

THE KREMLIN'S SLEIGHT OF HAND: RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER OFFENSIVE IN THE UK

BY DR ANDREW FOXALL

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The Henry Jackson Society
Millbank Tower
21-24 Millbank
London SW1P 4QP

Registered charity no. 1140489
Tel: +44 (0)20 7340 4520

www.henryjacksonsociety.org

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Summary

- Russian foreign policy has become more assertive and revisionist under the leadership of President Putin. While Russia's use of hard power has received much attention, particularly since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the Kremlin's use of soft power – with the exception of Russia's international rolling-news channel, *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) – has gone largely unnoticed.
- Since the mid-2000s, the Russian government has invested significant effort, intellectual endeavour, and money to increase the country's international appeal. The Kremlin has established cultural, educational, media, political and other organisations that appear, at first glance, to be unbiased, but which unapologetically promote a world view consistent with its own.
- In the UK, Russia has undertaken a marked soft-power offensive over the past decade, with some success. The goals and methods that define Russia's public-diplomacy efforts, however, pose a challenge to the UK's national interests, as Russia's actions have become more egregious. Russia's influence is also counter to the UK's core values, based on democracy, freedoms, and the rule-of-law.
- While there is nothing illegitimate about Russia using soft power to advance its policy objectives, there are a number of initiatives that the UK could undertake to highlight the extent of Russia's influence, to expose Russia's 'useful idiots', and to combat Russia's lies.

About the Author

Dr Andrew Foxall has been Director of the Russia and Eurasia Studies Centre at the Henry Jackson Society since 2013 and in 2017 became Director of Research. Previously, Andrew held academic positions at the University of Oxford and Queen's University Belfast. Andrew's research focuses on economic, political and security trends in Russia and the former Soviet Union. He is the author of *Ethnic Relations in Post-Soviet Russia* (Routledge, 2014) and numerous academic articles. He has written for publications including *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Telegraph*, *The Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *TIME*, *Foreign Policy* and *The Moscow Times*, as well as several other journals and newspapers. Andrew has also had his commentary carried in *The Washington Post*, the *Observer* and elsewhere. He regularly appears on international media outlets, including the *BBC*, *CNBC*, *CNN* and *Sky News*. Andrew holds a DPhil from the University of Oxford.



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Introduction

Much of the commentary on Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, and its destabilisation of eastern Ukraine since, has focused on its hard power – its geopolitical designs and strategic objectives in the so-called 'near abroad', its use of new and less conventional military techniques,¹ and its military capabilities. As a 2014 UK House of Commons Defence Committee report makes clear, these issues have a strong sense of urgency not only for countries in Eastern Europe, but also for Transatlantic security.² Yet, an excessive focus on Russia's hard power overlooks what academics Tomila Lankina and Kinga Niemczyk call "the Kremlin's skillful manipulation" of soft power.³

According to Joseph S. Nye, the academic who coined the term, 'soft power' is the ability to attract and co-opt, rather than coerce or financially induce, others to do what you want.⁴ The concept has gained substantial traction over recent years, in Russia, and policymakers have explained this firmly as recognition of the need to improve the Kremlin's image abroad.⁵ Though Russia has invested in various instruments of public diplomacy since the mid-2000s,⁶ the term 'soft power' (*myagkaya sila*) came to prominence during the 2012 presidential-election campaign, when Vladimir Putin, writing in the *Moskovskiy Novosti* newspaper, described it as "a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy [sic] goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence."⁷ The term was subsequently included in the country's 'Foreign Policy Concept' of 2013 – the first time it had been mentioned in an official document.⁸

Today, Russia combines elements of both soft and hard power in pursuing its foreign-policy objectives.⁹ As part of what analysts Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss call Russia's "weaponization of information, culture and money" for soft-power ends,¹⁰ the Kremlin has established organisations to promote a world view consistent with its own and to act solely in its interests. In 2004, it created the *Valdai Discussion Club*, to woo international experts. In 2005, the 24-hour rolling-news channel, *Russia Today* (subsequently renamed *RT*), was established, to project a positive image of Russia internationally. In 2006, the Kremlin contracted two Western PR firms – *Ketchum, Inc.*, in the US, and *GPlus*, in Europe – to manage the country's image.¹¹ In 2007, it founded the *Russkiy Mir* ('Russian World') *Foundation*, to promote values that challenge Western traditions. In 2008, the 'Russian Centre for International Scientific and Cultural Cooperation' (*Roszarubezhcenter*) – the government agency responsible

¹ These are sometimes described as unconventional, ambiguous, or non-linear warfare; Russia used these techniques in operations in Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008, and Ukraine in 2014.

² 'Towards the next Defence and Security Review: Part Two – NATO, Third Report of Session 2014-15', House of Commons Defence Committee (2014), available at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmsselect/cmdfence/358/358.pdf>.

³ Lankina, T. and Kinga Niemczyk, 'What Putin gets about soft power', *'Monkey Cage' blog at The Washington Post*, 15 April 2014, available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/04/15/what-putin-gets-about-soft-power/>.

⁴ Nye, J., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

⁵ See, for example: Tsygankov, A., 'If Not by Tanks, then by Banks? The Role of Soft Power in Putin's Foreign Policy', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 58.7 (2006): pp. 1079-1099.

⁶ Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of 2008 made reference to "public diplomacy", and a 2010 Addendum to the Concept referred to "international cultural and humanitarian cooperation". See: 'The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation', *Kremlin.ru*, 12 July 2008, available at: <http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml>.

