

Soft power and identity: Russia, Ukraine and the 'Russian world(s)'

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Abstract

What is soft power, and how can we analyse it empirically? The article proposes a social constructivist take on soft power by anchoring it to the concept of collective identity, and by suggesting a set of criteria that can be used to assess whether soft power is present in a relationship between two or more states. It argues that soft power is generated through continuous renegotiation of collective identity. We can assess the weight of a state's soft power vis-a-vis another state by investigating the extent to which the discursively constructed collective identity projected by the first state is accepted or rejected by different audiences in the second state, and by examining the ability of these audiences to affect the process of foreign policy decision-making. To illustrate this approach, the article applies it to an analysis of Russia's relationship with Ukraine prior to the 2014 crisis. In the late 2000s–early 2010s, Russia's dominant identity was increasingly associated with the idea of a 'Russian world' — an imagined community based on the markers of the Russian language, the Russian culture and the common glorious past. Despite a significant increase in Moscow's public diplomacy activities in Ukraine around that time, those efforts did not and could not fundamentally transform the psychological milieu in Moscow's relationship with Kyiv because the projected identity was inherently incompatible with one of the main identity discourses in Ukraine and was only partially compatible with another.

Keywords

Constructivism, culture, foreign policy, identity, nationalism, power

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Introduction

What is soft power, and how can we analyse it empirically? Since Joseph Nye (1990) coined this concept, it has been widely used both in the academic literature and in policy circles. An elusive concept, it has sparked a heated debate between those who acknowledge its relevance for our understanding of international politics (Gallarotti, 2010; Warren, 2014) and those who question its utility (Layne, 2010). It has also inspired a vast number of empirical studies that produced valuable insights into the ways in which governments engage with the idea of soft power in foreign policy discourses, into their image management activities and into their external perceptions. Yet, we can agree with David Kearn (2011: 66) that soft power remains ‘an ambiguous signifier with a nebulous theoretical core’. Dissatisfied with Nye’s definition, his critics have repeatedly called for a more rigorous conceptual discussion (Bially Mattern, 2005; Reich and Lebow, 2014). How does soft power work? If we accept that soft power is ‘the power of attraction’ (Nye, 2004), how can attraction translate into a change in someone’s behaviour? In addition, and more importantly, how can we study soft power?

This article contributes to the debate by anchoring the concept of soft power to the concept of collective identity, and by proposing a set of criteria that can be used to assess whether soft power is present in a relationship between two or more states. The state-focused approach does not aim to downplay the importance of soft power in any other relationships, for example, between non-state actors in the international realm or between political actors within the confines of domestic politics. Rather, it focuses on interstate relations in order to investigate the role of soft power at the level of foreign policies. While arguing against attempts to quantify the amount of soft power, the article suggests alternative ways of evaluating the weight and the dynamics of soft power in any given relationship. To illustrate this approach, it applies it to an analysis of Russia’s relationship with Ukraine prior to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The article is structured in the following way. The first section locates the concept of soft power in the wider debate on power, and considers some of the main difficulties of operationalising Nye’s definition. It proposes a social constructivist take on soft power by explicitly linking it to the concept of collective identity. The second section contextualises Russia’s engagement with the idea of soft power and analyses Moscow’s attempts to project a discursively constructed collective identity of a ‘Russian world’. The extent to which this projected identity was accepted or rejected by Ukrainian elites and public, and the implications of such reception for Russia’s soft power vis-a-vis Ukraine, are discussed in the third section. The article concludes by considering possible avenues for the further refinement of the concept.

Soft power and identity

It is hardly surprising that the concept of soft power remains contested. It has inherited all the ambiguity associated with the broader concept of power, which, despite its centrality to the disciplines of Politics and International Relations (IR), continues to be fiercely debated (Barnett and Duvall, 2005; Berenskoetter and Williams, 2007). Three issues related to this debate are especially relevant for this article: competing views of

power as resources or as a relationship; the significance of the concept of interests for our understanding of what soft power is and how it works; and the debate on agency. Let us examine these three issues and their implications for the empirical analysis of soft power.

Soft power as a relationship

The conceptualisation of power as resources has traditionally been central to the realist IR theory. In Mearsheimer's (2001: 57) view, for example, power is 'nothing more than specific assets or material resources that are available to a state'. This is not to say that all realists ignore non-material factors. Psychological factors are important for classical realists (Morgenthau, 1956), while neo-classical realists focus on decision-makers' perceptions of power distribution in the international arena (Schmidt, 2007). Some neo-realists explicitly engage with the concept of soft power by exploring the non-material assets of a state. Yet, they also view power as resources — an assumption that leads them to quantify soft power-related capabilities with the aim of ranking all states by the amount of soft power that they possess (Ferguson, 2012).

Nye's own conceptualisation shares some similarities with the power-as-resources approach. According to Nye (2004: x), soft power — as opposed to hard power — is 'an ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment'. Nye's (2004: 6) argument centres on the role of what he calls 'intangible assets' — an attractive culture, attractive values and institutions, and, finally, policies that are perceived as legitimate. Although Nye's understanding of 'soft-power resources' is inherently relational as it emphasises the importance of audience reception (it is the audience that finds them attractive or legitimate), Nye's language of resources or assets has had a major impact on empirical studies. While some scholars argue against a clear-cut differentiation between co-optation and coercion (Bially Mattern, 2005), most empirical studies differentiate between soft and hard power by explicitly or implicitly linking them to resources. Military means are traditionally associated with hard power, while public diplomacy tools are associated with soft power, with economic means attributed to either soft or hard power depending on the context (Hill, 2006; Tsygankov, 2006). As a result, the academic and expert literature has been disproportionally dominated by research on various resources and tools associated with soft power, such as cultural diplomacy, mass media, higher education and so on (McClory, 2011; Yang, 2010).

However, the use of the same resource by the same actor — be it military, economic or cultural assets — can be interpreted differently by different audiences within the same state. For example, when President Putin deployed troops near the border with Ukraine in the spring of 2014, this action meant different things for different actors within Ukraine. For some it was a threatening action that demonstrated Russia's willingness to use coercion (Yatsenyuk, 2014). For others it was a symbolic confirmation of Russia's determination to protect Russian speakers (Front of National Resistance to Euro-colonisation, 2014). One can agree with Guzzini (2013: 5) that 'resources are given weight not by themselves, but by shared understandings in social relations'. By studying resources, we cannot say much about differences between divergent interpretations of the same actor by different audiences and their changes over time. Instead of focusing on resources per se, we need to examine the ways in which different audiences 'read' an actor. This makes any

attempts to measure soft power or rank actors according to the size of their soft power inherently problematic: an international actor may, for example, routinely exercise soft power vis-a-vis one actor while completely lacking any soft power vis-a-vis another actor. With this in mind, it is more appropriate to conceptualise soft power as a relationship between two or more actors instead of seeing it as a property of one actor.

