

# ‘Soft Power’ in the Twisted Mirror of Disinformation and Propaganda<sup>1</sup>

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This paper investigates the role and importance of “soft power” elements in the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda. It highlights the differing approaches adopted by democratic countries and authoritarian regimes towards the concept of soft power. The analysis focuses on the instrumentalisation of soft power elements such as the media, culture, religion, education, and science in the spreading of disinformation and propaganda, illustrated through the example of Russia and the Russkiy Mir concept. The paper concludes that strategies designed to counter disinformation and propaganda should extend beyond fact-checking and the improvement of media literacy, adopting instead a more comprehensive and holistic framework. Such strategies should also encompass the safeguarding of the values targeted by information attacks. Finally, the author proposes a series of measures that states may implement to counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI).

**Keywords:** soft power; disinformation; propaganda; Russkiy Mir; human rights

## 1 Introduction: Disinformation, Propaganda, Hate Speech, and Soft Power

In 2024, disinformation and societal polarisation were identified among the three most severe global risks for the period up to 2026 (World Economic Forum 2024, pp. 16, 20). These phenomena are closely interconnected, as the dissemination of political disinformation leads to the erosion of a shared factual basis for public debate and fosters distrust in democratic institutions and processes (Jaursch & Sänglerlaub 2020, p. 36).

Another significant factor that exacerbates societal polarisation is the spread of propaganda and hate speech. Propaganda, in particular, cultivates an environment in which the likelihood and risk of certain crimes being committed – as well as their tolerance or even approval – are substantially increased (Badar & Florijančič 2020, pp. 455-456; Batura & Opryshko 2023, p. 1020).

Extensive research has been conducted on disinformation and propaganda (Pomeranzev 2016; Giles 2016; Bayer et al. 2019; Craufurd Smith 2019; Steinebach et al. 2020; Joris v. Hoboken & Ronan Ó Fathaigh 2021; Lucas, US Department of State, Suwarrow & Zimmerman 2020; Pomerantsev et al. 2021) as well as on foreign information manipulation and interference (hereinafter FIMI) (EEAS 2023; Arribas, Arcos, G rtrudix et al. 2023; EEAS 2024). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the role and significance of “soft power” in their dissemination, even though authoritarian regimes can instrumentalise elements of soft power to advance FIMI and promote disinformation and propaganda. When presented under the guise of soft power, such activities are more likely to take root in human consciousness. (Paul & Matthews 2016).

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This paper analyses the use of soft power elements in promoting FIMI and in disseminating disinformation and propaganda, focusing on the case of Russia and its so-called Russkiy Mir concept. The first section introduces the issues of FIMI and the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda under the guise of soft power. The second section outlines the differing approaches of democratic and authoritarian regimes to the concepts of soft power. The third section provides an overview of the background against which Russia initiated its information attacks on Ukraine and examines the core of the Russkiy Mir concept, whose elements Russia presents as soft power. The fourth section analyses the specific elements of soft power employed to conduct FIMI and to promote disinformation and propaganda to reach the widest possible audience. The paper concludes with a set of concrete proposals.

## 2 From Soft Power to FIMI, Disinformation, and Propaganda

The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph S. Nye Jr., who defined it as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction. The principal elements of soft power include values, culture, and policies. In addition, institutions play a crucial role in enhancing a country's soft power (Nye 2004, pp. x, 8, 10-11).

This concept has stimulated extensive academic debate (Mattern 2005; Hayden 2012; Ian & Smith 2013; Roselle et al. 2014; Szostek 2014; Keating & Kaczmarska 2019; Carbó-Catalan & Roig-Sanz 2022, pp 7, 8, 12) and has been adopted by politicians and governments in both democratic and authoritarian states (Nye 2017).

In democratic states, soft power largely derives from civil society (Nye 2017), which supports universal values promoted by these countries. Such states maintain open and free informational, cultural, economic, political, and academic spheres in which a wide range of ideas and opinions can be expressed and debated. Civil society in such countries is highly active, the media landscape is pluralistic, and educational institutions enjoy academic freedom. The rule of law and the respect for human rights make democratic values attractive to many, including those living under authoritarian regimes.

Authoritarian regimes often perceived the concept of soft power as a potential threat that must be countered. This perception has prompted such states to develop strategies aimed at neutralising the attraction of the soft power of democratic countries and at contrasting their own values with those of democratic states. In countries such as Russia, GONGOs<sup>2</sup> have been established in an attempt to silence and to displace institutions founded on democratic principles, as these were viewed as carriers and promoters of the soft power of democratic states. In such countries, media are either state-owned or controlled by individuals with close ties to the state, while culture and education maintain strong connections with the government and are employed as instruments of state policy. The “free marketplace of ideas” is largely absent, and the informational sphere is tightly regulated by the state. The dissemination of alternative viewpoints is limited and subject to legal liability. Moreover, authoritarian regimes often label culture, media, and educational institutions as “soft power,” thereby blurring the distinction between the soft power of democratic and of authoritarian states.

