that branches of leading Russian universities will open in Central Asian countries," May 18, 2023, <https://embassylife.ru/en/2023/05/18/28029>.

95 Sergey Yun, "Russia and the Central Asian Countries: Demography and Education," Valdai Discussion Club, May 26, 2025, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-the-central-asian-countries-demography>.

96 Посольская Жизнь (EL) [Embassy Life (EL)], "The Russian Foreign Ministry reported that branches of leading Russian universities will open in Central Asian countries," May 18, 2023, <https://embassylife.ru/en/2023/05/18/28029>.

97 David Matthews, "News in depth: Russian researchers disappear from academic conferences as isolation bites."

V. The GCC as a New Focus Area of the Russian Soft Power

1) Russia's Public Diplomacy toward the GCC

The context of the Cold War suggested limited engagement between the USSR and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Until 1985, only Kuwait had established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Diplomatic ties were subsequently concluded with Oman in 1985, the UAE in 1986, Qatar in 1987, and Bahrain in 1990. Diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, initially established in 1926 and severed in 1938, were restored only in 1992, following the dissolution of the USSR.

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's disintegration, Russia's presence in the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region remained relatively limited throughout the 1990s and much of the 2000s. The GCC states, in particular, lay outside the scope of Russia's traditional diplomatic engagement with the region. Cooperation in the cultural field during this period, while notable, such as the Bolshoi Theatre's tours in the UAE in 2008 and 2009,⁹⁸ took place only on an occasional basis. The launch of the Russia-GCC Strategic Dialogue at the ministerial level in 2011 marked the beginning of a more structured political engagement, although it was predominantly focused on political and economic aspects, setting cultural dimensions aside. However, over the past decade, bilateral ties have significantly deepened, driven both by a changing regional approach among the GCC states to international relations and by the evolving context of Russia's foreign policy. This has created new momentum for multifaceted cooperation. As a result, the recent intensification of political dialogue, reflected in the growing number of reciprocal high-level visits, has been accompanied by a broader spectrum of engagement tools, including soft power mechanisms.

A prominent illustration is the more elevated role of GCC countries in the *Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum* (SPIEF). Each year, the Forum grants a selected country a special status, "guest country," which includes several privileges such as an expanded national pavilion, larger-scale representation, and enhanced promotional opportunities. Qatar became the first GCC country to receive this designation in 2021, followed by the UAE in 2023, and Oman in 2024. In the 2025 edition, the "guest country" status was attributed to Bahrain,⁹⁹ which used the forum as a "key platform to showcase...business, culture, and tourism to the Russian audience." Saudi Arabia has been designated as the "guest country" for the 2026 edition of the SPIEF.¹⁰⁰

Engagement on a cultural and value-based level is also facilitated through Russia's observer status at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Building on this platform, in 2009, Russia launched the annual Kazan Economic Forum: Russia-Islamic World, which has since evolved into another significant venue for dialogue. At the 2023 edition of the Forum, the GCC Accreditation Center (GAC) and Rossakkreditatsiya (the Russian national accreditation body) signed an annex to their Memorandum of Understanding, establishing cooperation in the field of accreditation. The annex outlines a joint assessment procedure for Halal certification bodies, designed to promote mutual recognition of conformity

98 Bolshoi Theatre, "International Tour 2011," *Bolshoi Theatre Official Website*, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://2011.bolshoi.ru/en/performances/tour1/>.

99 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), "Kingdom of Bahrain to be Guest Country at SPIEF 2025," accessed July 22, 2025, <https://forumspb.com/en/news/news/kingdom-of-bahrain-to-be-guest-country-at-spief-2025/>.

100 TASS, "Saudi Arabia will be guest country for SPIEF-2026," June 21, 2025, <https://tass.com/politics/1978381>.

assessment documentation.¹⁰¹ As a result, *Roskachestvo-Halal*, a Russian-accredited certification body, received official recognition from the GAC.¹⁰²

In addition to multilateral developments on the issue, Halal certificates issued by Roskachestvo have been recognized on a bilateral level by Oman, Qatar, Kuwait,¹⁰³ and, in 2025, the UAE. The latter was particularly important as it is also regarded by Russia as a hub facilitating market access to other Gulf states.¹⁰⁴ While Halal certification may seem primarily related to economic and trade interests, Russia's efforts for the recognition of its certification system in the GCC contribute to subtly reshaping the image of Russia in the Gulf region, underlining Russia's multicultural composition and portraying it as a norm-conscious actor. This sphere of cooperation also broadens Russia's presence in the region beyond conventional diplomacy and reinforces Russia's profile as a partner for multidimensional collaboration, not limited to energy or security sectors.

