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# MALIGN RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN EUROPE IN 2021

Anton Shekhovtsov

In the course of 2021, we have seen the continuation of three major trends in terms of the Kremlin's influence in Europe. First, Russia's traditional influence – derived from soft power, public diplomacy, economic aid, peace-making, etc. – continued to shrink. Second, Moscow largely retreated from efforts to interfere in elections in Europe. Third, in attempts to influence European and Western politics, Putin's regime started to increasingly rely on more sinister instruments of persuasion including hard power and dark power.

The soft power of Putin's Russia has always been a problematic issue due to the Kremlin's misconception of this term. The term was coined by Joseph Nye to describe a nation's ability to influence other nations through attraction arising from the attractiveness of a nation's culture, political ideals and policies.<sup>1</sup> Putin, however, views soft power as an instrument of “promoting one's interests and policies through persuasion and creating a positive perception of one's country.”<sup>2</sup> In a different context, Putin defined soft power as “a complex of tools and methods for achieving foreign policy goals without using weapons or other levers of influence, but using information and other types of leverage.”<sup>3</sup> He also complained to Russian diplomats that “Russia's image abroad” was not formed by the Russian authorities, was “often distorted” and did not “reflect the real situation” in the country or Russia's “contribution to global civilisation, science and culture.” Thus, Putin treats soft power as

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. x.

<sup>2</sup> “Meeting with Russian Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives in International Organisations”, *President of Russia*, 9 July (2012), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15902>.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Rossiya i menyayushchiysya mir”, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 27 February (2012), <https://rg.ru/2012/02/27/putin-politika.html>.

diplomatic action, propaganda efforts or strategic communication rather than what it truly is – power of attraction, – suggesting that Russian diplomats and other actors can “persuade” other nations to adopt stances favourable to Putin’s Russia.

As James Sherr notes, Moscow mistakenly views soft power as a state power based on mobilising – often covertly – networks of influence.<sup>4</sup> Putin indirectly confirmed this assumption while alleging that the West used soft power for “fostering and instigating extremism, separatism, nationalism, manipulating public opinion, [and] directly interfering in domestic politics of sovereign states.”<sup>5</sup> Soft power, by definition, cannot be used for these purposes, but what is telling here is Putin’s conviction that it can, thus again demonstrating the misinterpretation of the concept.

This is not to say that Russia has no soft power. It does. Russian culture, sporting successes and contributions to space exploration have been cornerstones of Russian soft power since the 20th century. However, as the Kremlin’s domestic and international policies progressively conflicted with those of the overwhelming majority of European nations, they marred Russian traditional soft power, which resulted in the decline of its ability to influence other nations through attraction. Putin’s regime even managed to undermine its reputation as a sporting superpower due to the systematic state-sponsored doping of Russian athletes. Moreover, due to the Kremlin’s aggressive instrumentalisation of Russian art, music, literature, science, etc., and with the help of such organisations as Rossotrudnichestvo and the Russian World Foundation, many public events showcasing Russian soft power in Europe came to be associated with political agenda and outright propaganda, thus further undermining Russian influence through attraction.

One cannot ignore, however, a “technical” aspect of the reduction of visibility of Russian soft power in Europe in 2020-2021, namely the COVID-19 pandemic which in many cases disrupted the promotion of Russian soft power and public diplomacy in Europe because of restrictions on international travel and public events. Nevertheless, the decline of traditional Russian influence is primarily a result of the Kremlin’s repressive and aggressive policies at home and abroad respectively. Hence, by the beginning of 2021, the Kremlin’s toxic baggage included the following major developments:

*Internationally:*

- illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of parts of eastern Ukraine (2014);
- downing of the MH17 Malaysia Airlines passenger plane over eastern Ukraine (2014);
- involvement in the civil war in Syria on the side of the dictator Bashar al-Assad (2015);

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<sup>4</sup> “CDI Talks. Episode 8. James Sherr”, *YouTube*, 7 October (2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZuoUJCLnTE>.

<sup>5</sup> Putin, “Rossiya i menyayushchisya mir”.

- interference in the United Kingdom EU membership referendum (2016), as well as elections in the US (2016), France (2017), and Germany (2017);
- poisoning of the former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal in the UK (2018);
- support for the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus and its crackdown on the opposition (2020);
- assassinations of Chechen dissidents in Germany (2019), France (2020), and Austria (2020);
- continuous cyberattacks and information warfare against Western nations.

