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Russian Sharp Power
When the Soft Becomes Sharp

Doctoral School of International Relations and Security Studies

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Russian Sharp Power
When the Soft Becomes Sharp

Doctoral dissertation

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the late 20th century, the world became increasingly globalized and interconnected, driven by intensified trade, information sharing, and open borders—developments underpinned by liberal economic doctrines and a prevailing hope for a democratic future. This hope for a democratic future can be explained by the universalization of liberal democratic principles, initially at the scholarly level and later incorporated into foreign policy doctrines. One of the earliest attempts to universalize these principles was Francis Fukuyama’s declaration of the ‘end of history,’ which sparked significant debate regarding the universal appeal of democracy.

Similarly, in an effort to illustrate the superiority of American life—whether through liberal norms, market economy, public and individual freedoms, or democratic principles—Joseph Nye inadvertently created an academic concept that evolved into a widely recognized ‘buzzword.’ This concept, soft power, was embraced not only by journalists and scholars alike, but by global leaders, ranging from Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping (Diamond & Schell, 2019, p. 100) to David Cameron and Barack Obama (Cull, 2009) who emphasized the importance of soft power in their foreign policy doctrines. The competition for influence, which had originated during the Cold War, appeared to be entering a new phase—one that seemed poised to culminate in an era of cultural diplomacy.

Western leaders, educated by the liberal thinkers of the late Cold War era and particularly influenced by their victory in the Cold War, were optimistic that the appeal of liberal norms, the openness of democratic systems, human rights, and individual liberties—in other words, the tenets that Nye attributed to American soft power—would inspire global societies to change for the better, abandon oppressive dictatorial traditions, and align themselves with the principles of their democratic counterparts.

In the 21st century, during the era of information and digital technology, governments—particularly those with authoritarian tendencies—began capitalizing on what had been considered achievements of Western liberal systems: openness and accessibility. These regimes exploited such openness to their advantage, advancing their agendas by manipulating or even distorting reality. The events of the 2016 U.S.

elections and the Brexit referendum of the same year demonstrated that information could be wielded with an efficacy comparable to that of conventional military power.

Unlike Fukuyama's idea, Nye's conception of soft power was largely accepted without significant challenge. While some scholars criticized the concept, their concerns primarily revolved around its practicality, effectiveness, or the lack of robust theoretical debate surrounding it. It was not until 2017 that individuals associated with the National Endowment for Democracy began emphasizing the repeated misuse of the term, which not only caused considerable confusion and conceptual challenges but also posed a threat to the integrity of democratic systems. In their 2017 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Jessica Ludwig and Christopher Walker raised critical concerns, urging the scholarly community to recognize that authoritarian governments such as Russia, China, and Iran were employing a form of influence that had been mistakenly labeled as soft power (Walker & Ludwig, 2017).

The Western leaders' hope that engaging with Russia and integrating it into "Western clubs" such as the G8, the Council of Europe, and even considering the possibility of Russia joining NATO, proved to be disastrously misguided (Shevtsova, 2015). While Kremlin leaders outwardly adhered to democratic norms and feigned accountability to their electorate, they were simultaneously consolidating power domestically to extreme levels and exploiting the openness of democratic systems internationally.

Walker and Ludwig sounded the alarm about Russia, China, and other authoritarian states exporting their authoritarian norms abroad, particularly to democratic countries. A critical misstep of the Western scholarly community was their reliance on an overly simplistic formula: any form of influence that did not involve military intervention, espionage, economic coercion, or sanctions—traditionally associated with hard power—was automatically categorized as soft power. The West hesitated to restrict such intangible forms of influence, fearing it would contradict democratic principles and undermine the integrity of democratic systems.

Even in response to the threats posed by sharp power, Joseph Nye consistently emphasized that the openness of Western systems was a cornerstone of democratic

tradition. He argued that this openness should not be compromised, even in the face of intangible influence from authoritarian states like Russia and China (Nye, 2019).

Walker and Ludwig's primary concern was the need to redefine the conceptual vocabulary surrounding influence, emphasizing that the alleged "soft power influence" of authoritarian states required reevaluation and critical analysis. They argued that this influence did not align with the principles of soft power but instead represented its antithesis—relying on manipulation, distortion of reality, disinformation, and censorship (Walker & Ludwig, 2017).

An illustrative example of this misuse of terminology in scholarly literature is found in the paper titled *Soft Power of TikTok: The Social Network That Conquered the World*. While the title appears self-explanatory and engaging, the author posits that China exerts soft power by catering to the Russian government's interests, including the removal of political content created by Russian users that conflicts with the Kremlin's agenda (Podosokorsky, 2022). However, as this research will demonstrate—and as Walker and Ludwig contend—censorship is a hallmark of authoritarian sharp power, not soft power.

Although the National Endowment for Democracy, along with scholars and researchers associated with it, has been exploring the concept of sharp power for over seven years, their contributions have primarily focused on empirical research and investigative efforts to expose the sharp power tactics of Russia and China, as well as their negative impact on democratic societies. While their work tends to emphasize the institutional effects of sharp power on democratic systems, there is limited discussion of the ideational premises underlying the concept. Furthermore, although the emergence of sharp power in scholarly discourse represents a significant advancement in understanding the influence exerted by authoritarian regimes, the conceptual debate surrounding this notion remains relatively simplistic and unchallenged. Consequently, this paper seeks to provide a more comprehensive theoretical analysis of sharp power, alongside soft power and power, offering a more nuanced and elaborated interpretation of the concept. Additionally, by incorporating various sociological theories, this paper aims to highlight the socio-cultural dimensions that constitute sharp power.

1.1 FORMULATING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

Scholars of sharp power, including (Cole, 2018), (deLisle, 2020), (Fitzgerald, 2024), (Mankikar, 2022), Wu (2019), (Walker & Ludwig, 2017), argue that Russia, China, and other authoritarian regimes have increasingly relied on sharp power as a means to compensate for their failures in deploying effective soft power. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the case of Russia, whose reputation and overall image on the international stage have been significantly tarnished. This decline is attributable to its deteriorating socio-political environment, pervasive human rights abuses, lack of rule of law, the establishment of a clear autocratic system, and an aggressive foreign policy toward neighboring countries.

In examining Russia's authoritarian turn, Lilia (Shevtsova, 2015, pp. 22-25) highlights the Kremlin's efforts to position the country as a conservative alternative to the liberal, consumerist, and hedonistic West. Shevtsova contends that this ideological shift was designed to distract the domestic population from pressing internal challenges, including societal issues, widespread corruption, economic stagnation, and infrastructural deficiencies. According to Shevtsova, this approach fosters an illusory sense of national pride by presenting Russia as a superpower, transcending its status as a mere nation-state. This narrative is further reinforced by Russia's aggressive foreign policy, which cultivates the perception of an ongoing confrontation with the West, evoking collective memories of World War II, particularly the Great Patriotic War.

Shevtsova's argument is pivotal in formulating the hypothesis for this study: the Kremlin appears to exhibit a consistent tendency to obscure its shortcomings by distracting audiences through the distortion of reality and the incorporation of ideational factors. At the domestic level, these ideational factors are typically linked to notions of collective pride and national superiority. At the international level, as highlighted in the scholarship on sharp power, these factors are associated with strategies aimed at instilling fear and skepticism toward democratic norms and the concept of democracy itself. This includes efforts to discredit democratic governments, exacerbate social divisions, and amplify pre-existing grievances.

Building on Shevtsova's observations and the arguments of the aforementioned scholars regarding the use of sharp power as a compensatory mechanism for ineffective soft power, we can hypothesize that *Russian soft power has ceased to be effective. This very ineffectiveness has created the necessity for the Kremlin to adopt alternative means of influence, primarily through the mechanisms of sharp power.*

As suggested by Walker and Ludwig, along with other scholars of sharp power, the distinction between soft power and sharp power lies not only in their differing intentions but also in their origins. Drawing on social constructivist perspectives, which argue that political leadership is embedded within society, it follows that decisions and political practices often reflect the social and cultural characteristics of that society—whether religion, customs, norms, beliefs, or other factors. This leads to the second research question: *What collective beliefs or social norms underpin Russian sharp power?* To explore this, a case study on censorship will be examined. This specific element of sharp power—censorship—can be further contextualized by incorporating other aspects of sharp power, with the aim of studying them within the socio-cultural framework.

As the literature on sharp power demonstrates, scholars examining Russian or Chinese sharp power are primarily focused on the impact of malign influence on democratic institutions. This is undoubtedly a crucial area of inquiry; however, for a deeper understanding of sharp power and its construction, the broader scholarship on power offers more nuanced insights. Scholars such as Guzzini, Finnemore, Lukes, and Foucault argue that power has an inter-relational nature. This perspective suggests that power is not a unidirectional force where the power holder solely influences the system; rather, the system also influences and shapes the power holder in return.

In the context of this study, it is therefore essential to examine not only how Russian political leadership developed sharp power strategies in its competition with the West but also how the practice of sharp power itself has influenced political leaders and their rhetoric. In light of this, another hypothesis posits that, *in the ideological competition with the West and in efforts to discredit Western governments, democratic systems, and democratic norms, Russian political leadership—once rooted in an atheistic Soviet society—eventually adopted a pronounced religious stance.*

Building on Walker and Ludwig's argument that sharp power exploits the openness of democratic societies, this study hypothesizes that Russia applies a similar logic at the level of academic knowledge. Democratic societies derive strength from intellectual pluralism, academic freedom, self-criticism, and open theoretical debate. However, Russian political discourse selectively appropriates these very products of openness — including realist critiques of NATO expansion, anti-imperial and postcolonial critiques of Western power, and civilizational critiques of liberal universalism — and re-signifies them within a Kremlin-centered narrative. In this sense, Western academic knowledge is not merely cited or engaged with, but strategically weaponized to delegitimize Western policy, relativize Russian aggression, deny Ukrainian agency, and portray Russia as a reactive rather than revisionist power.

In short, the dissertation advances the hypothesis that *Russian sharp power exploits the intellectual openness of democratic societies by appropriating Western academic theories and critical traditions, recontextualizing them into political narratives that discredit the West, justify Russian foreign policy, and weaken the authority of democratic institutions.*

This hypothesis does not suggest that Western academic critiques of NATO, liberal universalism, American hegemony, or Western foreign policy are themselves propagandistic. Rather, the argument is that Russian sharp power selectively extracts, simplifies, and recontextualizes these ideas, transforming them from academic arguments into instruments of political legitimation and narrative warfare.

2 METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is twofold: first, it seeks to suggest a refined definition of sharp power by critically engaging with the existing literature, identifying its shortcomings, gaps, and inconsistencies. Given that sharp power was introduced as a term in juxtaposition to soft power, the second aim of this research is to clearly delineate the distinction between these two concepts. To achieve this, the study provides an extensive theoretical discussion encompassing sharp power, soft power, and the broader concept of power. This analysis is grounded in a thorough examination of academic articles, reports, and books related to these three areas.

Secondly, As Walker and Ludwig argue, sharp power is an export of authoritarianism; in other words, it is the international projection of the social and political norms and practices exercised domestically. To better understand sharp power, it is essential to examine how certain tenets of the concept emerged within the domestic environment. Understanding societal aspects, such as cultural norms and collective perceptions, is crucial for a more comprehensive conceptualization of sharp power. This becomes especially important, as Richter contends, because Western societies and governments have rejected specific political practices often associated with sharp power due to their incompatibility with the societal norms and cultural customs dominant in the West. While authors tend to superficially reference the cultural and normative aspects of sharp power, it is imperative to delve deeper into these cultural dimensions in the formation of Russian sharp power.

Thirdly, this research aims to demonstrate the inter-relational nature of sharp power by illustrating how certain sharp power initiatives undertaken by Russia have significantly influenced domestic social norms. This focus on the reflexive and inter-relational characteristics of sharp power necessitates a social constructivist perspective. Such an approach is particularly essential, as conventional schools of International Relations primarily emphasize the state as the central actor, often overlooking the critical role of social and cultural norms and beliefs in shaping a country's foreign policy vision.

When integrating social constructivist or post-positivist theories of international relations, (Lamont, 2015) advocates for adopting an interpretivist epistemological stance. This approach is particularly advantageous for this research, as its aim is not to conduct investigative work or expose Russia's disinformation campaigns. Instead, the focus is on understanding how various elements of sharp power are shaped by religious beliefs, collective perceptions, and socio-cultural norms.

The interpretivist approach aligns well with the social constructivist ontological premise, particularly when considering the cultural distinctions emphasized by scholars of sharp power. These scholars argue that the conflict between authoritarian Russia and the democratic West is not merely geopolitical but also ideological. This ideological—or more precisely, ideational—antagonism is frequently highlighted not only by Russian leadership but also embedded in Russia's geopolitical tradition and messianic rhetoric.

Contemporary Russian sharp power tactics are predominantly centered on the issue of Ukraine. Russia seeks to justify the war, frame it to its own advantage, discredit the West, and undermine the image of Western countries not only among the Ukrainian population, but in the EU as well. Consequently, the empirical part of this research will focus on the period during which relations between Russia and the West began to significantly deteriorate—starting with the annexation of Crimea and intensifying after the full-scale Russian invasion. This period is crucial not only for providing illustrative examples of Russian sharp power but also because it marks a time when the international community began paying greater attention to Russia's foreign policy activities, which have significantly influenced how Russia is perceived in the West. The empirical part of this study will rely on academic works, commentary of the field experts, statistical data and report provided by research organizations or governmental entities, as well as on media coverage.

For the sake of academic rigor and to improve the flow of the text for ease of reading, AI tools, specifically platforms like Grammarly and ChatGPT, were incorporated. The original texts are retained separately.

2.1 METHODOLOGY TO CONCEPTUAL DECONSTRUCTION OF SHARP POWER

As discussed in the literature review section, at a theoretical level the concept of sharp power is insufficiently debated among scholars. The original definition proposed by Walker and Ludwig, which frames authoritarian influence as "piercing, penetrating, or perforating the political and informational environments of targeted countries," remains rather simplistic. While this definition is accessible and intuitively understandable, its straightforwardness has led to its uncritical adoption within sharp power scholarship. Admittedly, there are no good or bad, false or true theories; theories exist to describe reality, preferably with maximum accuracy. To refine this concept so that it more accurately describes the real-world phenomenon and to capture the true complexity of sharp power, a comprehensive methodological approach is essential.

A key objective of this dissertation, and of the literature review section in particular, is to develop a more refined and encompassing definition of sharp power. Since sharp power was conceptualized in juxtaposition to soft power, the foundational principles of soft power will serve as a framework for examining sharp power in this work. It is, therefore, crucial to identify both the commonalities and distinctions between these two concepts. To achieve this, each concept will be deconstructed, and their respective attributes compared and contrasted.

The purpose of this section is to outline a systematic approach for studying the concepts of sharp and soft power. However, it does not aim to provide a detailed analysis of the methods' application to the broader debate. The specifics of the application process will be discussed comprehensively in a separate chapter. This analysis will culminate in a process of "reverse operationalization." Typically, operationalization transforms abstract theories and concepts into measurable indicators; here, the reverse process will aim to generate a more precise and comprehensive definition of sharp power, aligned with the foundational principles of soft power. This reverse operationalization will involve breaking down sharp power into sub-concepts or indicators derived from the existing literature. As these indicators are scattered across numerous reports and academic works, this methodology will involve synthesizing these sources to reconstruct a theoretical framework for understanding sharp power through a multi-source, multilayered analysis.

To foster a genuinely constructive debate on the concepts of soft power and sharp power—particularly when the goal is to deconstruct and render them more instrumental—it is essential to first define what a concept entails. According to (Merriam-Webster, 2024), a concept is “an abstract or generic idea generalized from particular instances.” Similarly, (Toshkov, 2016) defines concepts as "generalizations and abstractions of empirical events and phenomena," while (Gschwend & Schimmelfennig, 2007) describe them as scientists' general statements about their empirical observations. In essence, a concept is a verbalized representation of reality that captures a phenomenon or a chain of phenomena. While this definition may seem intuitive, it serves as a critical foundation for the subsequent conceptualization of both soft power and sharp power.

This research must establish a clear framework for how these central concepts interact. Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig introduced the concept of sharp power to extend the scholarship on soft power, intending to alert both academics and policymakers to the reality that certain methods of influence are not as “soft” as previously assumed.

