HOW RUSSIAN SOFT POWER FAILS IN ESTONIA: OR, WHY THE RUSSOPHONE MINORITIES REMAIN QUIESCENT

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ABSTRACT This article evaluates the significance of Russian soft power in Estonia, particularly in connection to the minority issue, and compares this soft power to the countervailing pull of the European Union on the other side. It concludes that although Russia does indeed have a number of soft power resources, their potential for being translated into actual power and influence is too often exaggerated, not least because Europe provides a much more attractive focus point for the disgruntled than Moscow. Moreover, Estonia has it fully within its power to bolster its own attractiveness in the eyes of the minority populations. Thus, although relations with Russia should be handled with care, it is not Russia's soft power that should be feared.

Introduction

Ever since Estonia regained independence in 1991, relations with Russia have been fraught with tension. Disputes exist over border treaties, transit arrangements, sharply differing official views of the Soviet period, gas prices, energy security, and the status of Russophone minorities; the list of problematic issues is long.[1] Similarly, anxieties over Russian designs, real and imagined, are high. To some extent, membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has allayed concerns over military security – although the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2014 was a stark reminder of why the alliance is considered so essential - while membership of the European Union (EU) fulfils a similar role in terms of economic and other forms of soft security. Other forms of encroachment, of a softer kind, are, however, still treated as a cause for concern (Crandall 2014). It is the possible threat from Russian soft power, and particularly its connection to minority issues that this article examines.

No issue has been as thorny and provoked as much emotion as the status of the Russophone minorities.[2] This dispute has soured not just state-to-state political relations, but has also been a source of tension within Baltic societies, and a source of international criticism.[3] Ethnic relations remain raw more than two decades after the restoration of independence, with many Russophones, most of whom arrived during the period of Soviet occupation, still classified as non-citizens.[4] Russia's official policy, as stated in the Compatriots Act of 1999[5] and in the official Foreign Policy Concept (MFA RF 2013), of still having responsibilities towards these minorities has not made for easier relations, but has rather stoked anxieties. While one might charitably choose to interpret this policy as an expression of concern for people who found themselves living outside of their nation state as the Soviet Union collapsed, many see an altogether more sinister picture. Indeed to some, Russia's is an ill-disguised policy of stirring up trouble in neighbouring countries so as to retain influence in the 'Near Abroad'.[6] On this reading, the minorities are primarily used by Russia as a policy instrument (e.g. Friedman, 2009).

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[1] This article uses the term Russophone to denote the minority populations, as these groups, although having Russian as their lingua franca, also encompass Ukrainians, Byelorussians, and other peoples from the former USSR. The discursive labelling of all Russian-speakers as 'Russians' thus grossly simplifies the composition of a very heterogeneous group. Therefore, we also refer to the minorities in plural rather than singular.

[2] Many of the arguments and conclusions of this article may also be applicable to Latvia. Probably less so for Lithuania, which never experienced immigration at the same scale as the other two Baltic States. In 1991, Russophone minorities made up 38% of the population in Estonia and 48% in Latvia, but barely 10% in Lithuania. These proportions have decreased significantly since, partly due to the withdrawal of Soviet military forces stationed in these countries. In Estonia the Russophone population is now 31% (2010) and in Latvia 40% (2010).

[3] Amnesty International published a rather notorious report in 2006 entitled *Linguistic Minorities in Estonia: Discrimination Must End.* Academic treatments of the Baltic States' ethnic policies have also tended to be critical (e.g. Hughes 2005). And during the 2014 Ukrainian crisis Russian-American journalist Julia Ioffe rehashed many of the classic

Yet for all the securitising discourses in which the minority issue has been cast, in spite of Russia's advantages in soft power, and in spite of there seemingly being no shortage of issues with which Russia could have made hay, the minorities have by and large remained docile and have not to any great extent sided actively with Russia. The number of people seeking Estonian citizenship has grown in spurts, especially among younger people, and the

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stereotypes in a piece in *New Republic* entitled 'Ethnic Russians in the Baltics Are Actually Persecuted. So Why Isn't Putin Stepping In?'.

[4] The majority of Russophones who remained in Estonia and Latvia did not automatically gain citizenship in 1991, but were, as part of the legal continuity doctrine, considered as immigrants and hence had to go through the standard naturalisation process. The biggest obstacle to this has been the minority population's generally poor grasp of the national languages. Given the much smaller size of Lithuania's Russophone minority, and that country's very different approach to citizenship issues, the minority issue was never as problematic there.

[5] This shorthand for 'The Law about the State Policy of the Russian Federation Concerning Compatriots Abroad, 1999', will be used throughout the article.

[6] Concern for local Russian populations was indeed the pretext used for the attack on Georgia in 2008and first the invasion of Crimea and then annexation of the peninsula in March 2014.

number of people with undetermined citizenship has steadily decreased. So the question beckons, why is Russia's soft power not more effective with the minority populations? Especially considering that Russia has been much more effective in other former Soviet states?

In order to suggest answers to such questions, we will start by outlining the sources of Russian soft power in the Baltics, and how it can potentially influence opinion among the minorities. Secondly, we will discuss the reasons why those same factors that have given Russian soft power such success in other former Soviet states are not working in Estonia. In this we argue that it is not necessarily the intrinsic attraction of the Estonian state and society that does it, for there are indeed some very real and unfortunate problems relating to the minority issue. Rather, we propose the hypothesis that it is Estonia's success in European integration that obviates most of what Russia could offer; EU soft power, in other words, is a big part of what keeps the peace. Lastly, we argue that most of the measures Estonia could take to bolster its own attractiveness towards the minorities are firmly within its grasp: Slightly more confident and visionary minority policies coupled with simple good governance; nothing would do as much as these two to reduce the potential for Russian mischief and strengthen Estonia's hold on the minority populations' loyalty.

