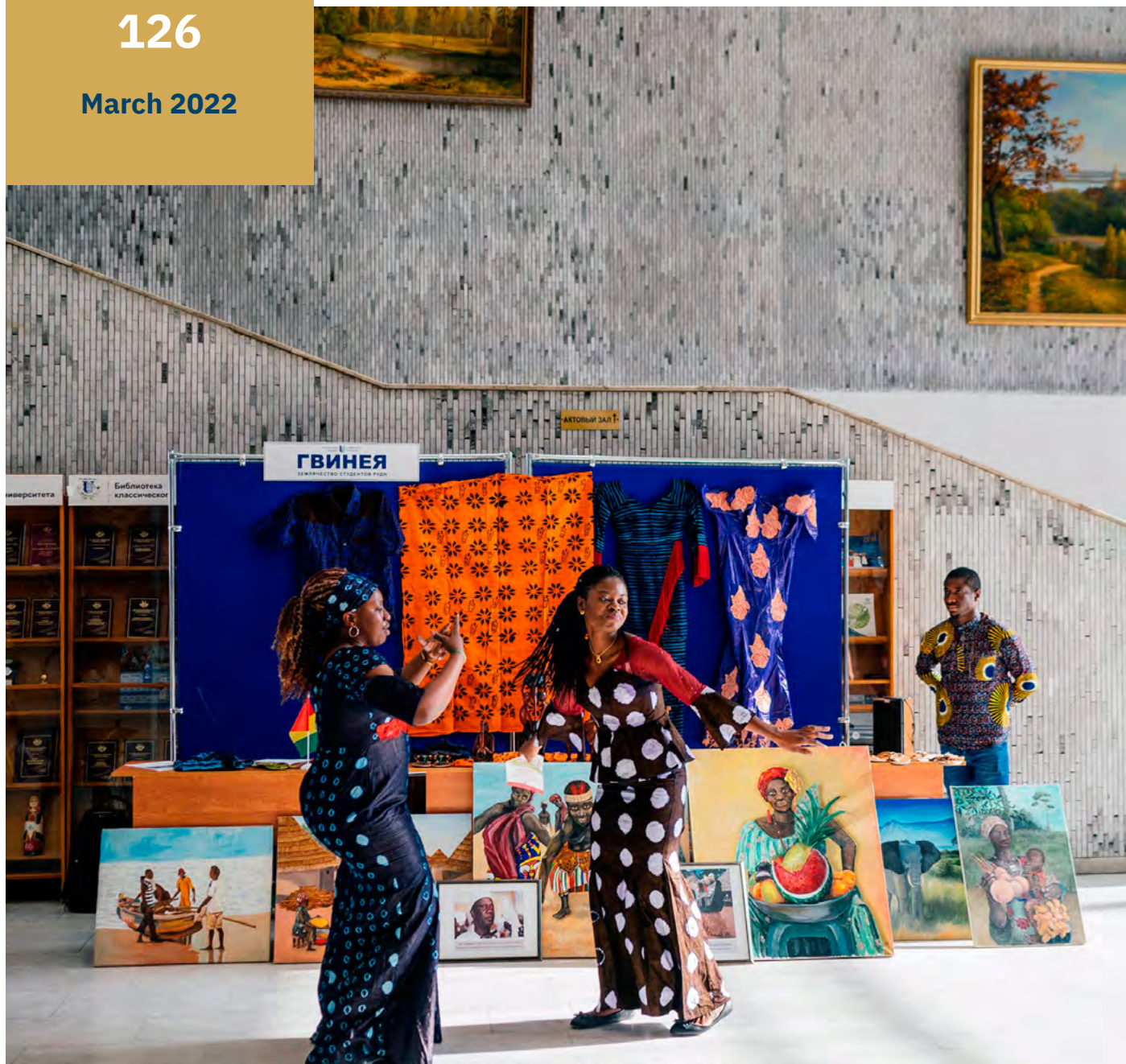


Policy Insights

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Russia's Soft-Power Sources in Africa

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African perspectives
Global insights

Executive summary

Does Russia have soft power – that is, the ability to attract and persuade rather than coerce – in Africa? Today, Russia is associated mainly with hard power, which relies on force (or the threat of force), economic sanctions or incentives. Yet, since the 2000s Russia has been trying to recover at least some of the Soviet Union’s soft power as part of its toolkit to gradually rebuild influence in Africa. While some observers are optimistic regarding the actual leverage of Moscow’s soft power in Africa, others deem it limited or non-existent.

However, to fully grasp Russia’s strategy in Africa, it is important also to look at its ‘soft dimension’, even in contexts in which Moscow predominantly uses hard-power tools. Russia also has some potentially strong sources of soft power, but needs key resources and investments to capitalise on them fully. This policy insight describes Russia’s soft-power sources and potential, following Nye’s categorisation of the three sources of soft power: the attractiveness of culture, political values and the legitimacy of foreign policies.

It briefly analyses the main features of Russian soft power, and then presents the main soft-power elements deriving from Russia’s culture, political values and the perceived legitimacy of its foreign policy. In so doing, it also considers concrete examples in African countries, as well as similar or competing soft-power strategies used in Africa (eg, by China or Turkey). In conclusion, this policy insight suggests three possible directions for future research on this important yet often overlooked topic: carrying out more country- and case-specific soft-power assessments; following preparations for the upcoming second Russia–Africa Summit and assessing post-summit developments; and looking at specific agents of soft power who conduct public diplomacy and actively promote Russia’s image.