In this context, the notions of horizontal and vertical interrelationships between concepts become significant. (Toshkov, 2016) explains that vertical, or hierarchical, relationships occur when one concept is part of a broader concept, often signaled by an adjective. For example, *power* functions as a parent concept, encompassing child concepts like *hard power*, *soft power*, *sharp power*, and *smart power*. Conversely, horizontal, or lateral, relationships exist between concepts on the same conceptual plane. Since both soft power and sharp power represent forms of influence, although employing opposing means, they can be understood as horizontal concepts.

As the common ground for both soft power and sharp power has been established, it is crucial to outline the nature of concepts. The classical view suggests that concepts can be defined by identifying criteria that establish sufficient conditions (Toshkov, 2016). This approach is particularly effective in setting clear boundaries and categorizing concepts, allowing for the identification of their essential attributes. In contrast, the prototype view, initially introduced by Max Weber, posits that individuals often categorize concepts based on associations. For instance, people frequently identify an apple as a representative example of the concept of fruit, rather than a fig, despite both meeting the necessary criteria. This perspective provides a lens to analyze how scholars perceive sharp power, including the adjectives they associate with it and the sub-concepts (e.g., propaganda, disinformation) they attribute to it.

To effectively deconstruct both concepts, it is essential to first identify their structure. Gschwend and Schimmelfennig suggest that a concept consists of three components. First, every concept requires a name—referred to as a term—that succinctly represents the idea without encapsulating the entire theory. In our case, these terms are soft power and sharp power. Second, a concept’s intension comprises the attributes that define the concept and distinguish it from others. For sharp power, these attributes might include manipulation, censorship, and disinformation. Finally, a

concept's extension refers to its empirical representation—real-world applications such as countries, spheres of influence, or specific methods like disinformation campaigns.

The literature review demonstrates that few scholars, if any, engage in a conceptual debate on sharp power. Scholars often juxtapose sharp power with soft power without further elaboration. Consequently, it is essential to compare these concepts systematically, focusing on their attributes and sub-concepts. For this purpose, we must establish a rationale for categorizing each concept based on methods, sources, intentions, targets, and similar aspects.

Toshkov introduces intensional and extensional classification as tools for such categorization. Intensional classification involves identifying the features or attributes that constitute a concept and dividing them into subcategories. For instance, soft and sharp power can be categorized by their means of influence: cultural attraction and ideological appeal versus disinformation campaigns and censorship. As noted earlier, the implementation of these methods and a detailed classification will be provided in a later section, where these methods are applied to the concepts. Extensional classification refers to the process of categorizing the real-world implications of a concept. In other words, it is an inductive, data-driven method that focuses on observable cases and empirical instances. This approach enables us to classify actual events, such as diplomatic initiatives, specific disinformation campaigns, areas of influence (e.g., online platforms or published media), and target demographics, including linguistic or age-based groups. By anchoring concepts in tangible examples, extensional classification helps demonstrate how theoretical distinctions manifest in practice. This method will rely on case studies discussed by scholars to provide empirical support for the differentiation and comparison of sharp and soft power. If intensional classification outlines the inherent aspects of both soft and sharp power, extensional classification helps transform these abstract notions into empirical reality.

Two potential outcomes arise from classification: typologies and taxonomies. While a taxonomy can be useful in illustrating the hierarchical ordering of attributes of both soft and sharp power, it may lead to confusion due to overlaps with typological classifications or redundancy. In contrast, a typology proves more useful as it employs multiple classificatory principles. Attributes of both soft and sharp power, classified

based on these principles, are more suitable for comparison, discussion, and further conceptualization.

As more scholars engage with sharp power, the concept is unintentionally expanding, broadening, and evolving. This means that, for a deeper investigation or for the classification and comparison of sharp power with soft power, the concept must be reconceptualized in light of the contributions researchers have made to the sharp power debate. While this will not be the final revision expected to culminate the theoretical discussion on sharp power, it is a necessary step to transform the concept into a workable theory. In other words, we need to develop a preliminary definition of sharp power that can be systematically analyzed alongside soft power and power.

(Adcock & Collier, 2001) suggest that concept analysis occurs in two phases. The first phase refers to the concept at an early stage of development: it is verbally expressed, lacks strong categorization, has no clear boundaries, and contains gaps. Adcock and Collier term this a 'background concept.' In the second phase, a 'systematized concept,' all inherent attributes are clearly outlined. They see this process of conceptualization, or reconceptualization, as essential to ensure the concept is ready to be operationalized.

2.2 RATIONALE FOR THE LITERATURE REVIEW SOURCE SELECTION

The rationale behind the selection of sources was as follows: due to the lack of conceptual debate surrounding sharp power, the decision was made to include the most cited academic works, investigative analyses, empirical studies, reports, and commentaries by scholars exploring the concept. The aim was to understand how scholars perceive and characterize sharp power.

To provide a clearer logic for the intention behind this literature review, the principle of discourse coalitions proposed by Maarten A. Hajer is incorporated. Hajer's central thesis emphasizes the importance of linguistic representation in shaping understanding. While the positivist tradition views language as a neutral instrument for

describing knowledge, post-positivist thinkers regard language as a medium that generates knowledge and constitutes reality (Hajer, 1993, p. 44). Hajer argues that stakeholders—including authors, academics, journalists, and think tank organizations—can create a shared storyline: a discourse generated by a group of individuals that shapes how an idea, event, or phenomenon is understood. In other words, a shared storyline reflects the commonsensical or widely accepted understanding of a particular notion. According to Hajer, this shared storyline forms the foundation of a discourse coalition—a group of stakeholders who share a common interpretation or belief about a specific issue. Given that language is the primary medium for communicating complex ideas, Hajer asserts that understanding either the discourse or the shared storyline requires close attention to the shared interpretations that underpin them.

Regarding soft power, given that the term is widely accepted and extensively utilized, the focus shifted from providing numerous examples of its application to assessing the basic principles articulated by Nye, critiques of the concept, and Nye's responses to those critiques. Finally, the discussion of power, which predates the conceptualization of both soft and sharp power, concentrates on authors who can offer a theoretical framework for the study of both soft and sharp power. This approach deliberately excludes conventional analyses of power from schools such as classical realism or neoliberalism.

2.3 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF WESTERN ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE APPROPRIATION

One of the aims of this study is to examine Russian sharp power from a perspective that goes beyond the institutional focus commonly found in the existing sharp-power literature. Much of this literature concentrates on how authoritarian actors exploit the openness of democratic institutions, including media plurality, academic freedom, civil society, public debate, and the accessibility of information. While this institutional dimension is central to understanding sharp power, the present study argues that it does not fully capture the ideational mechanisms through which Russian influence operates. Accordingly, this dissertation approaches Russian sharp power also

through an ideational lens, hypothesizing that Russia seeks to exploit not only the institutional openness of Western societies, but also some of their intellectual strengths: academic thought, theoretical pluralism, traditions of self-criticism, and ideological debate. In this sense, Western academic and political concepts become resources that can be selectively appropriated, reinterpreted, and redeployed in Russian discourse to legitimize Russian foreign policy, discredit the West, and reshape perceptions of the war in Ukraine.

This does not imply that Western scholars or intellectual traditions are responsible for Russian narratives, nor that their arguments should be treated as propaganda. Rather, the point is that Russian political discourse often extracts specific concepts, arguments, or moral vocabularies from Western academic and public-intellectual traditions and places them into a different discursive context. Neorealist arguments about great-power politics, left-wing critiques of American imperialism, civilizational interpretations of international order, and liberal vocabularies of victimhood or discrimination can all be used to speak to Western audiences in familiar terms. The underlying message is not simply that Russia is right, but that Western audiences should recognize Russia's claims because "even" Western theories, scholars, or moral traditions appear to confirm them.

As this study examines how the Russian political elite uses Western academic knowledge when addressing Western audiences — whether at governmental, academic, or broader societal levels — it adopts discourse analysis as its main methodological approach. The purpose of this method is to detect and interpret how theories and concepts originating largely in Western academic traditions are incorporated into Russian political discourse and then reworked for political purposes. The analysis is therefore not concerned only with whether Russian officials or commentators cite Western authors correctly. More importantly, it asks how academic concepts become politically useful: how they are removed from their original theoretical context, adjusted to a new narrative, and used to justify Russia's foreign policy, discredit the West, or weaken the agency of Ukraine.

The discourse-analytical part of the dissertation partly builds on an earlier publication by the author (Pareishvili, 2026), where Russian political discourse was examined in relation to the selective appropriation of Western academic knowledge.

The present study, however, substantially revises and expands that argument by placing it within a broader theoretical framework of Russian sharp power, democratic openness, and the appropriation of Western knowledge.

The methodological logic of this paper draws mainly on the discourse-analytical approaches of Jennifer Milliken and David Campbell. These authors are useful because both treat language not as a neutral reflection of reality, but as something that actively participates in the construction of political meaning. In this sense, discourse does not simply describe threats, identities, or interests; it helps produce them. Milliken's work is especially useful for understanding how discourse can be analyzed, while Campbell's contribution is important for explaining why discourse matters in the study of foreign policy and security.

Campbell argues that security does not merely respond to threats that already exist independently of language. Rather, threats are articulated and made meaningful through repeated discursive practices (Campbell, 1998). Foreign policy is therefore not simply a reaction to external danger, but also a product of the ways in which danger is narrated, named, and normalized. This is particularly relevant in the Russian case. Russian political discourse frequently presents the country as a victim of Western expansionism, Russophobia, neocolonial pressure, and existential threats to its sovereignty, identity, and historical role. These narratives do not only express Russia's worldview; they also help construct a political reality in which Russian foreign policy can appear defensive, necessary, or morally justified.

Campbell's emphasis on identity construction is equally important for this study. Political identities are often formed through opposition — by drawing boundaries between “us” and “them.” Russian discourse repeatedly constructs the West as hypocritical, expansionist, morally declining, or hostile to Russia's civilizational identity. At the same time, Russia is presented as defensive, sovereign, misunderstood, spiritually authentic, and historically entitled to resist Western pressure. This oppositional logic also allows Russian political actors to move between different ideological registers depending on the audience and context. At times, Russia speaks in the language of neorealist security concerns; at other times, it adopts anti-imperialist, postcolonial, conservative, civilizational, or liberal-progressive vocabularies of victimhood and discrimination. The broader purpose of appropriating these academic

and intellectual vocabularies is to speak to Western audiences “in their own language”: to imply that even Western theories, Western scholars, and Western moral traditions confirm what Russia is trying to argue.

Milliken’s approach further strengthens this analysis by offering three central premises for discourse analysis. First, discourses function as systems of signification: they produce meaning by linking words, concepts, actors, and events into recognizable patterns. Second, discourse is productive, because it shapes what can be said, known, or accepted as legitimate in a given political context. Third, discourse moves into practice: through repetition and institutionalization, certain narratives become normalized and begin to shape policy, identity, and common sense. These premises are useful for this study because Russian actors do not simply refer to Western academic knowledge; they re-signify it and insert it into a different political project (Milliken, 1999).

Drawing on Milliken and Campbell, this paper therefore treats Russian discourse as a field in which academic concepts are selectively appropriated and politically redeployed. The analysis focuses on how theories associated with authors such as Mearsheimer, Huntington, Chomsky, Said, Harvey, and others are invoked, echoed, or adapted in order to construct particular interpretations of the Russo-Ukrainian war and Russia’s confrontation with the West. The aim is not to reconstruct each of these authors’ arguments in full. Rather, the focus is on how fragments of these traditions become useful within Russian discourse. Neorealist arguments help present Russia as a reactive great power responding to security threats. Anti-imperialist critique helps portray Ukraine as an instrument of American power. Civilizational theory helps represent Russia and Ukraine as belonging to a shared Orthodox or post-Western space. Liberal vocabularies of phobia, discrimination, or victimhood help reframe criticism of Russia as Russophobia.

The empirical material consists of public speeches, interviews, written statements, and media appearances by figures who occupy different but interconnected positions within Russian political discourse. These include official state representatives, particularly Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov, as well as influential public intellectuals and commentators such as Vladimir Pozner and Fyodor Lukyanov. The latter are often presented as independent voices, but they remain closely connected to a broader Kremlin-compatible discursive environment. These sources were selected not because

they represent the entirety of Russian political thought, but because they offer visible and relevant examples of how Russian actors communicate with both domestic and international audiences. They are especially useful because they combine political messaging with references to academic concepts, geopolitical theories, moral claims, and debates already familiar to Western audiences.

The source selection is therefore purposive rather than exhaustive. The analyzed materials were chosen because they reveal recurring patterns that are central to the argument of this paper: the construction of Russia as a defensive or victimized actor; the weakening or denial of Ukrainian agency; the framing of the West as hypocritical, imperial, or morally degraded; and the strategic use of Western intellectual traditions to make Russian narratives appear more credible. This selection also makes it possible to examine discourse across several levels: official diplomatic discourse, para-official expert discourse, and internationally oriented media commentary. While the corpus is necessarily limited, it is sufficient for illustrating the central methodological claim of the paper: that Russian sharp power operates not only through disinformation, censorship, or institutional interference, but also through the appropriation and re-signification of Western academic knowledge.

3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This brief chapter addresses several limitations of the present study. Emphasizing these limitations upholds academic rigor within social and political sciences, reduces the risk of misinterpretation or undue critique, and ensures transparency regarding the scope of the research. Given the interpretative nature of the analysis, it is important to acknowledge that the findings should not be regarded as conclusive. By identifying areas that fall outside the scope of this study, this chapter also aims to inspire further scholarly exploration of the concept of sharp power.

3.1 DIFFICULTIES WITH MEASURING SOFT POWER

One significant limitation of this study, which requires a separate and detailed discussion, stems from Todd Hall's critical analysis of the concept of soft power. While (Hall, 2010) acknowledges that soft power, as a category of practice or a tool of everyday language, can simplify discussions of international affairs and enhance their accessibility, he remains skeptical of its utility as a universal analytical concept. Hall critiques the notion of soft power as a category of analysis that can be generalized or uniformly applied across diverse cases. In particular, he questions whether soft power can serve as a reliable metric for evaluating a country's success.

A potential response to Hall's valid critique would involve developing tools to measure soft power capabilities more effectively. Such measurements could offer quantifiable insights into whether and to what extent a country's soft power is successful. At present, contemporary scholarship relies heavily on data from organizations such as the IMF, Brand Finance, and ECFR, as well as other governmental, non-governmental, and private entities. These sources primarily focus on quantifiable aspects, such as soft power spending by various governments, often accompanied by limited qualitative analysis. While these efforts are commendable, they capture only a fraction of the broader picture.

The absence of a universally agreed-upon definition of soft power complicates these efforts. Without a clear conceptual foundation, assessing soft power expenditures in isolation offers little insight into their actual effectiveness. One possible approach to measuring soft power is its operationalization and deconstruction into smaller components. While this might yield somewhat clearer answers—and a similar attempt is made in this study—soft power encompasses such a vast array of nuanced aspects that conducting multiple, separate studies would be necessary to assess a single country's soft power within a specific society, let alone on a global scale.

Joseph Nye's (2010) suggestion to rely on public opinion polls and related statistics as metrics for soft power also presents significant challenges. For instance, in authoritarian regimes, individuals may struggle to express their opinions freely, and even where such freedom exists, the sincerity of responses cannot always be assumed. Furthermore, subconscious biases, tendencies, and psychological factors often shape public perceptions, adding layers of complexity to any such analysis. In other words,

even genuinely sincere respondents may be unaware of their own biases or the honesty of their answers.

A comprehensive evaluation of soft power may require an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from fields beyond international relations, political science, and social sciences. These complexities extend to sharp power as well, making it equally challenging to assess its success or failure. Consequently, this study necessarily incorporates speculative claims about the relative success or failure of soft power and sharp power in various contexts, given the inherent difficulties of measurement.

3.2 EXCLUSIVE AUTHORITARIAN NATURE OF SHARP POWER

Another significant limitation of this study stems from the adjective that Walker and Ludwig ascribe to the term: *authoritarian* sharp power. Numerous scholars emphasize that sharp power, as a tool of foreign policy or as part of international affairs, is predominantly an authoritarian phenomenon. Considering its core traits—monopoly over information, censorship, persecution of dissent, subjugation and silencing of free media, disinformation campaigns, and similar practices—it is not difficult to conclude that sharp power indeed has an inherently authoritarian nature. However, this does not preclude the possibility that, given its effectiveness, sharp power methods could be adopted by non-authoritarian governments.

Defining sharp power exclusively as an authoritarian phenomenon naturally raises a critical question: are democratic states also engaged in sharp power efforts, or is it inherently an authoritarian practice?