Russian soft power in Estonia

Soft power has been defined by Joseph Nye as 'the ability to get others to want what you want' (Nye 2004, p. x). By this is meant the power of attraction, to entice and co-opt others to support your political agenda, to come to your side. Whereas hard power is all the tangible instruments of foreign policy, military force or economic sanctions, soft power is about making others want to support you, by making it appealing for them to do so. The means are not coercive, nor for that matter rewards in a straight sense, but rather persuasive; making people want to side with you on their own accord. The currencies of soft power can be cultural appeal, if a country's culture resonates with people elsewhere. It can be political values, if these are considered desirable and are seen as being applied without hypocrisy. And lastly, policies that embody such values can be a source of soft power too (Ibid., p. 7, 10). Soft power can also target both elites and the general public. It is, in short, the power of image and reputation, and what such assets can contribute in addition to the more traditional tools of gaining influence in foreign policy. The contribution soft power can make to foreign policy success is of course context dependent. What may count as attractive about an actor in one set of circumstances may not necessarily, as we shall see below, do so in others.

When evaluating Russia's attempts to influence its 'Near Abroad', the former USSR, past research has tended to show it as relatively adept at using both hard and soft power (Popescu & Wilson, 2009). It has at varying times used both economic pressure on countries, e.g. gas supplies and trade sanctions, and it has even used military force, both in a coercive way, as with Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, and in a latent, reassuring way, as with Armenia in the whole period since 1991. Russia has also applied its considerable reservoir of soft power in several contexts with significant levels of success, and since 2012, Vladimir Putin has made soft power a declared cornerstone of Russian foreign policy (Maliukevicius 2013, p. 71; Tsygankov 2013, p. 261). On the whole, Russia has managed, by means both foul and fair, to frustrate EU outreach to several of the countries covered by the Eastern Partnership and to retain significant influence in the region. Its soft power resources have been drawn partly from continued cultural appeal, but also - hard as it may be to believe – from Russia's political example. The order imposed by Putin's regime is, by many in the former USSR, seen as positive, when compared to the tumultuous upheavals of the post-communist era (Liik 2013, p. 44-45). Comparisons of its hard and soft power usage in countries like Moldova and Armenia, however, has also shown that hard power usage can impair a country's soft power and its chances of having influence (ibid.).

The presence of Russophone minorities in Estonia would intuitively suggest open avenues for Russian influence, as its cultural appeal and political stance, as expressed in the Compatriots Act, ought to be strong with these groups. On one reading, Russia's policy might be seen as a way of utilising its soft power to better the lot of ethnic Russian minorities, and to provide these groups with an alternative to their otherwise marginalised position. Others see a more sinister motive, arguing that Russia primarily uses the minority issue to create problems, provoke a reaction from local authorities, and use that as an excuse to reassert themselves forcibly in the region (Friedman 2009). The prospect of these minorities forming a 'fifth column' - and the wariness of Russian soft power that might conceivably make it so - has been a stable of nationalist discourse over the years, and has implicitly informed many policy choices (Crandall 2014, p. 45-49).

That Russian soft power is the most worrying for Estonia is partly a reflection on the fact that hard power has been largely ineffective. In spite of repeated provocations in Baltic airspace, and ominous military manoeuvres in the Pskov Oblast in 2009, the threat of military aggression has come to seem less credible than previously given Estonia's NATO membership (Ehin & Berg 2009).[7] As for economic coercion, it was tried during the 1990s when Russia operated the 'double tariffs' system. Contrary to intention, this policy rather had the effect of turning Estonia's economy even more firmly to the West for export markets, lessening the dependence on Russia.[8] The 1998 Rouble crash underscored this development even further (Paas 2000). Only after the EU enlargement in 2004, when trade relations came to be regulated by the EU's common commercial policy, did trade with Russia pick up significantly. Other attempts at coercion, like cyber-attacks and threats to energy security, have also failed to have major lasting impacts. Given these failures to coerce, Russia's only true hope of influencing Estonia would have to be through shaping public opinion by casting itself as an attractive alternative to the current political order.

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[7] The drawing up in 2010 of more detailed contingency plans for the defence of Eastern Europe further assuaged Baltic anxieties about physical threats to their states. The 2014 Crimea crisis of course showed that such traditional threats are not entirely of the past, but it did also lead to NATO discussions on how to strengthen Baltic security.

As for the political elites, some sections are to some extent swayed. The Centre Party (*Keskerakond*) is a mainstream political party, which speaks firmly for making better relations with Russia a foreign policy priority and who appeal strongly to the ethnic minorities.[9] The Centre Party has sought to forge links with likeminded political parties in Russia, even entering into a formal cooperation agreement with Vladimir Putin's United Russia party.[10] This runs counter to the dominant line pursued by more national-minded politicians since 1991, which has emphasised western integration and a hard line against Russia. Such actions have frequently led to accusations those who favour rapprochement are Russian stooges, or even have been bought and paid by the Kremlin, although it has never been substantiated that there has been any criminal activity.[11] Proponents of rapprochement of course see themselves as trying to move *beyond* choosing between western integration and good relations with Russia, somehow seeking to have both. Similarly, they might argue, if one genuinely wishes rapprochement with another country, establishing contacts in that country is an obvious step to take. Most noteworthy in this context is that the very presence of proponents for rapprochement even among politicians of the ethnic majority shows that Russia's soft power has a certain effect in casting Russia, in the eyes of some at least, as a potentially attractive partner.