Thus, the soft power of authoritarian regimes outwardly resembles that of democratic countries. In both cases, institutions such as the media, and cultural and educational organisations, serve to promote values. However, its nature differs, as civil society and its interests are replaced by the state and its objectives.

The soft power of democratic and authoritarian states is in competition. Ideally, this competition should be conducted in a fair manner. However, when authoritarian regimes adopt the soft power strategies of democratic states, the result is often an uneven playing field. Authoritarian regimes do not merely promote their own values as a counterbalance to democratic ones; they also seek to undermine democratic systems from within, exploiting the opportunities offered by open democratic systems. For instance, culture, education, and the media – normally considered legitimate instruments for advancing a state's interests internationally – can be repurposed as tools for FIMI and the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda.

This dynamic will be exemplified by Russia and its so-called Russkiy Mir concept.

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<sup>2</sup> GONGO refers to a government-organised non-governmental organisation.

## 3 The Background

### 3.1 Attack on Values

The Russian war against Ukraine is waged not solely for territorial purposes, although Russian territorial claims over the eastern and southern oblasts of Ukraine, as well as the Crimean Peninsula, emerged almost immediately following Ukraine’s declaration of independence (Plokyh<sup>3</sup> 1996). This war is also directed against democratic values, with informational operations playing a central role.

The first Russian informational attacks on Crimea and the eastern oblasts of Ukraine can be traced back to at least 2004 (Aliyev 2018, p. 37; Feklyunina 2016, p. 779; Pijpers 2023, p. 3). These attacks occurred in the context of the Ukrainian presidential elections, in which pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko and pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich competed. These events culminated in the Orange Revolution, which marked a crucial turning point in Russia’s understanding of soft power and accelerated the development of various Russian diplomatic actors and pro-governmental organisations (Feklyunina 2016, p. 779).

The informational attacks in Crimea and the eastern oblasts achieved some degree of success, facilitated by the region’s high level of Russification during the Communist regime, as well as by the longstanding historical, cultural, and economic ties with Russia (Aliyev 2018, p. 37). Russian soft power is further underpinned by historical narratives. As researchers note:

“...throughout history, Ukraine has always been an essential part of narratives related to Russian nation-building ... Ukraine holds a special place in Russian national myths as Kyiv has traditionally been regarded as the ‘mother of all Russian cities’ ... Therefore, Ukraine does not only play a pivotal role in Russian geopolitical strategic thinking, but also holds a symbolic value hard to underestimate as the homeland of Russian civilization” (Müür et al. 2016, p. 31).

The next peak of Russian information special operations occurred in late 2013 and early 2014. In November 2013, President Viktor Yanukovich, who took office in 2010, abruptly refused to sign the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union, thereby trying to preserve Russia’s influence over Ukraine. This decision sparked the Revolution of Dignity<sup>4</sup>.

The Revolution of Dignity demonstrated that Russian values lacked appeal among Ukrainian citizens. As a response to the victory of the Revolution of Dignity, Russia illegally annexed Crimea and launched military aggression in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.

Having lost the battle for attractiveness in Ukraine, Russia turned to employing soft power elements to discredit and undermine the democratic values prevailing in the country. Channels of soft power – including the media, culture, religion, education, and historical narratives – proved particularly effective for disseminating disinformation and propaganda. The so-called *Russkiy Mir* concept played a central role in these efforts.

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<sup>3</sup> Serhii Plokyh is a Mykhailo S. Hrushevs'kyi Professor of Ukrainian History (Harvard University). Between 2013 and 2025, he served as the Director of Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University.

<sup>4</sup> To read more about the “Revolution of Dignity”, see Wynnyckyj M. (2019) in the *Bibliography* section.

### 3.2 The Russkiy Mir Concept

The concept of the so-called Russkiy Mir began to be discussed in Russia in the early 2000s. Vyacheslav Nikonov<sup>5</sup> identifies several theoretical schools that engaged with questions relating to Russkiy Mir (Никонов В 2010, pp. 4-5). In particular, he highlights Alexandr Dugin and Vadim Tsymbursky, who argued that the European world is alien to Russia and proposed the creation of an alliance of post-Soviet states to secure Russia's sovereign position in Eurasia while isolating it from the broader international system. At the same time, Nikonov emphasises that Petr Shchedrovitsky and Alexandr Neklessa conceptualised Russkiy Mir as a "Russian geo-economic world" encompassing the numerous Russian diasporas worldwide.

Notably, there is no precise definition of the term Russkiy Mir. The Russian word "мир" can be translated as "universe," "world," or "peace." However, the Russkiy Mir concept primarily emphasises a further meaning of the term, denoting "community" or "society." Russkiy Mir is thus understood not only as the territory of Russia but also as including its widespread diasporas and sympathisers throughout the world – those who demonstrate at least some interest in or affection for Russian culture, language, and society. For example, Vyacheslav Nikonov argues that Russkiy Mir cannot be fully captured by a single definition. At a minimum, it encompasses Russia and Russians abroad and, mentally, extends to everyone who recognises their involvement in the Russkiy Mir, including individuals with a sincere interest in Russia – for example, those who teach Russian or study Russian history and culture (Никонов 2010, pp. 5-6).

