

## Chapter 11

# The Struggle for the Hearts and Minds of Russians

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In the 25 years since the collapse of communism, Russia has not changed as much as the perception of Russia in the West as a whole has changed. It is a country that shows traces of modernity, for those favored few wealthy enough to afford it, but as a whole Russia remains feudal in its social and economic system, and keeps most of its population stuck in the past. Americans and Europeans alike must also understand that Russia will never be a friend or an ally that shares strategic interests with the West as long as this feudal autocratic-kleptocratic system prevails. The Western value-based democratic system of checks and balances poses the same threat to the present Russian autocratic system as it posed to the communist system. But what have we done to build a different kind of a relationship?

It is timely and useful to dust off the books about Stalinism, about Brezhnev's Soviet Union, the many studies about how the KGB operates, and about Mikhail Andreyevich Suslov, the chief ideologue of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Consult those still-living experts from the former Communist bloc who endured almost five decades of Soviet rule. Otherwise, we will never understand the subtleties of Russian power, Russian social and intellectual diversity, and the ever-more complicated relationship between the people and their rulers.

Some simplistically choose to explain the difficulties of understanding Russia by over-emphasizing the Russian soul, *russkaya dusha*. It is often stated that the Russian soul is impossible to understand, it is something esoteric. There isn't anything esoteric about the Russian soul. What they call the "Russian soul" is just the reflection of centuries of socio-political and cultural developments. But we should not deceive ourselves by suggesting that the Russian people are not ripe for Western-style democracy and freedom. That is the wrong question. The right question is: why did Russia miss the opportunity of a millennium to catch up with lost time, to leapfrog to fast track development and modernization? Why is it that they still yearn for the strong leader without checks and balances? Why is it that we should all just accept the fact that illiberal democracy is the

right kind of system for Russia? Explaining this all away because of the Russian soul is much too easy and much too shallow.

In the Soviet Union people yearned for the West. America was the beacon on the hill for Russian elites and the general public alike. The West was admired, copied and emulated. How have we, in a matter of just 25 years, arrived at a situation where the West is despised and hated? Or is it really? Maybe it's just that we have a lot less access to Russian society than we had during the dark days of the Soviet Union. Maybe it is because we have lost touch with Russian society. Maybe it is because we have allowed hundreds of thousands of personal contacts and relationships wither. Maybe it is because the West, in its greed and complacency, focused so much on the peace dividend of the 1990s that it took for granted the transformation of the dictatorial Soviet Union into a market-based democracy. And perhaps we thought that the Russia box had been checked, and that we needed no further investments in its people.

When we contemplate the future of Russian-Western relations, it is an enormous task to understand the reasons we got to this place, to find points of access to penetrate this seemingly impenetrable new Russia, to design strategies and build a not-so-soft-power toolbox to work with. But it is not impossible, and it is also absolutely necessary in order to complement our strategic and economic baskets.

### **The Current Non-influence of Western Soft Power in Russia**

After the fall of communism the West made the same mistake the Russians made during communism: they imposed an ideology rather than values and good practices. Free market liberalism was introduced to a country whose elites and general population were totally unprepared for it. Imposing a liberal market economy on a country with zero experience in democracy had catastrophic results. The West missed an opportunity by not launching a magnanimous Marshall plan for defeated Russia, which would have tied it to our world in the same way it tied the Western part of (defeated) Nazi Germany to the democratic West.

The West wasted the incredible goodwill and potential it had at the outset of the 1990s, a mistake and deficit from which we will never in our lifetime be able to recover. Establishing a fast track liberal democracy in Russia was doomed to fail from the start. The world, including Russia, had a unique historic chance to turn an enemy into a partner, to change

its perception of itself. There was a window for Russia to modernize, to give itself a chance to be something it had rejected time and again throughout history. But the change Russians were yearning for came as an alien force imposed from abroad. It came too fast, hit Russia too hard, with pressures too big, with an air of superior arrogance. Russians were hurt where the hurt would hit the hardest—their self-esteem. This led to the loss of confidence in the West. Our goodwill capital was squandered.

