

Seeing Beyond the Bear: Selective Processing and Russian Public Diplomacy in the West*

Abstract

During the Cold War, due to the greater political context and limited information, the public in the West had a minimal and distorted understanding of Russia. More than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, many of the stereotypes and negative attitudes towards Russia persist in the United States and Western Europe. The Russian government has tried to address the issue by undertaking a wide-reaching and expensive public diplomacy effort, but as various international public opinion polls demonstrate, it has achieved very few results so far. Such enduring negative attitudes not only hamper Russia's attempts to improve its relationship with the U.S., but also limit its ability to pursue foreign policy objectives around the world. This paper looks at some of the fundamental communication challenges faced by Russia in its public diplomacy efforts, and offers a set of recommendations to enhance its success.

Key words: public diplomacy, Russian foreign policy, selective perception, relational and network diplomacy

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Introduction

During the Cold War, publics in the respective superpower camps had very little information about each other due to the lack of contact, and the information they did get was usually controlled and filtered by their own authorities (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1989). Many public opinion studies from the Cold War period have demonstrated that Americans had mostly hostile feelings toward the Eastern bloc countries, not only because the Soviet Union was considered to be the prime national security threat to the U.S., but also because it “symbolized the antithesis of cherished core values, including political and religious freedom and what might simply be termed an ‘American way of life’” (Hurwitz & Peffley, 1989).

More than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, American public opinion about Russia and its international role is still largely negative. Aware of the persistence of these attitudes and stereotypes, the Kremlin has been carrying out an increasingly active public diplomacy and “soft power” strategy over the past decade, including but not limited to cultural diplomacy, international broadcasting, and the adoption of new communication technologies (Avgerinos, 2009; Evans, 2005; Finn, 2008; Harding, 2009). And yet, all this activity seems to be having little to no impact on public opinion. For example, the 2012 Transatlantic Trends survey found that the majority of respondents in both Western Europe and in the U.S. hold mostly negative opinions of Russia (GMF, 2012). The findings of the 2013 Country Ratings Poll carried out by GlobeScan/PIPA present a similar picture, with a clear majority of respondents in the U.S. and Western Europe indicating that they view Russia’s influence in the world as “mostly negative” (GlobeScan/PIPA, 2013).

Such persistent negative attitudes not only hamper Russia’s attempts to improve its relationship with the United States, but also limit its ability to pursue its foreign policy objectives

around the world. The crises in the Middle East, concerns about NATO and EU expansion, and Russia's attempts at creating its own "Eurasian Union" are just a few examples where Russian policy objectives would benefit from a more positive image in the West. In order to achieve public diplomacy success, however, Russia needs to change its approach and find a better way of winning over Western hearts and minds. This paper provides a brief discussion of reasons for the persisting negative attitudes towards Russia in the West, followed by a set of recommendations to enhance the success of its public diplomacy and foreign policy objectives.

Public Diplomacy and Information Overload

Public diplomacy is a broad and nebulous concept, incorporating theories and approaches from a wide range of disciplines. (Cull, 2009; Gilboa, 2008; Zaharna, 2010). Perhaps the best definition is provided by Nicholas Cull, who describes public diplomacy as "an international actor's attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public" (2009). The effort is meant to help the actor achieve their international objectives in a global political system where public opinion has come to play an increasingly important role (Clinton, 2010; Cull, 2009; Nye, 2008; Zaharna, 2010). With the growing importance of information and the rapid development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), the significance of public diplomacy and new approaches to improving foreign opinion have increased around the world (Castells, 1997, 2008; Cull, 2009; Hayden, 2012; Nye, 2004; Zaharna, 2010).

Although the information age and especially the new ICTs have arguably made the conduct of public diplomacy easier and more effective, they have also created a "paradox of plenty:" the abundance of information is overwhelming to the public, resulting in a scarcity of attention (Nye,

2008). This is especially true given the great variety of choices and personalization options provided by the Internet (Sunstein, 2001). The result is that cognitive biases, such as *selective exposure* and, more importantly, *selective perception*, are employed to cope with this excess of information. Put more simply, members of the public adopt certain methods of information processing in order to deal with this overload.