*Domestically:*

- increasing crackdown on the opposition to the Putin regime;
- killing of prominent opposition politician Boris Nemtsov (2015);
- poisoning of the major opposition figure Alexei Navalny and his imprisonment (2020);
- attacks on the independent media and civil society.

In 2021, a number of developments further undermined Russia's traditional influence in Europe and the West in general. Some of the developments were revelations about Moscow's involvement in past crimes committed on the EU territory, such as the explosions at the Vrbětice ammunition warehouses (Czech Republic) orchestrated by agents of Russian military intelligence in 2014.<sup>6</sup> (These revelations were followed by the inclusion of the Czech Republic – along with the US – in the Russian government's official list of "unfriendly states."<sup>7</sup>) Some other developments were linked to Russian domestic politics, such as the Kremlin's decision to amend the Russian Constitution to allow Putin to stay in power until 2036 – in violation of the previous version of the constitutional principles.

The toxic background engineered by the Kremlin was also one of the main factors undermining Moscow's already limited capacities to interfere in elections in Europe.

In general, the Kremlin's rationale behind election interference<sup>8</sup> has been guided by the five major considerations:

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<sup>6</sup> Mike Eckel, Ivan Bedrov, Olha Komarova, "A Czech Explosion, Russian Agents, A Bulgarian Arms Dealer: The Recipe For A Major Spy Scandal In Central Europe", *RFE/RL*, 18 April (2021), <https://www.rferl.org/a/czech-expulsions-bulgaria-gebrev-russia-gru-intelligence-explosion-spy-scandal/31209960.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Olga Demidova, "V spisok 'nedruzhestvennykh' stran v RF voshli tol'ko SShA i Chekhiya", *Deutsche Welle*, 14 May (2021), <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-spisok-nedruzhestvennyh-stran-v-rf-voshli-tolko-ssha-i-chehija/a-57537438>.

<sup>8</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, "Russian Interference, and Where to Find It", *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, 18 April (2019), <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/russian-interference-and-where-to-find-it-anton-shekhovtsov.html>.

- whether Moscow is satisfied with the prevailing political attitudes towards Putin's Russia in a particular European country (Country X);
- whether there are political forces in Country X that are significant enough and are ready to cooperate with Russian state-related actors;
- whether meddling in the elections in favour of a particular political force can clash with other, political or non-political interests of Putin's regime in Country X;
- whether Moscow has relevant human and structural resources to interfere in the electoral process in Country X;
- whether political culture in Country X is conducive to Russian influence.

Russia's shrinking traditional influence and the background discussed above have had an adverse impact on the number of European politicians willing to cooperate with Moscow as well as on political culture in European countries that became more resilient towards malign foreign influence.<sup>9</sup> An important caveat, however, should be taken into consideration here: while it is significant, the decline of Moscow's influence alone does not explain the Kremlin's non-interference in elections in Europe in 2021. In some cases, Putin's regime had neither relevant political forces to support nor human/structural resources to interfere (e.g., the 2021 Norwegian parliamentary elections) or did not need to interfere as it was satisfied with the prevailing political attitudes towards Russia (e.g., the 2021 Bulgarian general elections). In other cases, such as the 2021 German federal elections, Moscow did not interfere because, with the relative exception of the German Greens, the Kremlin had sympathisers in all major parties and supporting some of them would antagonise the others. At the same time, Putin's regime felt safe enough to attack the Greens leader Annalena Baerbock in the cyber domain in spring 2021,<sup>10</sup> but scaled down its operations closer to the 2021 German federal elections that were held on 26 September 2021.