Another proponent of Russkiy Mir, Alexey Gromyko, associates it with the notions of "empire," "great power," and "civilisation," viewing it as emerging from the historical Russian Empire (Громько 2010, pp. 22). He distinguishes between two spheres of Russkiy Mir: internal and external. The internal sphere consists of the post-Soviet space, with Russia, Ukraine and Belarus forming its core. The external sphere comprises (1) countries with large Russian-speaking minorities (e.g., Germany, Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom); (2) countries where the Orthodox Church predominates (e.g., Serbia, Cyprus, Romania, Montenegro); (3) countries meeting both criteria (e.g., Bulgaria); (4) states where Russian-speaking diasporas exist or are forming, with substantial interest in Russian culture; (5) countries where despite the limited influence of the Orthodox Church and the Russian language, there is a perceived interest or sympathy for Russian culture or business (e.g., Italy, Finland).

Thus, the boundaries of Russkiy Mir are not clearly defined. Membership in this community is determined vaguely, based on characteristics such as the use or study of the Russian language and interest in Russian history and culture.

The Russkiy Mir concept represents not only a philosophical framework but also a component of Russian state policy. This is evidenced by speeches from the highest political leadership of the Russian Federation (Putin 2021; Putin 2022a; Putin 2022b; Putin 2022c; Putin 2022d), as well as by strategic documents, notably, the Concept of the Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad (hereinafter the Concept of the Humanitarian Policy) (УП РФ 2022). The principal instruments for implementing this policy include the Russian language, Russian culture, history, education, and the Orthodox faith (with the Russian Orthodox Church as its principal carrier). It is important to emphasise that Russia designates all of these elements as part of its soft power.

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<sup>5</sup> At the time of the publication, Vyacheslav Nikonov was a member of the Russian Parliament. He is the grandson of Vyacheslav Molotov, who is known, inter alia, for the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact – the treaty of non-aggression between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany that included a secret protocol dividing the Soviet and German "spheres of influence" in Northern and Eastern Europe.

## 4 Russian Soft Power

### 4.1 Mass Media and New Media

The Russian Concept of the Humanitarian Policy explicitly recognises mass media and new media as “the most effective tools of ‘soft power’” [and] as “powerful tools for influencing people’s consciousness,” highlighting their “importance in the implementation of Russian humanitarian policy” (УП ПФ 2022, paragraphs 26, 70, 72).

Consequently, the role of media in Russia is understood not as that of a public watchdog, but as a mechanism for influencing public consciousness and implementing state policy. This is realised in practice, as almost all of the most influential media outlets in the Russian Federation are either state-owned or controlled by entities and oligarchs closely linked to the authorities (BBC 2023). As a result, these outlets function as the voice of the state rather than as independent media in the classical sense of democratic societies. Researchers note:

“The Russian government’s media policy is part of its overall approach to controlling the Russian people” (Vibrant Information Barometer: Russia 2024, p. 3).

Furthermore, Russia has introduced a “foreign agent” regime, applied to NGOs, certain media outlets<sup>6</sup>, journalists, bloggers, content creators, human rights campaigners, and opinion leaders both within Russia<sup>7</sup> and in the occupied Ukrainian territories. The European Court of Human Rights found that this regime produced a significant chilling effect on civil society and public debate (Kobaliya and Others v. Russia: par. 97). Additional measures have been included declaring some media, journalists, and civil society organisations “undesirable,” prompting some to leave the country, cease operations, or avoid political engagement (Vibrant Information Barometer: Russia 2024, p. 3).

These measures have substantially undermined the “free marketplace of ideas” and generated an unprecedented chilling effect on the exercise of freedom of expression, simultaneously creating a space for unhindered Russian propaganda. Russian media are used not only for domestic influence, but also to advance the state’s interests internationally. As instruments of the state, they have become channels for the mass dissemination of disinformation and propaganda.

Russian propaganda is often deployed subtly, relying on the mechanism of soft influence (Müür et al. 2016, pp. 38, 62). For example, in occupied territories, Russian mass and new media systematically incite hostility towards Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars, and Muslims, primarily in a soft form. This approach, intended to create a long-term negative image of the enemy, has proven effective: pro-Russian segments of the population have been radicalised, while those with opposing views have faced beatings, abductions, and torture (Sedova & Pechonchyk 2018, pp. 4, 7, 8, 37, 39; Sedova, Kurmanova et al. 2020; Sedova & Krylova-Grek 2022).