This view of soft power has significant methodological implications. As argued by Guzzini (2013: 5), by defining power as a 'relational phenomenon dependent on the specific encounter of people with their values and preferences in their historical context', we are shifting our investigation to the interpretivist perspective. In recent years, analysts of power have called for studying 'the normative structures and discourses that generate differential social capacities for actors to define and pursue their interests and ideals' (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 3). Bially Mattern, for example, offers a considerably more sophisticated account of soft power by drawing on Habermas's framework of persuasion. She argues that attractiveness is 'an interpretation that won out over many other possible interpretations through a communicative process' (Bially Mattern, 2005: 606). Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle (2013: 5) push this discussion further by applying the concept of strategic narratives, which they define as 'a communicative tool through which political actors ... attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives'. Having conceptualised soft power as 'the ability to create consensus around shared meanings', they rightly advocate paying more attention to audiences in order to investigate how narratives are interpreted (Roselle et al., 2014: 72).

Yet, this recent turn to strategic narratives and audience reception opens up further questions. Which audiences matter? How do competing interpretations of a projected narrative by diverse audiences within the same state translate into the state's behaviour? Ultimately, what does this tell us about a state's soft power vis-a-vis another state? Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2014: 80), for example, suggest a link between a particular interpretation of a strategic narrative and 'expectations that may feed into decision-making and the expression of support for certain courses of action'. However, this intuitive claim requires much more attention to audience reception. For example, should we be concerned only with interpretations of a narrative by a small group of decision-makers? What happens when a projected narrative is rejected by those in power but accepted by those groups that do not have immediate access to the locus of decision-making? Can we assess the weight and the dynamics of soft power in a relationship between two or more states? To answer these questions, let us turn to the second key issue — the issue of interests.

Soft power and interests

According to Nye's (1990) original definition of soft power, it works by shaping the interests and preferences of audiences through attraction. Later, this definition becomes more expansive: 'soft power is the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes' (Nye, 2011: 20–21). However, this conceptualisation does not tell us how and why interests change and whose interests matter. Unlike studies of soft power, the literature on power more broadly has engaged with the concept of interests at a

considerably more advanced level. We may recall, for example, the debate on the faces of power. Dahl (1961) understands power as an ability by one actor to get another actor to do something against their will, which presupposes an observable conflict of interests. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) suggest that power is also at work in agenda-setting when some issues simply do not arise on the agenda. Lukes goes further by investigating a 'third face' of power. He argues that A can achieve what they want from B by transforming B's understanding of their interests (Lukes, 2005 [1974]: 27). Nye's conceptualisation of soft power is noticeably reminiscent of Lukes's 'third face of power'. However, while he repeatedly mentions the 'faces of power' debate, Nye does not proceed to engage with the concept of interests further, and in his later works, he even suggests that soft power can be associated with other faces of power as well (Nye, 2011).

To push the discussion forward, we need to investigate the ways in which one actor can impact on another actor's understanding of their interests. The social constructivist tradition, with its attention to interest transformation, can help us with this. One of constructivism's fundamental assumptions is that actors' interests are not pre-given or fixed, but shaped by their socially constructed identities, and that they evolve as their identities transform in the process of interaction with others and in response to both internal and external changes (Adler, 2012; Wendt, 1999). If we accept this claim, we can expect that actor B's interpretation of their interests is likely to be more compatible with actor A's interests if there is a degree of compatibility between their socially constructed identities. In other words, soft power is significantly more likely to be present in a relationship between actors who broadly see themselves as part of the same socially constructed reality, which would entail compatible interpretations of their identities, compatible understandings of their interests and compatible definitions of the situation.

Scholars of soft power have often noted a link between soft power and identities (Hayden, 2012; Solomon, 2014). Nye (2011: 92), for example, suggests that 'we like those who are similar to us'. Similarly, Reich and Lebow (2014: 34) emphasise the importance of shared identities for an actor's ability to persuade another actor to cooperate. The concept of identity is also present, albeit less prominently, in Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin's (2014) conceptualisation of soft power as strategic narratives. Their thesis differentiates among three levels of narratives, which they label as 'International System Narratives', 'National Narratives' and 'Issue Narratives'. Often interlinked and mutually reinforcing, these narratives: (1) describe the structure of the world; (2) project the stories of individual states; and (3) provide interpretations of various 'problems' and suggest possible solutions. What is missing in their framework is the possibility of a collective identity narrative, which is not limited to an individual state or a nation, but uses other — not necessarily ethnic or national — markers to construct a shared understanding of common interests. A shared understanding of 'we' can be, for example, based on ideological ('we — supporters of Communism'), or civilisational markers ('we — European nations'), to name just a few. This, however, does not mean that both actors should share a common identity. As has been demonstrated in the burgeoning literature on 'European' identity, even in the European Union (EU), where member states share some fundamental norms of behaviour, competing definitions of 'Europeanness' continue to flourish (Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009). Nevertheless, both actors may share certain key elements of their constructed identities.

One can argue that if such an identity narrative is accepted by target audiences, they will be considerably more likely to accept what Roselle et al. (2014) describe as 'Issue Narratives'. It is this definition of Self as 'we' (however loosely defined) that makes it possible for the second actor to reinterpret their interests as compatible with the interests of the first actor. It is 'our' interests rather than something imposed by the first actor. At the same time, we can expect that a rejection of such an identity or seeing the Other as not belonging to our 'community' (however defined) will make it significantly more difficult for an international actor to promote their interpretation of a particular issue. Thus, the projection and acceptance of collective identity narratives can be seen as an important (albeit not the only) mechanism of soft power through which actor B can reinterpret their interests as more compatible or even common with those of actor A.

To some extent, this assumption can also be applied to other concepts of power that emphasise its seemingly non-coercive side, such as 'social power' (Van Ham, 2010) or 'normative power' (Manners, 2002). For instance, Manners's (2002: 252) description of the EU as a normative power is linked to the EU's attempts 'to redefine international norms in its own image'. Yet, a growing literature on the EU's external perceptions suggests that only a limited number of audiences, mostly in its immediate neighbourhood, view the EU as exercising normative power (Larsen, 2014: 907). Moreover, the audiences that accept the EU's normative leadership also tend to articulate variants of identity that interpret Self as belonging to the 'European civilisation' in one way or another (White and Feklyunina, 2014). These findings should not surprise us if we recall that norms are usually defined as 'a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891).