Introduction

The question of whether Russia has soft power – ie, the ability to attract and persuade rather than coerce – in Africa and more broadly is the subject of heated discussion among experts and policymakers. Today, Russia is widely associated with hard power – ie, force (or the threat of force), economic sanctions or incentives. Yet, since the 2000s it has been trying to recover at least some of the Soviet Union’s soft power as part of its toolkit to gradually rebuild its influence in Africa.¹

If some observers are somewhat optimistic regarding Moscow’s actual leverage of its soft power in Africa, others are more cautious. According to a European Parliament report, for example, Moscow can count on soft power resulting from ‘Soviet-era links and a growing media presence’.² A high-ranking African official working at an international organisation

1 Olga Kulkova, “Russian ‘Soft Power’ in North-East Africa”, *Politics and Religion* 15, no. 1 (2021): 105–30.

2 Russell Martin and Eric Pichon, “Russia in Africa: A New Arena for Geopolitical Competition” (PE 642.283, European Parliamentary Research Service, Brussels, November 2019).

believes it stems from a perception of the resilience of Russia and particularly President Vladimir Putin – that is, their ability to resist pressure and take risks – and criticism of ‘Western impositions’.³ On the other hand, many experts deem Russian soft power very limited or even non-existent. Olga Kulkova acknowledges that while there is potential, ‘Russia still needs to work out a clear political strategy to increase the level of its soft-power influence in Africa in the coming years.’⁴ Maxim Matusevich stresses that, while Russia exercises some soft power in Africa, its ‘influence/impact on the continent remains limited and often confined to individual countries and specific groups of ruling elites’.⁵ According to Sergey Sukhankin, there is no such thing as Russia’s soft power: ‘[E]ven the Soviet so-called soft power was based on handouts and free-of-charge economic help. When these ended, the Soviet “soft power” was gone.’⁶

Many experts deem Russian soft power very limited or even non-existent

Russia’s involvement on the continent has been making headlines recently, especially since the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi. Disregarding Russia’s ‘soft dimension’ risks generating only partial views of its strategy on the continent. This policy insight engages with this question. Drawing on both primary (in-person, online and written interviews with selected Russia and Africa experts) and secondary sources (academic, think tank and newspaper articles), it intends to establish a general yet solid base on which empirical studies can build. It focuses on Russia’s soft-power sources and potential, following Joseph Nye’s categorisation of the three sources of soft power: the attractiveness of culture, political values and the legitimacy of foreign policies. Building on recent soft-power literature, this policy insight also goes beyond Nye’s categorisation to include less conventional, even controversial, potential soft-power sources such as anti-Western narratives or the use of mercenaries to support counterterrorism activities.

Russia’s involvement on the continent has been making headlines

Looking at soft-power effectiveness would require a more specific geographical and thematic focus and cannot be achieved within the limited space available. It would also

3 African official (anonymous), interview by Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, October 19, 2021.

4 Kulkova, “Russian ‘Soft Power’”, 125.

5 Maxim Matusevich (Professor and Director, Russian and East European Studies Program, Seton Hall University), interview by Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, October 27, 2021.

6 Sergey Sukhankin (Senior Fellow, Jamestown Foundation), interview by Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, October 27, 2021.

demand addressing the methodological challenges sketched in the next section and, particularly, the scarcity of systematic and country-specific opinion polling. Nevertheless, this policy insight does give glimpses into how target audiences may react to soft-power narratives and policies (ie, soft power's effectiveness), mainly thanks to existing literature and interviewees' insights.

First, it briefly analyses the main features of Russian soft power. Subsequently, it presents the main soft-power elements deriving from Russia's culture and political values, and its foreign policy's perceived legitimacy. In so doing, it also considers concrete examples of African countries as well as similar or competing soft-power strategies implemented by other external players active in Africa, such as China or Turkey. The conclusion suggests three possible directions for future research on this important yet often overlooked topic.

What is soft power, and does Russia have it?

A phrase coined by Nye in 1990, 'soft power' refers to the ability of a state to achieve its objectives through attraction or co-option rather than coercion or economic inducement.⁷ Since then, the concept has become popular, transcending the ivory tower of academia and even inspiring a pop song.⁸ Yet it has also drawn considerable criticism regarding conceptualisation and operationalisation. Leslie Gelb, for instance, argues that soft power has become too inclusive, as it 'now seems to mean almost everything': since economic coercion and military power have been introduced 'through the back door', soft power now includes not only elements such as leadership, persuasion and values, but also concepts such as 'military prowess'.⁹ However, a counterargument could be that a strict 'soft power' definition fails to capture the essence of regional powers' broader understanding of soft power. According to Joshua Kurlantzick, for instance, China's idea includes 'all elements outside of the security realm, including investment and aid'.¹⁰

Academics and policy analysts have stressed the difficulty of 'quantifying' soft power and assessing its effectiveness. Even if certain aspects of soft-power activities can be measured, its effectiveness presents more problems. One reason for this is, because soft power pertains to political values, 'it is interwoven with discursive struggles over political identity'.¹¹ Common measurement systems such as soft-power indexes aim to quantify the unquantifiable – ie, volatile, immaterial factors – but have also been accused of mirroring a hierarchy of values that lean towards Western liberal democracy.¹² Furthermore, formal

7 Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

8 "Soft Power" is a song by British electropop band Ladytron.

9 Leslie Gelb, *Power Rules: How Common Sense Can Rescue American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 69.

10 Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Charm: Implications of Chinese Soft Power" (Policy Brief 47, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, June 2006).

11 Todd Hall, "An Unclear Attraction: A Critical Examination of Soft Power as an Analytical Category", *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 2 (2010): 189–211, 206.

12 Wu R Zhang C, "Battlefield of Global Ranking: How Do Power Rivalries Shape Soft Power Index Building?", *Global Media and China* 4, no. 2 (2019): 179–202.

adherence to the political values of the power-projecting countries does not translate automatically into foreign policy outcomes.

Over the past decade, there have been several studies on the soft power of Russia, China, Turkey and even Saudi Arabia. These countries have increasingly adopted the rhetoric of soft power in their public discourse, sometimes emulating US and EU policies and styles of cultural and public diplomacy. Russia has been investing in its soft-power tools and institutions, such as Rossotrudnichestvo (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States' Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation), Russkiy Mir¹³ and the Russian Orthodox Church.¹⁴ Rossotrudnichestvo is possibly the first organisation that comes to mind when talking about Russian soft power.¹⁵ The organisation, now headed by Yevgeny Primakov (a Russian politician and journalist and grandson of Yevgeny Primakov, former Russian foreign minister and prime minister), has representation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, South Africa, Tanzania, Tunisia and Zambia. It oversees different tasks, from managing scholarships for African students at Russian universities to promoting Russian culture through Russian centres for science and culture and engaging with the Russian diaspora.