(Richter, 2022) offers normative and institutional arguments to explain why sharp power is not prevalent in democratic systems. He contends that democratic principles, such as public and individual liberties, are fundamentally incompatible with sharp power methods. Consequently, adopting foreign influence practices resembling democratic norms domestically excludes the possibility of sharp power. Following Walker and Ludwig's logic—that sharp power is an export of domestic

authoritarianism—Richter argues that the institutional framework of democratic systems does not support sharp power tactics domestically. Furthermore, since democratic systems lack experience with such methods at home, they would find it ineffective or counterproductive to employ them internationally.

These arguments are compelling; however, examining potential sharp power practices carried out by democratic states could help determine the extent of alleged “democratic” sharp power. Such an analysis would enable comparisons between the scale at which authoritarian and democratic states employ sharp power methods.

As this research focuses primarily on the conceptual differentiation between soft and sharp power, as well as the social and cultural dimensions of sharp power, it is essential to undertake a separate study that specifically compares the practices of sharp power in authoritarian and democratic contexts.

4 LITERATURE REVIEW OF SHARP POWER, SOFT POWER, AND POWER

Stigler’s law of eponymy posits that scientific discoveries, theories, or concepts are often named after the individuals who popularized them, rather than those who originally conceived them. As pointed out by Stephen Stigler, a Nobel laureate in Economics, “... there is a tendency to read recent literature but not to look back too far... people back at that time were doing interesting things and asking modern questions—just not with the framework we have today” (Lund, 2021). In a self-deprecating manner, Stephen Stigler named the law after himself.

This trend is prevalent in the field of International Relations and other political science disciplines, where students are encouraged to rely on relatively recent literature. A classic example is *The End of History*, a notion often associated with Francis Fukuyama but originally suggested by Hegel. This pattern is evident in relation to the main concepts of this research: soft power and sharp power. Not to imply that either

Joseph Nye or Christopher Walker misappropriated the concepts of soft power and sharp power, scholars had been exploring the components and aspects of these very notions long before Nye or Walker introduced them to wider audiences.

While my primary focus is on independently exploring the concepts of soft power and sharp power, the central debate surrounding both appears to revolve around the very notion of *power* itself. This presents a twofold challenge. Firstly, Joseph Nye's interpretation of *power* lacks systematic discussion, often leading scholars to initiate metatheoretical debates. These debates primarily focus on the ontological roots of *power* before delving into the specific behavioral aspects of soft power. Secondly, Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig introduced the concept of sharp power based on Nye's argumentation, presenting it as somewhat akin to soft power. As we will see, authors investigating sharp power, whether in China, Russia, or elsewhere, juxtapose sharp power to the notion of soft power. Similar to Nye's case, their discussion lacks the same theoretical inquiry, becoming even more evident as they automatically accept the ideas suggested by Nye.

Admittedly, there is nothing inherently wrong with accepting the theses of either Walker and Ludwig or Nye. However, the absence of conceptual debate within the scholarship on sharp power is a clear indicator that the term remains at a very early stage of development.

It is noteworthy that Nye's relatively simplistic interpretation of 'power' proves useful, allowing for a comprehensible understanding of his concept and conveniently establishing logical lines for the development of this research. For instance, (Zahran & Ramos, 2010, p. 17) highlight that Nye provides a straightforward distinction between the sources of soft and hard powers: while hard power utilizes military force, economic means, population, terrain, territory, and other measurable variables, soft power relies on ideational factors such as ideologies, culture, institutions, values, and customs. Admittedly, some of these ideational factors can still be transformed into measurable and quantifiable variables. As will be demonstrated, several scholars dissent from Nye's ostensibly commonsensical interpretation of soft power and provide constructive critiques concerning the principal components of this concept.

The original plan was to commence the analysis of the notions of soft power and sharp power by delving into the essence of *power* itself, gradually constructing the argument leading to the two central concepts under examination in this paper. However, due to the limited existing literature on the concept of sharp power and its relatively straightforward definition, the decision was made to provide an overview of the current literature concerning sharp power. In doing so, the primary inadequacies pertaining to the definitions of the concept are highlighted.

Subsequently, the aim is to undertake an examination of the literature pertaining to the concept of *power* presented by notable scholars in the fields of philosophy, political science, and international relations, starting from the early 20th century and continuing onward. This comprehensive analysis will facilitate the identification of a reasonably cogent explanation of what sharp power entails and how it might be interpreted.

At the same time, this chapter aims not only to propose more nuanced definitions for each term but also to explore the areas where these two concepts intersect and overlap. For instance, researchers frequently argue that sharp power includes practices such as bribing foreign governments. Contrary to this, given the fundamental principle of soft power—voluntarism, that must be also present in the case of sharp power—bribery, as a potential indicator common to both concepts, loses its relevance when considered within this framework. Moreover, both sharp power and soft power initiatives typically target societies rather than individuals, with exceptions being relatively rare. Given the vast size and scope of societies—often encompassing the entire population of a single country or even populations across multiple countries—they generally fall outside the category of entities that can be directly bribed. This short example highlights the need to rule out similar irrelevant, redundant, or vague notions when defining sharp power.

For clarity and smoother progression of the literature review section, the following structure is proposed. Following a brief introductory segment, the concepts of soft power, sharp power, and power will be discussed individually, with minor intersections addressed as needed. Each concept's discussion, that draws upon the provided literature, with a summary of key findings and trends related to each concept, will be presented in a separate chapter dedicated to deconstruction and conceptual

analysis of the terms. In the concluding part of the chapter, a separate segment will aim to integrate the findings from each conceptual debate, ultimately proposing a more nuanced definition of sharp power.

4.1 WHAT IS SHARP POWER?

In November 2017, *Foreign Affairs* published an article positing that soft power had evolved into a more pungent, intrusive form of political, cultural, and ideational influence. Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, scholars from the National Endowment for Democracy, introduced an enhanced definition of contemporary soft power, denoting a discernible shift toward a more incisive and penetrating form they labeled "sharp" power: "Authoritarian influence efforts are "sharp" in the sense that they pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments in the targeted countries" (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). As we will see, this convenient, artistic, yet simplistic definition of sharp power is common in the work of scholars and researchers examining authoritarian methods of influence. Based on how often it is quoted verbatim, it appears that this very sentence has been widely accepted as the definition of sharp power.

Supposedly, this particular piece from *Foreign Affairs* is the most important text regarding sharp power as it introduces and establishes the primary premises for the concept, forming the foundation upon which the entire scholarship on sharp power is constructed. Through this text and the subsequent series, we can ultimately extract the fundamental elements that constitute sharp power. It will contribute to the research by outlining potential analytical components that will ultimately be translated into sub-concepts, practical indicators and variables. Subsequently, these sub-concepts and indicators will guide us in reconceptualizing sharp power through a more systematic analysis.

The crux of the article underscores the notable efforts by authoritarian states such as China and Russia to sway democratic societies following the Cold War. Contrary to Nye's previous claims regarding soft power's appeal, sharp power employs disruptive, manipulative, and coercive tactics aimed at undermining the institutions of

democratic states. Significantly, the focus of these sharp power efforts in the young Eastern democracies lies in tarnishing the image of democracy, liberal values, and the broader Western world. These authoritarian states seek not to enhance their global image but to discredit the West, thus gaining leverage and influence in the targeted regions.

They offer two examples of sharp power, each describing the influence efforts by China and Russia. In the case of China, authors argue that through Confucius Institutes, China seeks to influence academic discourse in Western countries. The Confucius Institutes and their branches appear to be particularly sensitive to certain topics, such as the Tiananmen Square events, Tibet's independence, and the mistreatment of Uyghurs. Walker and Ludwig emphasize that the Confucius Institute applies pressure on its staff to censor narratives deemed threatening by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Clearly, this kind of behaviour undermines academic norms and infringes upon academic freedom and openness. In the case of Russia, it appears that by the time Walker and Ludwig were writing their article, the most prominent example of Russian sharp power was Russia Today, now known as RT. They argue that RT's efforts aimed to shift the views of the international community in favor of Russian state institutions. According to Walker and Ludwig, RT attempts to portray Vladimir Putin, who by then had been in power for nearly two decades, as a leader equally legitimate as democratically elected counterparts. How can similar legitimacy be attributed to two fundamentally opposing cases—democratically elected leaders and an authoritarian ruler? Walker and Ludwig provide a compelling example that may serve as a distinguishing point between soft and sharp power. Rather than enhancing the image of Russia or its leadership, they argue, equating the Russian and Western political systems requires portraying the Western system as being equally flawed as the Russian.

Without invoking Huntington's notion of a Clash of Civilizations, Walker and Ludwig combine Russian and Chinese sharp power efforts with a shared argument: both systems adopt an ideological stance that favors the state over the individual, prioritizes power over liberty, and displays inherent hostility toward openness, freedom of expression, and various forms of individual liberties (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). As we will see later, many others share this perspective regarding the origins of sharp power. While scholars typically attribute the concept to less free political structures, many argue that sharp power as a method of influence has not thrived in democratic societies

due to the strong adherence to various liberties at the state, societal, and individual levels. This is an important argument, as it opens the possibility of raising an additional question about the socio-political aspects of sharp power's origins. However, the notion of a civilizational clash is deliberately avoided, as the term *civilization* is highly contested and encompasses far more than social and political norms.

The authors use the traditional soft power idiom and argue that sharp power is not about "winning hearts and minds," but rather about manipulating target audiences. They emphasize that one of the objectives of sharp power is to amplify existing societal divisions and spread narratives that weaken Western institutions. For instance, in Eastern and Central European countries, Russia attempts to disseminate a narrative designed to sow confusion within these societies and undermine their allegiance to Western institutions such as NATO and the EU. This approach, while carefully avoiding direct mention of Russia or its achievements, aims to corrode Western institutions from within, furthering Russia's geopolitical ambitions. Walker and Ludwig refer to the societies affected by these efforts not as mere "audiences" but as "victims."

Walker and Ludwig introduce the concept of 'asymmetry' to describe how authoritarian regimes exploit the openness of democratic systems (Walker & Ludwig, 2017). On one hand, these regimes view the transparency and freedom of democratic societies as weaknesses, leveraging them to spread disinformation, undermine democratic values, and manipulate free speech for their own gain. They establish influence within Western academia, censor critical perspectives, and suppress discussion on topics sensitive to their interests. On the other hand, these same regimes maintain a monopoly over their domestic information and knowledge spheres, ensuring that no independent media or external actors can penetrate their controlled environment. In other words, they block external influence within their own countries while fully exploiting the accessibility of democratic systems. In other words, Walker and Ludwig suggest that sharp power represents the global export of authoritarianism.

A central concern highlighted by the authors is the passivity of the Western powers. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, leading democracies assumed that integration and engagement with repressive regimes would prompt immediate progress within these states. However, in a global landscape that grew increasingly uniform, these countries made limited strides in advancing civil liberties and

fundamental human rights. Authoritarians were able to preserve and extend their authority, gaining the capacity to permeate the political, social, and media spheres of democratic systems. Hence, they call for the need to update the conceptual vocabulary so that Western societies – whether policymakers, academics, or other stakeholders – can distinguish between benign soft power, which may involve cultural events and public diplomacy, and malign sharp power, which harms the institutions of democratic societies. It is noteworthy that not only do Walker and Ludwig quote Joseph Nye, but the concept of sharp power itself was developed in contrast to Nye’s conception of soft power.

While the first widely known article was published as an op-ed in *Foreign Affairs*, Christopher Walker in 2018 presented a much lengthier academic article in the *Journal of Democracy*. In this piece, Walker identifies two main challenges facing the contemporary democratic world. The first challenge is what he describes as a "democratic downturn"—a rejection of fundamental democratic principles and a shift toward more authoritarian styles of governance in societies such as Hungary, the Philippines, and Turkey, countries once celebrated for their democratic aspirations (Walker, 2018). The second, and more important to this discussion, is the ideational influence coming from Russia and China and targeting democratic states. This influence is ideational in the sense that it seeks to shape how democratic societies think and perceive key notions, be it democratic institutions, elections, political and social norms associated with liberal democracy, etc.

Walker highlights three primary channels through which this influence manifests: culture, academia, and publishing. He provides examples of Chinese and Russian efforts to interfere in academic life in the United States and the United Kingdom. These include removing critical academic articles from libraries or online platforms, censoring sensitive topics or discussions, and obstructing research projects at Western universities that might portray these regimes in a negative light.

In 2019, Christopher Walker presented testimony before the U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. He reiterated the core premises of his thesis, focusing primarily on China's application of sharp power and the associated risks it poses. At this hearing, (Walker, 2019) describes sharp power as “efforts at censorship and the use of manipulation to degrade the integrity of independent institutions.” He

emphasizes that, unlike soft power, sharp power restricts free expression and distorts the political environment.

Agreeing with Nye, Walker also concludes that sharp power is primarily an authoritarian form of influence, given that authoritarian regimes are generally unsuccessful in wielding soft power (Walker, 2018). This shortcoming arises from the inherent nature of authoritarian systems: the government exerts constant control over its people, suppresses free thought, and seeks to embed its narrative or agenda within the outputs of civil society—whether in music, film, literature, or journalism. As a result, a country's soft power is significantly diminished. Walker expresses concern that, despite their lack of soft power, authoritarian states are still highly effective at projecting their influence. This success, he argues, stems from a fundamental misconception held by Western academics and policymakers regarding the nature of authoritarian states' soft power efforts, which are, in fact, sharp.

Openness to foreign media is, admittedly, a hallmark of democracy, as it allows for the diversification of information sources and the exploration of alternative perspectives. However, in a 2020 interview, Walker emphasized that the methods employed by Russia and China were not intended to promote media plurality or provide alternative viewpoints. Instead, their aim was to remove certain topics from the agenda, sow doubt, and create confusion (Walker, 2020). Walker highlights cases of Chinese authorities intimidating Italian journalists, underscoring a stark departure from soft power principles. Multiple reports confirm that journalists critical of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or China's influence in Italy have faced personal threats from representatives of the Chinese embassy (Freedom House, 2022). As the section covering the literature on soft power will show, brute force and coercion have never been components of soft power. Since this research uses voluntary will as the common ground between soft power and sharp power, intimidation emerges as a critical dividing point of between the two.

It seems that sharp power shares a parallel trajectory with soft power. Much like Walker and Ludwig, who almost instinctively adopt Nye's conception of soft power, authors delving into sharp power similarly embrace the fundamental definitions and characteristics proposed by Walker and Ludwig. The following paragraphs will attempt to highlight this very tendency. Before engaging with other authors, it is important to

first illustrate how the concept is discussed by researchers affiliated with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a think tank represented by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig. Between 2018 and 2021, NED in collaboration with the Forum for Democratic Studies, disseminated a series of reports delineating diverse manifestations of sharp power wielded by authoritarian regimes, with a particular focus on Russia and China. Admittedly, the series examines a limited number of Russian manifestations but predominantly delves into Chinese instances of sharp power. Two plausible explanations could be suggested: either there was a notable lack of interest in Russia for unspecified reasons, or since the Obama administration, China has been perceived as the primary geopolitical challenge to the United States.

The following paragraphs elucidate salient features of these reports, crafted with the collaborative efforts of nearly a dozen scholars. These paragraphs seek to reveal that the foundational concept of sharp power remains largely uncontested and enjoys broad consensus. Equally important, the series addresses various aspects of political and social life that could help us to establish the indicators of sharp power.

The aspects discussed in this series encompass areas ranging from media and educational systems to less expected fields such as infrastructure. For example, according to one of the reports of the series, China possesses the capability to exploit technologies employed in smart city projects across the Middle East and North Africa, enabling the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to exert control over populations by acquiring resident data, particularly within recently established or developing democratic systems (Hoffman, 2021). Hoffman attributes sharp power characteristics to technology when it is utilized for the surveillance of Chinese nationals abroad, with the intent to censor activities related to the CCP. Although Hoffman does not provide a detailed analysis of the sharp power term itself, her arguments imply that surveillance and censorship could be considered significant indicators of sharp power.

Nicholas D. Wright's report focuses on surveillance and artificial intelligence, particularly in relation to China, much like the previous report. Wright expresses concern that China's development of a highly authoritarian digital environment domestically may lead to efforts to standardize this system internationally (Wright, 2020). His primary concern is not with established democracies, with strong civil societies capable of resisting mass surveillance, but with newly emerged democracies.