Selective exposure refers to the selective choice of information based on one's needs, interests, and attitudes (Manjoo, 2008; Sunstein, 2001). *Selective perception*, on the other hand, occurs when, despite the exposure to information, only certain parts of the material are filtered through and accepted, according to one's value schema and pre-existing biases. The rest of the information is discarded, a mechanism that helps individuals avoid cognitive dissonance (Manjoo, 2008). A third bias to consider is *negative elaboration*, which refers to the audience's tendency to counter-argue against messages that are perceived to be inconsistent with one's worldview and prior experience (Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002). For example, if people believe that Russia is an authoritarian state with an expansionist foreign policy, messages about Russia's humanitarian aid abroad might be perceived as yet another attempt to extend Russia's influence beyond its borders.

Aside from the public's cognitive biases, the other major challenge created by the information age is the "credibility deficit." According to Zaharna (2006), the 24/7 news cycle and increased transparency of policy-making necessitate trust-building and diplomacy by deed, not just a deluge of information or promises. She suggests that, "without credibility, no amount of information holds persuasive weight," undercutting the much-desired effects of soft-power programs (2006).

Therefore, a public diplomacy effort that focuses solely on projecting a positive image will be unlikely to succeed in changing negative preconceptions. In some cases, the lack of information about a country might be the issue; yet, in places where the negative information and perceptions already exist, the strategy should involve much more than just an attempt to “out-communicate” the volume of negative information.

Challenges faced by Russia

Because audiences often have significant cognitive limitations in terms of attending to, storing, retrieving, and using information, they tend to simplify their views of the complex and ambiguous international environment (Entman, 2008; Golan & Wanta, 2003; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1989). Hence, falling back on generalizations, simplifications, and stereotypes—essentially, the cognitive schema that help them make sense of the world—becomes the norm (Chew, 2006). The effects of selective perception and negative elaboration usually follow.

Generalizations about “national character” are a good example of this phenomenon, since despite the widespread availability of information about foreign countries and nations, these ideas have proven to be resistant to change (Chew, 2006; Leerssen, 2007). Chew suggests that national stereotypes are generally rationalized by the spectator as “based on a supposedly objective reality,” as well as by their omnipresence in popular culture and media—those stereotypes are constantly recalled and re-affirmed (2006). What is more, they are reinforced by the current nature of mass media and international news coverage, where negative issues garner more attention and foreign actors are presented as posing a constant threat to domestic audiences (Besova, 2008; Gilboa, 2008; Golan & Wanta, 2003). An interesting example is Naarden and Leerssen’s observation that the view of Russia’s “national character” in the West fluctuates

between “oriental despotism” and “progressive Western-looking nation” depending on the perception of Russia as, respectively, powerful or weak (2007).

Similarly, a number of studies by Katchanovski and Tsygankov demonstrate that the mainstream American news media suffers from a degree of “Russophobia,” defined as an “irrational dislike and fear of Russia and Russians” (Katchanovski, 2007; 2009; Katchanovski & Morley, 2009; Tsygankov, 2009). The coverage of issues involving Russia by major news channels has often been incomplete and mostly negative, while “Russian foreign policy was frequently distorted as striving to start a new Cold War with the United States, allying itself with Iran, and bent on restoration of the Soviet Union by military force” (Katchanovski, 2009). The biased coverage has worsened since Putin’s return to power, and has continued to intensify following the “Arab Spring,” the Edward Snowden debacle, and most recently, the civil war in Syria.

Exacerbating the problem is the fact that most of the American public receives insufficient information about Russia beyond existing stereotypes, beginning with high school and college curricula that provide very little education about the country and its history. There is a dearth of unbiased coverage of Russia and Russia-related news; at the same time, the decline in the demand for academic literature on Russia and the former Soviet Union demonstrates dwindling interest in the country (Katchanovski, 2007). Given this context, popular culture—and Hollywood in particular—becomes a key point of reference for popular understanding of Russia. Katchanovski’s analysis of a set of blockbuster movies from the 1990s and the 2000s has shown that a large number of them focus on the “Russian mafia,” illegal weapons, the KGB, immigrants, technological backwardness, poverty, mail-order brides, and prostitution (2007). This general narrative about Russia and its relationship with the West is then constantly

reinforced by the media and the popular culture, making it increasingly difficult for Russia to counteract these negative stereotypes.