Despite Russia's attempts at exerting soft power, the international academic community is highly divided on its actual ability to do so

Despite Russia's attempts at exerting soft power, the international academic community is highly divided on its actual ability to do so. The applicability of the soft-power concept to non-liberal countries is contested, given Nye's tendency to look at universal, liberal-democratic values as the 'right' ones and the prominence of free civil societies as soft-power actors.¹⁶ To overcome Western biases, soft-power research is increasingly advancing non-conventional ways to deal with and assess soft power. This approach goes beyond conventional metrics (diplomatic infrastructure, cultural output, number of international students, etc.) and looks at soft power as constructed and exercised through discursive practices, and whose assessment should consider factors such as emotions, expectations or even affection¹⁷ without looking at the 'democratic credentials' of the different narratives. This approach informs this policy insight's analysis, which considers Russia's soft-power sources following the classical categorisation offered by Nye, but within this

13 The Russkiy Mir Foundation, a joint project of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science, supported by both public and private funds, aims to promote the Russian language and culture abroad.

14 For a detailed overview of these institutions, see Kulkova, "Russian 'Soft Power'".

15 The Kremlin created it in 2008 to implement the "state policy of international humanitarian cooperation, promotion abroad of an objective image of contemporary Russia". See Rossotrudnichestvo, "About Rossotrudnichestvo", <https://en.rwp.agency>.

16 Joseph Nye, "What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power", *Foreign Policy*, April 29, 2013.

17 Ty Solomon, "The Affective Underpinnings of Soft Power", *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 3 (2014): 720-741.

framework, also looks at less conventional, even controversial, potential soft-power sources. Examples of such sources are anti-Western narratives or the use of mercenaries to support counterterrorism activities.

Russia's soft-power sources: Culture

Russia's common cultural sources of soft power in the West (literature, classical music, ballet) do not seem to be particularly influential in Africa, possibly owing to the diversity of culture and language, as well as geographical distance. In addition, Russia has invested less substantially in its Russian cultural centres than China, which, since 2004, has sent 5 500 Chinese language teachers and volunteers to 48 African nations. China has also established 61 Confucius Institutes and 48 Confucius Classrooms on the continent.¹⁸ As Alexandra Arkhangelskaya notes, this also marks a difference with former colonisers, which left important legacies culture-wise, while the Soviet Union mainly used ideology as a soft-power tool.¹⁹ However, this does not mean that Russia does not exercise cultural soft power, which is mainly based on the attractiveness of its education and media systems.

'African countries no longer know as much about Russia as they did about the Soviet Union. They often receive distorted information about our country. We need to work in this regard.' This statement by Alexander Saltanov, chairperson of the Association of Economic Cooperation with African States, is emblematic, as it highlights two key dimensions of Russia's soft-power engagement in Africa. The first is the Soviet Union's effectiveness in shaping knowledge and opinions about itself, while the second is the need to build a favourable image through a powerful media arsenal that can counter the 'distorted' image spread by Western media. Given that 'in today's global information age, victory may sometimes depend not on whose army wins, but on whose story wins',²⁰ image and narrative shaping are becoming increasingly crucial. To this aim, the two most relevant aspects of Russia's cultural soft power are education and media.

The Soviet Union's legacy is visible in many domains, including elite influence through education

The Soviet Union's legacy is visible in many domains, including elite influence through education. During the Cold War, more than 50 000 African students studied in the Soviet Union thanks to Soviet scholarships. As Katsakioris argues, the training of African students

18 "61 Confucius Institutes, 48 Confucius Classrooms Established in Africa", *Xinhua*, November 26, 2021.

19 Alexandra A Arkhangelskaya (Researcher, Russian Academy of Sciences and Leading Researcher, Higher School of Economics), interview by Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, October 19, 2021.

20 John Arquilla, quoted in Joseph Nye, "The Information Revolution and Soft Power", *Current History* 113, no. 759 (2014): 19-22.

had 'major effects in terms of worldviews, political sympathies, networks and the formation of interest groups', despite the Soviet 'defeat' in the Cold War.²¹ According to Matushevich, Russians still benefit from long-standing ties with ruling African elites, with some of these dating back to the Soviet period. For example, prominent members of the African National Congress in South Africa and the ruling Angolan class were trained in the Soviet Union.²² This outcome mirrors an effort on the part of Moscow to 'target' African students: it would select and train young activists, children of party leaders and future leaders, enrolled mainly in the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia.²³

Today, education occupies a similarly relevant role in Russia's soft-power strategy. Over 27 000 African students studied at Russian higher education institutions in 2020/21, roughly a fourfold increase since 2010/11.²⁴ A lack of ideological agendas, in stark contrast with the Soviet past, enables Russian institutions to 'select students from African countries more openly and with no political strings attached', giving applicants 'a wider choice of opportunities'.²⁵ Apart from the attractiveness of Russia's universities, especially in technical spheres, what differentiates the Russian approach from the Western one, according to a Valdai²⁶ report, is shared values, especially Afro-intellectualism. Russia 'does not tend to treat Africa or Africans as inept students ... but adopted a different approach prioritizing Africa's intellectual achievements'.²⁷ As a South African analyst remarks, an adherence to Afro-intellectualism underscores 'Russia's vision of Africa as entirely and historically capable' and helps create 'a sense of comradeship, respect and collaboration with African nations'.²⁸ Focusing on Zimbabwean and Mozambican elites, Dzvinka Kachur argues that, while still preferring Western education, they also find education in Russia attractive.²⁹

Although there is huge potential in this domain considering the noticeable increase in the number of African students and cultural exchanges, several problems remain. First, there is a limited number of Russian state scholarships for African citizens – this has only increased from 1 765 in 2019 to 1 843 in 2020 for the whole continent. The pandemic also poses difficulties in terms of transportation and safety.³⁰ Russia's ability to unleash this potential therefore depends on domestic (allocation of public funds) and international factors (the evolution of the health situation).

21 Constantin Katsakioris, "Return From the USSR: Soviet-Educated Africans, Politics and Work, 1960s–2000s", *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 55, no. 2 (2021): 267–86.