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[8] Estonia's trade pattern changed dramatically. From being 90% directed towards the rest of the USSR in 1990, by 1998 more than 50% of exports was to the EU alone (Paas 2000; Purju 2004).

[9] Although mostly in opposition at the national level, the Centre Party has had several stints in government, most recently 2005-2007. It also has a strong presence in local government, e.g. having held the mayors' position in Tallinn since 2005. Although closely identified with the minority issue, the Centre Party does not draw its support exclusively from minority voters, but also has significant crossover appeal.

[10] Since the onset of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the Centre Party's leadership has however been busy distancing themselves from this agreement.

The group which would seem most susceptible to Russian soft power, however, is clearly the Russophone minorities. Language and culture are the most prominent means for making this soft power count. Most of the Russophone minorities inevitably feel their strongest sense of cultural community with Russia; literature, music and film in one's own language will obviously always have great appeal, especially when the cultural context is familiar. Hence the presence of the large Russian cultural space as the immediate neighbour means that the minority will probably always have their cultural orientation somewhat to the east. That is not to say that things are static; social scientists have long pointed to emerging divergences in attitudes and sensibilities between the Russian minority in Estonia and the citizens of Russia itself (e.g. Berg & Boman 2005; Feldman 2005), yet the two groups clearly remain closely culturally linked.

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[11] In December 2010 the Estonian Security Police made public that Edgar Savisaar, the Centre Party leader, had asked for money from Russia to finance the party's election campaign (Jaagant 2011). Yana Toom, today a member of the European Parliament, has also been accused of abetting Russia's Compatriot Policy. Neither has been charged with any criminal offences, and Toom succeeded, through legal action, in getting the Security Police to formally retract the accusation.

This tendency has been reinforced through television, as Estonia for almost 25 years invested little in Russian-language TV broadcasting (Shulmane 2006). Even during Soviet times, the Russophone minorities tended towards a higher consumption of TV relative to radio and newspapers than Estonians, thus making TV all the more crucial for reaching these groups (Vihalemm 2008). Moreover, another imbalance dating from Soviet times, but problematic in the current context, was that Russophone populations were catered to by the all-union TV channels, while broadcasting in other languages than Russian was then more of a sop to local sensitivities. There was therefore little local tradition of Russian-language broadcasting to build on after 1991 (Ruklis 2007). Attempts at establishing Russian-language broadcasting since then were intermittent, project-based, enjoying little official support, and were mostly cancelled again due to low uptake before they had had proper time to catch on with the viewers (Lauri 2014). Only on the 28th of September 2015, did ETV launch a new all-Russian language TV channel, ETV+.

The net effect was that for Russophone viewers wishing to watch TV in their own language, there was for a long time little local supply, but a wide selection easily available on the Russian market. Not surprisingly, the most popular channels among members of the minorities are Russian, and not those of the home country. This reinforces the cultural link between Estonian Russophones and Russia, as everything from children's programmes to movies and TV series are the same as seen by the average Russian viewer. It also means that Russian pop culture has a very big place among the minorities abroad. It's hardly a coincidence that at the annual Eurovision Song Contest, Estonia and Latvia have mostly given very high points to the Russian entry. When a county's popular culture is so readily accepted in another country, it usually tends to create and support more positive images among the recipient groups. A few exceptions aside, the Russian cultural appeal has been more limited towards ethnic Estonians, although still relatively decent proficiency levels in Russian among the majority groups make them a potential target for media influence (Maliukevicius 2007). To the ethnic minorities, however, the cultural appeal is strong and probably inevitable, and in most cases, to be sure, by itself a quite innocuous factor. While the cultural exposure is one partial effect of Estonia's failure to establish significant local Russian language TV broadcasting sooner, another, much less positive effect has been to spur many from the minorities to rely on Russian broadcasting for news too, as only just under half follow the Estonian language media regularly (Seppel 2015, p. 90).[12] As the Russian news media has come ever more under the Kremlin's thumb, bias in news broadcasts has become ever more clear and unbalanced (Gelbach 2010) – as further evidenced by its coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014. As Russia's information policy towards the Baltic States has become more hostile too, it has served to create a certain disconnect between the perceptions of events of Estonians and the minorities. 51% of Russian speakers tend to trust the Russian TV channels they watch – a corresponding figure is 81% of Estonians trusting the main Estonian channels (Seppel 2015, p. 90). While the fact that 28% of Russian speakers do not trust the Russian channels does suggest a certain scepticism, the scale of the propaganda is not in dispute, and its potential impact cannot be blithely dismissed.

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[12] Prior to 2007 ETV only broadcast a short daily news bulletin in Russian. A few programmes were broadcast with Russian subtitles, but never in prime time. ETV 2, opened in 2007, increased the number of items in Russian, taking ETV's Russian-language broadcasting to 5.3% of the total – for which it is the most watched Estonian TV channel among the minority population, showing that there would be a market for such broadcasting. ETV+ was launched only in late September 2015, and it is not possible to assess its real impact at the time of writing, although surveys have shown that during its first week on the air, it was watched for at least a few minutes by a total of 219,000 people, with app. 97,000 having watched it daily during its first week (in a country of 1.3 million people) (*The Baltic Times*, 8 October 2015).