These younger democracies, characterized by weak democratic traditions and financial dependence on China, may veer away from democratic norms. This deviation could manifest in the curtailment of individual liberties, widespread monitoring of populations and their personal data—including personal messages, criminal records, health information, credit history, and social networks—and the eventual suppression of dissent, thereby eroding democratic processes.

In the 2018 report of the same series titled *The Hard Edge of Sharp Power: Understanding China's Influence Operations Abroad*, J. Michael Cole not only references Joseph Nye but extensively quotes Walker and Ludwig. While acknowledging that "we are in the initial phases of understanding the nature and scope of China's sharp power challenge" (Cole, 2018, p. 5), he defines sharp power as political warfare and influence operations, placing significant emphasis on co-optation, bribery, disinformation, censorship, and propaganda. Given that these terms are somewhat vague, albeit commonly employed in contemporary politics, Cole admits the challenge in distinguishing between a country's soft power and sharp power endeavors. In line with Walker and Ludwig, when dissecting China's sharp power activities, Cole points to disinformation campaigns launched in foreign countries to sow doubt about democratic governments and undermine democratic institutions. While Cole does not delve extensively into the concept of sharp power, he delineates three principal domains where China's sharp power manifests: political and economic elites, media and public opinion, and civil society and academia.

Freedom House's Sarah Cook aligns with her counterparts at the NED. In her contribution to the sharp power series, she presents the methods of influence employed by the Chinese Communist Party: propaganda, disinformation, censorship, and exerting influence over key actors in the information flow (Cook, 2021). At the NED conference, Cook asserts that China spreads disinformation that is not directly related to China. According to her, the aim is to undermine democratic governments and foster skepticism among societies toward democratic institutions and the concept of democracy itself (National Endowment for Democracy, 2023).

In their report from the same series, Ruslan Stefanov and Martin Vladimirov investigate Russia's economic and financial influence over Latin America. The authors assert that local Latin American private companies that receive financial support from

Russia, often in the form of development loans, become disproportionately dependent on Russian influence (Stefanov & Vladimirov, 2020). Consequently, these companies are co-opted as instruments of Russia's sharp power, exerting influence by censoring and manipulating local media, academic institutions, and cultural spheres. The authors contend that Russia is particularly adept at shaping public opinion against liberal democratic values, with a specific focus on discrediting Western governments and undermining liberal democracy.

Glenn Tiffert explores the influence exerted by authoritarian governments on the academic freedom of Western societies. In his contribution to NED's Sharp Power series, (Tiffert, 2020) highlights the challenges facing Western academia. Universities, functioning as independent entities, often rely on financial support that increasingly comes from authoritarian regimes, particularly the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This reliance is exacerbated by the decentralized nature of Western universities, where academics are responsible for securing their own funding. China exploits this vulnerability, leading to a form of financial dependence that frequently compromises academic freedom. Scholars, fearing the loss of financial support, may avoid addressing topics sensitive to the CCP. Tiffert identifies censorship as a key manifestation of Chinese sharp power.

Not surprisingly financial considerations influence not only academia but also the media. Edward Lucas provides what is arguably the most comprehensive report in the series, focusing on the authoritarian influence over Western media and newly established media outlets. Authoritarian governments view freedom of speech not merely as a vulnerability but as an opportunity to manipulate democratic societies. (Lucas, 2020) identifies several key issues:

1. Lack of regulation or fact-checking: Lucas argues that while tobacco companies cannot claim that cigarettes are safe, and pharmaceutical companies cannot deny the addictiveness of opioids, media outlets in the West are largely free to make any assertions they choose. The primary risk they face is to their reputation.
2. Ethical dilemmas: In the West, media is a business. Consequently, media outlets prioritize selling news. As 'consumers' often focus on local regions, politicians, or individuals, media organizations tend to create sensational and

often-times scandalous content to capture attention. This sensationalism can undermine local political establishments, fostering significant distrust and political nihilism.

3. Financial pressures: On one hand, the cost of running a media outlet has decreased, as it no longer requires physical offices or large staffs—today, anyone can operate an online media platform. On the other hand, established media outlets are struggling due to public distrust, political polarization, and economic challenges. These aspects make established media vulnerable to the authoritarian influence.

In the separate segment dedicated to Russian sharp power influence over the Western media, Lucas outlines several methods that is exercised by Russia:

1. Russian media outlets, such as Rossiskaya Gazeta, RT, Sputnik, etc. attempt to plant disbelief among the Western societies towards the democratic institutions. Two of the main messages is that the Western media should not be trusted, and that Russian media may provide an alternative truth.
2. Sputnik does not charge other media platforms for using its information. This is especially profitable for newly established media outlets that strongly rely on various information sources. As these outlets become critical of the Kremlin, they immediately lose their access to Sputnik.
3. The third method is to secretly finance the main competitors of the well-established local media outlets. These media outlets usually publish information that is obtained by the Russian intelligence.

In the section dedicated to Russian sharp power influence over Western media, several sharp power indicators can be emphasized: cyberattacks, disinformation, planting doubt towards democratic institutions, manipulation of public discourse, financial coercion, etc. In this section Lucas outlines several methods employed by Russia:

1. Russian media outlets, such as Rossiskaya Gazeta, RT, and Sputnik, seek to instill doubt among Western societies regarding democratic institutions. Two primary messages are promoted: that Western media should be mistrusted, and that Russian media offers an alternative truth.

2. Sputnik does not charge other media platforms for utilizing its information. This arrangement is particularly advantageous for newly established media outlets that rely heavily on diverse information sources. However, when these outlets become critical of the Kremlin, they swiftly lose access to Sputnik's resources.
3. A third method involves covertly financing the main competitors of established local media outlets. These rival media organizations often disseminate information obtained from Russian intelligence.

In many cases, authoritarian regimes attempt to mimic democratic models to legitimize their rule. In the NED series, Nadège Rolland provides a thorough examination of how authoritarian governments acquire think tanks that create a deceptive appearance of diversity to support their regime. She argues that these think tanks, although presented as independent entities, are actually under full government control (Rolland, 2020). For instance, Vladimir Yakunin, the head of the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute in Vienna, Austria, is closely connected with Vladimir Putin, with whom he previously shared real estate in the Leningrad region. Yakunin served as the president of Russian Railways for a decade and has been subject to U.S. financial and travel sanctions since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (Office of Foreign Assets Control, 2024). Representatives from these think tanks—scholars, experts, and journalists—frequently appear on local television channels, reinforcing governmental positions and narratives. Rolland employs the concept of asymmetry, as discussed by Walker and Ludwig, to illustrate how Russia exploits the openness of Western academic circles to advance its agenda through think tanks while maintaining strict control over the academic environment domestically.

Walker and Ludwig revisit the key elements of sharp power in an extensive article that summarizes the previously discussed reports. Unfortunately, they do not provide a new definition of sharp power or engage in a systematic, scientific analysis of the concept, which could have included theoretical discussions on related terms such as soft power, influence, disinformation, censorship, or manipulation. Nevertheless, their article presents several noteworthy claims.

First, the authors suggest that the fundamental principle of sharp power is the control over information and ideas. Sharp power can be understood as the complete domestic dominance over the knowledge sector, including media, the internet,

academia, think tanks, cinematography, high culture, and pop culture, which is then exported internationally. This is an important notion, as it provides a valuable framework for proposing a more refined definition of sharp power.

Then Walker and Ludwig argue that interactions between democracies and autocracies tend to have a more detrimental impact on democracies than on autocracies (Walker & Ludwig, 2021). This imbalance stems from the openness of democratic systems, in contrast to the severe restrictions on freedom of speech and other liberties imposed by autocratic regimes. They contend that the most valuable characteristics of democratic information and education systems—openness and accessibility—are perceived as weaknesses by authoritarian governments and are heavily exploited. This argument ties back to the concept of 'asymmetry' introduced in their earlier article in *Foreign Affairs*. While authoritarian regimes claim that their broadcasters provide alternative news to the world, they simultaneously restrict access to independent media within their own borders.

The suppression of speech is central to the concept of sharp power. In China, the government silences those who speak out against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or express secessionist sentiments. Similarly, in Russia, government entities suppress dissent and target individuals critical of the Kremlin. As the report was published in 2021, it makes no mention of the so-called 'special military operation' or the Russo-Ukrainian war. However, as this dissertation will demonstrate, since February 2022, the suppression and repression of war critics have become a primary focus of the Russian state apparatus.

The authors oppose the notion that sharp power is exclusively tied to cyber or information warfare, arguing that it encompasses various aspects of public and political life. More importantly, they reject the idea that sharp power is simply a form of censorship practiced domestically and exported abroad. As sharp power extends into knowledge sectors, including academia and think tanks, Walker and Ludwig acknowledge that it has acquired an additional dimension: the creation of specific narratives. They caution that, while think tanks in Western societies are generally considered independent, in autocratic regimes they are not only closely affiliated with their governments but also financially dependent and tightly controlled.

Some media outlets, particularly in developing economies or those competing with more established media, often fall into the trap of financial dependency on autocratic sponsors. A key issue is that these analyses overlook the possibility that individuals working in these media outlets, the media environment, or the targeted societies may be ideologically aligned with these autocratic sponsors. In other words, the ideational factor is frequently neglected in these discussions.

Common recommendations for countering authoritarian sharp power include improving media and political literacy, fostering freedom of speech, protecting privacy, coordinating among democracies to counteract the ‘divide and conquer’ tactics employed by authoritarian states, and ensuring that civil society is institutionally integrated to enhance resilience against disinformation and manipulation.

This series reveals a lack of novelty in terms of conceptual debate over sharp power. Every author involved in the series, except for J. Michael Cole, expresses satisfaction with the initial definition proposed by Walker and Ludwig. Cole acknowledges that there is potential for further development of the concept. What is especially noteworthy is the overall consensus among all the authors that Russia’s failure to effectively wield soft power led it to resort to the use of sharp power strategies.

The following paragraphs present the perspectives of authors not affiliated with the NED regarding the concept. The first notable observation when searching for terminology on Google Scholar is that while academic articles related to soft power typically receive citations in the double digits, those addressing sharp power garner significantly fewer citations. Most authors tend to follow a similar approach: they begin by analyzing the basic principles of soft power and then proceed to introduce the concept of sharp power, often accepting the foundational premises suggested by Nye and Walker.

In contrast to Cole, who endeavors to contribute to the sharp power scholarship, Mankikar straightforwardly echoes the concepts put forth by Walker and Ludwig (Mankikar, 2022). He emphasizes culture, education, and the media as the primary target fields of the authoritarian systems. What is particularly significant here is Mankikar’s assertion, which resonates with one of the foundational premises of this

dissertation: to compensate for the limitations of its soft power, the CCP has integrated sharp power strategies.

Alexander Richter, drawing extensively on the works of Nye, Walker, and Ludwig, offers a compelling definition of sharp power by distinguishing it from soft power. While soft power seeks to enhance the attractiveness of the state employing it, sharp power aims to diminish the appeal of other states (Richter, 2022, pp. 658-660). In this sense, when Russia or China engage in sharp power, the focus is not solely on promoting themselves but on undermining the targeted states. In line with other scholars, Richter attempts to operationalize the concept of sharp power, identifying three key indicators:

1. Corrosion of institutions: Sharp power undermines democratic institutions, including academic freedom, media plurality, and freedom of speech.
2. Manipulation of public opinion: Sharp power influences public opinion in targeted societies, damaging the credibility of the target state's institutions, whether related to democracy, liberal values, or the legitimacy and effectiveness of its government.
3. Pressure on local actors: This involves targeting representatives of local media, opinion leaders, and other influential figures, coercing them to align with the interests of the sharp power state.

Although Richter aligns his framework with the perspectives of Nye and Walker, what stands out is his attempt to categorize sharp power based on its objectives rather than the tools employed. To illustrate sharp power in practice, Richter cites Russia's disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining the effectiveness of the U.S. COVID-19 vaccination efforts.

He challenges Nye's argument that sharp power can be wielded by both democratic and authoritarian systems, as seen during the Cold War when both the U.S. and the USSR employed such tactics. In contrast, Richter proposes two logics—normative and institutional. The normative logic suggests that democracies, which prioritize freedoms such as speech and media independence, inherently contradict the principles of sharp power, making it difficult for them to engage in its use. The institutional logic posits that democratic structures, including checks and balances,

media plurality, and transparency, inherently constrain a state's ability to deploy sharp power.

Perhaps the most significant claim in Richter's paper, and one that largely informs the case study selection in this dissertation, is his assertion that Russia supports both left-wing and right-wing movements, as well as populist and anti-establishment sentiments in the West, with the aim of destabilizing incumbent governments (Richter, 2022, p. 664).

While many authors rely heavily on the definitions provided by Walker and Ludwig, Yenna Wu offers a compelling alternative formulation of sharp power. Wu argues that sharp power can be differentiated from soft power based on three criteria: the nature of the regime, the methods employed, and the goals of the actions (Wu, 2019, pp. 133-134). The criteria can be broken down as follows:

1. Sharp power typically originates from authoritarian regimes that face less accountability to their electorate and have greater freedom to employ manipulative and coercive methods of influence. While democratic governments may also occasionally resort to such methods, they generally prioritize adherence to principles such as freedom of speech, human rights, accountability, and the rule of law.
2. Soft power strategies focus on cultural exchanges, diplomacy, and the promotion of attractive norms, seeking to build goodwill and voluntary alignment with other societies. In contrast, sharp power operates through covert tactics such as espionage, disinformation, and the use of pressure or persecution to force individuals or groups into compliance with the regime's political agenda.
3. While the aim of soft power is to foster voluntary attraction and portray the country projecting it as a positive and constructive international actor, sharp power seeks to manipulate perceptions, stifle dissent, and erode the foundational principles of democracy.

Like other scholars, Wu contends that the shift towards sharp power is a response to China's perceived failures in effectively utilizing soft power. Furthermore, in the case of China, she highlights the importance of the political conduct tradition established during the Mao era, which includes censorship, manipulation, disinformation, and monopolization of the informational environment. This is an important notion, as Russia shares a similar tradition of political and social conduct.

Similar to Wu, Mandeville explains the shift from soft power to sharp power as a transition from attraction to coercion, manipulation, and distraction. He demonstrates how China, Turkey, and Brazil pursue an enhanced image through religious soft power—China by promoting its Buddhist heritage in Thailand and other predominantly Buddhist populations, Turkey by building mosques in Muslim African countries, and Brazil by engaging evangelical groups in Portuguese-speaking Africa. In contrast, Russia, instead of improving its own image, uses the Russian Orthodox Church to fracture Ukrainian society, prioritizing societal division over self-image (Mandeville, 2022).

In 2018, the American Association for Chinese Studies hosted an annual meeting focused on China's sharp power. The panel involved numerous experts, advisors, and academics. Despite the diversity of the speakers, it is noteworthy that all the key presenters reiterated the fundamental tenets proposed by Nye, contributing minimally to the academic discourse surrounding these concepts. As is customary in such scholarly gatherings, the discourse did not yield precise definitions for either the soft or sharp power concepts. Bonnie Glaser characterized soft power as an influence primarily emanating from society rather than the government (Dreyer, 2018). In simple terms, when there is significant government involvement in a country's cultural sphere, it ceases to be soft power and instead becomes an expression of sharp power. Joseph Bosco associated sharp power with disinformation, manipulation, and censorship. Richard Bush of the Brookings Institution offered a relatively comprehensive classification of soft power, delineating it into categories such as very broad (encompassing all elements excluding military and economic power), broad (pertaining to propaganda), less broad (relating to culture), and narrow, aligning closely with the conceptualization of soft power put forth by Joseph Nye.

Even without the connotation of sharp power, scholars have extensively emphasized unorthodox methods of influence emanating from China. These methods deviate from traditional hard power means, such as espionage or covert operations practiced during the Cold War, and they are distinct from pure soft power mechanisms of influence. For instance, Han Li writes about Chinese hip-hop video clips that create suspicion. These clips, quite uncharacteristically for the genre, depict the achievements of the Chinese Communist Party (Li, 2018). What is important here is that while not explicitly employing the term sharp power and only briefly alluding to the concept of soft power, Li underscores the pervasive extent of the Chinese government's involvement in shaping public perception both internationally and domestically. This statement clearly references the origin of the means of influence. In other words, much like Bonnie Glaser, Li argues that when a country's pop culture is controlled by the government, it no longer constitutes traditional soft power.