⁷ See: 'Russia and the changing world', *RT*, 27 February 2012, available at: <http://rt.com/politics/official-word/putin-russia-changing-world-263/>.

⁸ 'Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation', *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 12 February 2013, available at: http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/O/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D.

⁹ Sherr, J., *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2013).

¹⁰ Pomerantsev, P. and Michael Weiss, 'The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money', Institute of Modern Russia (2014), available at: http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf.

¹¹ 'Spin doctors to the autocrats: how European PR firms whitewash repressive regimes', Corporate Europe Observatory (2015), available at: http://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/20150120_spindoctors_mr.pdf.

for maintaining a network of official overseas cultural centres – was re-named ‘Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation’ (*Rosstrudnichestvo*) and given significant additional funding to expand its activities, particularly in the West. Throughout this period, Russia also hosted a number of mega-events, such as the 2006 G8 Summit, the 2012 APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) Summit, and the 2014 Winter Olympic Games, in an effort to improve the country’s image.

1. Russia's Soft-Power Tools in the UK

The UK is not as exposed to Russia's soft power as other countries, particularly those in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the Kremlin uses of a number of soft-power tools in order to improve its image in the UK, including: public diplomacy and public relations; well-equipped and Kremlin-aligned print- and broadcast-media outlets; Christian Orthodoxy; a raft of cultural and linguistic programmes; political allies on the left and right; and expert academic and policymaking communities. Owing to the presence of a significant ethnic-Russian diaspora,¹² the Kremlin combines different tools designed to generate social goodwill and create economic and political incentives among various constituencies and audiences.

At the same time, prominent Russian businessmen invest in culturally popular projects. Roman Abramovich, an oligarch who is a close ally of Putin, bought Chelsea FC in 2003; Alisher Usmanov, another pro-Putin oligarch, bought a significant share in Arsenal FC in 2007; Evgeny Lebedev, son of former KGB agent Alexander Lebedev, bought the *Evening Standard* newspaper in 2009 and the *Independent* newspaper in 2010; Alexander Mamut, a billionaire businessman described as "probably the most powerful oligarch you have never heard of",¹³ bought the *Waterstones* bookstores in 2011; and Andrei Filatov, a billionaire and president of the pro-Putin Russian Chess Federation, sponsored an art exhibition at Somerset House in 2014.¹⁴ In doing so, these individuals have increased the profile of Russia, as well as legitimised their own reputations.

Though it is easy to make light of these developments, elements of the British political (and social) elite have openly admired Vladimir Putin – for his assertion of Russian power and promotion of so-called 'traditional' values, and for his belief in the West's double standards in the application of international law and its weak moral authority – and have been willing to turn a blind eye to the worst excesses of Putinism. In March 2014 – less than two weeks after Russia's annexation of Crimea had led to the sharpest decline in relations between Russia and the West, since the end of the Cold War – Nigel Farage, leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), named Putin as the one politician in the world he "most admires".¹⁵ The following month, Alex Salmond, leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), declared the same.¹⁶ While there seems little overlap between right-wing Farage and left-leaning Salmond, it is clear that the Kremlin has carefully cultivated ties with political communities whose interests overlap with its own,¹⁷ regardless of political affiliation, with members of the SNP and UKIP receiving exposure on *RT*.

Yet, it is not just elected elites who have shown themselves to be highly susceptible to the roubles that have poured into London; those working in the real-estate market and

¹² The 2001 UK Census recorded 15,160 Russians living in the UK; more recent estimates, however, put the number much higher. In 2014, *The Guardian* suggested that there were 150,000 Russians living in London alone. See: Groskop, V., 'How the Ukraine crisis is affecting Russians in Moscow-on-Thames', *The Guardian*, 06 April 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/06/among-the-russians-in-london>.

¹³ 'Alexander Mamut profile: probably the most powerful oligarch you have never heard of', *The Telegraph*, 04 February 2011, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/epic/hmv/8303237/Alexander-Mamut-profile-probably-the-most-powerful-oligarch-you-have-never-heard-of.html>.

¹⁴ In addition, *Gazprom*, the state-owned energy giant, provides the gas for Chelsea FC, while *Aeroflot* is the "Official Carrier" of Manchester United FC. See: Freeman, C., 'Should Chelsea end its sponsorship deal with Gazprom?', *The Telegraph*, 03 April 2014, available at: <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/colinfreeman/10026601/should-chelsea-end-its-sponsorship-deal-with-gazprom/>, and: 'Aeroflot come on board', *ManUtd.com*, 08 July 2013, available at: <http://www.manutd.com/en/News-And-Features/Club-News/2013/Jul/manchester-united-announce-global-partnership-with-aeroflot.aspx>.

¹⁵ 'Nigel Farage: I admire Vladimir Putin', *Press Association*, 31 March 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/mar/31/farage-i-admire-putin>.

¹⁶ Johnston, I., "'Effective" Putin has admirable qualities, says Alex Salmond', *The Independent*, 27 April 2014, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/effective-putin-has-admirable-qualities-says-alex-salmond-9294614.html>.

¹⁷ Bloodworth, J., 'Putin's Useful (British) Idiots', *The Daily Beast*, 15 August 2014, available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/15/putin-s-useful-british-idiots.html>.

luxury-service industry are similarly blithe –¹⁸ and it goes without saying that Russia's large hydrocarbon-fuelled economy is highly attractive to the City of London.¹⁹ At least 70 Russian companies are listed and traded on the London Stock Exchange, and companies from the former Soviet Union have raised US\$82.6 billion in London over the past two decades –²⁰ and that is just the transparent money.