What is more, while platforms such as BRICS and the SCO are becoming increasingly relevant to Russia's soft power strategy, some GCC states enter into different forms of engagement with these platforms. Qatar became a dialogue partner of the SCO in 2022, followed in 2023 by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE. In parallel, in August 2023, the UAE and Saudi Arabia were officially invited to join BRICS, with the UAE becoming a full member in January 2024. Both BRICS and the SCO serve not only as platforms for political and economic cooperation but also as instruments for promoting narratives centered on sovereignty, multipolarity, the need for alternative institutions, and diversified partnerships. In this sense, these frameworks stand in part as a vehicle for Russia's vision outreach and complement its traditional soft power channels. Moreover, in June 2024, as Russia's withdrawal from the *UN World Tourism Organization* (UNWTO) became effective, BRICS held its first Tourism Forum in Moscow, which included the participation of the UAE delegation. Discussions on establishing a BRICS Tourism Organization¹⁰⁵ are also gaining traction within Russian political discourse.

2) Tourism as the Main Cooperation Sector

In broader terms, tourism has emerged as a major dimension of Russia's cooperation with the GCC states. On the one hand, this strategic orientation aligns with Russia's economic and soft power aspirations. On the other hand, it corresponds to the GCC countries' efforts with regard to economic diversification and soft power initiatives, where encouraging the international public to come and discover its new image has become one of the major pillars in the regions' various national agendas. Russia's heightened focus

101 Russia-Islamic World Kazan Forum, "Rosaccreditation and the GAC (Persian Gulf Countries) Accreditation Center signed an agreement on joint accreditation of Halal certification bodies," April 12, 2024, <https://kazanforum.ru/en/press-center/news/8811>.

102 AK&M, "Russian producers of halal products have been simplified access to the Persian Gulf countries," November 20, 2023, <https://www.akm.ru/eng/press/russian-producers-of-halal-products-have-been-simplified-access-to-the-persian-gulf-countries>.

103 Realnoe Vremya, "Russia to triple halal supplies to Persian Gulf states and Egypt — up to \$700 million," May 17, 2024, <https://realnoevremya.com/articles/7908-russia-to-triple-halal-supplies-to-persian-gulf-states-and-egypt>.

104 Роскачество [Roskachestvo], «Сертификаты "Роскачество-Халяль" признали в ОАЭ» ["Roskachestvo-Halal' Certificates Recognized in UAE"] January 22, 2025, <https://roskachestvo.gov.ru/news/sertifikaty-roskachestvo-khalyal-priznali-v-oae>.

105 Игорь Синельников [Igor Sinelnikov], «Скрепить союз. Появится ли международная организация БРИКС Туризм» ["Strengthening the Union: Will an International BRICS Tourism Organization Appear?"], June 14, 2024, <https://mag.russpass.ru/business/rubric/biznes/skrepit-soyuz-poyavitsya-li-mezhdunarodnaya-organizaciya-briks-turizm?ysclid=mcni3cwcoq796118132>.

on attracting visitors from the GCC states reflects both an acknowledgment of the region's significant economic potential and the largely untapped opportunities for mutual tourist exchange. This increased attention also forms part of a broader strategy to reorient Russia's tourism outreach toward Asia and the Middle East in the context of the new political circumstances.