Another noteworthy aspect that holds significance for this study is that Li highlights that CCP has an extensive focus on the domestic environment. While she concurs with Nye's primary assertion that soft power is primarily associated with the foreign policy realm, Li contends that China's case diverges from traditional soft power in the sense that the CCP is primarily concerned with the domestic legitimacy of power. Consequently, the ruling party aims not only to appeal to foreign or international societies but, given that the primary source of power lies within the Chinese population, places significant emphasis on cultivating appeal among the Chinese populace. Similar to other scholars and investigative journalists, Li contends that subjects deemed sensitive by the CCP are consistently subjected to censorship across various platforms, encompassing domestic and international media, magazines, and academic journals.

Both the Baltic and other Slavic-speaking Soviet Bloc countries have long contended with Russian ideational influence, both throughout the Soviet era and since the Soviet Union's dissolution. Consequently, the local scholarship on sharp power in these countries is particularly valuable, as it offers unique insights into Russia's influence tactics in post-Soviet contexts. Andis Kudors of the University of Latvia links sharp power to disinformation, emphasizing language as Russia's primary tool for spreading its narrative in Latvia and other Baltic states (Kudors, 2022). He contends that the main aim of sharp power operations is to fracture society and erode trust in

democratic institutions and Western alliances like the EU and NATO. Kudors also highlights how Russia exploits the conservative-liberal divide to deepen existing societal rifts and intensify ideological conflict. He introduces the concept of the "Russian World" (Русский Мир), which not only supports Russia's influence operations but also justifies its narrative spread.

Vilnius-based researcher Gerda (Jakškaitė-Confortola, 2021) views the soft power and sharp power dichotomy as a conflict between “liberal universalism and authoritarian statism.” She highlights that Russian sharp power includes the Kremlin narratives to construct collective opinion regarding international politics, influencing both domestic and foreign actors' behaviors. Although the terms can seem somewhat broad, she defines sharp power as “manipulation of culture, manipulation of education systems, and manipulation of the media.” In her study of Russia’s narrative on NATO, she observes that Russian-backed media and commentators depict NATO as dysfunctional and morally compromised. This emphasis on morality underscores Russia’s portrayal of its own moral superiority, which evolves strategically to suit specific regions, societies, and communities.

Societal division is underscored by scholars at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, as a defining feature of sharp power (Kleiner, et al., 2023). Their research analyzes the Russian motorcycle club, the Night Wolves, and their 'Victory Road' rides across Slavic-speaking European countries, intended to celebrate the defeat of Nazi Germany. While the study does not introduce a new theoretical framework for sharp power, it highlights how these Victory Road rides serve to confuse and divide European societies, furthering Russia’s strategic influence in the region.

Researchers from Queensland University of Technology (Brisbane, Australia) identify RT (formerly Russia Today) as a central tool of Russian sharp power. Although their study does not delve deeply into theoretical discussions, they link Russian sharp power with disinformation tactics (Glazunova, et al., 2023). What is important is that their findings indicate that RT targets not only Russian-speaking audiences and diaspora communities but also specific segments within Western societies that are vulnerable to Russian propaganda or harbor skepticism toward Western institutions. RT appears to position Russia as an ideological alternative to Western values and institutions, including the principles of democracy, individual freedoms, and liberal traditions.

The absence of deeper conceptual debates is evident in the majority of scholarship and newspaper articles discussing soft power or sharp power. For instance, the Hungarian think tank Political Capital, which collaborates with Czech and Slovak experts in media, internet studies, academia, and information science, has launched a website that provides various non-academic articles on topics such as media censorship, cybersecurity, and, most notably, disinformation campaigns orchestrated by Russia in Central and Eastern European countries. The platform is managed by Hungarian academics, whose research focuses on authoritarian influence, conspiracy theories, and fake news. Based on several publications available on the website, it can be concluded that they have also adopted the categorization of sharp power proposed by Walker and Ludwig (Political Capital, 2022).

James Pamment contends that sharp power is essentially soft power with an authoritarian twist (Pamment, 2020). He follows the analytical framework of Walker and Ludwig, asserting that sharp power represents an authoritarian method of influence that targets vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and loopholes within democratic systems. While other scholars focus on the methods used for sharp power or the political systems of states employing either sharp or soft power, Pamment proposes an alternative categorization: distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate methods of influence. According to his categorization, public diplomacy, media pluralism, and democracy promotion are deemed legitimate forms of influence, whereas manipulation is considered illegitimate. However, Pamment's definition of manipulation remains unclear.

The primary critique of the concept of sharp power is offered by Xin Liu, who contends that "sharp power" is a redundant term for a military form of influence, defining it as "nothing but unsmart power" (Liu, 2018). Liu's argument lacks substantial conceptual debate and instead heavily relies on Joseph Nye's 2018 article published in *Foreign Affairs*. Nye's article addresses the threats posed by authoritarian regimes, and Liu adopts Nye's perspective that the US has employed similar practices during the Cold War. Liu argues that the term 'authoritarianism' is superfluous, focusing on the question of 'who' rather than 'why' and 'how'. Given the absence of novel insights or a robust argument in her critique, Liu's article contributes minimally to the debate on sharp power. Notably, this critique by Liu represents the only significant opposition encountered in the discourse on sharp power.

The discussion about sharp power is still at an early stage, making it hard to find strong critiques of the concept. For example, one of the 'most critical' works of the concept, presented by Jingkai Shao, a professor at Shanghai International Studies University, defines sharp power as a pseudo-academic and unnecessary term, allegedly driven by the ideological biases of *Washington-based* think tanks (Shao, 2019). The main thrust of Shao's argument is that sharp power is redundant simply because Joseph Nye said so. This overly simplistic and somewhat uncritical theorization of the concept is rather unfortunate, as it reflects the general state of discourse surrounding sharp power and highlights the superficial level at which the concept is often discussed. However regrettable it may be, one may get an impression that any contribution this dissertation or other works make to the discussion will still offer some degree of novelty.

Similarly, Jacques deLisle positions sharp power within the continuum of hard and soft power (deLisle, 2020). Although deLisle's analysis does not introduce new perspectives, it reinforces the existing understanding that sharp power emerges as a response to failures in soft power strategies.

By 2024, there remains no definitive definition of sharp power, though a general understanding of the concept persists. For instance, during a recent forum addressing Russian and Chinese sharp power, which included Michael McFaul, Oriana Mastro, and Gi-Wook Shin, as well as academics from other institutions, American diplomats, and members of think tanks, a precise definition of sharp power was not provided. Instead, the panelists articulated in broad terms that Russia and China engage in influence operations within democratic societies, employing tactics such as financial coercion and disinformation campaigns (Breger, 2024).

A similar development can be observed in a 2024 article by John Fitzgerald. As with previous examples, Fitzgerald explains the turn to sharp power as a result of failed soft power. Additionally, the same components are present, including disinformation and influence operations targeting political parties, community groups, media organizations, and universities (Fitzgerald, 2024).

Anaïs Marin, offers one of the most comprehensive and recent examinations of Russian sharp power. In her report, she associates sharp power with the Soviet

psychological operations that were specifically designed to manipulate public opinion (Marin, 2024). Marin highlights the notorious KGB influence strategy known as *reflexive control*, which was developed during the Cold War and frequently employed by Soviet agents in the United States. This concept is particularly significant, as *reflexive control* originated in the specialized literature of Soviet espionage, underscoring its strategic and targeted nature. The Russian Diplomacy Vocabulary (Дипломатический словарь) defines *reflexive control* as a strategic dissemination of information aimed at individuals, groups, or nations, designed to induce them to make decisions that are detrimental to their own interests (Дипломатический словарь, 2024).

This is significant for two reasons: First, it illustrates the concept of informational 'asymmetry' originally introduced by Walker and Ludwig, where a sharp power state infiltrates the information and knowledge spheres of the target country. Second, it aligns with Alexander Richter's categorization of sharp power based on the covert objectives pursued by such states. Most importantly, it resonates with Steven Lukes' third dimension of power, which indirectly reflects Joseph Nye's notion of voluntarism as a defining feature of soft power. Aspects of reflexive control emerge in Marin's argument that Russia supports both left and right-wing anti-establishment movements. This tactic exploits the democratic principle of political accountability to the electorate. By successfully influencing society—a key objective of reflexive control—Russia can shape state-level decisions. This also connects to the concept of soft power, which primarily involves exerting influence at a societal level.

The primary objective of these 'influence operations', as explained by Marin, is not necessarily to promote a pro-Russian narrative. Instead, if the targeted audience views local sources as equally untrustworthy as foreign or Russian ones, the operation is considered successful. In other words, sowing doubt in the credibility or legitimacy of their own system—whether in mainstream media, democratic values, or government institutions—is the core objective of these operations.

She identifies a discourse crafted by various groups, including Russian sympathizers, so-called 'useful idiots,' or as she defines 'accommodationists,' often composed of academics, intellectuals, and opinion-makers, who may not necessarily be Russian but actively propagate pro-Russian narratives (Marin, 2024). These individuals, often harboring strong anti-democratic, anti-establishment, and Western-skeptic

sentiments, propagate narratives suggesting that Russia's unique Eurasian civilizational character is fundamentally misunderstood by Western liberal discourse. This very distinctiveness is then used to argue that democratic values are alien to Russia, permitting its actions on the international stage, including war crimes, assassination attempts, persecution of dissidents domestically and critical voices abroad. Others may justify Russian claims over Ukraine by framing the country as part of Russia's historical sphere of influence, a narrative that aligns with Realist traditions in international relations.

While she identifies economic or energy dependency as a factor that increases the susceptibility of target states, this aspect can be disregarded since it excludes the principle of voluntarism. More relevant for identifying sharp power indicators is her claim that Russia leverages its diaspora and the Russian Orthodox Church to exert influence on predominantly Orthodox Christian societies in Europe, including Romania, Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria, as part of its sharp power strategy.

Joseph Nye's interpretation of sharp power is particularly significant. In his response to Walker and Ludwig's *Foreign Affairs* article, Nye highlights not just the dangers sharp power poses to democracies but its capacity to undermine soft power. His initial response was articulated in an op-ed published in *Foreign Affairs* (Nye, 2018). He subsequently reiterated his concerns through numerous articles in various periodicals. His primary concern is that, in fearing exposure to authoritarian influence from Russia and China, Western democracies might compromise their openness—an essential characteristic of both democracy and soft power (Nye, 2018). While Nye, like many scholars, accepts Walker and Ludwig's basic definitions, he stresses that voluntarism, integral to soft power, is absent in sharp power. He acknowledges, however, "... persuasion always involve some degree of framing, which limits voluntarism, as do structural features of the social environment. But extreme deception in framing can be viewed as coercive" (Nye, 2018). Nye does not fully explore what constitutes extreme deception or how voluntarism is restricted, but he emphasizes that voluntarism and credibility remain core to soft power and are absent in sharp power. Furthermore, he reiterates traditional attributes of sharp power: manipulation, subversion, coercion, and the suppression of openness. The notion of voluntarism, which Nye attributes exclusively to soft power, will later be challenged in the discussion of Steven Lukes' conception of three-dimensional power.

A year later, Nye reiterated his concern about the potential compromise of democratic values in the effort to counter authoritarian influence. He advocated for enhanced diplomatic engagement, greater accountability, increased openness, and the promotion of information literacy among the populace (Nye, 2019). The discussion based on the material provided in this section will be presented in the segment dedicated to the deconstruction of sharp power.

4.2 SOFT POWER

The birth of the concept that eventually became a buzzword is often mistakenly attributed to Nye's 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Although this book remains Nye's most significant work and the most important work on the concept of soft power, the first instance where Nye uses the combination of these words is his 1990 book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. While this book offers little, if any, theoretical debate, the first silhouettes of the concept can be detected. Nye argues that the United States, far from being in decline, possesses "...both the traditional hard power resources and the new soft power resources to meet the challenges of transnational interdependence" (Nye, 1990, p. 260). From this rather vague notion, we can infer that Nye refers to the ability of the U.S. to influence others not only through military means but also ideologically.

Although both the concepts of soft power and power itself remain highly contested, Joseph Nye's book, *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics*, continues to be regarded as the seminal text on the subject. In the often-chaotic debate surrounding the nature of power, (Nye, 2004, p. 1) offers a metaphorical yet insightful perspective, stating that "Power is like the weather. Everyone depends on it and talks about it, but few understand it." Much like the concept of sharp power, which was formulated in opposition to soft power, Nye presents soft power as a counterpoint to what he terms hard power—military or economic force. He defines soft power as the ability to shape others' preferences through attraction and persuasion.

The emphasis on the term ability is particularly relevant to this research, as it frames soft power not as a foreign policy tool that can be directly exercised or imposed,

but rather as an inherent capacity. Soft power, as Nye describes, generates goodwill through shared values and moral authority, rooted in the appeal of democratic policies, whether in domestic or international contexts. Nye also underscores the intangible nature of soft power. Notably, he identifies agenda-setting as a key dimension of soft power and highlights the appeal of democratic norms as one of its primary indicators.

One of Nye's more debatable claims is that the effectiveness of soft power can be measured through public opinion polls (Nye, 2010). While this approach may hold validity in some contexts, it faces significant challenges in certain political systems where public opinion is less freely expressed or accurately captured. Importantly, Nye does not position soft power as a replacement for hard power but rather as a complementary element of a state's foreign policy toolkit. However, he acknowledges that the misuse or overreliance on hard power can undermine and erode a state's soft power capabilities.

It is important to highlight the sources of soft power as suggested by (Nye, 2004, pp. 10-14). He argues that soft power primarily relies on the following three segments:

1. Culture, which includes not only literature, art, and other aspects of high or popular culture but also the values that shape society and its preferences.
2. Political values, particularly democratic practices that appeal to other nations.
3. Foreign policy, which is rooted in moral authority and legitimacy.

Nye emphasizes several critical notions regarding the independent nature of soft power. While governments can indeed enhance their soft power by fostering political norms associated with human rights, adopting liberal values, and promoting various individual and social liberties, soft power operates independently of governmental control. It is independent in the sense that the private sector can contribute to or harm a country's soft power without direct government involvement (e.g., American cinematography, private businesses, and American brands). Furthermore, soft power's independence is evident in how both domestic and foreign policies can either enhance or significantly damage a country's soft power. Nye cites the example of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which greatly harmed American prestige and, consequently, its soft power worldwide (Nye, 2004, pp. 14-18).

Although Joseph Nye is typically associated with the liberal school of international relations, and although he describes himself as both a realist and a liberal, his thesis still faces criticism from realist thinkers. Giulio M. Gallarotti is one of the few scholars who is skeptical of the concept of soft power. Gallarotti argues that soft power warrants more attention and detailed scrutiny as international relations continue to '...evolve into a softer world' (Gallarotti, 2011, p. 26). Despite Gallarotti's attempt to critically analyze the concept of power, he continues to rely on the neo-realist framework, which is rooted in a Hobbesian *state of nature* and *anarchy*. As a result, he contrasts two visions of power: on one hand, the *tangible form of power*, which encompasses military and material capabilities, derived from the work of John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz, and on the other, the *intangible form of power* articulated by Joseph Nye. In essence, Gallarotti juxtaposes coercive power with the power of attraction or persuasion (Gallarotti, 2011, p. 28). Notably, Gallarotti refers to soft power as a *meta-power*, a form of power that does not necessarily determine the competition among actors but rather shapes the agenda of their interactions, thus influencing the final outcome.

Todd Hall provides one of the most comprehensive and detailed critiques of soft power. While he does not reject the idea that other forms of influence, alternative to hard power, exist, he argues that the mere use of the term soft power in everyday discourse does not legitimize it as a formal concept (Hall, 2010). He distinguishes between the *category of practice* and the *category of analysis*. The *category of practice*, as he explains, refers to the informal and commonsensical use of soft power in political discourse, employed by politicians, diplomats, and other stakeholders to justify or promote their ideas. In contrast, for a concept to be considered a *category of analysis*, Hall argues, it must describe phenomena that share similar attributes. For instance, while the term *criminal* is useful in everyday language to describe a perpetrator, as an analytical category, it would imply the creation of a social group with shared traits. Since the label *criminal* is subjective and dependent on varying factors such as social norms, legal systems, and era, it cannot be treated as a valid analytical category. Hall expresses similar doubts about whether *attraction*, a core concept in soft power, can serve as a shared attribute across its different manifestations.

Hall is skeptical about whether culture, political values, or foreign policy can genuinely generate attraction as proponents of soft power suggest (Hall, 2010). He contends that cultural products, such as films, rely more on marketing strategies than on

intrinsic qualities, and films can be interpreted through the viewer's own cultural lens, rather than creating affection for the country of origin. Regarding educational exchange programs, Hall suggests that students often make pragmatic decisions that overshadow the cultural appeal of the host country. He highlights the fact that several of the 9/11 hijackers were educated in Western universities, questioning the role of such programs in fostering cultural appeal.