This conceptualisation of soft power as working through narratives of collective identities and common or compatible interests challenges Nye's differentiation between hard and soft power. It implies that an actor cannot choose to resort to soft power in any particular moment, but that soft power is always at work, shaping the psychological milieu of the relationship — increasing, decreasing or even disappearing together with the evolution of identities and interests. Moreover, because it is working at the level of identities and interests, we cannot attribute any individual foreign policy decision of the second actor to the exercise of soft power by the first actor. While individual foreign policy choices can be affected by a wide range of factors, soft power is working by making some decisions more likely than others. At the same time, any action or non-action of the first actor, including their use of military or economic resources that are traditionally associated with hard power, can be interpreted by the second actor as either reinforcing or undermining the narrative of collective identity and common interests. For example, while Nye would describe a promise of economic gain as 'inducement' and thus as an exercise of hard power, one can argue that this promise can also be interpreted by the second actor as confirming their collective identity.

Questioning agency

The question of agency appears particularly tricky in any discussion of power, including soft power (Bilsland, 2015). Although governments often adopt an instrumental approach to projecting a common identity aimed at other states, no government can achieve a

complete monopoly over the narrative, with multiple competing identity narratives articulated by other actors (Miskimmon et al., 2013). The impossibility of ownership of meaning by any actor makes the debate on agency especially difficult to resolve. Barnett and Duvall (2005), for example, in their major contribution to this debate, differentiate between power working through 'interactions of specific actors' and power working through 'social relations of constitution'. According to their taxonomy, which is reminiscent of the 'faces of power' debate, only compulsory and institutional power can be attributed to specific actors. Their conceptualisation of two other types of power — structural and productive power — emphasises the significance of structures over agency. Although they acknowledge the importance of agency in reproducing structures, these types of power, in their view, work through 'constitutive social processes that are ... not controlled by specific actors' (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 55). To illustrate this point, they refer to a vision of the US as an 'imperial centre', which is 'structurally constituted and discursively produced through a complex of imperial relations that are not themselves fully under the control of the US state as actor' (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 66).

This understanding of identity production would imply a structural reading of soft power. However, we can acknowledge the importance of structures and yet place the agents in the focus of empirical analysis (Guzzini, 2013). This move is consistent with the social constructivist ontological assumption about the mutual constitution of agents and structures (Wendt, 1999). As argued by Checkel and Katzenstein (2009: 3), identity transformation is affected by a multitude of cultural and instrumental factors, and is 'the result of open-ended processes that give space to actors pursuing their specific political projects'. Far from a linear process, it is a messy combination of intended and unintended consequences. On the one hand, governments cannot monopolise identity narratives and their own understandings of 'Self' and 'we' are shaped by existing cultural structures that were formed and evolved in specific historical circumstances. On the other hand, the process of collective identity construction and transformation, although often facilitated by the conscious efforts of cultural or political elites, is not dependent on their top-down instrumental efforts.¹

However, the actorness of state authorities is still extremely important. By articulating a particular variant of an identity narrative, they are mobilising some structures while, at the same time, potentially weakening others. They are signalling to the elites and public in another state (intentionally and unintentionally) about the interests that guide their foreign policy. If this projected identity and the corresponding interpretation of common interests are accepted by the elites and public in state B, the government of state A will be able to benefit from a more favourable psychological milieu. Ultimately, the question of agency is linked to the question about the analytical utility of the concept (Hayward and Lukes, 2008). What do we want to achieve by employing the concept of soft power? Two reasons appear particularly important. On the one hand, the concept can help us in practical terms as it would allow us to investigate the extent to which one actor (in this case, the government of state A) can benefit from another actor's understandings of their common or compatible interests. On the other hand, the language of power raises the issue of responsibility. To quote Lukes (in Hayward and Lukes, 2008: 7), 'we need to be able to locate and track the agents ... who have the capacity to affect our interests, as well as those of others'.

We also need to address the question of agency at the receiving end. The audience in state B is unlikely to be monolithic in terms of identity. Rather, we expect it to include different, often overlapping, audiences that may articulate fairly divergent identity discourses (Hansen, 2006), and that may vary greatly in their reception of the identity narrative projected by the authorities of state A. Moreover, these audiences are far from passive recipients of transmitted messages. This assumption that different audiences in state B can arrive at different interpretations of a projected narrative, as well as use these interpretations instrumentally, is crucial for unpacking the mechanism of soft power. If we limit our investigation of actors to states, we will have to agree with Kearn (2011: 81) that 'the concept [of soft power] seems highly dependent on a context of interdependent, rule-governed interactions between states that share fundamental goals and values'. However, even when the goals and values are shared not by the 'state', but only by some of the audiences within state B, they can — depending on their position within the society and their proximity to the locus of foreign policy decision-making — have a noticeable impact on the reinterpretation of the state's interests in the official discourse.

This article proposes that we can link this assumption to the idea of 'weight' as one of the key dimensions in the broader debate on power. The weight of A's power is usually understood as 'the probability that B's behaviour is or could be affected by A' (Baldwin, 2012: 275). We can expect that state A will have significantly greater soft power vis-a-vis state B if its projected definition of 'we', as articulated in the official discourse and signalled in practice (intentionally or unintentionally), is accepted in all major identity discourses of state B. If the definition of 'we' is rejected in some of the major discourses, an ensuing domestic contestation is likely to severely limit state A's soft power. We can also expect that the weight of state A's soft power vis-a-vis state B will never be static. Rather, it will be constantly fluctuating depending on the extent to which the projected collective identity is accepted by key audiences in state B and the ability of these audiences to influence decision-making. This ability can depend on a number of factors — ranging from the freedom of the mass media in state B, to the structure and powers of its legislature, to the federal or unitary system of government.

We can expect that the weight of state A's soft power will be greatest when its collective identity narrative is accepted, to one extent or another, in all major identity discourses in state B, including the identity discourse articulated by its authorities. The weight will be smaller when the narrative is accepted in some major discourses, including the official discourse, but contested by other domestic audiences. It will be yet smaller when the narrative is accepted by some key audiences, but rejected in the official discourse. However, even in this case, it can still be significant depending on the position of these actors in the political system of state B. For example, if a major oppositional political party incorporates this identity narrative, in one form or another, in its political programme, it can potentially work against those foreign policy decisions that appear to undermine the accepted collective identity.

These assumptions lead us to structure our empirical analysis around several key questions. First, what are the key elements of the collective identity narrative projected by the authorities of state A at audiences in state B? Our study can include discourse analysis of major statements of the authorities, as well as various texts associated with public diplomacy and image management activities of state A. Second, what are the

basic identity discourses in state B, and how do they interpret the projected narrative as it is articulated in A's official discourse and signalled in its practices? To what extent do they accept or reject this narrative, and to what extent do they see their interests as common or compatible with the interests of state A? Finally, to what extent do their constituencies, however overlapping, have an opportunity to affect decision-making at the state level? The following section will apply these questions to the case study of Russia's relationship with Ukraine in the run-up to Russia's incorporation of Crimea.