Notably, Russia has taken steps to position itself as a welcoming destination for halal-conscious travelers. In major tourist cities, halal hospitality infrastructure is expanding, with hotels increasingly adapting their services to accommodate Muslim guests and medical tourism growing, particularly in the Muslim-majority region of Tatarstan. Events such as Qur'an recitation competitions and Islamic exhibitions have been incorporated into Moscow's tourism calendar. Moreover, the city has introduced a dedicated *Muslim Friendly Guide* that highlights halal-certified restaurants, mosques, hotels, and shopping venues. These developments indicate a long-term and systematic approach aimed at strengthening ties with Muslim countries, including the Gulf states.¹⁰⁶

Furthermore, since 2022, Russia has launched negotiations on visa-free agreements with GCC countries that had not previously established such arrangements,¹⁰⁷ (Qatar and the UAE established this in 2019). While pursuing efforts for the mutual visa waiver agreements, Russia moved to facilitate tourist entry and introduced a new *Electronic Visa* (e-visa) system in August 2023, applicable to citizens of 52 countries, including all GCC member states. The e-visa, which initially allowed for a 16-day stay within a 60-day window,¹⁰⁸ was further extended in early July 2025 to allow a 30-day stay within a 120-day period.¹⁰⁹

The rollout of the e-visa system and tourism-promotion efforts tailored to Gulf audiences have yielded measurable results. In 2024, the UAE ranked third among all countries in terms of tourist arrivals to Russia, with approximately 65,000 visitors, marking a 53% increase compared to the previous year. Saudi Arabia also emerged as a key tourism source market, ranking sixth overall with an estimated 55,000 visitors, representing a 605% year-to-year increase, the highest growth rate among the top ten source countries.¹¹⁰ This positive trend continued into 2025, as during the first quarter of the year, Saudi Arabia, for the first time, entered the top three source countries for inbound tourism to Russia. Compared to just 210 Saudi visitors during the same period in 2019, the number rose 47-fold to 9,900 tourists, demonstrating an increase of over 65% compared to the first quarter of 2024.¹¹¹

106 Muhammad Ali Bandial, "Russia Eyes Muslim Travelers as Global Tourism Map Shifts," May 1, 2025, SalaamGateway, <https://salaamgateway.com/story/russia-eyes-muslim-travelers-as-global-tourism-map-shifts>.

107 Middle East Monitor, "Russia in Talks with Gulf States on Visa-Free System," December 17, 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221217-russia-in-talks-with-gulf-states-on-visa-free-system>.

108 Hala Ahmad, "Russia's e-Visa Program Hits One Million Milestone," Passe Port, April 28, 2025, <https://discover.passportindex.org/reports/russia-e-visa>.

109 TASS, "Госдума приняла закон об увеличении срока действия электронной визы в России" ["State Duma Passed Law on Extending the Validity Period of Electronic Visa in Russia"], July 8, 2025, <https://tass.ru/politika/24462571>.

110 RBC, "Сколько иностранцев приехали в Россию в 2024 году. Инфографика" ["How Many Foreigners Came to Russia in 2024. Infographic"], RBC, February 5, 2025, <https://www.rbc.ru/business/05/02/2025/67a23e129a794772bb-4f28e6>.

111 Russian Travel Digest, "TOP 10 Countries – the Main Suppliers of Foreign Tourists to Russia," May 30, 2025, <https://russtd.com/top-10-countries-the-main-suppliers-of-foreign-tourists-to-russia.html>.

This dynamic appears to be bidirectional. Outbound Russian tourism to the GCC is also expanding significantly, reinforcing mutual cultural exposure. In 2023, over 100,000 Russian tourists traveled to Saudi Arabia, up from 55,000 in 2022.¹¹² Oman also experienced substantial growth, with a surge of over 300%, receiving 53,145 Russian visitors in 2023 compared to 13,000 the previous year.¹¹³ Meanwhile, in recent years, the UAE has consistently remained a major destination for Russian travelers. The 1 million Russian visitors to the UAE recorded in the first half of 2024 marked an 11% increase compared to the same period in 2023.¹¹⁴ In total, the number of Russian tourists visiting the country throughout 2024 reached approximately 2 million.¹¹⁵ However, it should be noted that data from the Russian border service on outbound tourist trips may not fully capture actual travel destinations. The statistics do not record the final point of arrival for travelers flying with transfers,¹¹⁶ and UAE airports in particular have become key transit hubs in the context of restrictions on direct flights for Russian travelers amid sanctions.