Certainly, the general perception of Russia differs between the minorities and the ethnic Estonians, the former being more favourably disposed than the latter. Similar effects can be seen regarding many of the political disputes between Russia and the Baltic States, and perceptions of Russia's international behaviour otherwise. In terms of Estonia's own international posture 78% of Estonians consider NATO membership essential for national security, while only 41% of Russophones do. 53% of the minorities, on the other hand, view better relations with Russia as the best guarantee for security, as opposed to only 18% of Estonians (Estonian MoD 2014, p. 4).[13] Similarly, members of the ethnic minorities tend to view the Soviet period more positively, and also subscribe in greater numbers to the version of history that holds that the Baltic incorporation in the USSR was voluntary and legal, thus echoing the official Kremlin line as espoused by the Russian mass media. These different historical narratives were also major factors behind the riots that rocked Tallinn in April 2007 over the relocation of the Soviet Era war memorial, the Bronze Soldier, and led to one of the worst deteriorations in Estonian-Russian relations since 1991 (Pääbo 2008).[14]

Such tendencies are extremely unfortunate, all the more so since they are avoidable. Research shows that people of the minority do in fact use what little TV and radio offerings there are.[15] And even in Ida-Virumaa people who tend to distrust Estonian state institutions tend to trust Estonian Russian language media (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2011, p. 33). Surveys also consistently showed that Russophones would in fact like to have a Russian-language TV channel in Estonia, however as late as 2011, 53% of Estonians were against it (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2011, p. 20). Official attitudes changed rapidly during the 2014 Ukraine Conflict, as in May 2014 a working group under the Ministry of Culture proposed launching ETV+ in 2015 as a Russian-language only TV channel (Lauri 2014). By 2015, attitudes among the majority Estonian population had also shifted significantly, as now 55% were in favour of Russian-language TV broadcasting (Seppel 2015, p. 90). While such new initiatives are to be welcomed, it does not change that until very recently Estonia had largely ceded the airwaves.

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[13] Roughly equal proportions, however, consider Estonia's own defence capability important (47% for Estonians, 41% for Russophones).

[14] That the row over the Bronze Soldier became as explosive as it did was arguably also a result of the government's own handling of the issue. The rhetoric employed in the run-up to the crisis was clearly one meant to underscore rather than smooth divisions in society. The statue issue had also already been used as a wedge in the run up to the parliamentary elections earlier that same year. Only as the tensions spilled over into violence in the streets did the government change tack and adopt a more conciliatory stance (Brüggemann & Kasekamp 2008).

[15] A full 61% say that they consider the Russian language news on ETV2 an at least somewhat important source of news, against 17% who do not. And Raadio 4, which

With such advantages, it is interesting that Russia has not made more of its soft power despite periodic attempts to seek influence. Because there are some very real grievances to stir up, particularly the pervasive sense of alienation among the ethnic minorities. The continued non-citizen status of one fifth of the Russophone minority does not endear them to their states. Even among those who have obtained citizenship, as many as one-fifth still complain about not feeling truly accepted as equals by the titular populations, but only as second-class citizens (Võõbus 2009; Estonian Integration Monitoring 2011, p. 8). Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves's oft-quoted statement, usually taken out of context, that the Russian language is "the language of occupation" has hardly been helpful.[16] Related to this, several segments among

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broadcasts exclusively in Russian, is the most listened to radio station of all among the minority population. 44% consider it an important source of news, against 30% considering it unimportant (Seppel 2015)

[16] The president's office has always maintained that the seeming stridency of the statement came from the way the questioner framed the issue. Even so, it was criticised domestically for inappropriately conflating a language and a nation with the criminal

the minorities also dislike the language requirements that, in their view, have been imposed on them with little consultation and respect. Proposals to force Russian-language secondary schools to teach 60% of their curriculum in the national language have not been universally popular. The Estonian Minority Nations II Congress decried these reforms as being akin to assimilation rather than integration (Tamm 2010). Attitudes to the reforms, as they were being implemented, also showed significant differences between Estonian and Russophone perceptions of what their impact would be, the latter group being far more worried about the implications than the former (Saar 2008). The Tallinn Bronze Night riots of 2007 for their part showed that while ethnic relations may seem calm at most times, tension between the two major groups can quickly resurface.

And yet, apart from a few 'usual suspects' – well-known provocateurs and professionally aggrieved radicals – these grievances on behalf of the minorities do not exactly signal any wide-spread support for Russia either. Although Russian-speakers are unhappy with the decreasing status of their language in the school system, and many tend to feel unwelcome in their country of residence, they do not vote with their feet by moving to Russia. Nor have there ever, at any time, been Ukraine-style seizures of public buildings – not even during the 2007 Bronze Night incident. And much as the Kremlin tries posing as the defender of the disenfranchised minorities, such posturing is mostly met with shrugs by the people being 'defended'. Likewise, the tendency is for more, not fewer people to seek Estonian citizenship, with only a trickle taking Russian citizenship. The first major wave of naturalisations was in the years 1993-1998, followed by a second wave after 2004. Russian citizenship was a popular option in the early 1990s, but has since dropped significantly.[17] In recent years,

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Soviet occupation regime.

[17] Early in his presidency Vladimir Putin stopped the practice of giving citizenship to

even a few Russian citizens permanently residing in Estonia sought citizenship, although still significantly outnumbered by applicants without any citizenship (Nimmerfeldt 2008). This would all suggest that Russia's soft power has its limits.

