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HOW TO TALK WITH RUSSIA: PUBLIC DIPLOMACY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Introduction

On January 1, 1986, millions of Soviet citizens tuned into their TV sets to be addressed by their greatest enemy.

‘Good evening, this is Ronald Reagan, the President of the United States...’

After years of lobbying, Reagan had convinced Mikhail Gorbachev to allow him to speak to the US people directly. His pre-recorded five minute talk saw him use his acting gifts to the full. He spoke not as a man of power, but *as a regular American*, troubled by years of confrontation, able to differentiate between “Russians” and “the Communist party and the government”. He urged a partnership for peace and spoke in Russian when he looked forward to a future of ‘clear skies’. He also insisted on his values, arguing that “Our democratic system is founded on the belief in the sanctity of human life and the rights of the individual”. He described these values as “a sacred truth” that “every individual is a unique gift of God, with his or her own special talents, abilities, hopes and dreams. Respect for all people is essential to peace.”

This address- which was coupled with a similar opportunity for Mikhail Gorbachev in the US- demagnetised the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, and lent a human element to the pre-existing military and diplomatic avenues of communication between the two superpowers. Soon after, Margaret Thatcher went one step further. Interviewed live on Soviet TV, she deftly managed to inspire the audience to examine the problems inherent in the Soviet system: “Nothing like this had ever happened on Soviet TV screens,” remembers Boris Kalyagin, one of her interviewers. “We... let her tell our audience what she thinks about our domestic politics.”¹

Thatcher and Reagan’s breakthrough appearances took place during a wave of well-funded and concerted public diplomacy towards the people of the USSR. Millions of Soviets tuned in to Radio Free Europe, Voice of America and the BBC, which were

¹ BBC, “Boris Kalyagin: interview with Thatcher – the beginning of glasnost”, April 17, 2013. http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2013/04/130415_thatcher_soviet_interview, accessed September 12, 2016.

censored and muted but all the more trusted for that, spreading the gospel of human rights, individual freedom and access to information. Meanwhile, western cultural and commercial products, from jazz to US soap operas, jeans and chewing gum had an almost magical appeal. Soon after the barriers between the USSR and the West crumpled, and the world was celebrating a new era of convergence and mutual understanding.

Today we live in an age where the internet and cable channels allow countries and cultures to communicate to an unprecedented extent; where the relative freedom to move, exchange goods and services was meant to lead to a 'global village', an interconnected world of peace and prosperity. Yet for all this openness, the psychological barriers and divisions within countries and between states are more marked than at any time since the end of the Cold War.

Today there is no iron curtain. Russians have at least some access to an alternative information flow if they want it. The Kremlin, however, has been very effective at making the population so not want to access alternative sources of information.

The challenge for anyone who wants to speak to the Russian people- whether states engaged in public diplomacy, international broadcasters, NGOs, companies or individuals- is therefore to help stimulate the desire to seek out high-quality information. The central issue is not the flow of information as such, but motivation, developing the 'reason' to talk in the first place. But to understand this we need to investigate why Russians were prepared to engage with Western voices before- and what went wrong.

Defining Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is often associated with Joseph Nye's concept of 'soft power'.² Soft power is the "ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than through coercion or payment".³ A country's soft power "rests on its resources of culture, values and policies".⁴ As Nye argues, public diplomacy has a long history as a "means of promoting a country's soft power and was essential in winning

² Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616, Public Diplomacy in a Changing World, (2008), pp. 94-109.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

the cold war”.⁵ A good starting point for understanding 20th century public diplomacy is Alexander Wendt’s theory that the state can be understood as a person.⁶ States have recognisable personalities which effect how they are perceived and their behaviour. These personalities are consciously constructed to reflect what elites believe their country stands for- and then facilitate and limit behaviour. According to Alexander Wendt, «state personalities» may gimmick human behavior patterns: some states are friendly, extravert and loud communicators, while others may be melancholic and slow.

Public Diplomacy, however, should not be confused with ‘propaganda’, ‘strategic communication’ or ‘PR’. As Nick Cull, professor of Public Diplomacy, defines it, “propaganda is about dictating your message to an audience and persuading them you are right. Public Diplomacy is about listening to the other side”. In this paper we would expand this definition to ‘listening to the other side and finding causes for communication’. In the age of social media and interactive technologies the need to understand and listen to your target audience is more important than ever. Public diplomacy becomes even more of a self-critical conversation rather than a lecture.