What can Russia do?

Some might question the utility or the potential success of public diplomacy efforts, particularly by countries like Russia, which face a long history of negative stereotypes and hostile attitudes in the West. Others might suggest that stereotypes are everywhere, particularly in regards to foreign countries or people, and that Russia is not the only one facing such challenges.[†] However, those perspectives fail to address the fact that Russia is starting from a position of a strong, negative image that hampers its attempts to achieve its policy objectives abroad. Silence cannot reverse such hostile preconceptions, whether among the policy-makers themselves, or the public at large. Furthermore, Russia's desire to be a strong global power with a successful foreign policy necessitates positive presence and an international environment that is conducive for the achievement of those objectives. Public diplomacy can help lay the groundwork for this environment, and the following section outlines several brief, yet fundamental suggestions to that end.

Public Diplomacy by Deed: It is important to recognize that policies—whether foreign or domestic—are among the primary elements that shape foreign public opinion. Thus, simply whitewashing policies that are perceived as deleterious or threatening will be unlikely to

[†] Those questions were raised during the discussion of this paper, held at the Center on Global Interests on August 15, 2013. Some of the attendees disagreed with the need for public diplomacy by Russia altogether, suggesting that lack of attention and distance from the limelight might serve the country's foreign interests much better. Another major topic of discussion was the presence of stereotypes generally, and the insistence that Russia is far from being the only country or society being categorized in a "familiar box" in, particularly, the U.S. Some of the attendees suggested that creating the stage for Russia to be perceived "just like any other country", in short, would in itself help achieve Russia's objectives.

address the root cause of the negative image problem. In such cases, Cull suggests employing “public diplomacy by deed”—in effect, practicing what one preaches and acting on the image that the country attempts to project (Cull, 2009). However, while this can be an acceptable solution for smaller and less significant issues, it is not viable to expect international actors to change their national security or foreign policy strategies simply to please foreign publics. The rest of the recommendations, therefore, will focus on streamlining Russia’s message and its delivery approach.

Education: As noted earlier, the lack of knowledge about Russian culture and history strongly contributes to its negative image. Providing and promoting free programs of public education—as well as partnering to develop school and university curricula—that include elements of Russian history and culture will provide alternative points of reference for the public when they interpret current Russia-related affairs. Examples here would include educational and professional exchanges, which would also help establish relationships and extend them through growing personal and professional networks. Many of the programs supported by *Rossotrudnichestvo*, *Russkiy Mir*, and the *Gorchakov Fund* fall within this scope, yet they are by no means sufficient. Their volume and frequency should increase, particularly in the Western countries.

Information and Credibility: Disseminating information about Russia-related issues via impartial sources will contribute to the effort of positive image-building. Kremlin-sponsored projects such as *RT*, *Russia Behind the Headlines*, *RIA Novosti*, and *Voice of Russia* are obvious attempts in this area. These news outlets have adapted quickly and are trying to model their programming on leading international—but mostly, American—media. *RT*, in particular, has gained an impressive market share in the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe

(Moscow Times, 2012; RT, 2012a; TASS, 2012), and has received numerous prestigious television awards, including several EMMYs (RT, 2011, 2012b, 2013). However, these outlets face serious issues of credibility and selective processing discussed above: even if their information is unbiased and accurate, they run the risk of being perceived as untrustworthy or non-credible. Their source of funding, as well as the sensational and often confrontational nature of their coverage,[‡] has raised questions about their motives and has effectively situated them as opponents to the West in what has become known as an “information war” (Clinton, 2010; Seib, 2011; Warrick, 2011). Furthermore, these news outlets tend to focus too strongly on anti-American coverage at the expense of dedicating more time to explaining the Russian perspective on major international issues or ensuring more positive coverage of Russia and Russia-related matters. This problem reflects a much greater issue in the Russian approach to public diplomacy, something also pointed out by Joseph Nye (2013): the overwhelming and direct involvement of the government in this effort. In trying to reach Western publics—and especially the Americans—who perceive the proper role of the government as being much more limited, Russia’s top-down, heavy-handed approach to information dissemination abroad seems intuitively antithetical.