What holds Russian soft power back?

How can it be that Russian soft power is not more effective? One need only to look at the situation in other former Soviet republics, such as Moldova and Armenia, for examples of Russia having been very adept at utilising both hard and soft power to claw back some of its lost influence. Many of the same kinds of advantages that Russia enjoys in the Baltics also exist in these countries, yet the results have been markedly different.

The hard power aspect is the most obvious difference; Estonia is, at least for large-scale conventional aggression, under the protection of NATO's collective defence, the Western members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) are not. The certain knowledge that in a crisis the South Caucasus or Western CIS states would be on their own, as Ukraine has largely been during the conflict since early 2014, and the certainty that Russia knows it too and gambles on it, makes these states a lot more open to pressure than Estonia is. As one author puts it, Estonia would probably not have sought a confrontation over the Bronze Soldier had it not by then been enjoying the security of both NATO and EU membership (Steen 2010, p. 206). Similarly, being without the security in numbers offered by membership of the EU, the Western CIS states have to conduct their economic relationships with Russia bilaterally. The asymmetric interdependence between the sides makes for an advantageous Russian bargaining position.[18]

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people not resident in Russia. This was later changed again, when the policy on extra-territorial Russophone minorities was beefed up.

[18] Soft power can obviously not explain all things. For instance, Armenia's decision to

In addition, by not having full access to the EU's Single Market, or for that matter having even the prospect of eventual membership, the Western CIS states are simply more exposed than Estonia has been for many years.

It is worthwhile pausing briefly to distinguish soft power from the relatively new concept of 'hybrid warfare'. This term covers a range of irregular tactics, ranging from harassment and chicanery to invasions by 'little green men' or other special forces – typically not using national insignia, so as to ensure a degree of 'plausible deniability' – coupled with extensive propaganda and/or misinformation campaigns. The objective of such operations is often to simply sow chaos or to create incidents, which can then serve as pretexts for further intervention. By their very ambiguity, such campaigns can be very difficult to guard effectively against. It will certainly test NATO's responses, should ostensibly pro-Russian separatists suddenly occupy local administrative building in Ida-Virumaa, and local law enforcement be provoked into a violent over-reaction.

Yet, while soft power is the ability to change perceptions on the ground, and to encourage certain developments, hybrid warfare is very much usage of hard power instruments. It relies on military forces, and is offensive in nature. Moreover, it aims to create facts on the ground, or at least confusion as to the facts, whereas soft power, when present, would genuinely change people's minds. The target audience for hybrid warfare also varies; sometimes it is the local population, at other times it is an international audience that is being sought, with the local population being of secondary importance. Yet hybrid tactics can be particularly successful when

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abandon the Association Agreement with the EU in September 2013 was clearly the result of direct Russian pressure and the country's exposed geopolitical situation. One can perhaps instead infer Russian soft power in that the episode did not generate any significant popular blowback in Armenia.

soft power is strong locally. If home-grown protest movements are already in place, or emotions are running high over certain issues, Special Forces can blend in with the crowd and use it for their purposes, thus obscuring their own role.[19]

However, one should not mistake tactical successes for the long-term kind. In Ukraine, Russian hybrid warfare eventually helped make the mood in non-occupied Eastern Ukraine solidify into anti-Russian sentiment, ultimately undermining what soft power Russia might originally have held. Moreover, the circumstances of Ukraine in early 2014 will not be easily replicated elsewhere – especially not in Estonia, where state authority is much stronger than in Ukraine. Most importantly, Russian irregular tactics are less likely to work in the absence of some kind of significant home-grown movement sharing its aims. Occupations of administrative buildings, such as seen in Ukraine in early 2014, will most likely fall flat if not backed by a significant level of local unrest. As we have seen above, Russian soft power has not translated into that kind of militant support in Estonia.

In other parts of the former Soviet Union, Russia's cultural appeal is a major factor in its soft power. The cultural similarity with both Belarus and Ukraine is significant, and even as Ukraine seeks closer ties with the EU, it traditionally, at least until the events of early 2014, sought to maintain ties with Russia as well. In Moldova the governing elite remained, up until the election of a pro-western government in 2009, largely the same as in Soviet times, and was therefore quite 'Russified' (Crowther & Matonyte 2007).[20] Thus, cultural openness plays one part, as does the general openness of Russia to closer integration with the Western CIS countries and their populations. Russia offers closer economic relations and free trade, and usually does so in a fairly straightforward way. This is in marked contrast to the EU, which is often heavy on formal process and short on substance. Visa-free travel, for example, has been high on the wish list of the Western CIS countries, but something that the EU has been dragging its feet on granting for several years. In contrast, Russia has had a more liberal approach, allowing people from the former Soviet Union not just to travel freely to, but also work freely in Russia (Popescu & Wilson 2009).[21] But while Russia can present itself in a more positive light through such measures to former Soviet states with no prospect of full EU integration, the situation is the opposite in the Baltic States which have achieved full membership.

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[19] When in late winter/early spring of 2014, thousands of people in Eastern Ukraine came out in public protests – which were far more anti-Kiev than pro-Moscow – the general chaos provided an opportunity for such irregular tactics, something which the Kiev authorities proved ill-equipped to deal with.

[20] Even today, the pro-Russian opposition parties, who argue for abandoning the Association Agreement in favour of the Eurasian Customs Union, remain electorally competitive, as evidenced by the closeness of the 2014 parliamentary elections.