Transition is hard, and the West did not make it easier. The new era had few positive consequences for the average Russian. Unknowingly, the West destroyed every valuable asset created during the Cold War. In the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and all the way up to 1989, the West, the United States, Western Europe, and other prosperous Western democracies, were the envy and standard bearer for a better life for Russians. The way of life, the freedoms, the quality of life, personal and community security, and the perspective of life lived well attracted millions and millions of Russians to the West.

Famously in the 1960s, when Beatlemania hit the world, the West gained an incredibly powerful tool of unintentional influence in Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union. It was Western soft power at its best, because hundreds and hundreds of rock and roll bands would gain the respect and adoration of young Soviet citizens. They saw the West through the lens of rock. John Lennon and Paul McCartney did not look like the bureaucrats in the Kremlin, or the caricature of the ugly capitalist with a cigar hanging from his mouth that they knew from Soviet-Russian propaganda. Listening to Western rock and roll bands was a way of protesting the dull life in communist Russia. Soviet youth would emulate their peers in the West, would illegally fabricate electric guitars, and their devotion and eagerness to join the ranks of the West by playing rock and roll music could not be stopped by the KGB, the Komsomol, or the Party. In spite of the communist regime meting out the most serious of punishments, including imprisonment and years in the Gulag, the onslaught of Western soft power could not be stopped.

Filmmakers from Andrei Tarkovsky to Mikhail Kalatozov and Sergej Bondarchuk were looking for appreciation and acknowledgement from their peers in Hollywood, Rome or Paris. Hollywood was the standard bearer. Scientists seized any chance to communicate with their colleagues in Western universities. Artists wanted to be exhibited in the MoMa, the Centre Pompidou, or the Louisiana.

Then there were the products from the West. Western products were never just products. They were the symbols of a different world, a better life. Levi's jeans lived their own lives behind the Iron Curtain. Unbeknownst to its producers in San Francisco, in Russia they were worn not only as a reflection of style but as a sign of ideological discontent. It was a statement of where one belonged, or rather where one was longing to belong. Even party bureaucrats would want to own a pair. The same was true with other western products: a bar of quality soap, a nice perfume, a silk scarf or tie were all reflections of a desire for a better life, a sense of belonging. When VCRs and satellite television were invented, they became a drug, and the onslaught of Western movies was unstoppable even if, for an individual, it meant taking risks and surmounting major obstacles to obtain them.

The West helped distribute samizdat, indigenous and Western forbidden literature, thus making its support credible and sincere. The credibility of media outlets like Radio Free Europe, the Voice of America, the BBC, and other Western radio stations, transmitting in Russian, was strengthened by everything else Western. Without these unintentional tools of Western soft power, Western media would have just been considered propaganda.

Yes, this was a war, and it was a cutthroat competition for hearts and minds, which the Soviets were losing in stunning fashion. On one side there was credibility. On the other there was an army of Russian propagandists, censors, political police, and harsh sentencing with the goal of stopping people from listening to western radio stations, and most importantly, to stop emulating the West. Of course nothing could stop these millions of Soviet citizens. BBC, VOA, and RFE were considered credible, not just about the world but also about their own internal situation. No one believed what was written in *Pravda*. They all asked: what did the BBC, Radio Free Europe or Voice of America say about this or that? When the Chernobyl catastrophe occurred, Russians did not go to Russian sources to find out what really went on at the meeting of the Politburo. They never believed the state-run television or the radio stations or *Pravda*. Instead they were huddled around their small transistor radios to find out the truth. The West commanded respect.

When the West took sides with the political opposition in Eastern Europe, in Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Hungary, or indeed the Soviet Union, the citizens of these countries never doubted that the West was on their side and that it was the right side. There was no credibility issue.