In the meantime, the dialogue on visa-free arrangements has also started to produce tangible outcomes. On April 22, 2025, Russia and Oman signed a 30-day visa-free agreement. The deal allows Omani citizens to travel to Russia without the need for an e-visa, while extending to Russian travelers the 14-day visa-free entry that Oman had previously granted in 2020.¹¹⁷ Although discussions with Kuwait are still ongoing,¹¹⁸ Russian officials indicate that the visa agreement with Bahrain is nearing finalization and is expected to be signed in 2025.¹¹⁹ At the same time, the goal to conclude such an agreement with Saudi Arabia is considered to be of “particular significance” for Russia in the same vein as was the establishment of direct air connectivity between the two states.¹²⁰ Indeed, Saudi Arabia remained the only GCC state without direct air connectivity to Russia until August 1, 2025, when its national low-cost carrier, flynas, launched the first direct flights between Riyadh and Moscow.¹²¹ This development is expected to be complemented in October 2025, when the national airline, Saudia, commences its own services on the route.¹²²

112 Russian Travel Digest, “The Number of Tourists from Russia Visiting Saudi Arabia Has More than Doubled in Just One Year,” March 15, 2024, <https://russtd.com/the-number-of-tourists-from-russia-visiting-saudi-arabia-has-more-than-doubled-in-just-one-year.html>.

113 Muscat Daily, “Russian Tourists to Oman Increased over 300% to 53,145 in 2023,” June 11, 2024, <https://www.muscatdaily.com/2024/06/11/russian-tourists-to-oman-increased-over-300-to-53145-in-2023>.

114 Iuliia Tore, “Abu Dhabi Emerges as a Prime Destination for Long-Haul Russian Travelers in 2024,” *RusTourismNews*, August 20, 2024, <https://www.rustourismnews.com/2024/08/20/abu-dhabi-emerges-as-a-prime-destination-for-long-haul-russian-travelers-in-2024>.

115 TV BRICS, “UAE’s Number of Russian Tourists Approaches 2 Million,” February 17, 2025, <https://tvbrics.com/en/news/uae-s-number-of-russian-tourists-approaches-2-million/>.

116 RBC, Куда россияне выезжали в 2024 году за рубеж. Инфографика [Where did Russians travel abroad in 2024. Infographics], RBC, February 5, 2025, https://www.rbc.ru/business/05/02/2025/67a2005a9a79471e5fcff59b?from=article_body.

117 International Investment, “Russia and Oman Sign 30-Day Visa-Free Agreement: New Entry Rules Announced,” June 11, 2025, <https://internationalinvestment.biz/en/tourism/5877-russia-and-oman-sign-30-day-visa-free-agreement-new-entry-rules-announced.html>.

118 Fares Al-Abdan, “Visa Exemption Between Russia, Kuwait Pondered,” *Zawya*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.zawya.com/en/business/travel-and-tourism/visa-exemption-between-russia-kuwait-pondered-u7mqpguh>.

119 Анастасия Шинкеева [Anastasiia Shinkeeva], “Минэкономразвития: в 2025 году ставим задачу отменить визы с тремя странами” [“Ministry of Economic Development: In 2025, We Aim to Abolish Visas with Three Countries”], *TASS*, June 24, 2025, <https://tass.ru/interviews/24316385>.

120 Idem.

121 Flynas, “flynas Celebrates the Launch of Its First Direct Flights Between Riyadh and Moscow,” August 1, 2025, <https://www.flynas.com/en/media-center/news-updates/flynas-celebrates-the-launch-of-its-first-direct-flights-between-riyadh-and-moscow>.

122 Khitam Al Amir, “Saudi Arabia’s National Airline Confirms October Start for Direct Moscow Flights,” *Gulf News*, June 28, 2025, <https://gulfnews.com/business/aviation/saudi-arabias-national-airline-confirms-october-start-for-direct-moscow-flights-1.500179873>.