As it has made use of significant British business, cultural, financial, and political interests, Russia's soft-power offensive has, with the exception of *RT*, largely gone unnoticed. Indeed, where it *has* been noticed, it is largely because pro-Kremlin initiatives have taken place in partnership with British institutions – which often have little real idea of their Russian partners – so as to give their activities the impression of neutrality and legitimacy and to raise their activities' prestige.

The most important instruments of Russian soft power in the UK include the following:

2.1 Diplomacy

Russia maintains an active and assertive public-diplomacy presence in the UK, with its representatives often expressing sharp disapproval of policies that conflict with Russian interests. Influence is used to advance Russian objectives, such as opposing Western economic sanctions against Russia – following its annexation of Crimea – and limiting the 'expansion' of NATO. The two focal points of Russia's diplomatic strategy in the UK are the Russian Embassy and *Rosstrudnichestvo*.

Russian Embassy

Russia has invested heavily in modernising its traditional diplomacy over recent years, most notably by increasing its presence in social media, which has allowed the Kremlin to position its messages in the mainstream and to reach new audiences. At the forefront of this has been the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2011, the Ministry launched a new and more user-friendly version of its website (<http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/sitemap.nsf>), and, in June 2012, it launched its own *YouTube* account (<https://www.youtube.com/user/midrftube>), which currently has 6,845 subscribers and its offerings have received around 1.82 million views.²¹ The following month, in July 2012, Putin encouraged his country's diplomats to engage with new technologies, such as social networks, as instruments of Russian soft power.²²

The Ministry actively uses *Twitter*, and one of its most prominent users is Alexander Yakovenko, Russia's Ambassador to the UK (@Amb_Yakovenko). Yakovenko tweets in both Russian and English, hosts regular *Twitter* conferences, and is one of the roughly 35,000 officially verified *Twitter* users. In a 2012 article published in *Russia Beyond The Headlines* (RBTH) and distributed in *The Telegraph*, Yakovenko explained his use of *Twitter* thus:

In a country like Britain, where two-thirds of adult internet users are on Facebook and a quarter on Twitter, one cannot ignore these media and should learn the logic of communicating through them.²³

¹⁸ Hollingsworth, M. and Stuart Lansley, *Londongrad: From Russia with Cash* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010).

¹⁹ 'The Battle of Londongrad? How vulnerable is the City to sanctions on Russia?', *Open Europe*, 21 March 2014, available at: <http://openeurope.org.uk/intelligence/foreign-policy/uk-russia-sanctions/>.

²⁰ Bergin, T. and Brenda Goh, 'REFILE-London's lucrative Russia ties hang over sanctions debate', *Reuters*, 06 March 2014, available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/03/06/ukraine-crisis-britain-russia-idUKL6N0M31RX20140306>.

²¹ Figure accurate as of 19 January 2015. See: 'midrftube: About', *YouTube*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/midrftube/about>, last accessed: 19 January 2015.

²² Chernenko, E., 'Rossiya napravlyaet posolstva v Twitter' [Russia sends embassies to Twitter], *Kommersant*, 16 July 2012, available at: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1981536>.

²³ Yakovenko, A., 'Digital media diplomacy works for Russia's ambassadors', *The Telegraph*, 17 September 2012, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/rbth/technology/9548238/digital-media-diplomacy.html>.

So successful has Yakovenko's 'digital diplomacy' been that he boasts that Russia's UK Embassy "is third[-most followed of all the London-based embassies on *Twitter*, behind] the US and Israel, which have invested heavily in this instrument of foreign policy over a longer period."²⁴ Yet, Yakovenko uses *Twitter* to push the Kremlin's narratives, in an attempt to mislead the Western public.²⁵ For example, on 19 January 2015, shortly after pro-Russian rebels attacked Ukrainian forces near Donetsk airport, Yakovenko tweeted, "All that is needed for heavy weapons [sic] withdrawal to start is #Ukraine's decision. Instead, they started an offensive."²⁶

Rosstrudnichestvo

Formerly part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Rosstrudnichestvo* was created in 2008, by then-President Dmitry Medvedev, as a means to advance Russia's political and economic interests, by promoting its values in countries where it operates. To achieve this, the new-look agency took possession of Roszarubezhcenter's foreign activities, spanning 77 countries.²⁷ The reason for the creation of *Rosstrudnichestvo* – according to its head, Konstantin Kosachev – was clear:

Russia is experiencing certain difficulties with forming its image right now. Sometimes in countries with a well-developed media environment, the attitude toward us is worse than toward certain dictatorships. We have no intention of altering or glossing up Russian realities, we are merely trying to deliver truthful information to everyone willing to listen.²⁸

Since its creation, *Rosstrudnichestvo* has received significant government financial support. According to a 2013 Presidential Decree, its budget will increase from 2 billion roubles (\$60 million) in 2013, to 9.5 billion roubles (\$300 million) in 2020.²⁹ By 2020, it will receive 0.1 percent of Russia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Rosstrudnichestvo's London offices are located in Kensington and were opened in March 2012, by Alexander Yakovenko, Russia's Ambassador to the UK. *Rosstrudnichestvo* works closely with the Russian Embassy in London and collaborates with Russian-language media in the UK, including *RIA Novosti*.³⁰ It also maintains active relationships with some of Britain's leading universities, including Oxford, Cambridge, Durham and UCL.³¹