Russia's soft power: Negotiating the 'Russian world'

Although the idea of soft power was incorporated in Russia's official discourse fairly recently, soft power as a phenomenon in Moscow's relations with other actors has a much longer history. The USSR's narrative of collective identity based on anti-capitalist class markers was certainly accepted by diverse audiences throughout the world. In the early post-Soviet period, when Russia sought a closer relationship with the West, the Russian authorities initially neglected any coordinated image-projection efforts. This was particularly noticeable in Russia's engagement with other post-Soviet states. The 1990s saw Moscow articulating a rather incoherent narrative of some natural common space, without any clear identity markers or any clear vision of common interests. Russia's first Foreign Policy Concept of 1993 emphasised Moscow's commitment to developing the newly established Commonwealth of Independent States into an effective organisation 'based on the commonality of interests'. Yet, it was rather vague in clarifying what this 'commonality of interests' actually implied. It did, however, stress that Russia 'would not pay for building the relationship by agreeing to unilateral compromises against its own interests' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2002 [1993]: 26).

This negligence of image projection was replaced with an outburst of image-building activities in the early 2000s (Hill, 2006; Popescu, 2006). Initially, Moscow focused primarily on Western countries, where it projected a narrative of Russia's belonging to the greater European civilisation and emphasised its reliability as a business partner (Feklyunina, 2012). The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004/2005 marked a crucial turning point. The events in Kyiv that brought to power pro-Western President Yushchenko were interpreted in Moscow as a result of democracy promotion by the EU and the US (Putin, 2007b). Fearing that Russia was losing a soft power competition in its neighbourhood, the Russian authorities increasingly resorted to the idea of soft power. Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of 2013, for instance, mentioned 'a risk of destructive and unlawful use of "soft power" and human rights concepts to exert political pressure on sovereign states' — a reference to democracy promotion — and called for a more effective use of Russia's own soft power instruments (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013). This discursive change coincided with a rapid rise of various public diplomacy actors (Saari, 2014; Simons, 2014). Some already-existing actors, such as the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo) or the radio station 'Voice of Russia', saw a substantial increase in their funding. A number of new organisations were created with either the direct or indirect involvement of the Kremlin,

including the 'Russkyi Mir' (Russian World) Foundation, the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund and the English-language TV channel 'Russia Today' (later rebranded as RT), with Arabic- and Spanish-language channels following suit.

Scholars of Russian foreign policy have often argued that Moscow's understanding of soft power is fairly different from Nye's conceptualisation and more reminiscent of Soviet propaganda (Sherr, 2013). According to Putin (2012b), soft power is 'a set of instruments and methods used to achieve foreign policy goals without resorting to military means, but with the help of information and other instruments of influence'. In the post-Soviet space, the Russian authorities were particularly keen to utilise various projects promoting the Russian language, Russian-language media, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and business networks (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko, 2012). Crucially, their efforts focused primarily on ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. The somewhat fuzzy concept of 'compatriots', variously defined as either all those born in the Soviet Union and their descendants (with the exception of titular nations of the now-independent states), or those with cultural ties with Russia, was increasingly used not only to manage migration, but also to guide foreign policy. In the late 2000s–early 2010s, as Russia's relations with the West were going through a series of crises, Moscow began to pursue a more assertive policy in its neighbourhood. This policy aimed to stop any further erosion of its influence by preventing other actors, first and foremost, the US, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU, from encroaching into the 'sphere of [its] privileged interests' (Medvedev, 2008). Putin's ambition to reinvigorate Russia-backed integration processes became particularly evident in his vision of a proposed Eurasian Union. Its success was seen as crucial for Russia's global competitiveness. In Putin's (2013a) words, it was 'a chance for the entire post-Soviet space to become an independent centre for global development, rather than remaining on the outskirts of Europe and Asia'. However, its significance for Moscow went far beyond economic considerations: it was seen as 'a project for maintaining the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space' (Putin, 2013a).

Ukraine was clearly a critical missing link. Moscow struggled to persuade Kyiv to join its Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan. After the Orange Revolution, the Russian authorities were increasingly apprehensive of Ukraine's closer cooperation with the EU. Although Ukraine was not officially seeking NATO membership after this aim was removed from its security doctrine in 2010, Moscow remained acutely sensitive to the possibility of its membership. Overall, the Russian authorities viewed Ukraine as exceptionally important not only in terms of Russia's economic and military security, but also in terms of identity (Molchanov, 2002). It is hardly surprising that Ukraine became the key target of a massive public diplomacy campaign that the Russian authorities launched in an attempt to prevent it from pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration, and to secure its participation in the Customs Union and potentially the Eurasian Union.

Moscow's efforts to reintegrate the post-Soviet space were unfolding in the context of a noticeable change in the articulation of Russia's identity at home. In the early 1990s, the dominant variant of Russia's identity, articulated by Russian Westernisers and incorporated in the official discourse, emphasised Russia's belonging to Europe. While this idea was contested in other identity discourses, all major variants of Russian identity, including the official discourse, shared a vision of Russia as a great power, albeit

advocating different interpretations of great-poweriness (Hopf, 2002). By the late 1990s–early 2000s, as Russian Westernisers had been largely marginalised, the dominant discourse interpreted Russia's great power status as enjoying geopolitical equality with the West. The late 2000s–early 2010s, on the other hand, saw a growing emphasis on Russia's civilisational distinctness, its normative superiority vis-a-vis the declining West and its special responsibility for maintaining stability in the post-Soviet area (Tsygankov, 2010). The reinterpretation of Russia's identity also produced a number of overlapping narratives of a wider community. Rooted in the existing cultural structures (such as contested understandings of Europe or Eurasia), these narratives were further reinforced through their instrumental promotion by various public diplomacy actors. The narrative of Eurasia, for example, was often invoked in Moscow's dealings with other post-Soviet states. The narrative of a wider community based on the adherence to traditional values, with Russia at the heart of the resistance to the corrupt influences of the post-modern and declining West, was mobilised both in the post-Soviet area and beyond. Skilfully promoted by the RT, this narrative found receptive audiences not only in the neighbouring states, but also in the West, especially among right-wing political parties across the EU. Yet another narrative — the narrative of a 'Russian world' (*Russkiy mir*) — addressed mostly (but not exclusively) ethnic Russians and Russian speakers.