This ‘conversation’ can be explained with the language – if not the theory itself – of memetic culture, articulated most famously by Richard Dawkins.⁷ “Memes” – units of cultural transmission like ‘tunes, ideas, catch-phrases’ and fashions – are spread by “leaping from brain to brain” in a process of “imitation”.⁸ Whenever an idea – or a meme – travels, it is transformed by the process of travelling. By being situated in a new political context the idea is itself transformed. For an individual to remember an idea it needs to be relevant to their own political context. For an individual to adopt the idea into their thinking and to thus transform it, the idea needs to be able to fit into a pre-existing individual narrative and fill a pre-existing individual need.

State Personality: From the Cold War to 2017

In the Cold War the West’s, and the US’ especially, ‘personality’ was based around the concept of ‘freedom’. The roots of this freedom narrative can be found in Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms – freedom of speech and religion and freedom from

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Alexander Wendt, “The state as a person in international theory”, *Review of International Studies*, 30, (2004), 289-316.

⁷ Jeremy Trevelyan Burman, “The misunderstanding of memes: Biography of an unscientific object, 1976-1999”, *Perspectives on Science*, 20, no. 1, (2012): 75-104.

⁸ Asunción Álvarez “Memetics: Evolutionary Theory of Cultural Transmission”, *Sorites.org*, December 2004, http://www.sorites.org/Issue_15/alvarez.htm, accessed September 12, 2016.

fear and want – which had been articulated in 1941 as the basis for a democratic and peaceful world. With the onset of the Cold War the US administrations quietly dropped the idea of ‘freedom from want’ as a right: it was difficult to uphold while denouncing Soviet provision of social housing. Instead the US emphasised civil, political and cultural rights. The ‘freedom personality’ was packaged in support for ‘free-form’ arts, such as jazz and abstract expressionism; promoted through the allure of economic freedom and its material benefits, such as Western cars or cosmetics; institutionalised in political freedoms, such as religious rights and the right to travel; and expressed through freedom of information. This ‘personality’ also gave reasons for engagement: Russians would tune into Radio Free Europe or the BBC World Service because they had information which Russians had no access to domestically; and they would broadcast music and cultural products which were censored in the USSR.

Today the Kremlin has co-opted and spun many elements of this ‘freedom’ personality. Western cultural symbols, such as pop music and television formats, sit next to Kremlin hate speech and renewed authoritarianism on Russian TV, proving that you can watch MTV while spurning democracy, drive Mercedes’ while imprisoning dissidents. Freedom of movement and religious freedom have been granted, while Kremlin propaganda works hard to undercut the allure of other political freedoms.

The Kremlin puts forward the narrative that democracy and human rights are, at best, irrelevant to success, and, at worst, a tool of the duplicitous West used to justify intervention in domestic affairs. Kremlin propaganda reiterates the idea that Western ‘democracy’ is a sham; that the democratic revolutions of 1989 led to unhappiness in Central Europe; that Western politics are governed through conspiracies. The Kremlin may have failed to provide a strong ‘Russian idea’, but it has been successful in promoting the concept that the whole world is rotten: cynicism has replaced Communism. Meanwhile the West has abandoned human rights as a priority, preferring trade and security, making its talk of ‘values’ easier to attack. The West has continued to do business with autocratic rulers, even in the face of evidence of corruption and worse-something Russian audiences are very aware of.

Back in the Cold War the Kremlin jammed and censored foreign broadcasts: today the Kremlin’s approach could be defined as “white jamming”: no physical technological device is used to disturb foreign messaging, but a mental block does the work instead as all foreign criticisms are discredited as a sign of a «centuries-long Russophobia».

The overarching conspiracy narrative of the whole world being opposed to Russia is highly successful. After Putin's return to the Presidency in 2012, thirty years of good will towards America were ruined when the Russian president commanded his mass media to describe America as an existential enemy. Media outlets responded with enthusiasm. Positive attitudes to the USA, which had never fallen lower than 49 percent (during the 1998 NATO bombing of Belgrade) and were usually above the 60 percent range, decreased immediately. By 2015, only 15 percent of Russians had a favorable opinion of the US. NGOs and educational ties were cut. When Western media predictably responded with Cold War-style projections of Vladimir Putin as an all-powerful Bond villain, they walked straight into the Kremlin's narrative trap: helping the Kremlin define itself as under attack. Decades of improving relations between the two peoples were undone in months.

Russia can be described as a state wearing a propaganda Walkman, inside a permanent loop where any Western criticism is now interpreted as part of an 'information war' against the country. Thus the Panama Papers leak, which showed how President Putin's closest entourage were laundering money, or the investigation into state-sponsored sports doping by the Kremlin and subsequent ban on Olympic Russian athletes, only helped reinforce the sense that Russia is under attack⁹.