2.2 Media

Russia's state-owned media manipulate the British media's misunderstanding of the difference between balance and true objectivity, so as to present Putin's assertions as neutral;³² this represents an effort to undermine the Western model of news reporting. The Kremlin initially invested in initiatives that were demonstrably Russian (*RT*), but then began to invest in initiatives where its footprint was more opaque (*RBTH*). At a time when major Western media

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ As a number of investigative reports have detailed, the Kremlin also employs an army of "trolls" to spread its propaganda in the Twitter feeds of the West. See: Seddon, M., 'Documents Show How Russia's Troll Army Hit America', *Buzzfeed*, 02 June 2014, available at: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/maxseddon/documents-show-how-russias-troll-army-hit-america#2w346ct>; see also: Neimeister, J., 'How Russian propaganda spreads online', *The Daily Dot*, 19 January 2015, available at: <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/ukraine-nuclear-radiation-russia-propaganda/>.

²⁶ Yakovenko, A. (@Amb_Yakovenko), 'All that is needed for heavy weapons withdrawal to start is #Ukraine's decision. Instead, they started an offensive.', *Twitter*, 20 January 2015, available at: https://twitter.com/Amb_Yakovenko/status/557190792755023875.

²⁷ 'O Rosstrudnichestvo' [About Rosstrudnichestvo], *Rosstrudnichestvo*, available at: <http://old.rs.gov.ru/node/28132>.

²⁸ Abov, E., 'Straddling Journalism and Propaganda', *BRICS Business Magazine*, available at: <http://bricsmagazine.com/en/articles/straddling-journalism-and-propaganda>.

²⁹ 'Russia's Soft-Power Agency Is Allocated More Funds', *RIA Novosti*, 24 July 2013, available at: <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20130724/182398836/Russias-Soft-Power-Agency-Is-Allocated-More-Funds.html>.

³⁰ 'Rosstrudnichestvo – the Russian Mission in the UK', *RussianMind*, 15 February 2014, available at: <http://russianmind.com/content/rossotrudnichestvo-%E2%80%93-russian-mission-uk>.

³¹ 'Rosstrudnichestvo – Representative Office', *Rosstrudnichestvo*, n.d., available at: <http://gbr.rs.gov.ru/en/node/394>.

³² The same argument can be made with other similar state-funded channels, for example: Iran's *Press TV* and China's *CCTV*.

outlets are facing tightening budgetary constraints, Russia is increasing its investment in this sphere. *RT's* budget, for example, is estimated to have increased from US\$ 30 million to US\$ 300 million, since it was founded in 2005.³³

Because of the large Russian diaspora in the UK, other privately-owned Russian media have developed, such as *Russian Hour*, *RussianMind*, and the *Angliya* newspaper. Despite being privately-owned, however, these outlets often enjoy the support of the Russian government, the Russian Embassy in the UK, or Russian soft-power organisations, including *Rosstrudnichestvo* and the *Russkiy Mir Foundation*.

RT

According to the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board, which compiles UK viewing figures for television stations, between 2.25 million and 2.5 million Britons watched *RT* during the second half of 2012.³⁴ This made *RT* the fourth-most watched rolling-news channel in the UK, behind *BBC News*, *Sky News*, and *Al Jazeera English*. Online, though, *RT* bills itself as the "Most Watched News Network on *YouTube*", where it has more than 1.32 million subscribers and "over 2 billion views" for its videos.³⁵ It is an impressive track record for an organisation only launched in December 2005 as an attempt to, according to Putin, "try to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams".³⁶

Funded by the Russian government, through its 'Federal Agency for Press and Mass Media' (*Rospechat*), *RT* has the same effortless appearance as other 24-hour news channels; but, watch it for a while, and it quickly becomes clear that this is not the case. Although *RT* initially produced global journalism, it soon developed a policy of broadcasting 'alternative' news that was overlooked by Western networks and often contradicted the mainstream. So strongly is *RT* critical of the West that it is known as the "anti-Fox News".³⁷

Given that *RT* is a long-term funding priority for the Russian government, it plays a significant part in how Putin wishes Russia to be seen by the English-language West. In a 2013 interview, Putin admitted that the channel "cannot help but reflect the Russian government's official position on the events in our country and in the rest of the world one way or another."³⁸

Putin's words have certainly rung true for the Ukraine crisis, during which *RT* has reflected the Kremlin's baseless narrative of events (otherwise known as 'disinformation warfare'). The most blatant lies that *RT* has propagated include: a report that 400 elite US mercenaries were fighting, on behalf of the Ukrainian military, against pro-Russian separatists;³⁹ Putin's assertion that there are no Russian military personnel in south-eastern Ukraine and that "there never were any";⁴⁰ and consistent claims that Kyiv is beset by violence, fascism, and anti-Semitism. In light of *RT's* coverage of the Ukraine crisis, *Ofcom*, the UK's media monitor, launched four

³³ Pomerantsev, P., 'The Kremlin's attempt at soft power is back-to-front', *Financial Times*, 05 December 2013, available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/143ecf74-4e18-11e3-8fa5-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3B2tG77rM>.

³⁴ These are the most up-to-date statistics available.

³⁵ *RT* was the first news channel to have over 1 billion *YouTube* views. See also: 'RT: About RT', *YouTube*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/RussiaToday>, last accessed: 29 January 2015.