While Ukraine figured prominently in all these narratives, the idea of the 'Russian world' was particularly salient in Russia's official discourse in the run-up to the crisis that erupted in and around Ukraine in 2013/2014. The theme of a unique 'Russian world' that extends far beyond Russia's borders was certainly not new (Zevelev, 2014). It had been discussed by Russian philosophers, sociologists and political scientists long before Putin picked it up in his 2007 address to the Russian Parliament (Putin, 2007a; Shchedrovitskii, 2000). Yet, by incorporating it into the official discourse, the Russian authorities mobilised a particular interpretation of this idea, weakened competing understandings and made it far more visible in Russian foreign policy. The 'Russian world' narrative was also energetically promoted by such actors as the Russian World Foundation, Rossotrudnichestvo and the ROC. At times fairly incoherent, this narrative was based on four key points that were repeatedly emphasised both at home and abroad.

First, the 'Russian world' was imagined as a *naturally existing* civilisational community. The markers of the 'Russian world' identity were cultural rather than narrowly ethnic — the Russian language, Orthodox Christianity and Russian culture more broadly. Putin (2007a), for example, described the Russian language as a 'living space of a multi-million Russian world which is, of course, significantly wider than Russia'. The Russian World Foundation drew a more detailed picture by including 'millions of ethnic Russians, native Russian speakers, their families and descendants', but also 'the millions of people worldwide who have chosen the Russian language as their subject of study, those who have developed an appreciation for Russia and its rich cultural heritage' (*Russkiy Mir*, no date[a]). For the ROC head Patriarch Kirill (2009), the 'core of the Russian world are Russia, Ukraine, [and] Belarus' — those states that emerged on the territory of the medieval holy Rus. President Putin (2013b) also supported this interpretation by emphasising the importance of Orthodox Christianity in 'uniting Russia, Ukraine and Belarus through strong bonds of brotherhood'. This inconsistency in the definition of the borders of the 'Russian world' was particularly noticeable in relation to Ukraine. While a broader

definition would include all Ukrainians regardless of their ethnic, linguistic or religious background, a more narrow definition would include only Russian speakers or ethnic Russians.

Second, the constructed identity of the 'Russian world' drew on a particular interpretation of the 'common' past. On the one hand, it was based on the idea of the common origins of the now-separate states. In Putin's (2013a) words, 'Kievan Rus started as the foundation of the enormous future Russian state', with Russians and Ukrainians as its descendants sharing 'common traditions, a common mentality, a common history and a common culture'. This interpretation emphasised an organic nature of the Russian empire and downplayed any examples of coercion. According to Putin (2012a): 'for centuries, Russia developed as ... a civilisation-state bonded by the Russian people, Russian language and Russian culture native for all of us'. On the other hand, the glorious common past was juxtaposed with the abnormality of the current separation. Crucially, the 'Russian world' narrative, as articulated by Moscow, did not invoke any calls for challenging the sovereignty of the post-Soviet states. On the contrary, Putin (2013a) repeatedly argued that Russia had 'no desire or aspiration to revive the Soviet empire'. At the same time, in his view, Russians and Ukrainians continued to be 'one people' in terms of their shared past and shared culture (Putin, 2013a). This idea was also reiterated by Patriarch Kirill (2009), who described Russians and Ukrainians as 'spiritually' one people.

Third, the narrative of the 'Russian world' constructed a hierarchical relationship between Russia and other members of the community. This element of the projected identity was especially inconsistent. It revealed a noticeable tension between the vision of the 'Russian world' as a multinational civilisational space with Russia as only one of its constituent parts, and a vision of a Russia-centric 'Russian world'. On the one hand, the Russian authorities articulated a vision of an overarching civilisational identity that comprised various cultures, including Russian. For example, when talking about the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian culture, Putin (2013a) described them as 'part of our greater Russian, or Russian-Ukrainian, world'. This understanding of the 'Russian world' was closer to the idea of the medieval Rus, with modern Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, as well as other parts of the post-Soviet space, being its equal heirs. Patriarch Kirill (2009) drew on this interpretation when he referred to the Ukrainian, the Belarusian and the Moldovan cultures as 'organic parts' of the 'Russian world' that had 'enriched [its] multi-faceted culture'. On the other hand, Russia was imagined as the heart of the community: belonging to the 'Russian world' implied identification with Russia rather than with the Rus. As explained on the webpage of the Russian World Foundation, 'all layers of the Russian world ... are united through perception of their connection to Russia', or, even more explicitly, the 'Russian world is the world of Russia' (Russkyi Mir, no date[b]).

Finally, the projected collective identity legitimised a particular pattern of state-society relationship by emphasising the distinctness of the 'Russian world' compared to the West. The 'Russian world' was constructed as a 'unique civilisation' (Patriarch Kirill, 2009) — a civilisation based on the 'ideals of freedom, faith, spirituality, kindness, [and] conscience' (Nikonov, 2010). Although sharing with Europe its Christian roots, the 'Russian world' was imagined as distinct from — and superior to — it in the way in which it retained those Christian values that were seen as lost elsewhere. According to Putin (2013a): 'without the

values embedded in Christianity and other religions, without standards of morality that have taken shape over millennia, people will inevitably lose their human dignity'. The civilisational uniqueness of the 'Russian world' implied that it could not copy Western political models, but needed to seek its own path.

This interpretation of identity implied a particular understanding of common interests. For the 'Russian world' to stay alive and continue to uphold its values, all of its constituent parts had to draw closer and resist any attempts to leave the common space. This reading of common interests was incompatible with those foreign policy options that would symbolise a betrayal of the imagined community. Membership in the EU and especially in NATO would be the most radical manifestation of such a betrayal. At the same time, belonging to the 'Russian world' demanded closer cooperation with Russia, including participation in the Russia-backed integration projects in the post-Soviet area.

Reading the narrative: Ukraine and the 'Russian world'

To what extent was the 'Russian world' identity accepted in Ukraine, and what does this tell us about the weight of Russia's soft power? Ukraine has often been described as split between two competing 'identity complexes' (Shulman, 2004). The legacy of Ukrainian lands belonging to different polities, and pronounced regional divisions in the ethnic make-up, language use and religious affiliation, created fertile ground for identity contestation (Kuzio, 2002; Wilson, 2009). In the late 2000s, self-reported ethnic Ukrainians constituted 77.8% of Ukraine's population, while ethnic Russians accounted for 17.3% (Council of Europe, 2010). The use of Russian, however, extended far beyond the Russian minority. According to a 2008 survey, 35% of respondents spoke Russian at home — compared to 43% who spoke Ukrainian. Moreover, a further 20% admitted that they used both languages (Tsirkon, 2009: 40). With most ethnic Russians and Russian speakers living in the south-east, identity contestation had a significant regional dimension. Shulman (2004), for example, differentiates between an 'Eastern Slavic identity complex', based on identification with Russia, and an 'ethnic Ukrainian identity complex', based on distancing from Russia and identification with Europe.