22 Matushevich, interview.

23 Vadim Balytnikov et al., *Russia's Return to Africa: Strategy and Prospects*, Report (Moscow: Valdai Discussion Club, 2019), 28.

24 Statista Research Department, "Higher Education Students from African Countries in Russia 2010–2020", June 10, 2021.

25 Balytnikov et al., *Russia's Return to Africa*, 28.

26 Since 2004, the Valdai Discussion Club has served as a platform for discussion between foreign experts and Russian counterparts and senior officials, including Putin. Essentially an official Russian project, the Valdai Club can be described as a public diplomacy tool. It was founded by, among others, the Russian International Affairs Council – Russia's main think tank – and the National Research University Higher School of Economics.

27 Balytnikov et al., *Russia's Return to Africa*, 19.

28 Aaliyah Vayez, "A Changing Dynamic: The Evolution of Russia-Africa Relations", *The Republic* 4, no. 3 (August/September 2020).

29 Dzvinka Kachur, *Russia's Resurgence in Africa: Zimbabwe and Mozambique*, Special Report (Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs, November 2020).

30 Kester Kenn Klomegah, "Fewer African Students Came to Russia in 2020", *Modern Diplomacy*, April 4, 2021.

In addition, promoting a counter-flow of Russian students to African universities would boost people-to-people exchanges, reducing the risk of Russians' being perceived as patronising.

The second key aspect is Russian media presence, chiefly RT (previously, Russia Today) and Sputnik – Kremlin-funded media outlets that publish and broadcast in English and French. Both are commonly accused of spreading 'pro-Russian narratives', which range from Russia's being a friendly country bringing peace and prosperity to Africa to a more general Western bashing of former coloniser countries still engaging in 'imperialistic behaviour'.³¹ They are regarded as 'key public diplomacy tools' for Russia and are popular in some African countries showing a high degree of political volatility, such as Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR).³² Furthermore, 'there is a genuine respect for Kremlin-backed outlets' willingness to cover positive stories about African countries'.³³ The number of subscribers to the RT France Facebook page (1 583 601, as of 19 November 2021) has risen over the past few years. A French report claims that most new RT France subscribers come from Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa countries and that African online news websites are increasingly relaying content from Kremlin-sponsored media. For example, many of Sputnik's articles on Africa are picked up by seneweb.com, the fourth most visited site in Senegal with over 1.5 million Facebook subscribers.³⁴

Most new RT France subscribers come from Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa countries

This is the area in which most Russian experts think that the Kremlin should invest more to cultivate soft power. There is a general understanding that many foreign media outlets active in Africa tend to describe Russia as a 'villain',³⁵ spreading a negative image and making it 'harder for graduates to form associations by instilling fear that it could affect their political careers'.³⁶ However, several challenges persist. Russia is not investing enough in this domain to counter Western dominance in narrative-shaping.³⁷ There are calls for an 'integrated effort' by Russian media in African countries – for instance, through 'dedicated

31 These reports, however, often seem to deny target audiences' agency, depicting them as "passive receivers". Yet a balanced outlook should also consider the co-creation process of some narratives, such as the ones dealing with the "arrogant West" and former colonisers, and how local sites reproducing Russian content transform it and use it for their own political purposes.

32 Karel Svoboda, Paula-Charlotte Matlach and Zack Baddorf, "Russia's Activities in Africa's Information Environment", NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2021.

33 Samuel Ramani (RUSI associate fellow), interview by Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, October 28, 2021.

34 J-B Jeangène Vilmer et al., *Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies* (Paris: Policy Planning Staff of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and Institute for Strategic Research of the Ministry for the Armed Forces, 2018), 90-1.

35 Arkhangelskaya, interview.

36 Balytnikov et al., *Russia's Return to Africa*, 20.

37 Arkhangelskaya, interview; Balytnikov et al., *Russia's Return to Africa*.

television networks' (such as [RT Africa](#)) – to better articulate Russia's vision and African policies.³⁸ However, the returns on these efforts, as with any other soft policy, are long term and difficult to assess. In fact, Ramani argues that, despite their relative success, RT and Sputnik do not seem to be boosting pro-Russian sentiments. Rising viewership, in fact, might be 'merely creating more anti-Western sentiments ... and blurring narratives about pernicious aspects of Russian conduct, such as Wagner Group-related human rights abuses or election interference by Russian political technologists'.³⁹

Hence, media and education look like promising soft-power sources for Russia, but both suffer from structural and context-related challenges. Boosting media, in particular, seems a crucial tool for the Kremlin to present African audiences with a positive image of Russia. However, to generate actual soft power, Russian media should be perceived as objective, and not as mere propaganda vehicles. Such an objective image could be hard to achieve. Memories of Soviet *aktivnyye meropriyatiya* ('active measures') – attempts to influence political attitudes in non-communist states through propaganda and other covert means – are still fresh and, to a certain extent, still form part of modern Russian 'political warfare'.⁴⁰ Furthermore, there is competition from other international players on the continent, such as France, with which Russia is engaged in information warfare.⁴¹ Whenever media becomes weaponised, its soft-power potential is reduced considerably.

Russia's soft-power sources: Political values

The values underpinning Russia's soft power are interconnected and sometimes overlapping: multilateralism and multipolarity; anti-imperialism and non-interference; conservatism and localism (opposition to universalism). These values are particularly well received by policymakers in the Global South and relate to Russia's past and current anti-Western stance.⁴²

Many Western observers tend to view Russia as a unilateralist country that maximises power at the expense of existing institutions

Many Western observers tend to view Russia as a unilateralist country that maximises power at the expense of existing institutions, especially since the 2014 Ukraine crisis and Crimea

38 Balytnikov et al., *Russia's Return to Africa*, 20.

39 Ramani, interview.

40 Steve Abrams, "Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin's Russia", *Connections* 15, no. 1 (2016): 5–31.

41 Jack Stubbs, "French and Russian Trolls Wrestle for Influence in Africa, Facebook Says", *Reuters*, December 15, 2020.