Politically, many in the Neighbourhood countries look to Russia as a politically stable state, and a positive contrast to their own countries' rather chaotic politics (Liik 2013, p. 44-45). In Estonia, which has long since become a consolidated democracy, Russia's stability is typically viewed as being of a somewhat sinister nature. Having never resorted to the sort of illiberalism that has marked the rule of Vladimir Putin, Estonia has become an open society, where the rule of law is well observed and civil liberties respected. Russian-style stability is therefore a lot less attractive than it might be elsewhere. As the former Estonian minister for Education, Jevgeni Ossinovski (himself a member of the Russophone minority)[22] put it, "I don't know anyone who would say that Putin is their protector. Or that they would prefer to live in Russia instead of Estonia" (Puhl 2014). That somehow still does not fully explain why Russian soft power is not more effective with the ethnic minorities.

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[21] On the coercive side, Russia has dropped not too subtle hints that some of these arrangements may be reviewed should Ukraine or Moldova go ahead with their planned EU Association Agreements.

[22] In May 2015, Ossinovski assumed the leadership of the Social Democratic Party. He currently serves as Minister for Health and Labour.

Part of the issue is that Russia suffers from a certain credibility gap with the very people whose interests they profess to protect. As much as the feeling of alienation many members of the ethnic minorities feel is real, many harbour sincere doubts that Russia's interest in them is genuine. Interestingly, also, 65% of the Russophone minority do not even feel well-informed about the Compatriot Policy, and most are only interested in its cultural aspects (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2011, p. 25). The erratic nature of Russia's policies and investment, and the way this involvement always leads to intergovernmental squabbles, makes many wonder whether the Kremlin is just using them to stir up trouble for trouble's own sake. Thus although 50% considered the policy positively, a third considered it harmful to their own situation (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2011, p. 25). Indeed there is also some evidence that Russian attempts at meddling has hardened attitudes among the Estonian political elite against greater inclusiveness, and thus actually harmed the status and interests of the minority populations (Schulze 2010, p. 368).

But the other side of Russia's soft power towards the Western CIS, the offer of integration and free movement and travel, is also much less attractive in Estonia. To put not too fine a point on it, for someone from Belarus or Moldova, moving to Russia in order to escape bad governance and poor economic and social prospects in the home country is an attractive proposition. Not so in Estonia. Whatever feelings of being discriminated against members of the ethnic minorities may hold, their economic and material prospects would not be made brighter by moving east. Although Russia introduced a state financed repatriation policy in 2005, by 2009 only 20 families had moved there from Estonia (Koit 2009).

That does not mean, however, that Estonia is necessarily the preferred country of residence for the ethnic minorities. Previous studies have suggested that since EU accession, 'exit' of aggrieved minorities to the rest of the EU has become possible, and acts as a safety valve releasing built-up ethnic animosities that might otherwise lead to more overt conflicts (Hughes 2005). By having become part of an economic space that is far more advantageous and attractive than Russia, Estonia has thus managed to reduce Russia's soft power significantly. No matter how poor the salaries, job security and public services that most people (majority and minority alike) in the Baltic states have experienced under the weight of government cutbacks, the better alternative is westward rather than eastward migration.[23] Precise motivations may vary – and socio-economic factors do tend to rank higher (55%) than identity-based ones (21%) (Saar Poll 2006, p. 42) – but it is clear that given the choice, more people will choose easy movement in Europe rather than in the post-Soviet space. Thus among the minorities three times as many would rather move to another EU country than move to Russia (Saar Poll 2006). This offers a partial explanation for the eagerness of many, especially younger people, to seek citizenship in Estonia rather than in Russia; there are simply more opportunities offered.

The EU has furthermore bolstered its appeal to the minority populations through support for policies protecting ethnic minorities. These are explicitly mentioned as part of the Copenhagen Criteria that must be met prior to accession negotiations, and are continuously monitored throughout the negotiating process.[24] In the case of the Baltic States, the EU made progress contingent on them implementing the recommendations of the OSCE and its High Commissioner for National Minorities (Hughes 2005, p. 749-751). EU pressure thus played a significant part in easing the conditions for the minority populations and forcing national elites towards more inclusive policies. Moreover, the EU is committed to the creation of an integrated Europe where people can move, settle and work freely without facing discrimination. These are also factors in shaping the positive perceptions of minority groups (in the Baltics and elsewhere) of the EU and the opportunities it offers as a way of changing the status they are assigned, with all it implies, in their home countries.

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[23] This is, of course, different for those without any citizenship at all. They can only stay put or move eastward, but few have chosen the latter option. Although the Alien's Passport issued to persons with undetermined citizenship allows the holder visa-free travel for shorter visits to Schengen countries, it does not bestow the same rights to residence and work in the EU that Estonian and Latvian citizens enjoy.

The trend towards minorities taking Estonian citizenship thus invites the conclusion that it is not exclusively because of the minorities' growing sense of belonging or of being truly accepted as equals. The other factor, of the EU providing the minorities with an alternative to their home countries, and thereby reducing the attraction of closer formal and political attachment to their 'nation' state, Russia, also must be considered. It suggests that when especially younger people seek citizenship, many do it for the rather pragmatic reason of using the chance of mobility the EU offers. That in turn becomes problematic for the state when considered together with another broad trend. Since 1991 Estonia has seen a population decline of 230,000 people, due to net out-migration, particularly among the young, coupled with low birth rates. Not only does the loss of many young people remove valuable skills from the national labour market (Estonian Human Resource Report 2010), it has also resulted in a declining and ageing population.[25] More or less equal numbers of Estonians and

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[24] The political criterion consists of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and adequate protection for minorities. The other criteria are about market economy and administrative capability.

