

Micro-Diplomacy as an Act of Resistance: The Role of Soft Power since Russia's Invasion of Ukraine (2022)

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Abstract

Since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has escalated its use of soft power as a tool to manipulate foreign perception. Russia's disinformation campaign, both over social media and through traditional media outlets, as well as through cultural organizations abroad, aims to destabilize democratic society, especially in the U.S.. At the same time, Americans' trust in the federal government to act in the best interest of society is at a historic low. According to a recent Bentley University and Gallup survey, "just under a third of U.S. adults (31%) say they have 'a lot' or 'some' trust in the federal government to act in society's best interest" (Brenan, 2025). This figure is substantially lower than those who say the same about charitable organizations (80%), state and local governments (50%), and businesses (43%). The U.S. is further divided politically and socially; rising inflation increases economic strain. Many Americans remain unaware of the degree to which Russian State-sponsored propaganda has infiltrated sites of soft power, including social media and traditional media. Others choose to ignore the risks or minimize them, failing to account for the aggression motivating Russia's attack on truth. Further, Russia is systematically attempting to destroy Ukraine's identity: bombing its libraries, museums, and educational institutions. At the

same time, Russia targets Ukraine's linguistic sovereignty, mandating Russian language usage in occupied territories, while rewriting history to claim that Ukraine is part of Russia.

Russia's crimes of war are indefensible. However, Russia's culture retains immense value. It belongs to Russians across the diaspora, many of whom are political refugees. Others, married to Ukrainians, have family members who have lost their lives in the war. Careful ethical consideration therefore must inform the treatment of Russia's sites of cultural, linguistic, or religious soft power; while Russia's politically-fueled attack on Ukraine is abhorrent, its authentic cultural expressions and its people are not to blame. In regards to sites of soft power, however, the challenge remains: how does the individual consumer distinguish legitimate from coercive soft power? How does one determine the types of sites that are intended to spread chaos and disinformation? While multiple frameworks exist to evaluate the role of soft power globally, there currently is no tool that focuses specifically on Russia's soft power and the degree to which it is intended as manipulative. It is therefore challenging to know which sites of soft power can be trusted.

This paper evaluates the existing frameworks and then offers a tool that fills the gap for people seeking to know the degree to which a site of soft power is authentic or manipulated. Finally, the paper analyzes grassroots and micro-diplomacy as ways to develop citizen-to-citizen relationships which are not under the control of the Russian government. Going forward, the paper suggests, the focus on citizen-to-citizen diplomacy may improve trust between Americans and Russians, increasing compassion towards our global neighbors and fellow inhabitants of the World Wide Web.