Hall also critiques the notion of political values as a source of soft power, arguing that these values are dynamic, context-dependent, and susceptible to manipulation. This raises the question of why the fluid nature of political values should be seen as a barrier to attraction, especially if attraction is understood in terms of adaptability. Regarding foreign policy, Hall posits that support for a country's foreign policy is often driven by shared strategic interests rather than the attractiveness of the policy itself.

Hall proposes substituting the traditional sources of soft power with alternatives such as reputational power and representational power (Hall, 2010). However, it remains unclear why these alternatives, given their own context-specific nature, would be more plausible than political values as sources of soft power.

In conclusion, Hall argues that the concept of attraction itself is under-theorized. However, one potential limitation of his approach is his holistic critique of soft power, which overlooks the fact that power, including soft power, does not directly generate outcomes. Rather, it acts as a facilitator in achieving desired objectives.

Soft power has also been subject to criticism, particularly from scholars within the realist tradition of International Relations. Christopher Layne critiques Nye's conceptualization, which, in his view, oversimplifies the nature of soft power by attributing the notions of attraction and seduction to the influence exerted by a state. Viewing international relations through a conservative lens, Layne argues that states, as primary actors in IR, cannot be *attracted* or *seduced* by other states in the same manner as individuals in personal relationships (Layne, 2010, p. 53). He offers an empirical critique of Nye's argument concerning the success of American soft power, particularly questioning the causal mechanisms behind Nye's claim that American soft power led European powers to align with the United States after World War II. Layne contends

that the motivations of European states were driven by the Marshall Plan and their desire to counter the threat posed by the Soviet Union, rather than being influenced by the appeal of American values (Layne, 2010, p. 55).

This skepticism mirrors the concerns raised by Hall, who questions whether the success of soft power truly reflects attraction, or whether it is instead a result of strategic and pragmatic considerations. Layne further challenges Nye's argument regarding the role of American soft power in the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union, focusing more on the economic, institutional, and technological disadvantages faced by the Communist state. One of Layne's most significant critiques is related to the impact of soft power on target societies. He raises the question: if soft power can influence public opinion in democratic societies, how can it function in non-democratic regimes where the voice of the people is often suppressed? This concern is significant, as it can be linked to the notion of asymmetry proposed by Walker and Ludwig, particularly in how authoritarian states monopolize educational and informational fields and restrict the flow of information, thereby limiting the potential for external influence or engagement.

Although Nye's concept has been the subject of considerable debate, many scholars continue to accept and utilize the traditional conceptualization of soft power. Shogo Suzuki is one such scholar. For instance, he argues that China has adhered to the sources of soft power initially proposed by Nye in his early works (Suzuki, 2010, p. 201). Suzuki identifies the same three sources—culture, political values, and foreign policy—as central to China's soft power strategy. In this framework, Chinese cultural soft power is reflected in its literature, philosophy, and craftsmanship, its political values are rooted in Confucianism, and its "good neighbor policy" exemplifies the soft power potential of its foreign policy.

Geraldo Zahran and Leonardo Ramos begin their analysis of soft power by highlighting the complexities inherent in the interpretation of power. They emphasize the distinction proposed by Nye between two types of power: command power and co-optive power (Zahran & Ramos, 2010). However, due to the limited discussion on the tangibility of soft and hard power resources, the authors find it challenging to clearly differentiate between these two concepts. This ambiguity underscores the broader difficulties in distinguishing between similar concepts, such as soft power and sharp power, which complicates theoretical and practical applications in the field.

The interdependent nature of power constitutes a central aspect of Edward Lock's argumentation. While acknowledging Nye's principles of soft power, Lock contends that Nye's conceptualization is overly simplified and somewhat abstract (Lock, 2010). One of Lock's key criticisms pertains to the distinction between soft and hard power. Though this distinction may seem intuitive, Lock argues that it is unduly rigid and fails to account for the frequent interrelation and blending of these concepts in practice. While Nye focuses primarily on the agency of the initiator of soft power, Lock critiques the absence of discussion regarding the target or those being influenced. In this regard, Lock asserts that Nye overemphasizes the intentions of the actor while underestimating the reception and interpretation of power by the target.

To overcome this limitation, Lock proposes a Foucauldian framework, suggesting that power is not merely projected from the top down but is also resisted by the agency and capacities of the subject (i.e., those upon whom power is exercised) (Lock, 2010, p. 38). In this context, soft power is not solely about projecting one's values but involves a consideration of what may appeal to others. Accordingly, if Actor A seeks to attract Actor B, A may acquire specific traits, values, norms, or assets to enhance its attractiveness and influence over B. However, Lock observes an inverse dynamic: in order to leave a favorable impression on B, A may adopt values and norms that B finds appealing. Lock places significant emphasis on the agency-structure dichotomy and underscores the agency of those subjected to power. He advocates for a more nuanced and humble approach to conceptualizing soft power, urging scholars to refrain from making overly definitive assumptions about the concept and instead focus on understanding the dynamics of power projection itself. This approach is especially valuable when conceptualizing emerging concepts such as sharp power.

In his response to criticisms of soft power (Nye, 2010, pp. 219-221). Nye defends his ostensibly simplistic interpretation of the concept by referencing the traditional, predominantly neo-realist framework of international relations (IR) scholarship, which views power as a tangible possession requiring measurability. To address this demand for tangibility, Nye argues, he focuses primarily on the behavioral dimensions of soft power. Nye's challenge to this conservative vision of power—long dominant in realist and liberal IR traditions—was his introduction of an intangible form of influence, which he termed soft power.

While defining power broadly as “anything producing an effect or result” (Nye, 2010, p. 215) a definition that still suggests a behavioral undertone—Nye also emphasizes the relational

nature of soft power. This relational perspective acknowledges the mutual dynamic between influencer and target, or subject and object, as integral to its function. Despite appreciating his critics' contributions to the scholarly discourse on soft power, Nye appears unconvinced, and understandably so, by arguments such as Hall's assertion that soft power as *a category of analysis* can be dismissed simply due to accusations of conceptual ambiguity. A more detailed analysis of soft power will be presented in the chapter dedicated to the deconstruction of the concept.

4.3 HOW RUSSIAN ACADEMIA UNDERSTANDS SOFT AND SHARP POWER: FROM ATTRACTION TO INSTRUMENTALITY

As this paper primarily engages with Western academic scholarship on the main concepts of the study, it would be incomplete to dismiss Russian scholarship on both concepts. This section is intended to address this imbalance and is dedicated to examining how Russian academic and, subsequently, non-academic discourse defines both soft power and sharp power. It is a rather auxiliary section, as its main aim is not necessarily to contribute directly to the broader theoretical discussion, but rather to emphasize the extent to which Russian interpretations differ from the original Nyeian understanding, and more generally from Western understandings of the two concepts examined in this study.

One noticeable reason, among many others, why soft power became associated with practices that the West perceives as malign is the tendency to instrumentalize and simplify soft power to such an extent that the term loses its connection to Nye's original definition. While Nye's view of soft power may be interpreted as an attribute describing a country's ability to influence others through attraction, Russian discourse often treats it as a foreign policy tool. For example, Центр Гуманитарных Технологий — Center for Humanitarian Technologies — suggests that China started using soft power in 2007, as if soft power had not existed before Joseph Nye conceptualized it in the early 2000s (Центр Гуманитарных Технологий - Center for Humanitarian Technologies, 2024). The Center for Humanitarian Technologies could be described as an independent Russian consulting think tank, offering lectures and courses to private individuals, as well as to governmental actors. Interestingly, the wording and vocabulary used by the

organization in its lectures may indicate a strong, although indirect, proximity to the Russian state apparatus.

If Nye attributes soft power mainly, although not exclusively, to society, Russian discourse tends to view the government and the state as the primary sources of soft power. Even when the state is not presented as the source itself, it is still understood as playing a key role in managing and directing soft power that is supposedly derived from society. In their work, Krylova and Kulkova discuss Russian-speaking women's communities in Africa not merely as cultural bridges between peoples, but as Russian soft power assets for achieving foreign policy goals. The clearest indication that soft power is viewed as a foreign policy tool appears when they cite Putin's 2012 definition of soft power as "a set of tools and methods for achieving foreign policy goals, without the use of weapons" (Krylova & Kulkova, 2022). Similar to the Center for Humanitarian Technologies, the authors suggest that "Moscow joined the global 'soft power game' quite late," which points to a rather simplified understanding of the term, as if there were a starting date for this race, and as if before 2003 states had been largely disinterested in their global image and reputation.

While the authors emphasize cultural features as part of Russian soft power, they also strongly associate it with the "protection of national sovereignty," which is a rather unusual contribution to the terminology. Interestingly, although women's communities exist independently from the Russian government, the authors view them as an underused resource that could be instrumentalized and employed for the state's foreign policy goals. This does not mean that society is irrelevant, or that the societal contribution to Russian soft power is entirely neglected. Rather, society-derived soft power is treated as something that should be controlled, managed, and directed by the state. The most revealing omission in the article is that Russian soft power is discussed almost entirely through usable channels of influence — language, diaspora, compatriots, mixed families, Orthodox institutions, graduates of Soviet/Russian universities, media presence, and business networks. What is largely absent is the Nye question of whether Russia's political model itself generates attraction: democracy, rule of law, civil liberties, institutional credibility, or the moral legitimacy of its foreign policy. In this sense, the article treats soft power less as a reflection of Russia's broader societal attractiveness and more as a set of resources that can be discovered, coordinated, and mobilized for foreign-policy purposes. This omission is important because it shows that

Russian discourse tends to bypass the most politically demanding source of soft power — attractive political values — and instead concentrates on more manageable instruments of cultural and humanitarian outreach.

A particularly important contribution to the Russian academic discussion of soft power can be found in Alexander Konkov's article «Мягкая сила для России: от восприятия к навыкам латентного управления» (Soft Power for Russia: From Adoption to Latent Governance Skills). Rather than treating soft power merely as an attraction-based capacity, Konkov presents it as a concept that gradually entered Russian academic and official discourse and became associated with the development of state instruments, including instruments of latent governance and social management (Konkov, 2020).

One of the most revealing aspects of Konkov's article is his discussion of the Russian translation of the English word *power*. In English, power can simultaneously imply strength, capacity, authority, influence, and governance. In Russian, however, it can be translated in different ways, most importantly as *сила* (*sila*) and *власть* (*vlast'*). The term *sila* refers more directly to force, strength, capability, or might, while *vlast'* carries a stronger meaning of authority, rule, governance, and political control. Konkov suggests that translating soft power only as *мягкая сила* (*myagkaya sila*) somewhat reduces the conceptual richness of the original term, because it shifts attention toward external influence and away from the broader question of power as governance. His alternative emphasis on *myagkaya vlast'* is therefore important, as it reveals that in Russian discourse soft power can be understood not only as a foreign-policy resource, but also as a form of political management (Konkov, 2020, p. 214).

This distinction is important for the present study because it shows how easily the Nye concept of soft power is absorbed into a more state-centric understanding of politics. Nye described American soft power as rooted in the attractiveness of culture, political values, and foreign policy. Admittedly, Nye and many other American authors have been criticized for presenting liberal democratic values in overly universalist and absolutist terms, as if freedom, democracy, rule of law, and civil liberties were universally appealing in a self-evident way. However, what is revealing in Konkov's discussion is that Nye's concept is not primarily read as a description of attraction produced by these values in contrast to Soviet authoritarianism, absence of rule of law,

censorship, or dictatorial governance. Rather, soft power is initially interpreted through the prism of American or Western influence directed against Russia. In this reading, soft power appears less as a neutral analytical concept and more as an external instrument of geopolitical competition.

This is especially visible in Konkov's reconstruction of the development of Russian official discourse. At first, soft power entered Russian political vocabulary primarily as something to be resisted: an external technology associated with Western influence, manipulation, interference, and threats to sovereignty. Later, however, the same concept was gradually normalized as something Russia itself needed to develop. Thus, soft power shifted from being perceived as an anti-Russian instrument to being embraced as a necessary component of Russian foreign policy. This transition is crucial, because it demonstrates that Russian discourse did not simply adopt Nye's original meaning. Instead, it reinterpreted soft power as a field of strategic competition in which Russia had to build its own tools, mechanisms, and technologies of influence.

Another important implication of Konkov's article is its state-centric understanding of society. Civil society is not treated as an autonomous source of attraction in the Nyeian sense, but as a set of social structures that the state can rely upon, coordinate, and incorporate into its broader political strategy. This is visible in Konkov's claim that society provides the state with a kind of mandate to use social products such as language, culture, values, and the institutions formed around them. In other words, society-derived resources are not understood as independent sources of soft power, but as materials that can be mobilized by the state for both external and internal purposes.

This "mandate" idea is especially revealing. In Nye's original understanding, culture, values, education, civil society, and public legitimacy generate soft power precisely because they are not fully controlled by the state. Their attractiveness depends to a significant extent on their autonomy, credibility, and perceived authenticity. In Konkov's interpretation, however, these same resources become part of a broader model of latent governance. Society produces language, culture, values, and networks, but the state acquires the political role of organizing and directing them. This illustrates a broader tendency in Russian soft-power discourse: soft power is not primarily

understood as an emergent social phenomenon, but as a governable resource that should be strategically managed.

Therefore, Konkov's article is highly relevant to the distinction between soft and sharp power. It shows that Russian academic discourse does not necessarily reject soft power but transforms it. The concept moves away from attraction, credibility, and voluntary appeal, and becomes associated with state capacity, sovereignty, governance, and the instrumental use of civil society. This supports the broader argument of the present study: Russian discourse tends to operationalize soft power as a toolkit of influence, thereby blurring the boundary between attraction-based soft power and more manipulative forms of political influence.

Another meaningful contribution to the Russian discussion of soft power is Anna Kosiakina's article *Российский подход к концепции "мягкой силы"* (*Russian approach to the concept of "soft power"*). The article is not especially rich in theoretical innovation, especially when compared to Konkov's more conceptual discussion of soft power as a form of latent governance. Its significance lies elsewhere. Kosiakina writes from within the institutional world of Russian soft power itself, as a specialist affiliated with Россотрудничество, one of the central bodies responsible for Russia's international humanitarian and cultural policy. For this reason, the article is particularly insightful not because it develops a new theory of soft power, but because it reveals how Russian soft power is understood by someone located inside one of its key institutional structures.

What makes the article especially useful is its unusual degree of honesty regarding the weaknesses of Russian soft power. Referring to Yevgeny Primakov, the head of Russotrudnichestvo, Kosiakina openly acknowledges that Russia has relied too heavily on culture, language, education, sport, and historical heritage, while paying insufficient attention to the other two components of Nye's concept: attractive political values and a foreign policy perceived as legitimate and morally authoritative (Kosiakina, 2022, p. 72). This admission is important because it confirms one of the central arguments of this study: Russia may possess significant cultural and historical resources, but these resources alone cannot compensate for the absence of broader political attractiveness. In other words, Russian soft power is not weak because Russia lacks culture, literature, language, or educational traditions; it is weak because these

resources are not supported by a political model and foreign policy that are broadly perceived as attractive.

At the definitional level, Kosiakina remains relatively close to Nye. She defines soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, and she explicitly refers to the three Nyeian sources of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policy. However, when the article turns to the Russian case, the discussion becomes overwhelmingly institutional and bureaucratic. The main focus shifts to Россотрудничество, the Фонд “Русский мир”, the Фонд Горчакова, compatriot organizations, educational quotas, Russian-language promotion, humanitarian aid, vaccine diplomacy, and the coordination of state agencies. This creates a revealing tension: soft power is theoretically acknowledged as attraction but practically discussed as an institutional toolkit that must be administered, coordinated, reformed, and made more efficient.

This institutional focus is also visible in Kosiakina’s criticism of Russia’s soft-power infrastructure. She argues that Russian soft-power institutions suffer from unclear distribution of responsibilities, duplication of functions, weak coordination, and even interdepartmental competition. Her proposed solution is not the strengthening of autonomous social attractiveness, but better bureaucratic organization: clearer strategic planning, a more rational division of institutional responsibilities, and stronger coordination under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is important because it again demonstrates the state-centric logic of Russian soft-power discourse. Society, culture, education, humanitarian activity, and diaspora networks are not treated primarily as independent sources of attraction, but as resources that need to be organized through state institutions.