## **Russia's Soft Power: Weapons of Mass Disruption!**

Russia, including those tedious years when it went as the Soviet Union, always viewed power differently than the West. Western soft power was deployed not just by governments, but by non-governmental, independent platforms as well: social organizations, NGOs, individuals acting on their own, artists, writers, and the private sector, among others. Soviet communist propaganda was centralized, the content determined by the aforementioned Comrade Suslov and his predecessors and petty bureaucrats under him. There was always a huge bureaucratic infrastructure employed since the bloody birth of Communism in 1917, during 70 years of communism, and all the way up to Gorbachev's perestroika. With only a short respite in the late 1980s and the messy Yeltsin era, propaganda resumed with a vengeance. Vladimir Putin understood the force, he also understood that soft power is a misnomer: it is certainly hard on impact. But once he was done with occupying the centers of power, airwaves, pushing down unfriendly oligarchs and replacing them with his own friends, lining his own pockets with money, he turned on the West. And by portraying the West as the world's worst bogeyman, he managed to enshrine himself as the great savior.

Lessons learned from the last ten years are many. First, the West—if indeed it ever was a common entity in this century—never took the Russian threat seriously until the invasion of Ukraine. Even then, many Western governments deluded themselves into thinking that this was a one-off and that other countries would be insulated. How wrong they were!

Second, Western capitals, including Washington, Berlin, Paris, and Rome, did not understand the underlying Russian strategy: to reverse the fragile transitions to democracy in eastern Europe, to drive a wedge between East and West, and to disrupt the U.S.-Europe relationship.

In many ways, the hard power and the so-called soft power aspects weighed equally. The efforts to disrupt the democratic institutions of individual countries, including the United States, is nothing new. It is taken from an old playbook. But now Russia has embraced and retooled new technologies to fit its own narrative of the world, and this is a game changer. They got smarter. The internet, Facebook, Twitter, etc., once heralded as the ultimate medium of democratization (see the Western naïveté of the Facebook revolutions of the Arab Spring), has been turned against us. In the hands of Russian agencies, all these amazing gadgets have turned into formidable weapons of mass disruption. Russia Today

(RT) has only a relatively small Western audience, but the disturbing fact is that it is broadcast side by side with ABC, FOX, CNN, or NBC on many university campuses, 24/7. The untrained and very naïve eye will be confused. It is Russia that invented fake news: news based on real events, false facts. They have also learned their lesson from the past. Even a trace of Russian accent will spoil the whole message. Americans and British nationals employed by RT (yes, please call them traitors) give the fake, distorted news, aka, propaganda a totally different level of credibility.

Russia can count on anti-American sentiment in Europe, where significant parts of the cultural and political establishment and huge numbers of a disoriented population see America as the bigger danger to democracy. That is not new. The launch of super-weapon Snowden was a stroke of a genius on behalf of Vladimir Putin, on a par with Hitler's communication evil genius Goebbels, which not only damaged the immune system of the West, but also, cleverly, managed to divide Europe and America. One wonders why Americans and Europeans are now surprised at the efforts by Russia to influence democratic elections in America, Germany, and in defenseless Hungary, Macedonia, and Montenegro.

Speaking of not-so-soft Russian soft power, communications is certainly not the only tool. Economics, in particular energy, is as worrying, if not a lot more worrying, in the long run. While Russian communications soft power is annoying, economic influence, and in its wake corruption in the institutionally weaker and vulnerable parts of the West, can turn democracies into illiberal regimes and benign or not-so-benign dictatorships. Hungary's disastrous turnaround from being a cheerleader to a sad little autocracy is a case in point. Nothing has done more to keep the onslaught of Viktor Orban's illiberal regime than his cozy relationship with Russia, cementing his reign and Hungary's energy dependence on Russia for decades to come. And all of this was accomplished with a great degree of cynicism on the part of the European Union. But Hungary is not alone: infiltrating corporations, going on a buying spree to obtain Western assets, real estate, even influencing whole banking systems has become a powerful tool for Russia, an investment in the future.

### **Reinventing Not-So-Soft Soft Power: What Is To Be Done?**

The pushback starts at home. Declaring how angry we are, drawing red lines, but doing nothing when they are crossed, will not suffice. The West needs to build its defenses and fight back against the Russians and

Russian active measures, rather than fight each other. A common Western approach is needed. As long as the Russians are only a pretext, a proxy in the war between Democrats and Republicans, the Europeans and Americans, Putin will have the upper hand.