42 On this interesting and crucial debate, see Andrei Tsygankov, *Russophobia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Eleonora Tafuro, "National-Populism in Russia: Ticking All the Boxes?", in *When Populism Meets Nationalism*, ed. Alberto Martinelli (Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2018).

annexation. Nevertheless, one of the Kremlin's main narratives advocates for multilateralism and multipolarity. These narratives build on Russia's historical experience, attempting to 'bridge principles of multilateral decision-making with those of multipolar balance of power'.⁴³ Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 is emblematic in this sense. He talks about 'multilateral diplomacy' as an alternative to the unipolar model, which he considers as 'not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world ... the model itself is flawed because at its basis there is and can be no moral foundations for modern civilisation'.⁴⁴ This underscores Russia's deep dissatisfaction with US unilateralism, a sentiment shared by many other countries that feel underrepresented in US-dominated international organisations. This is what may attract African countries the most. Russia campaigned for South Africa's inclusion in BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China)⁴⁵ and, especially since 2014, has vocally promoted African presence in international institutions, with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Putin stressing the need for inclusivity in their speeches at the 2021 Valdai Forum. African states strive for representation at the UN Security Council and want 'concrete results', but it is not easy for Russia to deliver.⁴⁶ Yet one African official notes that, regardless of actual results, Russia is perceived as a 'consistent actor, someone who doesn't let down [its] friends – and Africans are very much attached to values such as respect and solidarity'.⁴⁷

Linked to the promotion of multilateralism and inclusivity, anti-imperialist and non-interference rhetoric is also a powerful soft-power source for Russia. Most of the interviewees mentioned the lack of a Russian colonial past in Africa as one of the most powerful 'legacy narratives' – ie, inherited from the Soviet Union. This marks a difference with the post-Soviet space, where Russia's historical status as the centre of two empires (the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union) creates a highly contested image. In this regard, Russia and Turkey use similar soft-power rhetoric. Turkey's narrative about Africa is also shaped by its non-colonial past, which is used to justify its enhanced aspirations on the continent and to present itself as an alternative to the West. 'When Turkish officials address their African counterparts and say "We are different from the other external powers because our policy is not driven by neo-colonial ambitions", they refer [to] the European ex-colonial powers, they don't refer China or Russia.'⁴⁸

43 Andrey Tsygankov, "Russia in Global Governance: Multipolarity or Multilateralism?" in *Contemporary Global Governance: Multipolarity vs New Discourses on Global Governance*, eds. Dries Lesage and Pierre Vercauteren (Brussels: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2009), 51–62, 51.

44 Vladimir Putin, "Speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy", Kremlin, February 10, 2007.

45 Andrew Weiss and Eugene Rumer, "Nuclear Enrichment: Russia's Ill-Fated Influence Campaign in South Africa" (Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, 2020), 1–15.

46 Arkhangelskaya, interview.

47 African official, interview.

48 Elem Eyryce Tepeciklioğlu (International Law Implementation and Research Center, Yasar University), interview by Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, October 25, 2021.

The image of today's Russia, and especially of its leader, as taking a stand against the West is also attractive to many. One African interviewee put it eloquently:⁴⁹

Putin embodies Russia's assertiveness and criticism versus Western impositions. Regardless of him being white, Putin is perceived as someone Africans can identify with – someone fighting for his country. This is a perception shared by the population and the political elites alike.

The image of today's Russia, and especially of its leader, as taking a stand against the West is also attractive to many

Putin and Lavrov frequently nurture this image, stressing the 'sacredness' of sovereignty in the face of foreign interference, particularly by former colonisers. For instance, in 2018 Lavrov described French President Emmanuel Macron's proposal for a European intervention as resembling 'old-time expeditionary forces ... that would primarily accomplish certain objectives in Africa'.⁵⁰ More recently, he criticised France for its opposition to the Malian government's decision to negotiate an agreement with the Wagner Group (a prominent Russian private military company), allowing their presence in the country: 'To say, "I was there first, get out," is insulting, first of all for the government in Bamako, which invited foreign partners.'⁵¹ Mali's Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga, in return, said his government was justified to 'seek other partners' to boost security and slammed a 'lack of consultation' by the French.⁵² According to Camillo Casola, negotiations with Wagner respond to a twofold need on the part of Mali's transition authorities:⁵³

First, negotiations help consolidate local authorities' power, which suffers from weak legitimacy. Wagner will not presumably do counterterrorism in Mali; it will offer training, but also security, protection, authority-strengthening services for the benefit of the high offices of the state, against possible risks of internal destabilization. Second, and even more important, negotiations constitute an instrument of pressure towards international partners and, especially, France. It is undoubtedly a sign of local actors' strong agency and ability to leverage on a context of competitive multilateralism to pursue their strategic interests.

49 African official, interview.

50 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview with RT France, Paris Match and Le Figaro", October 18, 2018.

51 "Russia Roasts West over Mali, Afghanistan Pullout", *DW*, September 26, 2021.

52 "Russia Roasts West".

53 Camillo Casola (ISPI Associate Fellow), interview by Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, November 2021.

This debate happened in the context of the announcement of a winding down of France's Operation Barkhane, an anti-insurgent operation that has fought Islamist groups in the Sahel region since 2014. The operation has grown increasingly unpopular among Malians and is perceived as a 'colonial hangover',⁵⁴ in contrast with a high satisfaction rate – at least among the local population in Bamako – with Russia as an international partner, according to a recent survey.⁵⁵

While China remains Africa's largest trade partner, Russia's financial capabilities in general – and trade links with African countries, in particular – are far smaller

Concrete economic initiatives based on the principle of sovereignty also include the creation in 2019 of the International Agency for Sovereign Development (IASD), chaired by Konstantin Malofeev, a nationalist banker under US sanctions infamous for his ties with far-right politicians in Europe and the US. The IASD's declared goal is to help African states gain access to financing alternatives to Western funds, increase national welfare, strengthen their sovereignty and 'provide opportunities for independent domestic and foreign policies based on financial and economic independence'.⁵⁶ In some ways, Russia's stress on sovereignty and perceived 'no strings attached' financial cooperation is reminiscent of China's approach,⁵⁷ which also stresses the importance of non-interference and the purely development-focused nature of its aid.⁵⁸ However, while China remains Africa's largest trade partner,⁵⁹ Russia's financial capabilities in general – and trade links with African countries, in particular – are far smaller: trade volume for 2020 reached \$14.5 billion, marking a decrease from the previous year.⁶⁰

Apart from campaigning for economic independence, Malofeev is a key promoter of local values against Western normative imperialism. The promotion of conservative, traditional

54 Faisal Al Yafai, "France's Exit from the Sahel War Offers Russia an Opportunity to Move In", *Euractiv*, July 23, 2021

55 Maliweb, "Sondage d'opinion de Sidiki Guindo: Les potentiels candidats préférés des Bamakois" (Sidiki Guindo's Opinion Poll: The Bamakois' Preferred Potential Candidates), October 7, 2021.