The challenge then is how can one break through the cynicism? If the old version of the freedom brand is undermined, what is the new state personality for the US- and the EU?

Russia and the Pursuit of Happiness

Russia's aggressive propaganda naturally invokes Western statesmen, editors and journalists to respond defensively, pointing out lies, rebuffing accusations, disclosing hidden motives and demonstrating the ugliness of the Russian regime.

Such reactions are natural, but they will always be reactive and risk helping the Kremlin by reinforcing its messaging. We need to move from reaction to a positive approach.

i) The Personality

⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/de025422-4d9b-11e6-8172-e39ecd3b86fc>

Ideas matter more than ever. In a world of messy, overlapping communications the ‘personality’ is the instantly recognisable shorthand for a country. Public diplomats aim to create a “meme” (a cultural reference point) that will spread of its own accord, and will help to encourage the central “idea” into discussion in diverse contexts.

What should that ‘idea’ be?

As we have explored, the original ‘freedom brand’ the US built up in the Cold War has been deconstructed and lost its coherence. The challenge for today’s public diplomats and broadcasters is to find what aspects of the American Idea are still powerful and resonate with Russian audiences. To understand this will require consistent and in-depth social media sentiment analysis and target audience analysis. However, to our mind the over-arching idea is the **Pursuit of Happiness** with a sequence of supporting themes.

‘Progress and The Pursuit of Happiness’. The positive, progress-orientated, future-envisioning nature of the US and EU contrasts it with illiberal regimes like the Kremlin’s, with their diet of nostalgia and cynicism, which are by their nature never obsessed with progress.

Open societies embrace change and are quicker to adapt and grow- autocratic societies tend to reject unplanned development for institutions and humans alike. Autocracies inevitably limit the boundaries a citizen can reach and go beyond.

Whether it be Elon Musk or Bill Gates, Steve Jobs or Sergey Bryn, there is nothing more powerful for US public diplomacy than the sense that anything is possible.

Imagine the Future: The ‘future’ has disappeared from the Russian regime’s public discourse. A cynical society cannot imagine a way forward. Economic modernizers with coherent plans for the future have been banished. Focusing on Western ideas of the future, from urban planning to economic policy, technology and teaching can stimulate a discussion inside of Russia where its own regime is leading it.

Innovation: Silicon Valley represents American dynamism. For all their efforts, Russia has not been able to create its own version or boost its nanotechnology sector as

trumpeted by former President Medvedev. Even more painfully, many successful American tech entrepreneurs have Russian roots, a clear case of failure of the Russian state to empower its own people.

Health/Social Welfare/Charities: Some of the most important activism in today's Russia is around the subject of health provision. High profile charities focus on cancer care for children and adults, hospices, cystic fibrosis cure etc. The elite's access to Western medical care outrages ordinary citizens and undermines the official 'anti-western' line: when 'patriotic' Russian politicians head to Germany for treatment, it shows their utter hypocrisy. The lack of provision for the elderly, and the early age of death, highlight the weaknesses of the Russian model. By supplying constant and accurate information about health care in the West, public diplomacy can stimulate a conversation around a subject that reveals the Kremlin's false equivalence to be a sham.

Education: Even Kremlin elites who pose as anti-Western send their children to study in the US and the West: a clear case where US achievements are admired.

Consumer Culture and Commercial Culture: «States in propaganda Walkmans» are still very much exposed to the Western consumer culture; this is a weak spot of all developing countries with authoritarian rule. Domestic content cannot match that created in Hollywood or London; domestic goods are not of high enough quality to satisfy demand. Autocratic states are incapable of producing relevant «import substitutions» to the iPhone and Tesla car; nor do they have the creative powers and professional capacity to churn out «Avatar» or «Sherlock Holmes». Despite the rapid development of its entertainment sector, the Kremlin is still reliant on Western stars and products, from soap operas to art house cinema. These remain a strong conversation starter. As we explore below, if films and programs with Western stars were made on themes which resonate with a Russian viewer they will be watched. If Western stars engage Russians in communication- they will be listened to.

ii) The Communicators:

The US and European countries need a pool of communicators who Russians will immediately listen to, who command respect above the barriers and who can cut through the 'mess' of digital media. Most state department officials, democracy

promoters and human rights activists will immediately be pigeon-holed as out to subvert Russia. 'Russia experts' can come with baggage.

We need a 'dream team' of communicators, who would need to be involved in a consistent way, making timely and emotional interventions at critical junctures. They would have to brave the battles of Russian TV, but could also talk directly through social media, whether YouTube or Twitter. Effective messages take place over multiple platforms and are targeted to multiple audiences. Developing meaningful relationships (on and offline) requires individuals to take risks, correct themselves if they make a mistake and continue to work with local contacts to build relationships and trust in the long-term.