Simultaneously, alternative perspectives are systematically suppressed. In Ukrainian occupied territories, television broadcasting is restricted, Ukrainian television channels are removed from cable networks, radio frequencies are reallocated, and numerous Crimean radio stations have shut down (HRIC 2016). Media outlets are forced to re-register under Russian legislation, exposing them to severe sanctions; Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar media outlets have been forcibly closed (PPPJS 2015). Journalists, bloggers, and activists opposing the occupation of Ukrainian territories (Resolution A/RES/75/192) have disappeared (PPPJS 2022), been detained,

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<sup>6</sup> Media outlets that received funds or other assets from any foreign entity or national, either directly or via another Russian entity, were required to label their publications with a notice indicating that they originated from a “foreign-agent” organisation, and to disclose information regarding their activities online, under the threat of administrative and criminal sanctions (Kobaliya and Others v. Russia: paras. 3, 8).

<sup>7</sup> This designation could also apply to individuals who disseminated materials produced by “foreign agent” media organisations or participated in their creation while receiving funds or assets from abroad, or from the “foreign agent” media organisations themselves (Kobaliya and Others v. Russia: para. 9).

tortured (PPPJS 2021a), or brought to show trials (KHRPG 2022b), often resulting in long-term imprisonment (PPPJS 2021b; PPPJS 2019; Постанова ВРУ 2020).

In 2024, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that, since February 2014, Russia has conducted an administrative practice in Crimea involving ill-treatment and incommunicado detention of ethnic Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars, and journalists, as well as suppression of non-Russian media, including the closure of Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar television stations (Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea)).

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the intensity of disinformation intensified. For example, one of the biggest Russian state information agencies, RIA, published: “What Russia should do with Ukraine,” an article by Timofey Sergeytsev<sup>8</sup>. This article calls for the “de-Nazification” and “de-Ukrainisation” of Ukrainians through the elimination of Ukrainian elites, punitive measures against supporters of Ukrainian authorities, ideological repression, and strict censorship in the political, cultural, and education spheres (Сергейцев 2022). Similarly, Russian state television channel RT, broadcast calls by Anton Krasovskyi to drown and burn Ukrainian children (УГІАІН 2022).

The role of Russian mass media in Russia’s war against Ukraine is highlighted by an independent legal analysis of the Russian Federation’s breaches of the Genocide Convention in Ukraine. Experts state that Russian officials and State media repeatedly invoke “de-Nazification” as one of the main goals of the invasion and have broadly described Ukrainians as subhuman, diseased or contaminated, as existential threats, and the epitome of evil, portraying a substantial segment or an entire generation of Ukrainians as Nazis and mortal enemies. This renders them legitimate or necessary targets for destruction, denying the existence of Ukrainian language, culture, national identity, and the right of Ukraine to exist (Diamond, Packer et al. 2022, pp. 1, 13, 21).

Thus, by branding its media as “soft power,” the Russian Federation has effectively redefined the concept, using it to disseminate disinformation and propaganda to domestic and international audiences.

## 4.2 Culture

Culture constitutes a source of soft power in politics, as shared cultural values can foster a powerful sense of community (Carbó-Catalan & Roig-Sanz 2022, pp. 1, 12). It serves as a potent means of conveying meanings and values, which political elites may exploit to achieve strategic goals.

The Russian Concept of the Humanitarian Policy recognises culture as an effective soft power instrument, noting that it “contributes to strengthening the international authority of Russia, the formation of its objective perception abroad and the neutralisation of anti-Russian sentiments of political and ideological origin” (УП РФ 2022, paragraphs 8, 29, 30). In the context of Ukraine, Russian cultural policy is used less to promote conservative values, and more to justify military aggression, prepare Russian society for war, and secure domestic support for these actions, as exemplified in cinema.

The Strategy of State Cultural Policy for the period until 2030 (2016 edition) notes:

“...cinematography is one of the most important creative industries, which, along with the media, has a *serious influence on the formation of the worldview* of modern individual” (Strategy of State Cultural Policy 2016, p. 15).

According to both the 2016 and 2024 editions of this Strategy, the state remains the principal investor in culture and cultural institutions, positioning it as the central actor in Russian cultural policy – a situation expected to persist in the coming years (Strategy of State Cultural Policy 2016, p.16; 2024, p. 31). Considering this, the priority topics for films that receive state financial support in Russia are of importance.

<sup>8</sup> Timofey Sergeytsev is a Russian philosopher, columnist, producer of number of Russian movies, inter alia, screenwriter, and producer of the feature film “Match” (2012), where all Ukrainians were depicted as cruel but stupid Nazis.

For 2023, these topics included, inter alia: “countering attempts to falsify history, Russia’s peacekeeping mission” (No. 4); “Malorossia<sup>9</sup> as a historical region of Russia” (No. 8); “countering modern manifestations of the ideology of Nazism and fascism. Popularisation of heroism and dedication of Russian soldiers during a special military operation”<sup>10</sup> (No. 11); “popularisation of service in the Armed Forces of Russia. Uniting society around supporting the army (frontline brigades, volunteers). Strengthening the status of the military profession using examples of historical events and modern history” (No. 12); “neo-colonial policy of the Anglo-Saxon world. Degradation of Europe. Formation of a multipolar world” (No. 14) (Order of the Ministry of Culture of the RF 2022).