56 International Agency for Sovereign Development, "About", <https://iasd.ru/en>

57 Matusevich, interview.

58 Huan-Kai Tseng and Ryan Krog, "No Strings Attached: Chinese Foreign Aid and Regime Stability In Resource-Rich Recipient Countries" (Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association, Chicago, January 6-8, 2016).

59 According to official data, China-Africa trade increased by 40.5% year on year in the first seven months of 2021 and was valued at a record high of \$139.1 billion. See Virusha Subban, "Africa: China's Trade With the Continent Grows to Record Highs", *Global Compliance News*, September 26, 2021.

60 Statista, "Trade Revenue Between Russia and African Countries from 2013 to 2020", September 6, 2021. Russia's trade dominance lies in weapons: in 2016-20 Russia supplied 30% of arms imported by sub-Saharan African countries, China 20%, France 9.5% and the US 5.4%. SIPRI, "International Arms Transfers Level Off After Years of Sharp Growth", Press Release, March 15, 2021.

values has become one of the footprints of Russia's soft power globally.⁶¹ The same can be claimed in parts of Africa where, 'in a strange reversal from the Soviet days, Russia now discredits the West by emphasizing traditional values, stability of leadership, [and a] conservative approach to gender roles'.⁶²

The World Congress of Families, an organisation with financial ties to Malofeev, has criticised the African women's rights struggle for reproductive rights, claiming that such battles reflect 'efforts by Western colonialists to curb the number of African babies'.⁶³ Alexey Komov, a Malofeev associate and a 'former night club owner and yogi turned Russian Orthodox monk, who established FamilyPolicy.ru to organize "pro-family" activists in Russia',⁶⁴ travelled to South Africa in December 2016 to participate in the launch of the anti-same-sex-marriage International Organization of the Family.⁶⁵ Another example is Alexander Malkevich's Foundation for the Protection of National Values, which supports national sovereignty and traditional values, and has released publications warning Africans of the dangers of Western-sponsored 'colour revolutions'.⁶⁶ The Russian Orthodox Church – the Kremlin's long-standing ally in this global campaign for conservatism – is also a 'visible example of Russia's soft-power outreach in Africa',⁶⁷ although its real outreach remains to be established. According to Arkhangelskaya, the Russian Church in South Africa acts as a magnet for both the diaspora and locals, hosting a Russkiy Mir office on its premises.⁶⁸ Over the past few years, the Russian Orthodox Church has also improved relations with other African Christian communities, such as the Ethiopian Church and the Coptic Church in Egypt. As Alicja Curanović notes, 'Church-State cooperation in Africa is a case of shared interests translating into two individual agendas targeting, respectively, countries and religious institutions with the conservative narrative as the symbolic platform bringing all the parties together'.⁶⁹

Receptivity to these value campaigns depends on the specific country and societal group. However, given that many large countries such as Nigeria and Kenya are deeply religious and many popular African evangelical Christian groups vocally oppose abortion and gay rights, it is safe to assume that this is a potentially strong soft-power source for Russia, provided these local conservative groups are influential enough to impact their countries' domestic politics.

61 Eleonora Tafuro, "Branding the Country and Its Leader: Soft Power Made in Russia", in *Forward to the Past? New/Old Theatres of Russia's International Projection*, eds. E Tafuro and A Ferrari (Milan: ISPI, 2020).

62 Matusevich, interview.

63 Southern Poverty Law Centre, "World Congress of Families", <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/world-congress-families>

64 Human Rights Campaign Foundation, *Exposed: The World Congress of Families – An American Organization Exporting Hate* (Washington DC: HRC, 2015), 12.

65 Paul Stronski, *Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa*, Report (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019).

66 Maxim Matusevich, "Russian 'Alternative' in sub-Saharan Africa: A Challenge to Western Liberalism", in *Russia's Foreign Policy: The Internal-International Link*, eds. E Tafuro and A Ferrari (Milan: ISPI, 2021), 136.

67 Tepeciklioğlu, interview.

68 Arkhangelskaya, interview.

69 Alicja Curanović, "Domestic Lobbyists and Conservatism in Russian Foreign Policy", in *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 59.

Russia's soft-power sources: Legitimacy of foreign policy

The section looks at how attractive and fair Russia's external actions, in Africa and elsewhere, are perceived to be, as a third soft-power source. In Nye's words, attraction stems from targets' perception of the agent's agenda-setting as 'welcome and legitimate'.⁷⁰

In terms of non-African foreign policies, it is interesting to look at how African states perceive the Ukraine conflict, which first erupted in early 2014 and then turned into a low-intensity conflict with periodic escalations. The conflict, centred on the status of the Ukrainian regions of Crimea and Donbass, has led to a sharp deterioration in Russia-EU and Russia-US relations. Yet a 2015 study showed that Ukraine made fewer headlines in Brazil or South Africa than in the EU and the US; indeed, the BRICS states adopted an approach based more on *realpolitik*: 'Criticism of Russia's actions vis-à-vis Ukraine is hardly voiced in public by government officials. Apparently, counterbalancing the West's perceived dominance in international relations is thought to be more important than upholding principles.'⁷¹

Elizabeth Sidiropoulos argues that South Africa's approach – not vocally condemning Russia's Crimea annexation, opposing Western sanctions and criticising Russia's exclusion from the Australian G20 Summit – should be understood through its 'desire to see the balance of forces change to reflect the rise of emerging powers'.⁷² Western unilateral actions irritated the South African government and civil society, with some groups condemning 'what they perceive as Western propaganda against Russia and the West's involvement in stirring unrest in Maidan Square, Kiev'.⁷³ One interviewee confirmed this viewpoint, stressing that 'Ukraine is perceived differently in Africa compared to other areas of the world like Europe' and that Africans tend to look at this and other issues through the lens of their own history of 'suffering from Western-inflicted mistakes, such as the artificial borders created by former colonizers'.⁷⁴ Such readings of the Ukraine conflict may point to the effectiveness of Moscow's use of anti-Western narratives, particularly its image as a country boldly defending its interests against Western interference.