To address these issues, the Russian international media could begin to give a more balanced and equally critical coverage of Russian domestic and foreign policies, contextualizing and explaining them more impartially. To build credibility, Gass and Seiter (2009) suggest focusing on audience-centric, culturally-specific, and ethical approaches. According to them, competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill—or rather, their perception as

[‡] Just two examples of this confrontational and conspiratorial tone: “RT – Question More” promotional video <<http://youtu.be/EsMK-Nh9oUc>>; “America’s Next Colonies”, *RT*, July 28, 2013 <<http://rt.com/shows/the-truthseeker/shocking-torture-footage-dictators-694/>>; and “Facebook Poll” put out by *The Voice of Russia* after the Boston Marathon Bombings, April 15, 2013 <<https://www.facebook.com/questions/10151413045598310/>>.

such by the target audience—constitute the basis of a credible public diplomacy strategy (Gass & Seiter, 2009). The Russian media, therefore, should always keep their audience in mind, and instead of focusing on confrontation and negativity, they should emphasize cooperation, positive aspects of Russia’s relationships with other international actors, as well as elaborate on the objectives and considerations behind various policy decisions.

Network approaches: The study of networks and recognition of the value they hold have increased exponentially in the past few decades (Castells, 2008; Fisher, 2008; Sunstein, 2001). Basing public diplomacy efforts on this knowledge could greatly improve the Russian approach, particularly in helping to overcome the selective processing issues discussed earlier. The strategy can be separated into two dimensions: relationship-building and digital public diplomacy.

The first dimension should focus on establishing relationships with new “key social nodes,” such as opinion leaders, who can successfully overcome existing stereotypes and later help others within their own social networks do the same (Zaharna, 2010). Educational and professional exchanges discussed above would play an important role in this area. However, it is important to remember that once these relationships are established, they need to be maintained and expanded. Furthermore, given the inherently horizontal structure of networks, the top-down, hierarchical approach usually adopted by the Russian government should be modified to accommodate and address the needs of the new structure. Incorporating a greater number of players and organizations—particularly independent and non-governmental ones—would be very helpful in this regard.

Digital and online network diplomacy is the second dimension of this strategy, whereby new ICTs and communication approaches can be leveraged to overcome selective processing

by audiences. The Russian government has already made several major attempts at adopting this strategy, establishing presence in many of the popular social networking websites and providing multi-media content on various online platforms (Osipova, 2013; Shakirov, 2013). However, many of these initiatives do not involve a consistent and well-planned strategy or a constant two-way information flow. For example, the Russian Ministry of Affairs uses its Twitter account as an outlet for putting out press releases, but not for communicating with interested Tweeters at home or abroad. In many cases, there is no effort to reach out to key foreign publics in their own languages—the MFA’s Facebook page is in Russian, only. Therefore, reconceptualizing and streamlining the digital diplomacy strategy holds a lot of potential for increasing foreign interest and improving the understanding of Russia abroad.

Conclusion

To achieve more effective performance, Russia should work on improving the credibility of its sponsored media outlets abroad, and focus on relational and network approaches with audiences. The key recommendation, however, is for the Russian government to recognize the true value of genuinely *public* diplomacy and decentralize its efforts, involving a greater number of independent and non-governmental actors in the process. These entities should be charged with building relationships and maintaining communication with international publics, as opposed to merely carrying out Russian government policy. It is equally important to emphasize that Moscow’s public diplomacy strategy should put greater emphasis on diplomacy by deed, which necessitates a cognitive shift among the officials regarding Kremlin’s approach to internal as well as international affairs. Public diplomacy is a two-way street, and its success depends on both sides involved in the process. Russia cannot change history or significantly alter the global

context in which it is judged, but it can change its approach to overcome the cultural misunderstanding and the legacy of its Cold War image.

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