In parallel with the increasing number of tourist arrivals and the growing Russian expatriate community in the Gulf, Russia's cultural footprint in the region is becoming more visible through the gradual development of a network of partner *Russian Houses*. As previously noted, Saudi Arabia has been identified as one of the countries where Rossotrudnichestvo is considering launching its flexible “partner” format of cultural presence. Similar discussions are ongoing with Bahrain,¹²³ while in 2024, agreements were reached to establish *Partner Russian Houses* in the UAE¹²⁴ and Oman.¹²⁵

This evolving network of cultural institutions is taking shape at a time when Russia seeks to broaden its international partnerships, and GCC states are pursuing strategic autonomy and diversification in their international engagements. Within this context, enhanced cultural cooperation contributes to a more resilient and multidimensional relationship between Russia and the Gulf states. While the preference for the “partner” format rather than formal *Russian Houses* may reflect a measured approach by GCC members, the sustained development of these initiatives nonetheless indicates a growing institutionalization of Russia's soft power engagement toward the Gulf and its plans for long-term cultural presence in the region.



123 Rossotrudnichestvo, “The Agency Discussed the Prospects of Russian-Bahraini Cooperation,” September 27, 2024, <https://rs.gov.ru/en/news/the-agency-discussed-the-prospects-of-russian-bahraini-cooperation>.

124 Rossotrudnichestvo, “Rossotrudnichestvo Expands the Geography of ‘Russian Houses,’” July 17, 2024, <https://rs.gov.ru/en/news/rossotrudnichestvo-expands-the-geography-of-russian-houses>.

125 Rossotrudnichestvo, “Partner Russian Houses to Open in Côte d’Ivoire, Oman, Thailand and Turkey.”

Conclusion: Opportunities and Challenges for Russian Soft Power

As this research has demonstrated, Russian soft power has consistently been reshaped in line with changing political contexts and global realities. This has involved restructuring its strategic framework, redirecting policy efforts geographically, reorganizing existing initiatives, and recalibrating its messaging. At the same time, there is a discernible continuity in both narratives and objectives, reflecting a consistent vision for Russia's global positioning. In particular, Russia has long sought to project the image of a peaceful, peace-seeking, and open-to-cooperation international actor, while aiming to respond to negative external perceptions. Similarly, cultural diplomacy, with a focus on classical "high culture," as well as sports diplomacy, projecting Russia's strength through high sports achievements, or the use of media to suggest a counter-narrative, represent long-standing instruments of influence recurring throughout different historical periods.

In the current political landscape, the nature of Russia's soft power policy may bring certain opportunities. For example, a more pronounced and explicit positioning vis-à-vis the "West" has enabled Russia to explore new avenues for identity construction, identity projection, and global engagement. This stance may resonate in parts of the "Global South," where critiques of existing international structures can find some support, thereby enhancing receptivity to Russia's soft power. In this regard, Russia's outreach benefits from the relative absence of entrenched negative perceptions that are often associated with "Western" actors in these regions. This advantage in perceptions, coupled with a conscious reorientation toward the "Global South," aligns with a broader tendency among many states in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East to pursue greater strategic autonomy and to recalibrate their foreign policy choices in the context of ongoing global tensions, including those linked to the Ukraine conflict.

At the same time, certain challenges and pressures can also be identified. To start with, one concerns the potential gap between Russia's official discourse of peace and respect for sovereignty, on the one hand, and its reliance on military instruments, on the other. Such divergences may complicate the credibility and wider resonance of its narrative. Yet, it can also be noted that, in some contexts, demonstrations of strength and the assertion of national interests vis-à-vis established international actors may carry appeal, particularly for states that seek greater influence themselves. Another challenge lies in the relatively limited use of the Russian language globally compared to English, which constrains the accessibility of Russian media, cultural content, and messaging. Moreover, in the specific case of the GCC, Russia's comparatively late investment in soft power instruments has contributed to the perception of its presence as less established in the sphere of public diplomacy. This image may reflect a degree of caution or mistrust on the part of GCC governments and risks leaving a gap in soft power engagement. Overall, considerable effort and ample room to maneuver are needed for Russia to further strengthen its soft power reach in the GCC. The intensification of intellectual interactions and their diversification with greater involvement from younger generations of experts could serve as an avenue in this direction.

On a broader scale, as Nye pointed out, soft power can be more effective when it draws on values that are widely shared.¹²⁶ In this vein, a counter-stance on the “West” has limits in its outreach. While potentially effective in selective contexts, this posture can pose challenges to Russia’s ability to engage broader global audiences, not only in “Western” states but also in countries seeking balanced relations with all major powers. In addressing this challenge, Russia emphasizes that the traditional and moral values it promotes are of a universal nature but have been marginalized in other dominant global narratives. The July 2025 phone conversation between the Russian and US presidents discussing mutual exchanges of films highlighting traditional values¹²⁷ could serve to underscore Russia’s vision that the “universality” of traditional norms is a political issue shaped by powerholders.