The 'African dimension' of Russia's foreign policy is potentially attractive, at least to some countries' elites or social groups. In general, several sub-Saharan African states may look at Russia's moderate resources but valuable political and security services to diversify their policy options and prevent overdependence on China.⁷⁵ Indeed, the high attendance at the first Russia-Africa Summit on 23-24 October 2019 seemingly shows interest in and appreciation for the Kremlin's decision to engage more in Africa. However, the summit may

70 Joseph Nye, "Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept", *Journal of Political Power* 14, no. 1 (2021): 1-13, 7.

71 Felix Hett and Moshe Wien, eds., *Between Principles and Pragmatism: Perspectives on the Ukraine Crisis from Brazil, India, China and South Africa*, Report (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, May 2015).

72 Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, "South Africa's Response to the Ukrainian Crisis" (Policy Brief, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, Oslo, 2014).

73 Sidiropoulos, 'South Africa's Response'

74 African official, interview.

75 Olga Kulkova, "Povorot Rossii k Afrike: Kakovy Perspektivy?" [Russia's Turn to Africa: What Perspectives?], Valdai Discussion Club, March 5, 2018.

also have generated expectations that Russia is unable to meet. Many of the agreements reached are only memoranda of understanding – hence, not legally binding. Some even lamented that, of the 43 heads of state and government attending the summit, fewer than half were able to meet with the Russian president.⁷⁶

Russia's vaccine diplomacy understandably drew much attention in Africa, but risks turning into a double-edged sword

Russia's vaccine diplomacy understandably drew much attention in Africa, but risks turning into a double-edged sword. Its registration of the world's first COVID-19 vaccine and its declared willingness to assist – sometimes, in tandem with China – those developing countries that have been neglected by the West represents a potentially strong soft-power source. However, Russia's production problems, coupled with delays in Sputnik V's approval by national and international drug agencies due to an alleged lack of data (or political motivations, as Russian officials have claimed),⁷⁷ have jeopardised its ambitious vaccine delivery targets. For instance, the South African decision not to approve Sputnik V (and its subsequent suspension by Namibia) owing to worries about the vaccine's safety 'is a setback for Russia's vaccine diplomacy in Africa.⁷⁸ In Ramani's words,⁷⁹ the

inefficacy of Russia's vaccine diplomacy ... reinforces negative perceptions of Moscow's international conduct and ... risks diluting positive memories of previous Russian public health efforts, such as the Soviet Union's smallpox eradication campaign and Russian aluminium giant Rusal's Ebola vaccine trials in West Africa.

Hence, for this soft-power instrument to work, Sputnik V's production and delivery targets must be met. However, this also depends on Russia's positive interaction with national and international regulatory bodies. Furthermore, the boundaries between vaccine donations and commercial sales must be stated clearly.

Moscow's involvement in local conflicts – from its role in the Libyan conflict to alleged involvement in the 2021 Sudanese coup – makes headlines and, despite relating to hard power, can also become a soft-power source. States can indeed play on their hard power to boost attraction. For example, the military might provide them with the means to protect less powerful allies, or economic capabilities could justify their image as successful

76 Olivier Marbot, "Russia-Africa: Sochi More About Symbolism Than Strength", *The Africa Report*, October 29, 2019.

77 "Registration of 'Sputnik V' in the EU Is Deliberately Delayed, Naryshkin Said", *RIA Novosti*, May 19, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210519/registratsiya-1732970637.html>.

78 South African Health Products Regulatory Authority, "Update on the Sahpra Review of the Sputnik V Vaccine", Media Release, October 18, 2021.

79 Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Vaccine Diplomacy Is Overhyped and Underwhelming", *TRT World*, August 18, 2021.

models. Some of Africa's authoritarian governments may see Russia as an attractive partner that can 'offer international cover/support, as it did – together with China – by preventing/delaying the UN Security Council (UNSC) from taking any strong stance on Ethiopia's Tigray conflict'.⁸⁰ Russia's 2015 intervention in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad 'increased respect for Russia as a counter-terrorism partner', while its security cooperation with authoritarian regimes in sub-Saharan Africa based on state centralisation has 'sullied its international reputation'.⁸¹ As Ramani notes, this 'strong state' approach to counterterrorism encouraged Somalia to request Russian support in developing the country's economy and military and inspired Mozambique to enlist Russian private military companies (PMCs) against Islamic terrorism in the Cabo Delgado province.⁸² PMCs, especially the Wagner Group (with which Moscow denies any links), provide maintenance services, military equipment and training in several African countries, but they are increasingly under the spotlight over accusations of human rights abuses.⁸³ However, this negative element may turn into a positive one, 'simply because many African countries don't have many other options to fight terrorism'.⁸⁴ This applies primarily to ruling elites, but could also appeal to some countries' populations. In May 2021 the release of the Russian-CAR film *Tourist* reportedly drew several thousand viewers. The film 'glorifies the actions of Russian "instructors" who supported the regime of Faustin-Archange Touadéra ... and propagandises Russian mercenaries on the banks of the Ubangi – without addressing the accusations of abuse that target them'.⁸⁵

Polls can measure support (or lack thereof) for Russia's African and global foreign policies. In 2020/21, Afrobarometer found that Russia was favourably perceived by 35% of Africans.⁸⁶ To some, this score is a positive result, reflecting its growing political, economic and security engagement with Africa, as well as the influence of Russian media.⁸⁷ To others, this is rather a poor score, underlining Russia's limited soft power.⁸⁸ While these and similar surveys are certainly valuable, they lack (to the author's knowledge) the systematic and country-specific approach applied, for instance, to perceptions of China. Such rigour is necessary to observe and contextualise the evolution of African perceptions of Russia.