Yet, this reading misses a possibility of partial identification with Russia. The post-Soviet area, as any other post-colonial space, presents an inconsistent picture in terms of overlap between identity and language practice. The legacy of Russification, when the use of Russian was either imposed or chosen as a strategy of social mobility, made it possible to combine the use of Russian with an identity that was not Russia-centric (Laitin, 1998). Kulyk (2007), for example, highlights instances when Russian-speaking parents hoped that their children would speak Ukrainian. At the same time, more than two decades of Ukraine's independence produced a favourable environment for the growth of an identity discourse that emphasised Ukraine's distinctness — yet not radical difference — from Russia.

To account for these nuances, White and Feklyunina (2014) suggest looking at the identity debate as a continuum of Ukraine's otherness from Russia and Europe, which allows them to differentiate between three rather than two basic discourses. In the discourse that they label 'Ukraine as Europe', Ukraine was understood as radically different from Russia. Central to this interpretation of Ukraine-ness were the use of the

Ukrainian language and historical narratives of oppression by Russia and of Ukraine's natural belonging to Europe. At the other end, the vision of Ukraine as an 'Alternative Europe' emphasised its identification with Russia, cherished memories of the common past and treasured the Russian language as the most important identity marker. A third understanding — 'Ukraine as part of greater Europe' — constructed Ukraine as culturally close to Russia and yet increasingly distinct from it. While accepting Russian as the language of everyday use, this discourse cherished Ukraine's independence from Russia, and was more ambivalent towards the common past or future (White and Feklyunina, 2014).

Given the extent of identity contestation, it is not surprising that the 'Russian world' narrative was received differently across Ukraine. Before examining audience reception in greater depth, however, it is worth emphasising that the 'Russian world' narrative was only one among a number of collective identity narratives that were projected towards Ukraine by various international and domestic actors. The EU's narrative of a 'Wider Europe', for example, appealed to the idea of Ukraine's historical belonging to Europe, and emphasised the normative superiority of the democratic values associated with the European integration project, on the one hand, and the promise of economic prosperity, on the other (White and Feklyunina, 2014). Similar to the 'Russian world' narrative, it resonated with some audiences more than with others. Also, similar to the 'Russian world' narrative, it was further reinterpreted by Ukrainian actors. Another point worth emphasising is that the reception of the narratives — be it the 'Russian world' or the 'Wider Europe' narrative — varied in the extent to which Ukrainian audiences accepted all or only some of their key elements. Examining the extent of their acceptance is particularly important for our analysis of soft power.

Overall, the 'Russian world' identity was accepted only by those members of Ukraine's political elite and public who articulated the vision of Self as an 'Alternative Europe'. Explicit references to the 'Russian world' idea were, for example, present in the language adopted by 'Russian Unity' — a political party in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Among major political parties, the Communist Party of Ukraine was the most consistent supporter of this vision. Another major political party — the Party of Regions, with its electoral base concentrated mostly in the Russian-speaking south-east — was significantly less unanimous in its reception of the narrative, with some members rejecting its key elements. It was also largely accepted by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate).

The idea of a natural community was, for example, often invoked by Metropolitan Volodymyr, who described it as 'a unique civilizational thousand-year unity of our peoples' (Interfax, 2010). In his view, the narrative of the 'Russian world' 'does not deny our countries, or our peoples, or our national languages or cultures' (Interfax, 2010). While Metropolitan Volodymyr saw the basis for this unity in common religious roots, for the Communist leader Petro Symonenko (2013a), it was in the common Soviet past. Sharing the vision of the 'Russian world' as radically different from the declining West, this audience interpreted Moscow's more assertive behaviour in the post-Soviet space in the late 2000s–early 2010s as reinforcing the collective identity. A Party of Regions member, Dmytro Tabachnyk (2008), for example, wrote about Russia's war with Georgia in 2008 as a symbolic confirmation that 'from now onwards any attempt to exercise aggression

or force towards any part of the Russian cultural world will be suppressed by Russia'. By understanding Ukraine as unconditionally belonging to the 'Russian world', this audience interpreted Ukraine's interests as common with the rest of the community. Symonenko (2013b), for instance, while calling for Ukraine's 'full-fledged participation in the Eurasian integration processes', viewed it as important in terms of 'maintaining civilisational identity'. Similar calls for Ukraine's entry into the Customs Union with Russia were often voiced by 'Russian Unity' in Crimea. In the words of the 'Russian Unity' leader, Sergey Aksyonov (2013), who would later play an important role in organising the 2014 referendum on Crimea's 'reunification' with Russia, 'our strength is in unity and solidarity'.

Compared to this unconditional acceptance, in the 'Greater Europe' discourse, Ukraine's belonging to the 'Russian world' was interpreted as conditional on Ukraine's status. Although accepting the idea of Ukraine's cultural affinity with Russia, this audience increasingly emphasised Ukraine's distinctness, rejected the idea of Russia as the natural heart of the community and challenged the hierarchical relationship. Volodymyr Zubanov, deputy head of the Party of Regions faction in the Verkhovna Rada, for example, proposed a competing vision — a 'Slavic Europe'. In his opinion, the idea of the 'Russian world' was 'fairly narrow', while the idea of a wider 'Slavic Europe' would be more inclusive and would confirm Ukraine's status as the 'cradle of Slavdom' (TSN, 2011). This audience interpreted Moscow's efforts to persuade Kyiv to abandon the strategy of European integration as an exercise of coercion. As the Ukrainian authorities were preparing to sign the Association Agreement with the EU despite Moscow's concerns, the audience increasingly rejected the projected identity narrative. Another member of the Party of Regions faction, Olena Bondarenko (2013), argued against describing Ukraine's foreign policy options as 'loyalty' or 'betrayal': 'Ukraine hasn't taken up a job of Russia's soldier or scout'. In her view, Moscow's behaviour contradicted the narrative of friendship because friendship would imply 'mutual compromises, mutually beneficial contracts, patience [and] understanding' (Bondarenko, 2013). In practice, Russia's relationship with Ukraine was fraught with 'blackmail, ultimatums, [and] insults' (Bondarenko, 2013). Bondarenko's reference to Moscow's unwillingness to negotiate a cheaper gas price is especially telling, as it suggests an interpretation of Ukraine's and Russia's interests as divergent: friendship is incompatible with 'profiteering on a friend' (Bondarenko, 2013).