For 2024, the topics remained almost the same. The theme “neo-colonial policy of the Anglo-Saxon world. Degradation of Europe. The formation of a multipolar world” has disappeared. However, the newly introduced topics are also noteworthy: “Russia as a stronghold of peoples and nations fighting for self-determination, the founder of the anti-colonialist movement” (No. 10); “protection and patronage of co-believers abroad” (No. 11) (Order of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation 2024).

These priority topics, given by the state as the main investor in culture and the main strategic subject of Russian cultural policy, clearly show that Russia aims to provide its own vision of history, especially in regard to Ukraine, in an attempt to justify the actions of the Russian army by creating a positive image of its soldiers and to portray the Global West as an enemy.

Cultural shows, including concerts, are also employed as instruments of propaganda in support of Russia’s state policy. For instance, on the twenty-third day of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian authorities organised a concert-rally named “За мир без нацизма” (translated to “For a world without Nazism”) at the Luzhniki Stadium, Moscow (Concert-rally 2022). The programme featured speeches by senior political leaders of the Russian Federation, representatives of major state-controlled media outlets, and performances by prominent actors, singers, and musical groups. These participants recited poems by Russian literary classics, quoted well-known Russian films, and referred to Russian ballet, theatre, and art – all with the intention of providing moral justification for the illegal and unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Batura & Opryshko 2023). Speakers glorified the conduct of the so-called “special operation” and the actions of the Russian army, urging citizens to continue supporting the war.

Throughout the concert, constant references were made to the shared and glorified Soviet past within its pre-collapse borders. Narratives asserting that Ukrainians form part of the Russian people, that Russia possesses historical rights to Ukrainian lands, and that “Nazis” have come to power in Ukraine were repeatedly expressed. The war was framed as a defensive act protecting Russia, while the Russian army was glorified. The fame of participating artists, and consequently their influence, further reinforced negative stereotypes of Ukraine and Ukrainians perpetuated by the state-controlled media, thereby contributing to the legitimisation of Russia’s armed aggression.

Other cultural examples abound, including theatre productions praising the so-called “heroes” of the Russian aggression against Ukraine (Radio Liberty 2023); children’s cartoons that justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (ПЛЮС МИНУС 2022); caricatures that dehumanise Ukrainians, depicting them as unintelligent and vulgar (Sedova & Pechonchuk 2018, pp. 30-33); and exhibitions presenting a decontextualised “reconstruction” of Ukrainian cities in occupied territories without acknowledging that these cities were forcibly seized and destroyed by Russia, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths (Opryshko 2023, p. 37). The Director of the State Hermitage Museum openly equated Russian cultural exhibitions with the Russian invasion, declaring that Russian culture should be perceived as a “special operation” – a powerful cultural offensive that must not be interfered with (Yakovleva 2022).

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<sup>9</sup> Malorossia (so-called “Little Russia”) is often used by Russians to refer to Ukraine.

<sup>10</sup> The so-called “special military operation” is a term that is used by Russians to refer to the illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

An even more aggressive cultural policy has been forcibly implemented in the occupied Ukrainian territories. In 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognised that Russian aggression against Ukraine has been accompanied by a systematic, state-driven policy of Russification of the occupied areas and the denial<sup>11</sup> of a distinct Ukrainian cultural identity to those living under occupation (Resolution 2558 (2024)1, para. 1).

Russian cultural institutions also play a significant role in advancing propaganda and disinformation. This is exemplified by the activities of the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund. The establishment of the Russkiy Mir Foundation is considered the first step in the institutionalisation of soft power in Russia (Kosyakina 2022, p. 66). The foundation was created by the President of the Russian Federation (УП РФ 2007; Устав 2007, paragraphs 1.6, ch.1) and is financed from the federal budget, with private donations forming only a negligible share of its income (Masiyenko, Zahryvenko et al. 2022, p. 23).

The Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund was also established by the President of the Russian Federation (ПД РФ 2010). It is financed through allocations from the federal budget, as well as by unnamed private individuals and organisations (Koval & Tereshchenko 2022, pp. 10-11).

In 2022, the European Union imposed sanctions on both institutions. The decision was taken because the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund was established to support Russian compatriots in the post-Soviet space in accordance with the Kremlin's ideological objectives, and the projects organised by this fund have constituted significant elements of Russia's foreign policy discourse (Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/1270: Annex, point 104). At the same time, the Russkiy Mir Foundation has been responsible for disseminating pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukrainian propaganda, supporting the illegal annexation of Crimea, and the recognition of the so-called separatist "People's Republics" in the Donbas region by the Russian Federation, as well as for justifying Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine (Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/1270: Annex, point 106).