³⁶ Fisher, M., 'In case you weren't clear on Russia Today's relationship to Moscow, Putin clears it up', *The Washington Post*, 13 June 2013, available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/06/13/in-case-you-werent-clear-on-russia-todays-relationship-to-moscow-putin-clears-it-up/>.

³⁷ Bullough, O., 'Inside Russia Today: counterweight to the mainstream media, or Putin's mouthpiece?', *New Statesman*, 10 May 2013, available at: <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/world-affairs/2013/05/inside-russia-today-counterweight-mainstream-media-or-putins-mou>.

³⁸ See footnote 36.

³⁹ '400 US mercenaries "deployed on ground" in Ukraine military op', *RT*, 11 May 2014, available at: <http://rt.com/news/158212-academi-blackwater-ukraine-military/>.

⁴⁰ 'Putin speaks out on Ukraine, Crimea and US relations with French media', *RT*, 05 June 2014, available at: <http://rt.com/politics/official-word/163912-putin-interview-french-media/>.

investigations into the channel's behaviour;⁴¹ RT was found guilty, in each case, of breaching broadcasting regulations on impartiality.⁴²

So bad did RT's propaganda become that it led to an on-air rebellion. On 03 March 2014, Abby Martin, the host of *RT America*, condemned Russia's invasion of Crimea in a broadcast.⁴³ Days later, Liz Wahl, one of the network's anchors, resigned on air, saying, "I cannot be part of a network funded by the Russian government that whitewashes the actions of Putin."⁴⁴ In July, meanwhile, Sara Firth, a London-based correspondent, resigned because of RT's lies about the downing of *Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17*.⁴⁵

Russia Beyond The Headlines

Russia Beyond the Headlines (RBTH) is an international information project funded by *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, the Russian government's newspaper of record. RBTH maintains a '.co.uk' domain website, an English-language iPad app, several English-language digital magazines, and an English-language "analytical resource for expert communities", called *Russia Direct*.⁴⁶ Its main product in the UK, however, is the monthly supplements that are distributed as pull-outs in the influential *The Telegraph* newspaper. The newspaper has a circulation of around 500,000 readers, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (which provides independent verification of circulation figures for UK national newspapers).⁴⁷

Much like RT, on first glance, RBTH is just another newspaper supplement: its glossy pages are reader-friendly and its format apes Western-conventions. Most of its articles are written by Russian freelance authors; but a significant amount of RBTH's material is taken from other Russian state-owned newspapers (such as *Vedomosti*, *Kommersant*, and *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*) and reflects the position of the Russian government. In addition to content, there is also an overlap of personnel between media:⁴⁸ Eugene Abov, RBTH's Manager, is Deputy Chief Executive Officer at *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and enjoys a prominent position at the Kremlin-backed Russian Guild of Press Publishers.⁴⁹

RBTH was especially active in the run-up to the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. In early February 2013, for example, it published a piece by Gevorg Mirzayan, an author identified as a research fellow at the Kremlin-operated Russian Academy of Sciences. The article reiterates Putin's claim that the "huge expense" which Russia had made in hosting the Games was an "investment in national consciousness";⁵⁰ however, not once in the 500-word piece does the word 'corruption' appear.⁵¹ This is rather a large oversight, given that reports suggest that as much as half of the Olympics' US\$50 billion budget was lost to corruption.

⁴¹ Plunkett, J., 'Kremlin-backed RT to launch UK TV news channel', *The Guardian*, 28 October 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/oct/28/kremlin-rt-uk-news-channel-russia-today>.

⁴² Plunkett, J., 'Russia Today threatened with Ofcom sanctions due to bias', *The Guardian*, 10 November 2014, available at: http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/nov/10/russia-today-ofcom-sanctions-impartiality-ukraine-coverage?CMP=tw_t_gu.

⁴³ 'Russia Today anchor Abby Martin speaks out against Russian invasion of Crimea 3/3/2014', *YouTube*, 03 March 2014, available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZolXrjGIBJs>.

⁴⁴ Carroll, R., 'Russia Today news anchor Liz Wahl resigns live on air over Ukraine crisis', *The Guardian*, 06 March 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/06/russia-today-anchor-liz-wahl-resigns-on-air-ukraine>.

⁴⁵ Wagner, M., "'Every single day we're lying": Russia Today reporter resigns over coverage of Malaysia Airlines MH17 crash', *New York Daily News*, 18 July 2014, available at: <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/russia-today-reporter-quits-malaysia-airlines-mh17-crash-coverage-article-1.1871924>.

⁴⁶ See footnote 28.

⁴⁷ Although specific data is not available for *The Telegraph*, RBTH suggests that its supplements are read by between 35% and 60% of the audience of its partner newspapers. If this were true, then between 175,000 and 300,000 Britons read the RBTH supplement.

⁴⁸ 'Our Team', *Russia Beyond The Headlines*, available at: http://rbth.co.uk/about_us/team.

⁴⁹ 'Guild of Press Publishers (GIPP)', *Guild of Press Publishers*, available at: <http://www.gipp.ru/english/>.

⁵⁰ Mirzayan, G., 'VIP turnout at Sochi: Trouble, but not a tragedy', *Russia Beyond The Headlines*, 28 January 2014, available at: http://rbth.co.uk/opinion/2014/01/28/vip_turnout_at_sochi_trouble_but_not_a_tragedy_33611.html.

⁵¹ See: Zigfeld, K., 'Dishonor at Sochi', *American Thinker*, 03 February 2014, available at: http://www.americanthinker.com/2014/02/dishonor_at_sochi.html.