Meanwhile, in this dimension of traditionalist discourse, another challenge lies in its tendency to appeal to and draw on the past. One of the strengths of Soviet-era identity-building was its orientation toward the future, a forward-looking vision mobilizing around a shared ideal and a promise of societal progress. Meanwhile, today’s search for a new Russian identity often turns to “distant historical sources” and emphasizes the revival of pre-Soviet traditions.¹²⁸ The Soviet approach had its vulnerabilities, as the state of “mobilization” is difficult to maintain for the long term within a society. Yet, the current Russian approach, while it may be useful to reinforce cultural distinctiveness, raises questions about its capacity to offer a compelling vision of progress.

A further challenge relates to the foundation of the identity Russia seeks to project. While the concept of Russia as a distinct “civilization” has spread in official discourse, internal debates continue over what this civilization entails. As previously mentioned, frameworks, such as the idea of the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) and the ideology of “Eurasianism,” suggest varying content and directions of this civilizational narrative. Moreover, this civilizational identity construct is relatively nascent in its concrete formulation. Even though the groundwork for this construct has been laid in prior official political discourse, it may take time before this vision becomes fully embedded within Russian society. At the level of external considerations, the ideas underpinning Russia’s civilizational concept also need to find a way to coexist with the political agendas and national aspirations of neighboring states. For example, Kazakhstan cultivates its own Eurasian identity narrative,¹²⁹ presenting itself as a country at the crossroads of East and West, embracing a plurality of cultural influences. This narrative serves to support Kazakhstan’s strategy that emphasizes multi-vector foreign policy and strategic openness for cooperation with multiple actors.

Furthermore, Russian diplomacy is increasing its focus on broader platforms such as BRICS and the SCO. While these frameworks offer opportunities to amplify Russia’s international standing, they may also divert attention away from post-Soviet integration processes. Some of these projects face structural difficulties, as evidenced by Armenia’s recent suspension of participation in the CSTO.

126 Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power*, 87.

127 TASS, “Putin, Trump Discuss Exchange of Films Promoting Traditional Values — Kremlin Aide,” July 3, 2025, <https://tass.com/politics/1985175>.

128 Fedor Loukianov, “Les paradoxes du soft power russe,” 154.

129 Vera Ageeva, “Russian ‘Soft Power’: Between Eurasia and Russian World,” 21.

Moreover, with regard to the post-Soviet space, Russia also faces the growing pressure of competition from other international actors seeking to expand their presence and influence in the region. To elaborate, over the past decade, China has significantly deepened its political, economic, and cultural ties with Central Asian states. In particular, in June 2025, the Treaty on Eternal Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation was signed, bringing together China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.¹³⁰ Through the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), China's expanding infrastructure investments and trade networks have become major vectors of influence. This economic presence is complemented by cultural diplomacy, as can be seen through the expanding number of *Confucius Institutes*, the establishment of Chinese university branches, the development of university cooperation networks, and a growing array of educational scholarships.¹³¹ Together, these efforts enable China to exercise soft power through both economic integration and the promotion of linguistic and cultural familiarity. At the same time, there is growing influence from Turkey in the region. While its economic capabilities and the increasing number of investment projects have not yet reached a level competitive with China or Russia, Turkey is building its soft power by capitalizing on shared historical, cultural, and linguistic ties. The strategic relationship with Azerbaijan, often framed as "two states, one nation," serves as a symbolic reference point. More broadly, Turkey also builds its influence in the region through the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), formerly known as the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States.¹³² This transformation occurred in 2021 and marks a shift to a more institutionalized framework aimed at broader political, economic, and cultural coordination fostered by a shared Turkic identity.