These Russian so-called cultural institutions operate as GONGOs (Pallin & Oxenstierna 2017, p. 41; Koval & Tereshchenko 2022, p. 7) and play a key role in supporting Russia's policy objectives and advancing its geopolitical aims. Thus, by referring to culture as a form of soft power, Russia in fact employs it – similarly to its use of the media – as an instrument for the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation.

### 4.3 The Russian Orthodox Church

For many years, Russia has sought to influence Ukrainians through the Church, particularly via the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (hereinafter UOC) (ПЦУ МП 2017). The name "Ukrainian Orthodox Church" first appeared in 1990, in accordance with the Resolution of the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church of October 25-27, 1990, *On the Ukrainian Orthodox Church*. However, both before and after this decision, the UOC remained and continues to remain a constituent part of the Russian Orthodox Church, as opposed to the Kyiv Metropolitanate and its successors.

The origins of the Kyiv Metropolitanate as a distinct ecclesiastical entity date back to the early 990s (ПЦУ 2018-2022). In 1686, the non-canonical accession of the Kyiv Metropolitanate to the Moscow Patriarchate took place. On 11 October 2018, the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in Istanbul annulled its 1686 synodal letter that had entrusted the Patriarch of Moscow with the right to ordain metropolitans of Kyiv who were, however, subordinate to Constantinople. The Russian Orthodox Church interpreted this de-

<sup>11</sup> According to PACE, this denial is based in particular on putting into question the existence of the Ukrainian language, culture and history, and on a portrayal of Ukraine and Ukrainians as a lower caste, ethnicity and race. It is carried out through: removal of archives; confiscation or replacement of history textbooks; indoctrination, including through militarisation of education; impeded access to education in native, including indigenous, languages; decontextualisation of artefacts through relocation or changing narratives around them; narrowing the diversity of commemorative practices; looting; destruction of cultural objects and heritage sites; intentional refusals to preserve cultural heritage in order to showcase certain layers of history and erode others; distortive and ethnically biased restoration of cultural objects; and neo-imperial renaming of geographical sites (Resolution 2558 (2024)1, para. 1).

cision as an alleged transfer of the Kyiv Metropolitanate to Moscow (Радіо Свобода 2021). In 2019, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew granted the *Tome of Autocephaly* to the Head of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Reports of the UOC Affairs Manager demonstrate the extensive presence of the UOC in Ukrainian public life. Over the past years, the number of eparchies has increased from 44 in 2010 to 53 in 2021, and the number of parishes from 10,984 in 2010 to 12,381 in 2021 (ПІСУ 2010; УПЦ 2021). For comparison, as of 2022, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine comprised of 44 eparchies and nearly 7,200 parishes (ПЦУ 2022).

Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, has been an active supporter of the Russkiy Mir concept. He argues that it consists of Orthodox faith, Russian culture and language, and a shared historical memory uniting Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Moldova and “other countries of the historical space of Rus,” with Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus forming its core. He considers state borders as unnecessary obstacles between the peoples of the Russkiy Mir, refers to Ukrainians as “Malorussians” (“Little Russians”), and asserts that the Ukrainian people are spiritually one with the Russians (Патриарх Кирилл 2010). Such statements closely align with those of the Russian Federation’s highest political leadership, particularly President Vladimir Putin, who employs similar rhetoric to justify Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the rhetoric of the Russian Orthodox Church towards Ukraine and its citizens has become increasingly aggressive. It has not only incited hatred and violence against Ukrainians but has also sought to prepare Russian society for war and to justify it. For instance, on 20 February 2022 – just four days before the invasion – Patriarch Kirill delivered a sermon of the biblical parable of the prodigal son (how he returns to his father who then forgives him) (ПЦУ МП 2022a), implicitly alluding to Ukraine’s supposed return to Russia. In his sermon of 27 February 2022, he compared Ukrainian defenders to “evil forces,” declaring that “Russian land ... [is] the land which now includes Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and other tribes and peoples” (ПЦУ МП 2022b).

On 3 April 2022, he argued that the concept of “independence” was wrongly applied to most countries, as they were allegedly under the influence of a single force hostile to Russia. In the same speech, he glorified Russian armed forces and their actions (ПЦУ МП 2022c) – at a time when the world was learning of the horrific crimes committed by Russian troops in the Kyiv oblast, including in Bucha, Hostomil, Irpin, and Borodyanka.

In his sermon of 25 September 2022, Patriarch Kirill went so far as to suggest that participation in the aggression against Ukrainians could absolve a person of all of their sins (ПЦУ МП 2022d).

In 2024, the World Russian People’s Council, chaired by Patriarch Kirill, adopted an *Order* addressed to the legislative and executive authorities of the Russian Federation (Order of the XXV World Russian People’s Council 2024). In this document, the Russian aggression against Ukraine (referred to as the so-called “special military operation”) is described as a “Holy war in which Russia and its people...protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism.” The World Russian People’s Council explicitly stated that “the borders of the Russkiy Mir...are significantly wider than the state borders of both the current Russian Federation and the greater historical Russia,” and that “the entire territory of modern Ukraine must enter the zone of exclusive influence of Russia. The possibility of the existence on this territory of a Russophobic political regime hostile to Russia and its people...must be completely excluded” (*Order of the XXV World Russian People’s Council* 2024, Chapters 1-2).