Writing in 2020, Natalia Tsvetkova and Dmitry Rushchin observed that "Russia's public diplomacy [had] pivoted from embracing soft power to increasingly relying upon rigid forms of political communication viewed by experts as constituting sharp power."<sup>11</sup> Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig conceptualised "sharp power" as a type of authoritarian influence that "pierces, penetrates, or

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<sup>9</sup> "GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index", <http://www.vulnerabilityindex.org>.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Jansen, "Gezielte Diffamierung von Annalena Baerbock", *Der Tagesspiegel*, 16 June (2021), <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/russland-mischt-sich-in-wahlkampf-ein-gezielte-diffamierung-von-annalena-baerbock/27291998.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Natalia Tsvetkova, Dmitry Rushchin, "Russia's Public Diplomacy: From Soft Power to Strategic Communication", *Journal of Political Marketing*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2021), pp. 50-59.

perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries.”<sup>12</sup> One infamous example of Russian sharp power operations in Europe is the ongoing operation “Ghostwriter”, described by the Council of the EU as “malicious cyber activities [...] targeting numerous members of Parliaments, government officials, politicians, and members of the press and civil society in the EU by accessing computer systems and personal accounts and stealing data.”<sup>13</sup>

We, however, would go as far as to say that, in 2021, Russia increasingly turned to the instruments of persuasion more sinister than sharp power, namely dark power and hard power.

“Dark power” can be defined as the ability to influence preferences and behaviour of other nations by projecting an image of a state inherently antagonistic to their political values. For example, in 2021, Putin’s regime used dark power when it supported the usurpation of power by the military junta in Myanmar.<sup>14</sup> While the West condemned the violent overthrow of Aung San Suu Kyi’s rule in the country, the Kremlin decided to demonstrate defiant opportunism, one of the aims of which was to confuse and intimidate the West. Yet another instance of Russian dark power is Moscow’s involvement in exculpating Lukashenko’s regime after it hijacked a Ryanair flight in May 2021 to arrest a Belarusian opposition activist and journalist, Raman Pratasevich.<sup>15</sup>

The Kremlin’s use of hard power in 2021 includes massive military build-ups on the Ukrainian border<sup>16</sup> with the likely aim to exert political pressure on Ukraine’s Western allies. It also includes weaponization of Russian gas supplies to Moldova as a response to President Maia Sandu’s pro-EU government,<sup>17</sup> and of gas supplies to the EU to promote its controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Walker, Jessica Ludwig, “Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence” (Washington: National Endowment for Democracy, 2017), <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Introduction-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> “Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the European Union on Respect for the EU’s Democratic Processes”, *Council of the EU*, 24 September (2021), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/09/24/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-respect-for-the-eu-s-democratic-processes/>.

<sup>14</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, “Putin and the Myanmar ‘Khaki Revolution’”, *The Moscow Times*, 5 April (2021), <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/05/putin-and-the-myanmar-khaki-revolution-a73468>.

<sup>15</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, “Russia Is Trying to Whitewash the Belarus Ryanair Hijacking”, *Prospect*, 27 May (2021), <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/russia-is-trying-to-whitewash-the-belarus-ryanair-hijacking>.

<sup>16</sup> “OFFICIAL Russian Military Build-Up near Ukraine Numbers More than 100,000 Troops, EU Says”, *Reuters*, 19 April (2021), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-military-build-up-near-ukraine-numbers-more-than-150000-troops-eus-2021-04-19/>.

<sup>17</sup> “Gas Being ‘Weaponised’ against Moldova, EU Says”, *Reuters*, 28 October (2021), <https://www.reuters.com/article/moldova-gas-idAFB5N2N800S>.

<sup>18</sup> “Putin: Nord Stream 2 to Start Gas Sales to Europe Right after Its Approval”, *Reuters*, 21 October (2021), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-nord-stream-2-start-gas-sales-europe-right-after-its-approval-2021-10-21/>.

As Lilia Shevtsova writes, “the efforts to develop Russia’s attractiveness are over. Moscow displays willingness to ‘break windows’. [...] The readiness to escalate can deliver desired results to the Kremlin faster than the image of a balanced partner”.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, against the background of diminishing traditional influence, the willingness to “break windows”, or, in other words, to use instruments of dark power and hard power in the Kremlin’s anti-Western political war has become too obvious in the course of 2021. Putin himself seems to have confirmed the new approach by saying that Russia needs to maintain the state of tension in the West, which the Kremlin produced, as long as possible.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lilia Shevtsova, “Ch’ya vozmyot?”, *Facebook*, 29 November (2021), <https://www.facebook.com/ShevtsovaLilia/posts/3037222233201254>.

<sup>20</sup> “Putin prizval sokhranyat’ sostoyanie napryazheniya na Zapade”, *RIA Novosti*, 18 November (2021), <https://ria.ru/20211118/napryazhenie-1759677188.html>.