

Kremlin Grapples With Series of PR Disasters

By [Ivan Nechepurenko](#)

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Giving the State Duma a shine. A worker cleaning a window at the Duma building just meters from a double-headed eagle, the Russian state symbol. **Igor Tabakov**

Rainbow flags were flown at half mast to mark President Vladimir Putin's visit last month to Amsterdam, widely known as a city of open minds that take pride in enjoying free love.

Thousands of brightly dressed Dutch activists gathered outside the Amstelhof, the site of Putin's dinner with Queen Beatrix, to protest a proposed Russian ban on the promotion of homosexuality among minors and the imprisonment of two members of the all-female punk band Pussy Riot.

Ironically, the Amstelhof has since 2004 housed an institution designed to promote Russia and its culture in the Netherlands: a branch of St. Petersburg's world-famous Hermitage Museum.

Following an incident days before in Hannover, Germany, where Putin was confronted by five topless Femen activists who called him a "dictator," the president's European trip was the latest in a series of PR disasters for Russia.

The government is well aware of the problem.

Having recognized the widespread damage dealt by a leaked U.S. diplomatic cable that labeled Russia a "mafia state" run by an "alpha dog," the Kremlin has ordered a boost to soft power initiatives to help give the country's image a more positive spin abroad.

'The only times the West viewed Russia positively were in 1917 and 1991, when Russia was disintegrating.'
Nikonov

To succeed, the government will have to combat a downward trend in Western public opinion about Russia. The 2012 Transatlantic Trends survey of global attitudes toward countries on both sides of the Atlantic found that American public opinion regarding Russia has flipped from favorable to negative over the last two years with a drop of 6 percentage points (42 percent, down from 48 percent in 2011 and 51 percent in 2010) , while in Europe the decrease was even more pronounced, by 13 percent, with only 37 percent of Europeans now being positive about Russia.

"There was a certain sense of hope associated with Dmitry Medvedev, but once the decision that Putin would reclaim the presidency was announced in September 2011, people around the world could no longer see where Russia was going," said Sergei Kulik, director for international development at the Institute for Contemporary Development, a think tank that prepared policies for Medvedev's presidency.

"A country needs a strong set of values and a narrative on what it stands for and where it's going to be attractive," he said.

PR Push

Putin has singled out soft power as being of key importance to achieving this goal. Ahead of the publication of an updated foreign policy in February, Putin met with Foreign Ministry officials, noting that "competent use of 'soft power' methods is ever more of a priority."

"We need to boost the Russian language's position, be active in promoting a positive image of Russia abroad, and learn how to organically integrate ourselves into global information flows," Putin said.

Soft power, a concept introduced by Joseph Nye of Harvard University, refers to making others want to do what you want them to do instead of coercing them. In a 1990 book, Nye questioned whether the U.S. was in decline by pointing out that apart from military and economic power, the U.S. is also a cultural superpower, making it a model that other

states emulate.

Russia has substantial room for improvement in this area: It occupies last place out of 26 countries, trailing Turkey, Brazil and Mexico, according to the results of the International Ranking of Soft Power, conducted by Britain's Institute for Government and Monocle magazine.

Britain and France top the list jointly, while fellow BRICS member China is in 19th place — although the report's authors said they expect the Asian giant to climb swiftly thanks to the presence of 900 Confucius Institutes, government-aligned institutions set up to promote Chinese language and culture and facilitate cultural exchanges around the globe.

Jonathan McClory, the author of the index, said Russia placed so low because it has not emphasized soft power enough in the recent past.

"Russia has not made soft power a strategic priority, nor have international perceptions of Russia been a serious concern. This is demonstrated in the policies pursued by the government," McClory said.

"To take one example, Russia is a foreign aid donor country, but it gives the smallest amount of aid compared with the rest of the G8 countries. It's only one example, but foreign development aid is an important soft power tool, both in terms of helping the poor, but also as a signal that a country wants to be helpful in a very selfless way," he said.

But the government has been trying in other ways. In 2008, Dmitry Medvedev set up Rossotrudnichestvo, a government agency designed to advance Russia's economic and political interests in the world. Among its initiatives is establishing new centers of Russian culture and science across the world, emulating China and the U.S.

At the same time, Russia has in recent years kicked out certain foreign groups that wielded soft power on its soil, including the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, last year and the U.S. Peace Corps in 2002. Part of its justification has been that Russia is a donor country and does not require foreign aid.

McClory said that on the cultural side, Russian traditions could be difficult to engage with for non-Russian speakers. He also said that while Russia's cultural influence was strong in Eastern Europe and the CIS, that influence did not resonate as much in countries beyond its traditional sphere of influence.

One sphere that avoids the language barrier and that Putin has emphasized is sport — the Kremlin made strong pushes to host the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and the 2018 World Cup in part to be able to show Russia off to a skeptical world public.

Soviet Echoes

Some of the methods employed by the government harken back to Soviet-era strategies, prompting critics to liken them to propaganda.

One event the government has planned that has direct Soviet lineage is an international festival for youth and students set to be held in Russia in 2017. The Soviet Union hosted such

events twice, in 1957 and 1985, the first as part of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's political thaw and the second as an element of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika.

In a related initiative, the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs recently proposed organizing Russia-oriented youth camps in Europe and the United States, two places where Russia is perceived most negatively. In Europe, it would be held in Strasbourg, the seat of the European Court of Human Rights, which historically has been flooded by complaints from Russian citizens.

Those locations have also been particular targets for the Kremlin-funded global news channel RT.

Originally known as Russia Today, the English-language channel rebranded itself RT in 2009 to launch a more global-oriented image. It has had some success in foreign markets, becoming the third-most-watched news channel in the U.K. behind BBC News and Sky News and the second most-watched foreign news channel in the U.S. behind BBC World News and ahead of Al Jazeera.

Last October, Putin vetoed any funding cuts for RT, which requested \$370 million for 2013.

A different media-based PR effort last year landed the Kremlin in hot water. In November, reports surfaced that public relations firm Ketchum, retained by Russia to tout its image abroad, was placing op-eds purportedly written by independent analysts on the websites of CNBC and The Huffington Post. The incident provoked a firestorm of criticism.

Responding to attacks on these types of methods, Rossotrudinichestvo head Konstantin Kosachev said the difference between current and past PR efforts was that Russia was now presenting a more honest image of itself.

"It is wrong to compare what Russia does in the field of soft power with Soviet propaganda," Kosachev said. "It would be both futile and foolish for us to do so in the context of an open and globalized world. We do not intend to project a fictitious image of the country, but would like to present well what Russia is in reality."

But even some people involved in the Kremlin's soft-power push see the effort as being futile in the West.

"There is no problem with the way Russia is viewed in most countries," said Vyacheslav Nikonov, a State Duma deputy from United Russia and the head of the Russky Mir Foundation, which was established in 2007 to promote Russian language and culture around the world. "Only in the West is the image of Russia biased. I believe it has been like that for at least five centuries."

"The only two episodes when the West viewed Russia positively were in 1917 and 1991, when Russia was disintegrating," Nikonov said. "The current view of Russia has become a part of the West's cultural code and I doubt it can be changed."

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