This demonstrates that the Russian Orthodox Church actively participates in Russia’s political life and functions as a conduit of state policy, exerting influence over a wide range of believers through its institutional structures. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has recognised such actions as an abuse of religion and has called on all Member States to regard Patriarch Kirill and the Russian Orthodox hierarchy as an ideological extension of Vladimir Putin’s regime, complicit in war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the name of the Russian Federation and the Russkiy Mir ideology (Resolution 2540 (2024), para. 13).

Alongside the dissemination of propaganda through church institutions and their representatives, Russia exerts unprecedented pressure on representatives of other religious communities who disagree with the stance of the Russian Orthodox Church, thereby suppressing religious diversity in the occupied Ukrainian territories. For example, in 2024, the European Court of Human Rights stated that Russia had violated Article 9 of the European Convention due to its administrative practice of harassing and intimidating religious leaders not

conforming to the Russian Orthodox faith (notably Ukrainian Orthodox priests and imams), conducting arbitrary raids on places of worship, and confiscating religious property in Crimea (Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea)).

The Russian Orthodox Church has thus become an extensive network through which the Russian state exerts its influence over a substantial portion of its parishioners.

#### 4.4 Education

Education and language are regarded as among the most effective instruments of Russian soft power (Kosyakina 2022, pp. 70-71). At the same time, both have been actively exploited to promote state propaganda. For example, Russia adopted the *Fundamentals of The State Policy in the Field of Historical Education* (УП РФ 2024), assigning history a central role in shaping the worldview of citizens.

Through selective interpretation of historical facts, Russia constructs an alternative reality within the information space (Aliyev 2018, p. 38). Alternative perspectives on history – particularly regarding the Second World War – are suppressed (УП РФ 2022, par. 69; УП РФ 2024, par. 6-7, 8(a), 8(г), 8(з), 9(г), 10(б)).

However, in the occupied Ukrainian territories, these policies go much further. Education has been used as a tool to eradicate Ukrainian identity and indoctrinate children and youth (Lychko, Vorobyova, Sulialina et al. 2023; 2024). Before the illegal annexation of Crimea, branches of Russian educational institutions, including Moscow State University, were used by Russkiy Mir propagandists to influence young people (Aliyev 2018, p. 37-38). After the Russian occupation, education was entirely instrumentalised at all levels.

Children and young people were completely isolated from the Ukrainian educational and cultural environment. In Crimea, for example, the Ukrainian language and literature were effectively removed from curricula (*International Court of Justice* 2017, para. 97). In 2024, the European Court of Human Rights found that Russia had violated Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 to the European Convention due to its systematic suppression of the Ukrainian language in schools and the persecution of Ukrainian-speaking children (Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea)).

Russian language was introduced as the sole state language, educational programmes in the occupied territories were changed (РИА Новости 2022a; РИА Новости 2022b), and books on Ukrainian history and literature were removed under the pretext of them containing “extremist content” (KHRPG 2022a). Ukrainian textbooks – particularly in history and literature – were forcibly replaced with Russian ones (РИА Новости. Крым 2022), and access to Ukrainian resources was entirely blocked (Lychko, Vorobyova, Sulialina et al. 2023, p. 66). Teachers were compelled to instruct, and students to learn according to Russian state standards; parents who refused to send their children to school operated by the occupation authorities were threatened with severe sanctions, including deprivation of parental rights (Yankovskiy 2022; Amnesty International 2023).

From kindergarten through higher education, the entire educational process was reconstructed to sever children’s and young people’s ties with Ukraine, convince them that they are Russian citizens with a sacred duty to defend their “Fatherland” against ideological enemies, and justify Russian aggression against Ukraine (Lychko, Vorobyova, Sulialina et al. 2023, p. 66).

A wide range of methods has been employed to achieve this goal. In Crimean schools, these include, inter alia, holding thematic lessons glorifying the sacred duty of the “defence of the Fatherland,” campaigns in support of the Russian army, the establishment of cadet and Cossack classes with a militaristic focus, encouragement for children to join the ranks of the “Young Army” movement (where they are trained to handle weapons), mandatory basic military training, propaganda lessons called “Conversations about the Important,” and military-patriotic summer camps. All these are supported by pervasive state propaganda (Lychko, Vorobyova, Sulialina et al. 2023, pp. 5-8, 12-19, 37-57, 66-67). Similar actions are conducted by occupation authorities in the newly occupied areas of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions (Lychko, Vorobyova, Sulialina et al. 2023, pp. 8-10, 19-57, 67-68).