The article is also significant because Kosiakina directly acknowledges the damage caused by Russia’s actions in Ukraine. She argues that the events beginning on 24 February 2022 negatively affected Russia’s international image and that, in the coming years, it will be extremely difficult for the country to construct an attractive image abroad (Kosiakina, 2022, pp. 73-74). This point is crucial because it shows that Kosiakina, despite writing from within the Russian institutional field, follows the Nyeian logic that foreign policy is one of the central sources of soft power. If foreign policy is perceived as illegitimate, aggressive, or morally unacceptable, then cultural diplomacy,

language promotion, education, sport, and humanitarian initiatives cannot fully preserve a country's attractiveness.

Therefore, the value of Kosiakina's article lies precisely in this contradiction. On the one hand, it reproduces the Russian tendency to treat soft power as a policy field managed by state institutions. On the other hand, it openly recognizes that soft power cannot be reduced to institutional performance alone. By admitting that Russia's excessive focus on culture and insufficient attention to political values and foreign-policy legitimacy weaken its soft power, Kosiakina indirectly confirms the limits of the Russian instrumental approach. Soft power can be organized, promoted, and bureaucratically coordinated, but it cannot be manufactured entirely through institutions if the political and foreign-policy foundations of attraction are damaged.

Marina Lebedeva without directly referring to the concept of sharp power, introduces an insightful perspective on how Russia interprets the notion of soft power. She argues that in Russia, soft power is understood as a non-military form of influence. However, she challenges the widespread assumption that certain fields of activity are automatically "soft" simply because they are non-military. In her view, education, culture, sport, language promotion, or economic attractiveness cannot be classified as soft power in themselves; their meaning depends on the manner in which they are used. For example, an attractive model of economic development may function as soft power, while economic sanctions clearly belong closer to hard power. Similarly, education and culture may generate attraction when they are voluntarily accepted, but if cultural norms or educational models are imposed, aggressively promoted, or bureaucratically forced upon others, they may cease to function as soft power and move closer to propaganda or coercive influence (Lebedeva, 2017, p. 213). This point is highly relevant for the present study, because it shows that the "softness" of power should not be located in the sphere of activity itself, but in the logic of interaction: attraction, voluntariness, trust, and recognition of the target audience as a subject rather than an object. Her original paper, titled "Мягкая сила: понятие и подходы" (Soft Power: The Concept and Approaches), was published in 2017, a time when the concept of sharp power, coined by Walker and Ludwig, was just beginning to gain traction. Lebedeva's analysis further supports Walker and Ludwig's argument that soft power has been misinterpreted, particularly by non-democratic governments.

In a public lecture, a Moscow State University scholar, Aleksandr Grebenyuk treats soft power not simply as attraction, but as a technology of consciousness formation that acts on values, social attitudes, and behavioral models. In this sense, he presents soft power partly as a Western-developed instrument and partly as a threat to Russian society, especially to youth, whose image of the desirable future may be shaped by external information flows (Группа Компаний ЭФКО, 2024).

This securitized understanding becomes most explicit in his discussion of Ukraine and “color revolutions.” For Grebenyuk, the purpose of soft power is to generate a public demand: “we want it to be like there.” He interprets pro-European mobilization in Ukraine as a case in which an attractive image of Europe had been constructed through information flows, even among people who had not personally lived in the European Union. He then links this imagined destination to color-revolution technologies, arguing that such political technologies require a prior image in people’s minds; without such an image, people cannot be mobilized. Soft power therefore appears as the cultural-psychological foundation upon which regime-change technologies can later operate. At this point, however, his account becomes noticeably political and moralistic. He presents color revolutions as Western-induced or Western-amplified events but does not consider the possible role of Russian intelligence services or Russian influence operations in the same geopolitical field. The result is an asymmetric narrative in which manipulation appears as a Western practice, while Russia is implicitly positioned as the object of such technologies rather than as an actor capable of using comparable methods. At the same time, his interpretation neglects a more ordinary sociological mechanism: people may desire to imitate Europe not because they are simply manipulated, but because they associate Europe with higher living standards, stronger institutions, or a more attractive model of political and social life.

A similar moralistic register appears in Grebenyuk’s treatment of Western mass culture. He argues that Western, especially Anglo-Saxon, soft power is effective because it produces globally consumable pop-cultural content: teenagers in many capitals dress similarly, listen to similar music, and watch the same films or Netflix series. This is contrasted with Russian culture, which he describes as possessing incomparable civilizational depth but also as “elite,” difficult to consume, and requiring discipline, patience, and work on oneself. The contrast is revealing. Western soft power

is associated with simplicity, aggressiveness, negativity, and mass reproducibility, while Russian culture is positioned as deeper, more demanding, and less easily converted into mass attraction. This framing contains an implicit hierarchy: Western culture is effective because it is accessible and simplified; Russian culture is morally and civilizationally superior, but disadvantaged because it is harder to package and distribute (Группа Компаний ЭФКО, 2024).

His distinction between material and immaterial resources of soft power should also be treated carefully. Grebenyuk does not entirely deny that American soft power possesses intangible concepts: he explicitly lists democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, the American Dream, and entrepreneurship as positive immaterial patterns. However, he also emphasizes the role of material and recognizable products — phones, films, schools, brands, visual symbols, and other physical-cultural patterns — in anchoring perceptions of the United States. By contrast, he insists that Russian soft power also contains many intangible or symbolic resources, such as *матрешка* (matryoshka doll), the Olympic bear, and broader civilizational-cultural associations. Grebenyuk could indeed identify several intangible Russian soft-power resources. However, if his intention was to juxtapose the Olympic bear with, for example, Disney's Mickey Mouse, then Russian soft power clearly appears disadvantaged in terms of global recognizability and cultural reach.

Overall, the lecture is useful as an example of Russian discourse in which soft power is transformed from a concept of attraction into a language of vulnerability, information struggle, and cultural defense. Even while relying on Nye's vocabulary, Grebenyuk interprets soft power through the prism of Western manipulation, color revolutions, youth consciousness, and the moral contrast between Western mass culture and Russian civilizational depth.

1.1.1. Olga Leonova associates sharp power with soft power and smart power (Leonova, 2019, p. 21). She adopts the definition of sharp power proposed by Walker and Ludwig, who attribute the concept to authoritarian or autocratic governments such as Russia, China, and Iran. While the terminology of soft power and smart power is widely established in non-Western academia, linguistic barriers may arise, as "sharp power" is relatively difficult to translate into other languages. Leonova provides the

following translations of sharp power: “резкий, острый, сообразительный, пронизательный, сильный, пронзительный, всепроникающий, четкий, точный, колкий, зоркий, отточенный, заостренный” (Leonova, 2019, p. 22). These words roughly translate as: sharp, acute, clever, perceptive, strong, piercing, all-penetrating, clear, precise, cutting, sharp-sighted, refined, pointed. The primary characteristic she attributes to sharp power is its capacity to penetrate foreign political and informational spheres. She further suggests that sharp power can be interpreted as informational terrorism. Although Leonova describes the characteristics, qualities, aims, and other significant behavioral traits of sharp power, she does not engage in any ontological debate regarding the concept.

Makhmud’s article is useful for understanding a specific Russian response to the concept of sharp power. Rather than treating sharp power as a neutral analytical category, she presents it as a politically motivated Western attempt to separate legitimate Western influence from allegedly illegitimate non-Western influence. This is already visible in the title of the article, where sharp power is described as an effort by Western authors to divide soft power into “ours” and “theirs.” The article therefore does not simply discuss sharp power as a new concept in international relations; it interprets the concept itself as part of an ideological struggle over who has the authority to define legitimate and illegitimate forms of influence (Makhmud, 2020, p. 186).

Makhmud begins from Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power, but her understanding of it is broader than Nye’s classical emphasis on attraction. She presents soft power as a widely established concept used to describe non-military diplomacy and indirect or latent influence in international politics. In this broad interpretation, the tools of soft power include cultural phenomena, educational projects, exchange programs, and other conventional instruments of public diplomacy. However, she also includes more problematic instruments, such as cognitive information technologies, agenda-setting, neuropsychology, neurolinguistics, the transformation or replacement of historical memory, the falsification of facts, and the creation of new semantic contexts for political purposes (Makhmud, 2020, pp. 187-188). This is important because it makes the boundary between soft power and manipulation less clear from the very beginning.

For this reason, Makhmud sees soft power and sharp power as much closer to each other than Western theorists admit. In her reading, sharp power does not describe a fundamentally new type of influence. Rather, it re-labels certain instruments of non-military influence as malign when they are used by Russia, China, Iran, or other non-Western states. Since soft power already includes indirect influence, media strategies, education, cultural diplomacy, and even forms of cognitive or informational impact, Makhmud questions whether sharp power has independent conceptual value (Makhmud, 2020, pp. 188-189). The distinction between soft and sharp power therefore appears to her less as a scientific distinction and more as a political classification.

The main target of Makhmud's criticism is the understanding of sharp power developed by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, especially through the National Endowment for Democracy. According to her summary, sharp power was introduced as an alternative version of soft power supposedly characteristic of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. Its tools include data falsification, cyberattacks, propaganda, manipulation of news flows, and other instruments intended to undermine Western-style democracies and democratic values (Makhmud, 2020, p. 187). She explains that the concept was built on NED research into the influence of Russia and China on "young democracies" in Eastern Europe and Latin America, where these states were presented as authoritarian actors using culture, education, media, and information technologies in hostile ways (Makhmud, 2020, p. 188).

One of the most revealing parts of the article is Makhmud's discussion of the term "sharp" itself. She argues that the English word carries not only the meaning of "sharp" or "acute," but also connotations of cunning, fraud, trickery, and deceit. On this basis, she proposes that the Russian translation *острая сила* does not fully capture the negative moral charge of the term. She suggests that *хитрая сила*, or cunning/treacherous power, better reflects the meaning that Walker and Ludwig attach to the concept (Makhmud, 2020, pp. 191-192). This terminological discussion matters because it shows that Makhmud reads sharp power not only as an academic label, but as a morally loaded accusation directed at Russia and China.

Makhmud rejects the claim that sharp power is inherently authoritarian. Her central counterargument is that the instruments associated with sharp power are not unique to authoritarian regimes. She turns to Gene Sharp and U.S. democracy-

promotion practices to argue that Western actors also use methods of regime transformation, social mobilization, sanctions, external assistance, and information support. She presents Sharp's *From Dictatorship to Democracy* as a manual for nonviolent regime change and links it to "color revolutions" in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Ukraine, and elsewhere (Makhmud, 2020, pp. 196-198). Through this example, she argues that methods treated as democratic soft power when used by the West could be interpreted as sharp power when viewed from the perspective of targeted states.

The article is also strongly concerned with Western moral superiority. Makhmud argues that the concept of sharp power divides influence into "good" Western soft power and "bad" authoritarian cunning power. In her view, this reproduces a moral hierarchy in which liberal democracies are associated with openness, attractiveness, and legitimate persuasion, while Russia and China are associated with manipulation, censorship, disinformation, and aggression. She explicitly questions the legitimacy of distinguishing the "good" soft power of Western states from the cunning or treacherous power of authoritarian regimes (Makhmud, 2020, p. 199). Thus, the problem for her is not only conceptual imprecision, but also the moral asymmetry built into the category.

This is closely connected to the theme of Russia's discursive stigmatization. Makhmud argues that sharp power functions as a label that places Russia, China, and other states in a negative symbolic position before analysis has even begun. Russia is described in Western sharp-power discourse as authoritarian, kleptocratic, manipulative, and hostile to democracy. Its media activity, especially through RT, is interpreted not as an attempt to present an alternative view, but as an effort to undermine trust in democratic institutions and portray the West negatively (Makhmud, 2020, p. 194). For Makhmud, this means that sharp power is less a neutral explanation of Russian behavior than a discourse that delegitimizes Russia's international influence by attaching to it the language of dishonesty, aggression, and authoritarian subversion.

The conclusion confirms this reading. Makhmud argues that sharp power is not a convincing scientific concept, but rather a mixture of cyber power, soft power, and propaganda. Unlike Nye's soft power and smart power, which she sees as having contributed to international-relations theory, sharp power is described as lacking cognitive or heuristic value (Makhmud, 2020, pp. 200-201). Her bibliography also

supports this assessment of the article's style: it is rather small and relies mainly on Gene Sharp, Christopher Walker, and Walker and Ludwig, with Nye appearing only briefly in relation to smart power (Makhmud, 2020, pp. 201-202). This limited bibliography suggests that Makhmud is not primarily developing a broad theoretical critique through extensive literature review. Instead, she discusses sharp power mainly from a moralistic and polemical perspective, emphasizing double standards, Western hypocrisy, and the stigmatization of Russia and China within Western discourse.

Unlike more polemical Russian critiques that simply reject sharp power as an ideological weapon of the West, Naumov and Belousova attempt to preserve its analytical usefulness while detaching it from the regime-based distinction proposed by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig. Their central argument is that sharp power should not be understood as an inherent attribute of authoritarian or illiberal regimes (Naumov & Belousova, 2022). Rather, it should be treated as a universal phenomenon: a set of destructive practices that use the resources of soft power in manipulative, deceptive, or destabilizing ways. For the authors, sharp power can become an independent analytical category only if it is stripped of excessive politicization.

The article begins from a broad critique of the contemporary Western intellectual and political context. Naumov and Belousova argue that the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world has weakened the symbolic authority of the liberal consensus, understood as the assumed connection between liberal democracy, the free market, and economic growth. In this context, concepts such as soft power, smart power, and sharp power are interpreted not merely as neutral academic terms, but as auxiliary metaphors that help the West preserve its ideological authority at a time when its military, economic, and normative superiority is becoming less self-evident. This framing is important because it places the sharp power debate inside a broader Russian critique of Western universality. Sharp power, in their reading, is not only a concept about influence; it is also part of a struggle over who has the authority to define legitimate and illegitimate forms of influence (Naumov & Belousova, 2022).

Naumov and Belousova's critique of Walker and Ludwig focuses on the regime-type bias built into the original formulation of sharp power. According to their reconstruction, Walker and Ludwig effectively deny that Russia, China, and other non-liberal actors can possess genuine soft power. Even cultural, educational, or media

initiatives that outwardly resemble soft-power instruments are reclassified as sharp power if they are connected to authoritarian states. This is the core problem for Naumov and Belousova: the same tools are interpreted differently depending on who uses them. When liberal democracies promote values, narratives, and institutions abroad, this is treated as soft power or public diplomacy; when non-Western or illiberal actors do similar things, their activity becomes suspect, manipulative, and sharp. The concept therefore risks becoming less an analytical category than a moralized label attached to the foreign policy of Russia, China, and other states outside the liberal-democratic camp (Naumov & Belousova, 2022).

A particularly useful element of the article is its engagement with Joseph Nye. Naumov and Belousova show that Nye himself did not fully endorse Walker and Ludwig's separation of sharp power from soft and hard power. The authors use this to demonstrate that even within Western scholarship there is no stable consensus on what sharp power actually is. Some authors present it as an independent phenomenon; Nye treats it as a coercive or manipulative form of information influence; Russian scholars often emphasize its hybrid and politically contingent character. This supports the authors' broader claim that the concept remains unstable, over-politicized, and analytically underdeveloped (Naumov & Belousova, 2022).

The most important theoretical contribution of the article is its critique of liberal-democratic bias in the study of soft power. Drawing on the argument by Keating and Kaczmarek, Naumov and Belousova argue that Western discussions often assume liberal-democratic values to be universally attractive, while non-liberal values are treated as incapable of producing genuine attraction. This produces what the article describes as a kind of empirical blindness: the inability to see *illiberal political values* as potentially attractive to some audiences. On this basis, the authors argue that conservative values, the primacy of the state over the market, or the central role of a political leader may also generate attraction among audiences that share or value these principles.

Naumov and Belousova argue that the dominant Western framework constructs binary oppositions in moral terms: liberal versus illiberal, democratic versus authoritarian, attractive versus manipulative, legitimate versus pathological (Naumov & Belousova, 2022). From this perspective, the very promotion of non-liberal values is

interpreted not as a competing form of attraction, but as a threat to the existing order. The authors reject this assumption, suggesting that the problem lies not necessarily in the content of non-liberal values, but in the methods through which influence is exercised.