[25] For the period 2001-2011 alone net out-migration was 45,000, while the natural

Russophones consider going abroad to work for a while, although it is estimated that Russophones are slightly more likely to follow through on the thought (64% to 54%) (Ministry of Social Affairs 2013, p. 15). Since 2008 the main reasons for leaving have been socio-economic rather than identity-based, but members of the ethnic minorities are less likely to eventually return than Estonians.

Bolstering Estonia's own attractiveness

To note that the soft power of the EU plays a large role in trumping that of Russia, and that the attractions of Estonia are not necessarily what makes the difference for the ethnic minorities, is not to say that it cannot be any other way. In fact, the means for changing this situation and bolstering Estonia's attractiveness in the eyes of its minority populations are very much in its own hands.

The first, and most obvious, starting point is good governance; making Estonia a more attractive place to work and live in. Irrespective of ethnicity, that is primarily a question of sound and responsible economic management, better public services, better living standards for all, and more predictability for the citizens. Both the titular and minority populations care about such issues, and let them influence their decisions on whether to move abroad or stay in the home country. Especially during the economic crisis since 2008 most of these virtues have been in short supply, and have led many, regardless of ethnicity, to question, in the face of plunging living standards, if there is a future for them at all in their own countries. It has long been recognised that the minorities' allegiance can also be strengthened by their experience of social opportunity and material well-being, while a lack of such things is fertile ground for populist pandering. But longer term economic

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negative population growth was put at 32,000 (2012 census).

growth will not come off cheap labour costs alone, but will require investments in infrastructure and human capital. This brings us to the point of why better integration policies are needed, both for their own sake, but also because they can become a source of attraction and loyalty.

The overwhelming obstacle to better integration is a lack of confident and forward-looking policies to bring it about. As Steen (2010, p. 209) points out, the EU may have forced national elites to soften their policies, but they have not changed their underlying attitudes towards the issue. Much policy is still being conducted from a sense of insecurity and a need to protect and assert the national culture, language and status, almost as if it was still under threat (Golubeva 2010). Moreover, the main fear among elites has often been to be seen as being influenced by Russia, resulting in a reflexive hardening of attitudes whenever Russia has made noises on the minority issue (Schulze 2010, p. 378). Such sentiments are quite understandable given the historical context. Moreover, the somewhat exclusionist policies of the early 1990s were clearly necessary at that time in order to secure the restoration of statehood on the majority's terms and to break the link to Soviet practices. But they have equally clearly served that purpose by now, and no longer provide a helpful basis for a future-oriented policy. This article is not the place for setting out a full set of detailed policies, but a few of the core elements of a more forward-looking strategy that would boost Estonia's attractiveness towards its own minority populations can nonetheless be outlined. They would need to start with acknowledging the obvious: That Estonia is not, and never will be an ethnically homogenous state.[26]

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[26] While one should certainly not dismiss the severe impact of the Soviet era's forced demographic changes, one should also not assume that Estonia was ever a truly ethnically homogenous state either. Already in the 1930s it had a degree of multiculturalism that Western Europe didn't reach until the late 1980s. Thus Estonians in 1934 made up 88% of the population and Russians 8%, with Germans, Swedes and Jews prominent among the remainder. The Interwar republic also introduced a feature, novel and progressive for

Instead of, as some nationalist politicians are wont to do, bemoaning multiculturalism, which is already an established fact, the challenge is to make it work. This is not to suggest the somewhat extreme Swedish model of making multiculturalism the official ideology – and relegating the titular nations to being merely the largest single ethnic group – but only to properly institutionalise it in ways that both sides find acceptable. Clearly, there will, and should, always be red lines for the majority, and such things as fully equal status for the Russian language would be going much too far. The primacy of the titular nations' languages should and will remain firmly entrenched, and one should not contemplate a return to the Soviet era's forced bilingualism.[27] But some form of recognised secondary status for the Russian language could surely be crafted if the will was there.

The most important single element in such an exercise would be to change the discourse in which the issue is cast. It is almost paradoxical that while on the one hand the Estonian Constitution (§50-52) provides significant guarantees for minorities, the actual status of Russian language and culture seems deliberately left in flux. The main problem is thus not always in the practices on the ground, but that the atmosphere surrounding the issue all too often gives the impression of the status quo being just temporary until the next change chipping away at people's identity is rammed through. Codification of the current status, however, would in most instances mean little more than giving *de jure* recognition to what is anyway taking place (see also Skerrett 2013, p. 14), and could be rhetorically cast as the majority offering statutory *protection*

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its time, of 'cultural autonomy' for minority populations.

[27] In Latvia, where Citizens' Initiatives are possible, a referendum was held in 2012 on whether to change the constitution to make Russian an official language on the same level as Latvian. On a 71% turnout, 75% voted to reject the proposal; a margin so big that even if all stateless people and Russian citizens with residence permit had participated and voted for the change, it would still not have been carried.

of the Russian language.[28] Of course, if such a law is to avoid being merely an Orwellian use of words, it must place itself firmly on the side of *integration* rather than *assimilation*, which is what many Russophones still suspect is the majority's real agenda. To counter such fears, the majority would have to debate their visions of integration, and do so in an inclusive and cooperative process, instead of treating the minorities merely as passive objects of policy. Such a law, if properly framed, could create a sense of certainty for the minorities, and would be one the majority would be careful about changing too frequently without full and thorough consultation.