The West has sheepishly shut down or scaled back its institutions of influence: Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, and BBC have left the field to one player in Russia. We told human rights activists to fight, and when things got bad, we just left, leaving them not just exposed but helpless. Never do that again! Americans have their share of responsibility for these failures, but Europeans are a lot worse. There is today almost nothing on the ground to help deploy thoughts, to help disseminate proper information about ourselves, our realities. We have not given serious thought, and certainly no serious financial support, to using 21st century technology to get our own message through. We have ceded control of our narrative to Putin, who has created his own image of the West as a bunch of depraved people with no moral code intent on wrecking the very fabric of Russian society. We never cared much about our image in Russia in the last 25 years. We were distracted by the adoration of soft power as if it was the secret potion, which will do its magic on its own. Don't blame it on the theory, blame it on complacent politics.

Once our own defenses are in place, we should move to push back on Putin at home. Almost nothing has been done in the last 25 years to regain some influence on the mindset of Russian elites, Russian society at large and the Russian people themselves. During the last 25 years we have never engaged in a serious and strategic exercise to rethink and launch a war of thoughts. We have been terrible at explaining to Russians (let alone to our own people) that democracies do better economically, socially, in the quality of life and global influence in general. We never engaged in a serious intellectual exercise to define the 21st century message of democracies.

We have two major targets. First we must seek opportunities to engage with Russian political, scientific, and cultural elites. The thousands of Russians spending time in the most wealthy neighborhoods of Europe, on the French Riviera in the Swiss Alps, and the most expensive neighborhoods of London, New York, Berlin, Budapest, or Vienna do not make up for real and deep contacts with Russia's elite. They are just the extended arm of the regime. We have been blinded by surrogates for Vladimir Putin. We need to find ways to reverse the trends and broaden our concept of the elite, to include much more than the super wealthy and Putin's willing servants. We need to reconnect with artists, scientists, inventors, engi-

neers, city planners, architects, university professors, students in a big way; the ones who yearn to be appreciated by the West, the next generation of the Yuriy Gagarins and Sergey Magnitskys.

New means of communication are at our disposal, which need to be selective and diversified. Russia is a strange construction of world-class elites, a cosmopolitan Moscow and St. Petersburg, and a few other big cities. The rest, the majority of the country's population, live in poverty and in isolation, both physically and mentally. A striking number have never had internet access. These people's thoughts focus on survival, nothing else, and at this point we have not the slightest idea how to address them. Russia is not the Soviet Union, however 70 years of communist domination over the minds of people has left its mark, has become part of their genetic code. But then, we have no clue what their true issues are. We don't even know the extent of their disdain for Putin. We must assume, that in the confines of their small kitchens, behind closed doors, they curse Putin as much as they cursed Brezhnev. And they too need to be reached.

What rock and roll music did to promote ideals of freedom and democracy to the Russians during the Cold War cannot be repeated. Rock and roll in this case is only a metaphor. We need to invent new tools and content that touch the imagination of the Russian people. It is time to make them understand that we, the West, are not part of the problem causing their crushing poverty and less-than-developed country status. We are part of the solution.

We need to put our best minds in foreign affairs to find new attractive ways to get our message through that the individual citizen matters for the future of society. Bring our best practices to the Russian people. Learn from the enormous success of America's fight against cancer, a disease decimating Russians. Bring the American Race for the Cure to Moscow. And be stubborn in letting Russians know that Sergey Magnitsky was a hero who tried to cure another form of cancer killing Russia: corruption. We must reach the young and smart, let them know that their future lies in embracing modernity. And communicate, communicate and communicate. This must be a truly transatlantic endeavor: Europe and America needs to hold hands in pursuing the goal of getting our message through to Russians.

We ourselves have allowed a bottleneck to be created. Presently the West communicates only through Putin and his surrogates. One wonders

where all those networks of the past have gone. Where are the myriad contacts which were so enthusiastically established during the good times of perestroika, during the early days after the fall of the Soviet Union?

It is time for a fresh start. It is time to understand that it is all about the *hearts and minds* of people.