The analysis of voting patterns at the UN could also help assess support for Russia's external actions. It is commonly maintained that, since Russia's annexation of Crimea and subsequent problems with the West, it has turned to Africa to boost its international partnerships and escape isolation, while using engagement with multilateral institutions

80 Carbone, interview.

81 Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Enduring Quest for Great Power Status in Sub-Saharan Africa", in *Forward to the Past?*, 141.

82 Ramani, "Russia's Enduring Quest", 141.

83 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "CAR: Russian Wagner Group Harassing and Intimidating Civilians – UN Experts", October 27, 2021.

84 African official, interview.

85 Benjamin Roger and Georges Dougueli, "Russia-Africa: Behind the Scenes of Moscow's Soft Power", *The Africa Report*, July 29, 2021.

86 Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey, "Africans Welcome China's Influence But Maintain Democratic Aspirations", *Afrobarometer Dispatch* 4891 (November 15, 2021).

87 Folashade Soule and Edem E Selormey, "How Popular Is China in Africa?", *The Conversation*, November 17, 2020.

88 Carbone, Ramani interviews.

to increase its influence on the continent. Russia frequently engages with and seeks African nations' support at the UN General Assembly,⁸⁹ but it is also commonly regarded as influencing African states at the UNSC (the A3). On a closer look, however, Moscow's influence over the A3 may be overblown. Analysing UNSC voting patterns from 2014–2020, Singh and De Carvalho conclude that the 'relationship between Russia and the African grouping on the UNSC remains comparatively uncoordinated' and that 'arguments that try to paint certain A3 members as becoming more aligned with the interests and positions of Russia on the UNSC simply do not hold true for the African grouping as a collective'.⁹⁰ Therefore, available research paints a more nuanced picture of Russia's influence over African states at the UN.

The analysis of voting patterns at the UN could also help assess support for Russia's external actions

Conclusion

This policy insight has sought to outline Russia's most prominent soft-power sources in Africa, following Nye's categorisations. Contrary to liberal understandings of the concept, it has adopted a more nuanced and de-Westernised approach that allows for the existence of potential soft-power sources in cases of non-fully democratic governments such as Russia. Given the policy insight's broad scope, a detailed assessment of the effectiveness of policies and narratives based on each of these soft-power sources is impossible. However, a key takeaway is that Russia's seemingly most powerful soft-power asset lies in its image as an independent, pragmatic and assertive actor. At the 2021 Valdai Forum, Putin suggested that Russian soft power is based on self-respect: 'If you respect your own culture and history, then people will be naturally drawn to you.'⁹¹ This statement fits well into Russia's soft-power strategy in Africa. Today, Moscow's allure is based on its image as a global player that stands up to the West, insists on local values against foreign interference, and is 'open for business' with all countries, regardless of the government in power and how democratic it is. Russia wants to be a model for developing and underdeveloped countries, has expressed opposition to the uneven power distribution in international organisations, and supports multipolarity against Western unilateralism.

89 Samuel Ramani, "Russia's African Strategy Passes Through BRICS and UN", ISPI, November 15, 2019; Vladimir Shubin, "Russia and Africa Need Each Other: Reflections on Russian-African Relations and the 2019 Africa-Russia Summit", Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, January 2, 2020.

90 Priyal Singh and Gustavo de Carvalho, "Walking With the Bear? Russia and the A3 in the UN Security Council" (Policy Insights 118, SAIIA, Johannesburg, 2021), 14.

91 RT, "Putin Speaks at the Plenary Session of Valdai Discussion Club Meeting", YouTube, October 21, 2021, 3:33.

As Russia's soft power in Africa is a relatively understudied topic, there are several promising research avenues. For instance, future studies could look at three topics. First and foremost, there is a need to carry out more country- and case-specific soft-power assessments. These should rely not only on opinion polls but also on fresh qualitative analysis based on fieldwork – interviews or focus groups – and/or methodologies such as process-tracing. South Africa and the CAR have received some scholarly but mainly journalistic attention; other African countries such as Mali, Sudan and Nigeria would constitute relevant case studies to assess Russia's soft-power strategy and means.

Second, future studies could follow preparations for the second Russia–Africa Summit, due to take place in November 2022 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and assess post-summit developments. Given the hype that preceded and followed the first summit, it would be interesting to test whether those goals and ambitions were met, and, in turn, which new scenarios open up with the second event. Such analysis could confirm or downplay claims about the existence of a 'softer but nevertheless efficient [bond] between Russia and African counterparts'.⁹²

Finally, it would be interesting to look at specific agents of soft power who – individually, or in tandem with the Kremlin, purposefully or, sometimes, unconsciously – conduct public diplomacy and actively promote Russia's image, hence increasing its soft power. Several interviewees mentioned the relevance of such individuals. Emmanuel Dupuy speaks about 'active Russian "entrepreneurs"', notably in the mining, energy sector.⁹³ Matusevich even deems Russia's 'so-called "return" to Africa as essentially an elite project, supervised by the oligarchs close to Putin'⁹⁴ such as Yevgeny Prigozhin, the man commonly indicated as the owner of the Wagner Group and funder of *Tourist*. Such analysis would be particularly interesting in this context, given the co-existence of Russia's private and public interests in Africa and the often-thin line that separates them.

92 Emmanuel Dupuy (President, Institut Prospective et Sécurité de L'Europe), interview by Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, October 30, 2021.

93 Dupuy, interview. This definition resembles what Laruelle and Limonier call 'entrepreneurs of influence', ie, people who invest their own financial or social resources to build influence abroad, hoping to be rewarded by the Kremlin. Marlene Laruelle and Kevin Limonier, "Beyond 'Hybrid Warfare': A Digital Exploration of Russia's Entrepreneurs of Influence", *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37, no. 4 (2021): 318–35.

94 Matusevich, interview.

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Cover image

Guinean students dance during a presentation of their country at the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN) in Moscow on October 8, 2019. As the Kremlin seeks to boost ties with Africa, a Moscow university that was a training ground for the continent's elite during the Cold War is once again working to bolster Russia's soft power (Dimitar Dilkoff/AFP via Getty Images)

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