The rejection of the 'Russian world' in the 'Ukraine as Europe' discourse was significantly more intense. This audience was particularly numerous in western Ukraine and included representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate), as well as several major political parties that competed for the nationalist vote, ranging from centrist 'Our Ukraine' to far-right 'Svoboda'. Interestingly, even this audience shared some elements of the 'Russian world' narrative. For example, while vehemently rejecting any positive vision of the common past or future, the nationalist 'Svoboda' shared Moscow's emphasis on social justice or 'traditional' values. Echoing the rise of the anti-gay discourse in Russia, its election manifesto, for instance, included a call to criminalise 'sexual perversion' (Svoboda, 2012). Yet, this audience radically opposed other elements of the 'Russian world' narrative. Patriarch Filaret, for example, emphasised the Ukrainian language and the independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from Moscow as key

to the Ukrainian identity (Cerkva.info, 2012). The idea of the common past was challenged by references to historical grievances. In the words of Arseniy Yatsenyuk (2013a), who later became one of the Euromaidan leaders and headed the post-Yanukovych government, 'what did we have in the [common] past apart from Holodomor, Stalin, ... executed priests, burnt down churches [and] destroyed genetic code of the Ukrainian nation'? For this audience, the hierarchical structure of the 'Russian world' confirmed their vision of Russia as an oppressor. According to Archbishop Evstratiy Zorya, 'by accepting itself as a "country of the Russian world", Ukraine would have to accept itself as Russia's colony' (Focus.ua, 2009). Russia's pressure on Ukraine in the run-up to the 2013 EU summit in Vilnius was interpreted as coercion that had to be resisted at all costs. Yatsenyuk (2013b), for instance, spoke about a 'wall of threats, hostility and trade wars' between Russia and Ukraine. In this interpretation, Ukraine and Russia did not belong to the same imagined community, and Ukraine's interests were fundamentally different from those of Russia.

As we can see, while the 'Russian world' identity was largely accepted by those political actors who perceived Ukraine as an 'Alternative Europe', it was largely rejected by those who identified Ukraine with Europe, with another audience — supporters of the 'Greater Europe' vision — accepting cultural affinity with Russia but rejecting its claims to dominance. These pronounced differences were also present at the level of public opinion. Taking into account the distinct regional dimension of the identity debate, the 'Russian world' identity found greater acceptance in the south-east. With a significantly higher share of self-declared ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, the south-eastern regions enjoyed considerably higher levels of popular support for the 'Alternative Europe' identity (White and Feklyunina, 2014) and, thus, were noticeably more open to the 'Russian world' narrative. Yet, acceptance of the narrative did not necessarily imply support for separatism. For example, despite their consistent support for strengthening Kyiv's ties with Moscow, the overwhelming majority of Crimean voters did not support the political party that explicitly identified Crimea with Russia: during the 2010 elections to the Crimean Parliament, 'Russian Unity' accumulated around 4% of the popular vote, which allowed it to claim only three seats (Kuropyatnik, 2014).

How did the Ukrainian public interpret the 'Russian world'? Interestingly, according to a survey conducted by the Kyiv-based Razumkov Centre in 2013, not many respondents had even heard about 'Patriarch Kirill's doctrine of the Russian world'. Somewhat counterintuitively, the largest share of respondents familiar with the doctrine was in western Ukraine (36.3%), while the smallest share was in the east (12.9%) (Razumkov Centre, 2013b: 14). The higher share of respondents in the west may be explained by the emotional intensity of the rejection of any collective identity with Russia. At the same time, in the east, this idea was less controversial and less likely to draw media attention. When asked about their understandings of Russia's goals, those familiar with the doctrine were split in their assessment. The overwhelming majority of respondents in western Ukraine (78.3%) interpreted the 'Russian world' as an attempt to restore the Russian empire. In contrast, only 14.8% of respondents in the south and 28.6% in the east saw it in imperial terms, while the majority viewed it positively: 59.5% of respondents in the east and 70.4% in the south believed that the idea of the 'Russian world' served to promote 'spiritual unity of the brotherly ... peoples' (Razumkov Centre, 2013b: 14).

More importantly, there was a significant rise in the share of respondents across Ukraine who understood the 'Russian world' project as an attempt to 'restore the Russian empire' — from 30.4% in 2010 to 48.4% in 2013. At the same time, the share of those who saw it in positive terms dropped from 56.8% in 2010 to 39.7% in 2013 (Razumkov Centre, 2013b: 14).

These numbers suggest that Moscow was not particularly successful in promoting the 'Russian world' narrative, which was reflected in low levels of its explicit recognition by the respondents. However, we can also investigate the levels of its tacit acceptance or rejection by looking at popular attitudes towards Ukraine's integration with Russia before the crisis. When asked about their integration preferences in March–April 2012, nearly half of respondents in the south (47%) and the majority of respondents in the east (60%) chose Ukraine's accession to the Customs Union with Russia. In comparison, only 7% of respondents in western Ukraine supported this option, while the overwhelming majority (70%) favoured accession to the EU (Razumkov Centre, 2012). What is interesting, however, is that there were also significant regional differences in what Ukrainian respondents expected from closer integration with Russia. According to a survey conducted by the Razumkov Centre in April 2013, respondents in the south and the east expected that Ukraine's entry to the Customs Union would have a positive impact on the economy (59% and 53%, respectively). In comparison, only 22% of respondents in the west expected a positive impact on the economy (Razumkov Centre, 2013a). Thus, although part of Russia's 'attraction' was clearly associated with a promise of economic gains, these expectations were unevenly distributed, with much more prominent expectations in the south-east.

What does this mixed reception of the 'Russian world' narrative tell us about Russia's soft power vis-a-vis Ukraine in the run-up to the crisis? First, its weight was inherently limited to only one of three main audiences — the audience that consisted mostly of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in the south-east, although, as emphasised earlier, not all ethnic Russians or Russian speakers accepted this identity. Moreover, the level of public support noticeably decreased during the few years before the crisis. This audience interpreted Russia's more assertive policy in the immediate neighbourhood as a symbolic confirmation of Moscow's commitment to protecting the community. Their access to Russian media outlets provided an exceptionally favourable environment for Moscow's ability to cultivate the desired understandings of common interests. However, Moscow's soft power vis-a-vis the second key audience, which included a growing number of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers who began to emphasise Ukraine's distinctness from Russia, was declining. For this second audience, Ukraine's interests were increasingly divergent from Russia's. Instead of mobilising this audience, Moscow's narrative of the 'Russian world' was pushing them away. At the same time, Russia's soft power was almost entirely absent vis-a-vis the third key audience that articulated the vision of 'Ukraine as Europe'.

Second, the ability of the first audience to influence the articulation of Ukraine's identity and interests in the official discourse and to affect the process of foreign policy decision-making in the late 2000s–early 2010s was fairly limited. Those political parties that were more receptive to the 'Russian world' idea, first and foremost, the Communist Party of Ukraine, did not generate the degree of electoral support that would have allowed them to dominate the Parliament. Compared to the 1990s, when the Communists enjoyed

much broader popular appeal, their share of seats in the Verkhovna Rada dropped from 121 out of 450 seats in the 1998 parliamentary elections to 21 seats in the 2006 elections, with a small increase to 27 seats in 2007 and 32 seats in 2012 (Central Election Commission of Ukraine, no date). Due to Ukraine being a unitary state with a unicameral legislature, this audience did not have any institutional channels that would have allowed it to incorporate regional concerns into the official discourse.

