

Review - Russia's Public Diplomacy: Evolution and Practice

Written by Olga Krasnyak

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OLGA KRASNYAK, OCT 22 2019

Russia's Public Diplomacy: Evolution and Practice
Edited by Anna Velikaya and Greg Simons
Palgrave Macmillan, 2020

Despite the commonality of public diplomacy objectives to promote a nation-state's foreign policy when engaging with domestic and foreign audiences, contemporary public diplomacy is understood and practiced from a wider perspective. The main goal of public diplomacy is communication, while the mechanisms include promoting dialogue between governments and people, widening international people-to-people contacts both with allied and adversarial countries, maintaining nation branding campaigns, strengthening governmental agencies that fit with the objectives of cultural diplomacy, advancing international broadcasting, and many more.

Russia's public diplomacy is no exception and its strategies are based on promoting national interests on the international stage. However, among Western liberal democracies, the stereotypes about Russia's public diplomacy are often negative and primarily related to propaganda campaigns dating back to Soviet times. Old habits die hard. Some elements of propaganda, although packaged differently (as strategic communication or information campaigns), can't be completely removed from the state's public diplomacy approaches. Moreover, the contemporary world has experienced a digital transformation that has had a critical impact on public diplomacy, putting digital tools at the forefront. Looking beyond digital diplomacy, an understanding of the methods, practices and structure of the whole spectrum of modern Russian public diplomacy is required to further contrast and compare it with the full range of public diplomacy practices used by others.

The reviewed volume, edited by Anna Velikaya and Greg Simons is one-of-a-kind. It underlines the basic principles and structural elements of Russian public diplomacy and highlights its distinct features as well as commonalities with other countries. The volume consists of fifteen chapters, including the introduction and conclusion sections which, based on the content, can be considered separate chapters. For clarity, the chapters can be symbolically divided into three main groups, even though such a division was not initially intended in the book. The first group includes the first five chapters plus the conclusion, which analyse the historical approaches of Russian public diplomacy from the Tsarist period throughout the Soviet times to modern Russia. This group highlights the peculiarities of various nation branding campaigns including the aim of generating soft power. It looks at traditional Russian diplomacy's means and ends when promoting national economic interests and international economic cooperation.

The second group of chapters from six to ten is devoted to more specialised branches of Russian public diplomacy: digital, education, and science diplomacies. The participation of civil society and the role of government-led memberships in critical international organisations are two of the specific directions of Russian public diplomacy included in this group. Finally, chapters eleven to fourteen highlight some regional aspects and approaches that are of interest to Russian foreign policy: South and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. In these regions, Russia uses different strategies and tactics to effectively engage with local communities to promote national interests.

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Here I will focus on a couple of chapters that are particularly useful to gain an understanding of Russian public diplomacy at its best. Chapter four, *Development Diplomacy of the Russian Federation* by Stanislav Tkachenko, argues that through development diplomacy Russia actively engages with those countries and regions where Russia's strategic and geopolitical interests are considered important, thus should be secured. For example, Russia is keen to keep and strengthen its influence in the post-Soviet space and in the Middle East. Development diplomacy, a major asset for Russian public diplomacy, is characterised by economic assistance and defence cooperation, used to advance its national interests. The author states that in Soviet times, development assistance was wrapped up in the 'building socialism' model of development in third world areas (p.68). This model traditionally included a set of radical reforms regardless of the socio-economic and political orientation of local communities. Coordinated by the Politburo and the Central Committee (the supreme governmental body of the Soviet Union), it arranged credits for countries receiving assistance, supplied them with goods and services, and trained their specialists in Soviet higher education institutions.

To strengthen its international influence and generate soft power, the author argues, modern Russia continues its development assistance diplomacy although it had to readjust some practices due to Russia's reduced financial capabilities and transformed geopolitical architecture. In the same way today, Moscow considers its 'privileged interests' to be security-development-foreign policy priorities combined with civilian and military instruments and policies directed towards the former USSR (p.72). Russia's long-term aim to continue development diplomacy can be seen in its macroeconomic policies, such as the provision of credit facilities to stabilise the exchange rate, balance the budget deficit and forgive debt. The author summarises that development diplomacy can also be seen in the provision of structural aid aimed at education, agriculture, industry, (p.73), and active engagement with local communities in the post-Soviet space (for instance, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and in the region of geopolitical interests (Syria). The author also notes that regarding the practical implementation of development diplomacy, Moscow makes decisions based on reports by Russian diplomatic missions and the use of diplomats as mediators (p.71).