This policy of “re-education” and destruction of Ukrainian identity among children and youth is systemic and continues at the level of higher education, inter alia, notably through the “university sessions” programme. This programme targets children aged 12-17 from the occupied parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions, as well as from Crimea. The institutions implementing it are under occupation authority con-

trol and emphasise military-patriotic indoctrination. Programme content is based on the “patriotic component” and includes, inter alia, lectures on the fight against “Ukrainian Nazism,” glorification of military personnel of the Russian Federation, promotion of Russian culture, state symbols, and the dissemination of distorted historical facts (Lychko, Vorobyova, Sulialina et al. 2024, pp. 4-6, 11, 50). The author agrees that “re-education” of children and youth on the occupied territories seeks to form loyal Russian citizens devoid of historical memory and incapable of resisting the occupation regime (Lychko, Vorobyova, Sulialina et al. 2024, p. 49).

It is also important to note the establishment of specialised centres and programmes within Russian universities. For instance, in 2020, the Centre for the Study of Problems of “Soft Power” and “Colour Revolutions” (Центр 2023) was established at Lomonosov Moscow State University. Its key objectives include comprehensive analyses of global experiences of soft power application and developing domestic strategies for enhancing Russia’s own soft power.

Another example is the Master programme *Strategies of information influence in international relations* at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Compulsory academic disciplines of this program include, inter alia, *Information Wars in International Crises: Applied Aspects, as well as Basics of Information Influence Practice*. Electives include *Nuclear Weapons in World Politics, Problems of Historical Memory of the Post-Soviet Space, Psychology of Influence, Intelligence Using Open Data, Practice of Combating Disinformation in the International Environment*. In addition, the students also receive “masterclasses” from leading experts in the fields of information confrontation and building information policy, such as Oksana Boyko (Russia Today agency), Andrey Shitov (TASS news agency), Maria Zakharova (Director of the Department of Information Policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation), and Sergey Nalobin (Deputy Director of the Department of Information Policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation) (MGIMO Master program 2024, pp. 8-12). Similar courses are taught in other civil Russian universities (Программа дисциплины 2017; Рабочая программа 2022; Программа подготовки магистров 2023).

Thus, education, science and language – key components of soft power – have been fully instrumentalised by Russia for the mass dissemination of disinformation and propaganda.

## 5 Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Elements of soft power play an important role in the dissemination of FIMI, disinformation, and propaganda. The original concepts of soft power – achieving objectives through attraction of culture and values – originated in democratic states. However, authoritarian regimes have perceived this idea as a threat requiring active counteraction.

The Russian example clearly illustrates this dynamic. Russia has adopted and distorted the concept of soft power, transforming it into an instrument for advancing state interests. The vital component of genuine soft power – civil society and its interests – has been replaced by the state and its strategic objectives. Russia has systematically instrumentalised the media, culture, religion, education, and science to conduct FIMI operations and to disseminate disinformation and propaganda. These channels have proved particularly effective because they simultaneously reach broad audiences and embed narratives deeply within human consciousness. The analysis of Russian legislation and state policies confirms that FIMI, together with the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda have become integral parts of state policy.

Such distorted understanding of soft power by authoritarian regimes poses a significant threat to democracies. Manipulative information, disinformation, and propaganda penetrate open societies under the guise of exercising universal rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and the right to education. Such content is designed to undermine the fundamental values of democratic societies, often from within. In this context, it is justified to concur with the view that illiberal regimes, including Russia, have hijacked the concept of soft power as part of a broader assault on democracy and its core values (Walker 2016, pp. 49-51).

Given the above, strategies to counter disinformation and propaganda must be both comprehensive and multidimensional. They should not be limited to fact-checking initiatives or efforts to raise media literacy in society but also involve the active protection of the very values under attack. The latter may include, inter alia,

conducting continuous monitoring of FIMI and related disinformation activities. The results of such monitoring are essential for identifying actors – whether foreign states or their proxies – conducting sustained information attacks against a state. Where such attacks display permanence, systematic character, and mass impact, it becomes necessary to determine whether a link exists between the operational actors (those who execute or disseminate disinformation and propaganda) and a particular foreign state. If such a connection is established, or if the results of the monitoring indicate that the foreign state itself conducts the attacks, an in-depth analysis of the state’s policies and narratives in relevant spheres – media, culture, education, and religion – should follow. If this analysis demonstrates that information attacks and manipulation are embedded in the state’s official policy, responses must be framed from a national security perspective, recognising the variety of mass-communication channels through which FIMI is disseminated.

In this regard, it is particularly pertinent to recall the words of Ganna Yudkivska, former Judge of the European Court of Human Rights (2010-2022):

“No one defends the restrictions on expression of views or opinions that should take place in a pluralistic, democratic society. However, democracy should also have the right to protect itself, before it’s too late” (Zayets et al. 2017, p. 57).

## Self-Disclosure Statement

During the preparation of this work, the author employed language-enhancement tools (DeepLWrite and ChatGPT) to correct grammar, refine language structure, and diversify word choice. The author also used ChatGPT to finalise the bibliography in Chicago style. Following the use of these tools, the author carefully reviewed and edited all content and assumes full responsibility for its publication.

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