2.3 Culture and Education

Russia has an extensive programme of cultural and public diplomacy in the UK, where tours of the *Bolshoi* and *Mariinsky* theatres are sell-out occasions, West End theatres play host to critically-acclaimed Russian stage plays, and British galleries (often with the sponsorship of Russian state-owned companies, which are euphemistically called 'strategic partners')⁵² provide the backdrop to exhibitions of Russian artists. An important strand of Russia's cultural diplomacy in the UK is undertaken by the Kremlin-aligned Orthodox Church, which works closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One of the Church's main aims outside Russia is to foster international Slav Orthodox unity through its 'Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia' initiative. The Orthodox Church, which was resurrected by Putin in the early 2000s and has been central to his consolidation of political power in Russia, has over 50 churches in the UK.

Maslenitsa

Maslenitsa, the Russian pagan spring festival, has been celebrated in London since 2009. Organised by *Ensemble Productions*, a London-based firm specialising in promoting cultural events in Britain and internationally, the festival was initially held in Potters Fields Park, near Tower Bridge and close to City Hall. In 2011, it moved to Trafalgar Square, and, the following year, the one-day festival was expanded into a week-long series of events.⁵³

Since its introduction to Britain, the festival has enjoyed the patronage of Russia's Ministry of Culture; it also counts the Russian Embassy in the UK, *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the *Russkiy Mir Foundation*, and Mayor of London Boris Johnson amongst its benefactors. (Johnson, who has been an ardent supporter of the festival since he was elected in 2008, claims to have Russian roots in his family history and speaks Russian in his annual Maslenitsa greetings.)⁵⁴ The festival also boasts significant financial backing. In 2011, the pro-Putin oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov's *Onexim Group* sponsored the event, and, in 2014 it was the turn of Russia's state-owned oil giant *Rosneft*.

Russkiy Mir Foundation

Established on President Putin's initiative in 2007, the *Russkiy Mir Foundation* is supported by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education and Science and oversees a network of so-called 'Russia Centres' in the UK. Its four main initiatives are: a Russian-culture centre at Durham University;⁵⁵ a Russian-language centre at Pushkin House, London; an educational programme at St Antony's College, University of Oxford; and the Princess Dashkova Russian Centre at Edinburgh University. These Centres mainly run Russian-language courses and cultural programmes, but also organise events explaining Russia's position on global issues.

UK-Russia Year of Culture 2014

Russia's use of culture as a soft-power tool was especially visible last year, which was officially the 'UK-Russia Year of Culture 2014'. Agreed in March 2013, by UK Foreign Secretary William Hague and Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, the initiative sought to raise the profile and improve the image of Russia in the UK, by providing "an unprecedented showcase of Russian culture."⁵⁶

⁵² See, for example, the *Calvert 22 Gallery*, which was founded in 2009 in East London and is dedicated to exhibiting contemporary art from Russia and Eastern Europe; the Gallery's 'strategic partner' is *VTB Capital*. See, 'Strategic partner', *Calvert 22 Gallery*, available at: <http://calvert22.org/about/strategic-partner/>.

⁵³ 'Russian Maslenitsa in London', *Russia Beyond The Headlines*, available at: http://rbth.co.uk/culture_calendar/2014/02/04/russian_maslenitsa_in_london_33817.html.

⁵⁴ 'Mayor Boris Johnson speaks perfect Russian for London Maslenitsa Festival', *YouTube*, 06 February 2012, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zO1hLueRHko>.

⁵⁵ 'Centre Russkii Mir opened at Durham University', *Durham University*, 26 April 2013, available at: <https://www.dur.ac.uk/chi/news/?itemno=17535>.

⁵⁶ 'Programme in the UK', UK-RUSSIA YEAR OF CULTURE 2014, available at: <http://ukrussia2014.ru/en/calendar-uk/>.

Overseen by Russia's Deputy Prime Minister (Olga Golodets) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and supported by *Russia Beyond The Headlines*, the initiative arranged over 250 artistic, sporting, and, scientific events throughout the UK. These included an exhibition of the artist Kazimir Malevich's works, at the Tate Modern, and performances by the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Moscow Music Theatre and the Tchaikovsky Symphony Orchestra.

In June 2014, in a show of frustration over the ongoing Ukraine conflict, UK ministers announced that they would boycott all events set to be held as part of the Year of Culture.⁵⁷

2.4 Public Relations

Putin cares a great deal about how Russia is viewed in the West, and the Kremlin has invested significant amounts of money in public-relations campaigns, working with a number of London-based PR agencies in the process. In 2006, Russia employed *GPlus* – as well as the Washington-D.C.-based *Ketchum, Inc.* – to provide support to the Kremlin during the G8 Summit of that year. The following year, in 2007, the state-owned energy giant, *Gazprom*, also signed a deal with *GPlus*, for help with media handling and government advocacy.⁵⁸ The same year, *Gazprom* also contracted *Gavin Anderson & Co* (now *Kreab*), a financial PR firm with offices in London.⁵⁹ Through its London-based subsidiary, *Portland Communications*, *GPlus* also offers advice to Russian oligarchs, including Putin-ally Oleg Deripaska.⁶⁰

Though Russia has spent heavily on PR, it has not relied solely on this; based on shared ideological affinities, influential forces in the UK political establishment advocate pro-Russian positions on policy issues. Russia's political allies in the UK include parliamentarians from all of the major political parties, as well as parties on the populist left and nationalist right. British intellectuals, meanwhile, are just as prone to the Kremlin's enticements, participating in pro-Moscow events.

