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Russian Bear Should Be More Cuddly, Less Snarly (Op-Ed)

By Mark Galeotti

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The most recent Pew Research global survey of attitudes to Russia has seen the country's standing nosedive like — just to pluck a metaphor out of nowhere — a civilian passenger plane hit by a surface-to-air missile. Only Vietnam, Ghana and (barely) China showed overall a positive perception of Russia.

To be sure, thanks to an extraordinarily active and well-funded foreign information campaign Russia has been able to undermine some of the West's narrative. But what it has demonstrated is that it is one thing to throw sand into the eyes and into the gears of the international system. It is quite another to actually accrue soft power, to get people to respect, like and want to support and emulate you.

If anything, recent high-profile debacles from the destruction of confiscated food to presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov's now-infamous watch suggest that in detail as well as the big picture, Moscow is losing ground.

So just as the West is currently engaged in often-overblown debates about how to "fight the information war" — a dangerous and probably counterproductive metaphor — how could Russia perhaps reverse its manifest failure in the realm of soft power?

For a start, not invading a neighboring country would help. Likewise not shooting an airliner down — or seeing your proxies do it — and then maintaining a crass and unrepentant stonewall over the matter.

Given that the art of spin is usually one of making the best out of unpromising situations, though, what could Russia do to try and look less like a Western hawk's dream "evil empire"?

Maybe get more people to see and above all experience the diversities of Russian life? Many pundits, news editors and miscellaneous opinion formers have never been to Russia or last saw it in the miserable 1990s.

Rather than setting up sock puppet think tanks or carefully staged efforts to woo people such as the annual Valdai Discussion Club jamboree, why not simply seek to influence through unmediated experience?

Invite some of the Russia-watchers who haven't experienced today's Moscow for a long weekend, give them a troika travel card and a guide book, and turn them loose. No press minders, no formal presentations, no staged program of happy, shiny Putinistas. Just a dynamic, glitzy and exciting city ready to show them a good time and demonstrate a diversity of opinion and experience that makes it a true world city.

It will not guarantee they will end up liking the Kremlin any more, but may help break down some of the crass stereotypes and out-of-date oversimplifications of the sort that lead to headlines about a "medieval" Russia "sliding back into totalitarianism."

In general, this means more, not less interconnection with the West. Where is the Russian equivalent of the British Council, Confucius centers or the Goethe institutes? Doesn't the Kremlin believe that encouraging people to study Russian language and culture might be worth the price of a few Armata tanks (up to $8 million a pop)?

Indeed, rather than holding it back for a tit-for-tat deal that at the moment seems far, far away, why not implement visa-free travel for Westerners? Or at least relax pointless and irksome residence registration rules? Russia would look welcoming and may even shame the West into reciprocal visa deals that it has not up to now been able to browbeat them into.

For that matter, stop engaging in counterproductive tit-for-tats in general, especially where Moscow lacks the muscle to make them anything more than symbolic acts of pique. From expelling diplomats when its spies are caught, to banning Western products (perhaps even condoms!), it does enough to look petty, spiteful or downright childish, not enough actually to force the West into a change of policy.

Meanwhile, reverse the processes which have made RT an increasingly blatant propaganda network and make it a source of real news and diverse opinion. So long as Russia's voice to the world is strident, blatantly one-sided and too often mouthed by conspiracy theorists and shrill propagandists, it makes the country look insecure.

Confidence is contagious; Moscow will appear more trustworthy if it looks comfortable facing the same scrutiny it — rightly — encourages toward the West.

Russians have the wit, intelligence and subtlety to make friends and make their points at once. Think how the Sochi closing ceremony winningly played off the technical problems with the opening. The kind of snarky humor evident in propagandistic T-shirts could be put to much better use.

Until fundamental issues such as interference in Ukraine are solved, there are limits to what can be achieved. But as serious new challenges approach, from regional debt crises to shale gas, and the gap between its aspirations and capacities become ever more evident, the bear may well be better served by being a little less snarling, and a little more cuddly.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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