Chapter six, *Russian Digital Diplomacy: A Rising Cyber Soft-Power?* by Natalia Tsvetkova, assesses digital diplomacy as Russia's communication policy (p.103). Through digital diplomacy, Russia is communicating with the rest of the world by promoting a state narrative about its foreign policy, underlying intentions, creating an image of the country, and explaining its worldview. Digital diplomacy, the author suggests, modifies the face of public diplomacy, and is perceived to be one of the most controversial tools of Russian foreign policy (p.104). Through social media and international broadcasting (RT, RIA Novosti, etc.), Russia has proven capable of impacting world politics by exploiting provocative and inflammatory information (p.110). Since implementing digital public diplomacy, Russia has successfully identified target audiences for effective informational campaigns, often in opposition to radical international left and right groups and movements who resist mainstream news (p.108). By amplifying divisive problems and polarising political issues in broadcasting, smear campaigns or doxxing on the internet, promoting and advertising hashtags on social media, Russia sought to disrupt mainstream liberal discourse in the United States and Europe. As an alternative, Russia embraced conservative, nationalistic, populist, and right-wing parties, to demonstrate itself as a guardian of traditional values (p.110). The author concludes that despite the controversies and questioned outcomes of its offensive digital diplomacy campaigns, Russia has contributed to public understanding of the enormous power of international broadcasting and social media wielded to manipulate public opinion (p.116).

In a more general observation and as the source of slight criticism, the common problem coming with any edited volume is that the chapters, written by both academics and practitioners, are usually uneven in style, narrative, analysis, and insights. This reviewed volume is not an exception. Some chapters are brilliantly written and provide unique analytical insight into Russia's public diplomacy. Other chapters are less well-written, and it is unclear what the author(s) intended to say, or how the examined theme fully reflects Russia's public diplomacy objectives. Another problem in this volume is that not all of the key elements of contemporary public diplomacy were covered. For example, the absence of sports, cultural, or city diplomacies weakens this volume significantly and are aspects of public diplomacy that should not be overlooked. Additionally, the rarely discussed military diplomacy that is used to generate soft power, ensure a secure communication environment, and portray the military as a defender and not a threatening aggressor should not be excluded from the discourse. The Russian military presence in Syria requires a

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diplomatic approach similar to that of NATO's portrayal as a key defender of the Western liberal world.

Finally, the volume contains multiple repetitions that could be significantly reduced. The repetitive mentioning in almost every each chapter of the Rossotrudnichestvo (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation), the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), or the Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Foundation — key assets of Russia's public diplomacy backed by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs — undermines the substance and content of later chapters because the reader has already learned about these assets multiple times from earlier chapters.

Such criticism should not discourage readers as the edited volume succeeds in its aim to pull together and analyse existing practices of Russian public diplomacy. This volume is a timely call to focus on a range of debates, such as the use of strategic communication versus propaganda campaigns, genuine development assistance and aid versus economic diplomacy, nation branding campaigns versus nationalism and populism. The volume can be taken as a starting point for further research on the theory and practice of Russian public diplomacy. The volume would be a useful text for students majoring in international relations, diplomacy, public relations, and communications. It could also help our understanding of the entanglement of often confusing and contradictory Russian history and politics.

About the author:

Dr. Olga Krasnyak is currently an Assistant Professor at the Department of Theory and History of International Relations at RUDN University in Moscow. Prior to RUDN University, she taught international relations at Underwood International College of Yonsei University in Seoul. Her research interests lie within diplomatic studies with a focus on science diplomacy and its implementation into a state's foreign policy agenda. Dr. Krasnyak is the author of *National Styles in Science, Diplomacy, and Science Diplomacy* (Leiden, Boston: Brill 2018). She often provides media commentary on diplomacy, foreign policy, and international relations. She tweets @OlgaKrasnyak