In terms of conversation-generation, communicators who are able to operate independently from official government policy are far more likely to be successful. The ability to be self-critical could help distinguish the US and EU from more autocratic regimes.

This, of course, a very A-list selection. But it's the sort of 'out-of-the-box' 'casting' one needs to apply.

- The Innovator. Elon Musk, who appeals to Russian ideas of the visionary scientist.
- The Soldier. The military, and the US military in particular, are respected in Russia. A General Petraeus would command attention.
- The Movie Star: In a dream team George Clooney, who combines star status with social conscience with a commitment to journalism and social causes.

This might sound fanciful, but if one considers how effectively the UK have used David Beckham as a spokesperson, or how the French government can talk through Bernard Henri-Levi, then maybe it is not so speculative.

iii) Content

Beyond the News: The Russian mass media, controlled and orchestrated by the government, offers a mix of home-grown and imported high quality entertainment to

attract towards its propaganda. Unless the West's content becomes really competitive, one shouldn't expect any successes. Russian audiences are still attracted by Western entertainment content. If the West wants to compete with Kremlin channels they would ideally need to invest in entertainment with an underlying social message which will work for Russian audiences. This means creating fiction, documentary formats especially for Russian audiences. This sort of investment is probably only possible if Western countries pool resources through a mechanism akin to the Nordic Film Board. Currently, funding is tragically fragmented, making any kind of impact minimal.

At the very least, existing Western cultural assets that embed core democratic values as a part of their message should be made available. This includes everything from translation of the foundational works in liberalism, social justice and ethics, along with communications, political science, international relations, history and philosophy; classic movies and TV series. Relevant articles in magazines, think tank reports, TED talks and so on should be immediately available in Russian. Press releases from state institutions and NGOs need to be made available in Russian. Relevant archives which relate to Russia-West relations translated into Russian.

Such efforts may not yield immediate results- but in the long run they are key.

The News: When broadcasting news into Russia, Western public broadcasters are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand accurate information about such issues as Ukraine and Syria is part of any news agenda. On the other hand, it can play right into the Kremlin's propaganda strategy, which portrays all Western voices as part of a campaign to discredit Russia. Western broadcasters cannot pretend they are not voices from the US or EU; Russian audiences instantly see them as such and Kremlin propaganda will always frame them as following a hidden agenda. The more they attack Russian foreign policy, the more it reinforces the Kremlin's message that the West is out to get Russia.

This rejection of direct criticism is borne out in the social media interactions of Russian viewers on the Facebook page of Current Time, Radio Free Europe's premier Russian language TV news program. Posts about the war in Ukraine usually receive less engagement than more human stories about Russian lives beyond Moscow: the highest amount of interactions were for stories about Karelian villagers defending their forest and about the provision of laundry for the homeless.

In order to pursue an effective news strategy, international broadcasting needs to differentiate between Russian language audiences. To truly understand this will require ongoing social media and targeted audience analysis, but one could estimate that Ukrainians, for example, need reassurance that the West cares about their (military) security and reforms; Baltic Russians that they belong in the EU; Russians in Russia want to hear about examples of positive change from throughout Russia and beyond. Programming needs to move beyond mere Kremlin bashing and over-focus on Moscow political intrigues, to include 'constructive' and 'solutions-based' news which gives viewers concrete examples of how to improve their lives, through both domestic or international examples.

v) Crowd-Sourcing a New Deal: Post-Soviet Russians feel they never received a true deal from the West. Whether fair or not, symbolic gestures, such as G8 membership on the one hand and lectures about democracy on the other, did not a 'new deal' make. There was nothing of the sweep and scale as the prospect of EU Membership gave to Central European countries.

What is in demand today is an open dialogue with a broad array of Russians, elites and common people, on the «terms of coexistence». The US and EU governments must decisively articulate their goals towards Russia. There is no need to 'balance the message': Russians expect America to penetrate every aspect of their life¹⁰ and many believe the West is out to destroy Russia's existence. Notwithstanding the groundlessness of such convictions it will probably not disappear even when Vladimir Putin vacates the stage.

However the enduring popularity of Western culture and way of life shows that Russians are not intrinsically opposed to the West. With the right communicators, new media opens up the space to create a transnational conversation, which can ultimately guarantee freedom, security and prosperity for all. It will not be easy, and it will no doubt be 'trolled' and attacked, but ultimately it is the only way forward.

¹⁰ The favorite joke in Russia in 2015 - «Never had Russians lived such a hard life as they do under Obama's presidency»