Such an approach would have three major advantages. First, it would signal confidence on the side of the majority; that they are willing to guarantee and protect the minorities' culture and heritage. Secondly, it would seek to actively utilise the fact that Russophones in the Baltic States already have different identities from those living in Russia (Berg & Boman 2005; Feldman 2005). Strengthening the discourse that e.g. Estonian-Russian or Estonian-Ukrainian is an acceptable identity and completely distinct from the Russian state would signal inclusivity. Thirdly, it would be in line with Estonia's pre-war practise, when their minority laws were very progressive by international standards. Such changes as suggested here might not be progressive by 21st century standards, but would nonetheless rob many of Estonia's international critics of most of their best arguments.[29] It would, moreover, give the political elite something positive to point to rather than having to defend their actions.

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[28] This could, for instance, include giving more explicit approval and support to many existing practices in Russian-speaking areas, like state and municipal authorities also offering their services in Russian, or municipal councils holding their meetings in Russian, but afterwards making a protocol available in Estonian. It would, of course, also define the presence of the Russian language in education.

[29] Hughes 2005 is a good example, as is the aforementioned 2006 Amnesty International report.

Another more confident step in line with this approach, which could bolster Estonia's attractiveness, would be a more systematic approach to giving people the means for integration without signalling, even if unintentionally, an attack on their culture. The numerous reforms to Estonian schools aimed at bringing in more subjects taught in the majority language have been controversial when enacted and the evidence of their benefits to the minority populations has not been entirely unambiguous.[30] Authorities have certainly not been very successful at combatting the perception among minorities that language requirements are forced on them. A clearer overall vision of integration might help them understand the point of it, and convince people that integration is a two-way process, and not a one-way street. Perhaps the Estonian government and parliament ought to change the discussion away from being about which percentages of classes are taught in which languages to whether they are delivering as they should in terms of providing the best possible quality language teaching to children. Research has shown that many Russophone children are still not sufficiently proficient in the language when having to study in Estonian at the high school level, suggesting that basic language teaching at primary school level is not up to standard (Kirss & Vihalemm 2008). This is particularly problematic in places like Ida-Virumaa towns, where the proportion of native Estonia-speakers is already low. Others point out that there is a lack of kindergarten places and other pre-school offers that might help early acquisition of language skills (Estonian Human Resource Report 2010). In like vein, more could be done to make language classes available free of charge for adults wanting to learn. Capping the number of classroom hours, and making reimbursement for courses contingent on successful completion somewhat defeats the purpose.[31]

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[30] For opposing views on the 2007 Latvian reform, which had similar aims and has been a frequent point of comparison in the Estonian debate, see Kruma 2010 and Skerrett 2013.

Lastly, it was a very positive step to introduce proper TV broadcasting in Russian, as happened with the launch of ETV+ in late September 2015, thereby providing a decent alternative to the propaganda of Kremlin-controlled Russian TV stations. If anything, the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 has shown the importance of being able to counter Russian propaganda and provide timely information and fair news coverage to people. Moreover, the most important aspect of increasing the number of programmes offered is gradually building the habit among the target audience, and the influence that media usage can establish with the viewing/listening public. One must therefore hope that ETV+ will be properly prioritised in order to effectively meet its objective. Information is the key to winning hearts and minds. And measures such as the ones outlined in this section would, at a relatively small cost, do much to enhance Estonia's attractiveness in the eyes of the minority populations.

Conclusion

The conclusion on the themes above is that Russian soft power is not something to dismiss lightly, yet a few home truths about its efficacy should not be forgotten. Soft power does not work everywhere and at all times; it works in a context. In the Estonian context, whatever Russia has to offer, and what it stands for, will always be seen in comparison to what is already there, and Russia does not come off best in that comparison. Moreover, European integration seems to ensure that even the Russophone minorities look unlikely to ever reorient back to Russia. To be sure, the minority issue can still be a source of occasional trouble, and dormant tensions exist and can be inflamed periodically. But it has lost its potency compared to the situation ten or twenty years ago, not least under the competing influence of Europe.

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[31] In Estonia, people will be compensated for 120 hours of classes if the exam is passed. However, experts consider that at least 240 hours should be covered (Human Resource Report 2010). A more radical idea would of course be to simply make the classes free of charge, rather than have people pay at all.

The decline in Russian soft power in the Baltics should be an opportunity for Estonia to strengthen its own position and its hold on the minority population's loyalty. Overcoming the past - and the traumas that many associate with the presence of the Russophone minorities - is never easy; all of the measures outlined above are sketchy, and none would be easy to implement overnight. Furthermore, all can easily be labelled as concessions from the majority to the minorities; and why should the majority bother? One answer might be that the tactical retreat to the moral high ground is sometimes the winning strategy. Another might be that facing down charges of making concessions is precisely what political leadership is about. Taken together, such measures as outlined in this article could take much of the heat out of ethnic relations, and hence do much to improve the image the Russophone minorities hold of their country. That would be for the good of Estonia, and would in turn undermine any residual soft power and populist influence Russia could wield. There are many reasons to fear Russia, and many reasons for Estonia to treat its big neighbour with extreme caution. However, provided a few prudent steps are taken, it will not be Russian soft power that threatens Estonian security.

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