At the same time, the Party of Regions had a much greater capacity to shape the interpretations of Ukraine's identity and interests, coming first in the 2006, 2007 and 2012 parliamentary elections. Moreover, Yanukovych's victory in the 2010 presidential elections allowed them direct access to foreign policy decision-making. Yet, despite their seemingly pro-Russian platform, the party's position was closer to the 'Greater Europe' discourse (White and Feklyunina, 2014). While some of its members accepted Ukraine's belonging to the 'Russian world', others, including Yanukovych, remained on the fence. Although compared to Yushchenko's presidency, Moscow could enjoy a more favourable psychological milieu during Yanukovych's presidency, its ability to benefit from this milieu was still rather limited. This became evident when Kyiv continued to pursue the strategy of European integration, albeit fairly half-heartedly, even after Yanukovych's electoral victory. At the same time, the scale of popular protests after Yanukovych's decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU in November 2013 demonstrated the extent to which Russia's soft power was constrained by the intensity of competing identity frameworks. The scale of the protests also demonstrated that the rejection of a collective identity at the popular level can have a serious impact on the legitimacy of the regime in a situation when there is a significant tension between popular preferences and a major foreign policy decision.

Finally, the limited weight of Russia's soft power meant that Moscow was relatively more successful in preventing Kyiv from taking those actions that were seen as undermining the 'Russian world'. However, it struggled to encourage Kyiv to take those actions that were seen as consolidating it. For example, the Russian authorities benefitted from promoting the interpretation of NATO membership as a symbolic betrayal of Russian-Ukrainian unity, with the goal of accession to NATO removed from Ukraine's security strategy in 2010. Yet, encouraging Ukraine to join the Customs Union was fundamentally more difficult.

These limits on Russia's soft power proved very important during the subsequent crisis in Ukraine. Moscow clearly benefitted from a favourable psychological environment in Crimea, where both the political elite and public were overwhelmingly supportive of Crimea's belonging to the 'Russian world'. Although the acceptance of the narrative did not automatically imply support for separatism, as the crisis unfolded, it created significantly more favourable conditions for the Russian authorities to promote a range of what Rosselle et al. (2014) define as 'issue narratives', such as, for example, the narrative about the threat of fascism emanating from Kyiv. This, in turn, made it significantly easier for Moscow to arrange a transfer of power to the pro-Russian forces and ultimately to incorporate Crimea into the Russian Federation. However, local support for independence or reunification with Russia in Ukraine's south-east was significantly lower. Only parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions went as far as to establish self-proclaimed People's Republics, and it is questionable whether this could have happened without the involvement of Russian operatives.

On the whole, the limited weight of Russia's soft power and its decline in the years immediately before the crisis made it increasingly difficult for Moscow to achieve desired outcomes in its relationship with Kyiv. Yet, its weight — and the corresponding ability to benefit from a more favourable psychological milieu — would have increased if the audience that accepted the 'Russian world' narrative had gained easier and more consistent access to the locus of Ukraine's foreign policy decision-making. This could, for example, have been achieved through the process of federalisation (which, indeed, became one of Moscow's key 'suggestions' during the crisis). According to a Russian commentator with close ties to the Kremlin, Moscow was interested in 'creating a sort of built-in "disabling device" ... that would prevent Ukraine from moving in a direction undesirable to the Kremlin'. Although the Russian authorities realised that this 'disabling device' was highly unlikely to come to power, it nevertheless could 'carry enough influence to exercise veto power over Kiev's strategic decisions' (Lukyanov, 2014). Ironically, while it is too early to make any definite conclusions about the transformation of Russia's soft power vis-a-vis Ukraine as a result of the ongoing crisis, the 'Russian world' identity is likely to be rejected even more intensely by a much larger share of the Ukrainian elites and public. This, in turn, is likely to make it fundamentally more difficult for Moscow to influence Kyiv in future.

Conclusions

The article has argued that one of the key mechanisms of generating soft power is the renegotiation of collective identities. As illustrated by the example of Russia's relationship with Ukraine, we can assess the weight of a state's soft power vis-a-vis another state by investigating the extent to which the discursively constructed collective identity is accepted or rejected by different audiences in the second state, and by examining the ability of these audiences to affect the process of foreign policy decision-making. Russia's soft power vis-a-vis Ukraine in the late 2000s–early 2010s was fundamentally limited because of the ways in which the projected identity of the 'Russian world' was based on the markers of the Russian language, Russian culture and the common glorious past that constructed a Russia-centric community. Despite the intensification of Russia's public diplomacy, these efforts could not transform the psychological milieu in Moscow's relationship with Kyiv because the projected identity was inherently incompatible with one of the main identity discourses in Ukraine and was only partially compatible with another. At the same time, Moscow's choice of a projected narrative was constrained by the domestic identity debate. To use Hopf's (2013: 322) idea of a 'discursive fit' between elite projects and mass beliefs, the 'Russian world' identity, as it was articulated by the Russian authorities, presented a 'discursive fit' with the dominant vision of Russia at the level of the Russian public. It was shaped by the dominant vision of Self as a great power and a legitimate centre of a wider civilisational space, and served to reinforce this vision.

While the focus on audiences allows us to assess the weight of soft power, our understanding of how soft power works can be enhanced further by paying more attention to the role of identity entrepreneurs who shape the identity debate and contribute, intentionally and unintentionally, to greater acceptance or rejection of projected narratives. To account for varying extents of acceptance, we can, for instance, benefit from engaging with the growing literature on status and self-esteem (Paul et al., 2014), on

‘affective investment’ (Solomon, 2014) and on security communities (Adler and Barnett, 1998). While the case of the ‘Russian world’ narrative may be somewhat typical of the post-colonial context, looking at soft power through the prism of renegotiated collective identities can also be helpful in other contexts. We can, for example, gain valuable insights into the trajectory of the Cold War by investigating the extent to which Soviet narratives of a socialist community and US narratives of a democratic community competed both at home and abroad, and by examining the changing roles of audiences that accepted their narratives. We can also explore the dramatic decline of US soft power in its relationship with post-Soviet Russia by analysing the extent to which those Russian audiences that accepted Washington’s identity narrative were marginalised, and were increasingly unable to affect the process of foreign policy decision-making. Overall, the concept of soft power can help us uncover the meanings of relationships as they evolve.

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