In parallel, there is the threat of economic difficulties and their impact on Russia's soft power. Sanctions, particularly those affecting financial transactions, have imposed practical limitations on sectors such as tourism. At the same time, Russia's economy is also facing certain internal pressures. The June 2025 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) was marked by debates among Russian officials regarding the state of the national economy and the necessity and conduct of efforts to "cool down" the overheated growth of previous periods, amid concerns about rising inflation and potential recession.¹³³ On the one hand, such economic difficulties may impact the country's image abroad. On the other hand, the narrative promoted by Russia emphasizes resilience and self-reliance in the face of external pressure. The idea that Russia is withstanding large-scale sanctions imposed by a number of "Western" states and is continuing to pursue its political course and national interests can contribute to its soft power projection as a strong and independent actor, capable of navigating global challenges while maintaining its strategic direction.

Another important dimension concerns the relatively limited role of private (non-state) actors in supporting and resourcing soft power in Russia. Yet, some of the most successful cases of Russian cultural projection internationally have originated from private or bottom-up initiatives. For instance, Sergei Diaghilev's early 20th-century cultural initiatives led to the creation of the *Russian Seasons*, a brand that continues to serve as a key asset in Russia's contemporary soft power policy. Similarly, the animated sitcom *Masha and the Bear*,

130 Aibarshyn Akhmetkali, "China, Central Asia Sign Treaty, Outline New Paths for Cooperation," *The Astana Times*, June 18, 2025, <https://astanatimes.com/2025/06/china-central-asia-sign-treaty-outline-new-paths-for-cooperation>.

131 Albina Muratbekova, "Expanding China's Education Diplomacy in Central Asia," Eurasian Research Institute, February 2024, <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/expanding-chinas-education-diplomacy-in-central-asia>.

132 Aziz Pirimkulov, "Whose Soft Power Is More Effective in Central Asia and Why?" *The Caspian Post*, January 21, 2025, <https://caspianpost.com/central-asia/whose-soft-power-is-more-effective-in-central-asia-and-why>.

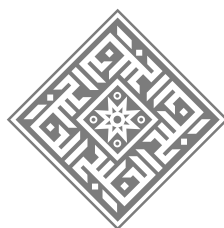
133 RBC, "Костин усомнился в положении экономики на грани рецессии" ["Kostin Doubts Economy Is on the Brink of Recession"], June 19, 2025, https://www.rbc.ru/economics/19/06/2025/685432419a7947036b37905b?from=from_main_5%20+%20https://www.rbc.ru/economics/19/06/2025/6853c9879a794721812a6f1c.

which was initially developed without state funds and supported by Animaccord Animation Studio, has achieved exceptional worldwide popularity, resonating with audiences across different cultures and regions while featuring elements of traditional and everyday Russian culture. In June 2020, one of the episodes of the cartoon series reached more than 4.3 billion views, making it the site's fifth most-viewed video of all time and the most viewed video on YouTube that is not a music video.¹³⁴ These bottom-up initiatives not only demonstrate the creative potential of private actors but can also foster a sense of personal involvement and emotional engagement with the broader national narrative and its projection.

In this light and in the context of the Gulf region, the growing Russian diaspora, particularly in the UAE, may represent an emerging vector of soft power influence. With increasing numbers of Russian citizens relocating and establishing different initiatives, from private schools to cultural venues and hospitality services, there is potential for these actors on the ground to project aspects of Russian culture in a region that functions as a major international crossroads. Understanding how this emerging diaspora might contribute to Russia's image abroad and to what extent this potential will be recognized or integrated into broader soft power strategies offers an area for further exploration.

To crown it all, Russia's soft power navigates between continuity and recalibration, between resonance and resistance, opportunity and constraint. In this context, its trajectory in the coming years may present a particular interest. Specifically, the new political context marked by Donald Trump's return to the US presidency may introduce new dynamics where questions arise. For example, to what extent can the shared emphasis on traditional values serve as a point of convergence between the two countries? How can the renewed dialogue with the US impact Russia's political narratives with regard to the "West"? How can these dynamics affect Russia's deepening engagement with other regions? How can Trump's political stance with regard to BRICS and the policies of its members affect the platform of international engagement and cooperation important to Russia? These questions highlight the need for continued observation and nuanced analysis of Russia's soft power policies.

134 Dmitry Efremenko, Anastasia Ponamareva, and Yury Nikulichev, "Russia's Semi-Soft Power," 115.



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