Conservative Friends of Russia / Westminster Russia Forum

Launched in mid-2012, at the Russian Embassy in London, *Conservative Friends of Russia* (CFoR), was the brainchild of PR consultant Richard Royal. The group, which aimed at “strengthening relations between the British and Russian communities and informing political decision-making within both countries”,⁶¹ featured several notable parliamentarians on its board (including Sir Malcolm Rifkind as its Honorary President). The group was an effort, by the Kremlin, to deepen its ‘co-operation’ with the Conservative Party, in an attempt to rebuild relations between London and Moscow following the murder – widely accepted to be by the Russian security services – of Alexander Litvinenko in 2005. In September 2012, the group went on a 10-date trip to Russia, paid for by *Rosstrudnichestvo*,⁶² and at least one member of the group appeared on *RT*.⁶³

In late 2012, however, the group published a homophobic attack piece on Chris Bryant MP, a member of the Labour Party, and accused him of “ineffectual” leadership of the All-Party

⁵⁷ Quinn, A., ‘Ministers Boycott U.K.-Russia Year of Culture Over Ukraine Crisis’, *The Moscow Times*, 28 July 2014, available at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/ministers-boycott-u-k-russia-year-of-culture-over-ukraine-crisis/504170.html>.

⁵⁸ Rettman, A., ‘Russia hones new image among EU elite’, *EUObserver*, 09 February 2009, available at: <http://euobserver.com/foreign/27567>.

⁵⁹ McKenna, T., ‘Gazprom Export enlists Gavin Anderson & Co.’, *PR Week*, 30 August 2007, available at: <http://www.prweek.com/article/1256220/gazprom-export-enlists-gavin-anderson---co>.

⁶⁰ Spanier, G., ‘Reputation launderers: the London PR firms with their own image problems’, *London Evening Standard*, 28 March 2011, available at: <http://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/reputation-launderers-the-london-pr-firms-with-their-own-image-problems-6385745.html>.

⁶¹ ‘British media puts Russia in the crosshairs’, *RT*, 04 December 2012, available at: <http://rt.com/politics/british-media-uk-russia-pussy-riot-putin-239/>.

⁶² Muir, H., ‘Diary’, *The Guardian*, 20 September 2012, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/sep/20/hugh-muir-diary-russia-putin-friends>.

⁶³ Weiss, M., ‘Moscow-on-Thames’, *Foreign Policy*, 23 November 2012, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/11/23/moscow_on_thames.

Parliamentary Group on Russia, which had been critical of Putin and the Kremlin's human-rights record.⁶⁴ As a result, CFoR lost all of its Conservative MPs amid allegations of being too close to the Kremlin. Shortly afterwards, the organisation was re-launched as *Westminster Russia Forum*, with the same chairman (Richard Royal) and the same Kremlin-friendly aim.⁶⁵

Positive Russia Foundation

In July 2013, the *Positive Russia Foundation* was launched in London, with the aim of improving Russia's image in the UK.⁶⁶ Behind the initiative was *New Century Media*, a PR firm that had spent the previous two years working to position Moscow as an international financial centre. According to press reports in Russia, however, the initiative was conceived after close talks with Vasily Shestakov, a Russian MP who was made an honorary freeman of the City of London in May 2013 and who is an old friend of Putin.⁶⁷ The same press reports note that the *Positive Russia Foundation* was "approved by Prince Michael of Kent and British Prime Minister David Cameron".⁶⁸ In an interview with a Russian news website, Shestakov described the Foundation "as a new variant of Russia Today, but under the patronage of English aristocrats."⁶⁹

In June 2013, Shestakov hosted a Sambo event at Kensington Palace and delivered a message from Putin to the event's guests, including Prince Michael of Kent. Shestakov began working with the *Positive Russia Foundation* in order to organise a major London-based Sambo tournament (the President's Cup, named after Putin) in 2014, which the Foundation would arrange and promote. Putin, it was envisaged, would hand the cup to the winning team, as well as headline a black-tie evening reception. For its part, the Foundation promised that members of the British elite would attend, including the Prime Minister and members of the Royal family.⁷⁰ Some boast that may be, but the Foundation certainly is well-connected; it was able to invite guests to the Conservative Party's summer ball for several years, including in 2014 – at which a game of tennis with David Cameron and Boris Johnson was auctioned for £160,000, to the wife of Vladimir Chernukhin, Putin's former Deputy Finance Minister.⁷¹

Valdai Discussion Club

Established in 2004, by *RIA Novosti* and the Moscow-based, state-supported think-tank *Council on Foreign and Defence Policy*,⁷² the *Valdai Discussion Club* is an annual gathering of leading Russian and international intellectuals. At *Valdai*, prominent attendees ask pre-approved questions to leading Russian politicians, including Putin, and, in doing so – to quote the analyst Lilia Shevtsova – participate in a "Kremlin-orchestrated show".⁷³

In 2013, as Syria descended into civil war and Russia stood by President Assad's regime (in the face of growing international condemnation for suspected war crimes), a British attendee

⁶⁴ Harding, L., 'Sir Malcom [sic] Rifkind quits Friends of Russia group over Chris Bryant photo', *The Guardian*, 23 November 2013, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/nov/23/rifkind-quits-friends-russia-bryant>.

⁶⁵ 'UK Russia Relations: An Interview with the Chairman of the Westminster Russia Forum', *Shout Out UK*, 31 May 2013, available at: <http://www.shoutoutuk.org/2013/05/31/russia-west-interview/>.

