

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 its invasion of Ukraine in February, 2022, Russia has escalated its attempts to manipulate foreign perception. Russia's disinformation campaigns, both over social and traditional media outlets, aim to destabilize democratic countries, especially the United States. At the same time, Americans' trust in their federal government is at a historic low (Brenan, 2025). Many Americans remain unaware of the degree to which Russian State-sponsored propaganda has infiltrated Western media. Others choose to ignore or minimize these risks, failing to account fully for Russia's intent to harm the U.S. At the same time, Russia uses cultural organizations abroad to cover espionage operations. According to Dmitry Valuev, President of Russian America for Democracy in Russia, "Businesses, religious groups, churches, cultural programs, education, exchange programs--all of it is used and weaponized by the Russian government. It's not a question of whether they use it. They do" (Hourani, 2025, p.14). Meanwhile, since 2022, Russia has systematically bombed Ukraine's libraries, museums, and educational institutions, attempting to destroy Ukrainian cultural identity and to erase Ukraine's history.

Clearly, Russia's crimes of war are indefensible. Yet Russia's cultural heritage belongs to Russian people, both in and across the Russophone diaspora. Careful ethical consideration must therefore accompany the ways in which Russian culture is addressed in the West, especially in the context of Russia's assault on Ukraine.

In order to distinguish coercion and manipulation from authentic cultural expression, it is useful to understand the concept of "soft power," first defined by Joseph Nye in 1990. According to Nye, soft power exerts influence by attracting others to a country's culture, values, and political ideals. While military force includes violence and economic sanctions, soft power involves culture, language, religion, history, intellectual and scientific innovation, achievement, and commercial brands (Nye, 2004 p. 48). Over the last twenty years, the concept of soft power has evolved to take into account how

adversarial governments manipulate media in other countries and use cultural diplomacy in deceptive ways. Christopher Walker defines these tactics as “sharp” or “coercive power”:

[Sharp power] takes advantage of the asymmetry between free and unfree systems, allowing authoritarian regimes both to limit free expression and to distort political environments in democracies while simultaneously shielding their own domestic public spaces from democratic appeals coming from abroad. (Walker, 2018, p. 17)

The aims of adversarial countries like Russia are to use sharp power to weaken democracy and “sow chaos and confusion in Western countries” (Shea, 2025, p. 8). While some actions have been taken by the U.S. to combat Russian sharp power, such as designating the Russian station, RT, as a foreign malign influence, this has not been a high priority for the current administration (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024). Thus, it remains difficult to distinguish Russian soft power from sharp power. As a result, the population of the U.S. remains vulnerable to Russia’s coercive and manipulative tactics.

The paper aims to address the challenges of identifying Russian sites of sharp power in the U.S. After giving a historical overview of cultural diplomatic relations between the two nations, the paper proposes a framework for distinguishing between authentic sites of soft power and coercive power in the service of the Russian state. Finally, the paper proposes that the most authentic and trustworthy sites of Russian soft power can be found in citizen-to-citizen exchange, grassroots organizations, and acts of micro-diplomacy.

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