

Micro-Diplomacy as an Act of Resistance: The Changing Landscape of U.S.-Russian Relations since the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

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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 (Bentley-Gallup). 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 aggressive anti-democratic agenda motivating Russia's attack on truth.

Putin's war machine attempts to rewrite history to claim that Ukraine is actually part of Russia. At the same time, Russia is systematically destroying Ukraine's culture by bombing its libraries, museums, and educational institutions. By mandating that the Russian language be used in occupied territories of Ukraine, Russia attempts to erase Ukrainian linguistic identity.

Russia's crimes of war are indefensible. However, Russia's cultural heritage and contribution to multiple areas of knowledge retain immense value. They belong to Russian-speaking people across the diaspora, many of whom are political refugees and/or count Ukrainians as family. Careful ethical consideration must therefore accompany the treatment of Russia's cultural and intellectual standing in the world, even as Russia's attack on Ukraine and its manipulative use of disinformation are condemned.

It is challenging to determine, however, which organizations outside of Russia do or do not support Putin's agenda, since soft power is inherently subjective. While several frameworks exist to categorize aspects of soft power, there is currently no way for an outsider to determine the degree to which soft power assets are manipulated. After examining three soft power frameworks, the paper proposes a potential index for measuring Russian manipulation of various soft power entities.

Finally, the paper concludes by focusing on the least-manipulated category of soft power, citizen-to-citizen diplomacy. It ends with the hypothesis that micro-diplomatic acts may serve to mitigate the degradation of trust among global citizens, both at a grassroots level and, most expediently, on the worldwide web.