⁶⁶ As well as advising the Russian government, *New Century Media* also acts for wealthy Russian individuals.

⁶⁷ Alexandrova, L., 'Russia takes new steps to improve its image abroad', *Itar-Tass*, 09 July 2013, available at: <http://en.itar-tass.com/opinions/1512>.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ 'Vasilii Shestakov: Chetyre goda nazad v MOK dumali, chto sambo — eto kakoy-to brazil'skiy tanets' [Vasily Shestakov: Four years ago, the IOC thought Sambo was a Brazilian dance], *Fontanka.ru*, 28 November 2013, available at: <http://www.fontanka.ru/2013/11/28/129/>.

⁷⁰ Newman, M., 'Russian front: Cameron's encounter with Putin friend at Tory party', *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, 01 July 2014, available at: <http://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2014/07/01/russian-front-camerons-encounter-with-putin-friend-at-tory-party/>.

⁷¹ Wright, O., 'Exclusive: Tories under fire for links to pro-Russia lobbyists', *The Independent*, 03 July 2014, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/exclusive-tories-under-fire-for-links-to-prorussia-lobbyists-9583023.html>.

⁷² See: 'Sovet po vneshney i oboronnoy politike' [Council on Foreign and Defence Policy], *Council on Foreign and Defence Policy*, available at: <http://svop.ru/>.

⁷³ Shevtsova, L., 'The Kremlin Kowtow', *Foreign Policy*, 05 January 2010, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/01/05/the_kremlin_kowtow.

praised the Kremlin for “its achievement for bringing about a deal which looks as though it could lead to the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria”, before noting that the achievement was all the more noteworthy, “given that the Syrian government didn’t admit it had them until very recently.”⁷⁴ Years earlier, in 2008, shortly after Russia had gone to war with Georgia, a well-known British expert at the meeting with Dmitry Medvedev declared that Russia’s “western partners still subscribe to the old stereotypes in terms of relations with the Soviet Union.”⁷⁵

By participating in these meetings and relaying their observations to the Western media, British intellectuals legitimise the Kremlin’s ideas and transmit them to Western audiences. Often, these ideas contain little in the way of critical assessment, instead simply rehashing justifications for authoritarianism and Moscow’s geopolitical ambitions.

⁷⁴ ‘Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club’, *Kremlin.ru*, 19 September 2013, available at: <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6007>.

⁷⁵ ‘Transcript of the Meeting with the Participants in the International Club Valdai with President Dmitri Medvedev, September 12, 2008’, *The School of Russian and Asian Studies*, 15 September 2008, available at: http://www.sras.org/transcript_of_the_valdai_club_meeting_2008.

Conclusion

With its access to the world's financial markets, its rule of law, and its proximity to Moscow, London has long served as a propaganda mill for individuals seeking to have their share of the Kremlin's dirty money, and as a home for Russian oligarchs and state officials who wish to educate their offspring at elite schools and socialise with aristocrats. In many respects, the UK has welcomed Russia's increasing influence with open arms.

The Kremlin has taken advantage of the openness of the UK and its system: Russia's state-owned media were taken at face-value; its anti-Western cultural activities were seen as a reflection of the freedom of speech; and its pro-Putin public-relations exercises were understood as being legitimate. Russia did not create this system; but it does seek to exploit it. This makes Russia's understanding of soft power very different to the West's: Moscow seeks to take advantage of the weaknesses of others, rather than persuade others of its strengths.

While there is nothing illegitimate about Russia using soft power to advance its policy objectives, the problem is that Russia's manner of pursuing these objectives undermines some of the UK's core values, based on democracy, freedoms, and the rule of law.

There are a number of policy recommendations which emerge from the conclusions that this paper draws:

- **Highlight Russia's Influence.** Any cultural and educational events in the UK, organised by the Kremlin, should be advertised as such, rather than being obscured behind Kremlin-funded or Moscow-allied organisations. While citizens should, of course, be able to freely access such events, they should do so knowing who is supporting it and making it possible. This would make explicit the connection between going to an art gallery or music festival, for example, and supporting the Kremlin, thus highlighting the extent of Russia's influence in the UK.
- **Expose Russia's 'Useful Idiots'.** One reason why Russia's soft-power approach to the UK has been successful is that the Kremlin has co-opted expert communities who collectively echo its message. Those academics, commentators, and policymakers who receive financial, logistical or other support from the Kremlin should be held to account. In the same way that individuals who publish opinion-editorials in newspapers are required to declare 'conflicts of interest, actual or potential' in their taglines, so too should members of these communities disclose their affiliations, in public statements. This would begin to expose Russia's 'useful idiots' in the UK.
- **Use Existing Regulations to Combat Russia's Lies.** *RT* promotes itself as providing a necessary antidote to the 'mainstream' news agenda of large media networks, and is the fourth-most watched rolling-news channel in the UK. Yet, the channel is nothing more than a vessel for pro-Putin propaganda. While some of the stories that *RT* covers are controversial, others are pure fiction; four times in 2014, *RT* was found to be in breach of the broadcasting code for impartiality by the media regulator, *Ofcom*. *Ofcom* should continue to be vigilant; enforcing existing regulations and rules is an important part of the effort to combat the Kremlin's lies in the UK.

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The Henry Jackson Society
Millbank Tower, 21-24 Millbank
London SW1P 4QP, UK

www.henryjacksonsociety.org

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