Their alternative definition is therefore more useful than a simple rejection of sharp power. They accept that soft-power resources can be used destructively. Culture, values, language, media, and public diplomacy can become sharp when they are connected to deception, one-sided information, manipulation, or the restriction of the recipient's voluntary judgment. In this sense, sharp power is not "authoritarian soft power," but the manipulative use of soft-power resources for destabilizing purposes. However, the authors insist that this can be done by any actor, including Western states. The concept should therefore be universalized and depoliticized rather than reserved for Russia, China, or other non-liberal regimes (Naumov & Belousova, 2022).

At the same time, the article is not entirely neutral. Its opening critique of the declining liberal consensus and Western mainstream discourse reveals a recognizably post-liberal and partly anti-Western orientation. Nevertheless, it is valuable because it moves beyond the simpler Russian argument that "the West also does it." Naumov and Belousova offer a more sophisticated position: sharp power can remain analytically useful, but only if it is understood as a destructive technology of influence rather than as a moral label attached to non-Western actors. This makes the article especially useful for showing how Russian scholarship both contests the Western genealogy of sharp power and attempts to redefine the concept on more universal terms.

Overall, the Russian academic discussion of soft and sharp power reveals a distinctive reinterpretation of Western power vocabulary through a more state-centric, geopolitical, and sovereignty-oriented lens. Russian authors often adopt Joseph Nye's terminology of attraction, culture, values, and public diplomacy, but they tend to embed soft power within the practical needs of state foreign policy, national image-making, compatriot policy, language promotion, educational diplomacy, and the broader project of defending or promoting the *Русский мир* (Russian World). In this literature, soft power is rarely treated as a spontaneous attraction emerging primarily from civil society. Rather, society, culture, diasporas, universities, media, and humanitarian institutions are frequently understood as resources that can and should be coordinated in

support of national priorities. At the same time, several Russian authors acknowledge that culture alone is insufficient for successful soft power, since attraction also depends on political values, foreign-policy legitimacy, and the credibility of the state's international conduct. This already shows an important tension: Russian scholarship formally accepts the language of attraction but often operationalizes it as a strategic instrument of the state. The discussion of sharp power develops this tension further. Russian authors generally reject the Western attempt to define sharp power as a specifically authoritarian mode of influence, arguing that the opposition between Western soft power and non-Western sharp power is politically and morally loaded. For them, the concept often functions as a discursive label that preserves the legitimacy of Western public diplomacy while problematizing similar practices when they are associated with Russia, China, or other non-liberal actors. Some authors dismiss sharp power as an ideological construct, while others attempt to preserve its analytical usefulness by redefining it as the destructive or manipulative use of soft-power resources, regardless of regime type. Taken together, this literature shows that Russian debates over soft and sharp power are not simply about definitions. They reflect a broader struggle over legitimacy, hierarchy, and the authority to distinguish attraction from manipulation. Nevertheless, these Russian critiques also have limitations: they often expose Western double standards more readily than Russia's own manipulative practices. Their value therefore lies less in providing a neutral theory and more in revealing how soft and sharp power have become contested concepts within the wider confrontation between Russia and the West.

4.4 THE MULTIFACETED NATURE OF POWER

After examining Joseph Nye's conception of soft power, this literature review concludes with a focused discussion on the broader concept of power. This approach is justified by the observation that many scholars critiquing Nye's ideas ground their arguments in debates surrounding the nature of power itself. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the scholarship on power—predating both soft and sharp power—provides a more rigorous and detailed analysis of these concepts. It addresses

fundamental questions such as: What is power? How is power projected, received, or rejected? What are its sources? Is there a core principle or shared commonality underlying all forms of power? Additionally, it explores whether power is best understood as a force, a form of influence, or simply an ability, and whether a consensus exists regarding its definition. Several models or perspectives on power have been introduced in this section. Their application to the current conception of sharp power will be elaborated upon in the next chapter.

David Baldwin captures the enduring complexity of this debate, quoting Robert Gilpin's observation that the "number and variety of definitions [of power] should be an embarrassment to political scientists" (Baldwin, 2016, p. 2). However, this lack of consensus is not necessarily problematic; rather, it highlights the richness of power as a concept. Such contestation enables more nuanced interpretations of the multifaceted and complex natures of both soft and sharp power, offering insights from a variety of perspectives.

This chapter intentionally omits the conceptions of power proposed by scholars of conventional International Relations (IR) schools. The reasoning behind this decision lies in the fact that most classical or neo-realist and classical or neo-liberal thinkers either ground their arguments in foundational concepts established by Robert Dahl—extensively discussed in this section—or rely on relatively straightforward interpretations of power. It is important to acknowledge the foundational contributions of realist scholarship to the field of international relations; however, its theoretical framework remains somewhat elementary in comparison to other schools of thought. These alternative frameworks often provide a more nuanced and comprehensive conceptualization of power, making the inclusion of realist perspectives potentially redundant in the context of more sophisticated analyses.

For example, Andrew Moravcsik, in his influential work *Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics*, critiques the simplicity inherent in realist traditions of international relations theory. While advancing a liberal perspective, Moravcsik raises a significant objection to the reductionist tendencies of realism, particularly its oversimplification of the complex nature of international politics (Moravcsik, 1997). Realists, he argues, reduce the multifaceted social dimensions of international relations to a singular focus on the anarchic nature of the international

system. This critique highlights the inadequacy of realist approaches in capturing the complex interplay of social, cultural, institutional and other factors that influence state behavior.

Hans Morgenthau's work serves as a clear example of the realist tradition's tendency toward oversimplification. In his *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Morgenthau considers power one of its central themes. Despite dedicating quite a lengthy chapter to his understanding of power, Morgenthau presents definitions that can be seen as overly simplistic, such as: "Political power is a psychological relation between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised," or, "when we speak of power, we mean man's control over the minds and actions of other men" (Morgenthau, 1948, pp. 13-21).

The complexity of the concept of power is perhaps best encapsulated by Robert A. Dahl's characterization of it as "a bottomless swamp" (Dahl, 1957, p. 201), highlighting its contested and multifaceted nature. Dahl's seminal works, *The Concept of Power* and *Who Governs: Democracy and Power in an American City*, rank among the most cited, debated, and influential texts on power. Since the late 1950s, nearly every scholar contributing to the discourse on power, including Joseph Nye, has engaged with Dahl's conceptualization as a foundational point of reference.

Dahl's influence on the modern understanding of power can be likened to the role of classical realism in the development of International Relations (IR) as an academic discipline. Just as every branch and sub-school of IR—from neo-realism and neo-liberalism to social constructivism, feminism, and postmodernism—has evolved by responding to the core claims of classical realism, Dahl's ideas have similarly shaped debates across various academic traditions.

Dahl's appeal may stem not only from his status as one of the first scholars to systematically analyze power but also from the simplicity and accessibility of his framework. Two key aspects of his work stand out:

1. While acknowledging that power can encompass authority, legitimate authority, influence, control, and other related concepts, Dahl uses these terms interchangeably (Dahl, 1957, p. 202) This straightforward approach makes his ideas accessible and widely applicable.

2. Dahl provides a pragmatic and, as he labels it, an intuitive definition of power: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957, pp. 202-203) This clarity has made his framework a cornerstone for scholars in international relations and political science. For instance, Joseph Nye, in his discussion of soft power, references Dahl's definition to frame power as the ability to influence others' behavior (Nye, 2004, pp. 1-3).

Dahl's blend of theoretical rigor and practical simplicity ensures his enduring relevance, offering a foundation that continues to inform contemporary debates on power in multiple disciplines.

Dahl's first ontological distinction posits that power is inherently a relational concept, specifically among human beings. Consequently, his analysis intentionally excludes the natural sciences, focusing instead on social interactions. Dahl identifies three preconditions for the exercise of power: (1) a discernible time interval between A's action and B's response, (2) some form of connection or interrelation between A and B, and (3) the success of A's attempt to influence B. However, Dahl argues that simply stating that "A has power over B" is insufficient. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of examining power through its sources, instruments, extent, and scope.

This approach is significant, as Dahl prioritizes the comparative analysis of power over its mere identification. He introduces key variables to facilitate such comparisons, specifying differences in the basis, means, scope, and probabilities of power among actors, as well as the number of comparable respondents. These variables form a conceptual framework for understanding power in both abstract and comparative terms (Dahl, 1957, pp. 205-206).

Most importantly, Dahl distinguishes between the conceptual and operational dimensions of power. While he outlines an ideal-type framework with measurable criteria, he acknowledges the practical challenges of translating these criteria into observable variables. This difficulty is especially evident in attempts to measure the soft power capabilities of different countries. Joseph Nye, for instance, suggests using tools like focus groups, opinion polls, and public surveys to gauge soft power (Nye, 2010, p. 218). While these methods can yield valuable insights, they fall short of capturing the

full scale and effectiveness of soft power. In particular, the reliability of such data is compromised in non-democratic contexts, where freedom of expression is constrained, thereby limiting the accuracy and scope of public opinion as a measure of influence.

In his later works, Dahl acknowledges that the conceptual formulation of power may prove inadequate when applied to real-world case studies. To address this limitation, he adopts an eclectic approach in his influential book *Who Governs: Democracy and Power in an American City*, aiming to leverage a diverse range of data sources: “in order to take advantage of the existence of a very wide assortment of data” (Dahl, 2005, pp. 330-331). While such an approach allows for a more nuanced evaluation of power, the question remains whether this diversification of variables can fully capture the complexity of power dynamics.

In *Who Governs*, Dahl concludes that power, being distributed among multiple powerholders operating across various domains, precludes the existence of a single, monopolizing ruling elite. This observation has led many scholars to classify Dahl as a “pluralist.” His pluralist framework challenges the notion of elite dominance, emphasizing instead a fragmented distribution of power within democratic systems. However, the extent to which this approach accounts for systemic inequalities or hidden power structures remains a subject of scholarly debate.

One of the most important critiques of Dahl’s conception and one of the most influential works on power is *Two Faces of Power* by Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz. The authors distinguish between the perspectives of “sociologists” and “political scientists,” or more broadly, between “elitists” and “pluralists” in their views on power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962, p. 947). Notably, Bachrach and Baratz do not directly reference Dahl’s earlier work, *The Concept of Power*, but instead focus their critique on his book *Who Governs: Democracy and Power in an American City*, published a year prior to their article.

In their analysis, Bachrach and Baratz challenge Dahl’s methodology and conclusions about whether power is concentrated among a small elite (the elitist view) or dispersed across multiple actors (the pluralist view). The central contribution of their critique is the introduction of the concept of “agenda-setting.” They argue that power is not limited to direct decision-making—where A compels B to act against B’s initial

will, as outlined by Dahl—but extends to the capacity to shape the norms, institutions, and frameworks that define what issues are considered in the political arena. In essence, power is not only coercive but also structural, as it can establish the parameters of decision-making and determine which topics are even up for discussion.

As they cite E.E. Schattschneider: “All forms of political organization have a bias in favor of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others because organization is the mobilization of bias” (Schattschneider, 1960, p. 71). This idea of agenda-setting aligns closely with the concept of soft power, particularly when considering the global influence of norms propagated by the Western world. These norms span political, geopolitical, philosophical, and economic domains, showcasing how soft power relies not only on attraction but also on the ability to define the parameters of international discourse and practice.

Bachrach and Baratz primarily offer a methodological critique of Dahl’s conception of power, challenging his “pluralistic” understanding of the concept. For instance, Dahl asserts the existence of “key political issues,” which he argues demonstrate disagreement among powerholders on specific matters. In contrast, Bachrach and Baratz contest this notion, claiming that significant disagreements may occur over issues that do not fall into the predefined category of “key issues.” They highlight the difficulty in determining which issues hold the highest significance (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962, p. 950).

This critique problematizes the concepts of “significant,” “key,” or “political” issues, suggesting that any issue can gain momentum or become political unless it is intentionally or unintentionally suppressed from the outset. In other words, when a powerholder deems certain issues as minor or insignificant, they effectively prevent these issues from becoming recognized as “political” or “key.” This notion ties directly to the “second face of power,” which Bachrach and Baratz identify as agenda-setting.

The authors argue that without a thorough examination of dominant norms, ideas, or the “mobilization of bias,” it becomes challenging to differentiate between important and unimportant issues. Their critique underscores the structural dimensions of power, wherein the ability to shape the agenda or preclude specific issues from entering the political discourse is as critical as overt decision-making.

The contribution of Bachrach and Baratz, particularly their articulation of the notion of agenda-setting, holds significant relevance for the study of sharp power. Agenda-setting, understood as the deliberate manipulation of topics to be discussed, closely aligns with efforts of censorship and control identified by scholars examining the practical applications of sharp power. This concept highlights how power can shape discourse by determining which issues gain visibility and which are excluded, a central theme in sharp power's operational mechanisms. The idea will be further explored in the subsequent discussion of Steven Lukes' three-dimensional model of power, which offers an expanded framework for understanding these dynamics.

As previously indicated, Dahl's work has provided a foundational basis for scholars exploring and further developing the concept of power. Arguably, one of the most influential critiques of Dahl's conception of power—particularly significant for this research—was presented by Steven Lukes in his 1974 book, *Power: A Radical View*. In this work, Lukes critiques both Dahl's formulation of power and the contributions of Bachrach and Baratz, which he identifies as representing the first and second dimensions of power, respectively. Additionally, Lukes introduces a third dimension of power, which he argues serves as a fundamental framework for understanding both soft and sharp power.

1. One-dimensional view: Lukes begins by critiquing the pluralist view of power, as proposed by Dahl. He distinguishes between two notions in Dahl's work: *A's capacity* to influence *B* and *A's successful attempt* to influence *B* (Lukes, 1974, p. 12). In other words, Lukes differentiates between potential power and actual power, or between the capacity to exercise power and its execution. He argues that Dahl's approach, which focuses on power as observable and measurable conflict over political decisions, is overly simplistic.

The pluralist understanding of power, which defines it as the ability of one actor to influence another against their will, is critiqued by Lukes for its narrow scope. He characterizes this as a one-dimensional view of power, as it neglects unobservable aspects such as implicit desires, unspoken intentions, and unconscious biases. Furthermore, Lukes highlights inconsistencies in Dahl's logic. For example, in *Who Governs?* Dahl acknowledges the possibility of conflicts without

observable variables, yet this acknowledgment contradicts the strict focus on observable phenomena in the first dimension of power.

The first dimension, as described by Lukes, pertains to observable power, which manifests when one party prevails in a conflict of interests or compels others to act against their preferences. Crucially, this dimension emphasizes the importance of measurability and observability in power relations. Lukes critiques this emphasis, arguing that it excludes significant, albeit less tangible, aspects of power dynamics.

2. Two-dimensional view: Lukes' two-dimensional view of power builds upon the work of Bachrach and Baratz, who propose the notion of agenda-setting. Lukes views this as a two-dimensional perspective because it acknowledges not only observable variables related to overt conflict but also the preemptive determination of what constitutes conflict (Lukes, 1974, p. 18). The concept of nondecision-making plays a significant role in this view, as it involves suppressing certain topics from being discussed and defining the boundaries of what can be debated. The mobilization of bias, a related concept introduced by Bachrach and Baratz, underscores how institutional structures and values systematically favor certain groups or issues while marginalizing others. While recognizing that this perspective extends the analysis of power and broadens its scope from mere force to more nuanced forms of influence, Lukes critiques it for its continued reliance on the presence of conflict—whether overt or covert. Specifically, he argues that focusing solely on conflict, even in its covert forms, overlooks more latent forms of power that shape perceptions, preferences, and agendas without direct opposition.

This formulation of power, including nondecision-making or agenda-setting, is particularly significant in sharp power scholarship. For instance, censorship—frequently highlighted in reports analyzing Chinese attempts to suppress specific topics in academia and media—provides a clear empirical example of how power can be exercised. Such actions demonstrate how certain topics are effectively removed from

public discourse, aligning closely with the concept of agenda-setting by preemptively excluding subjects from discussion.

3. The three-dimensional conception of power, which represents a critical turning point in conceptualizing soft and sharp power, is rooted in Steven Lukes' critique of the two-dimensional perspective, as articulated by Bachrach and Baratz. While acknowledging the advancements made by incorporating the notion of agenda-setting, Lukes raises three significant objections to Bachrach and Baratz's methodology.

First, Lukes critiques the dichotomy of action versus inaction, or decision versus nondecision, arguing that it retains behaviorist tendencies. He asserts that nondecision, insofar as it is a conscious act, falls within the broader category of decisions. Lukes further distinguishes between nondecision and systemic bias, emphasizing that while nondecision is inherently a deliberate action, bias often operates at a subconscious level, emerging from social norms, structures, and practices. These societal frameworks, he argues, play a central role in shaping biases, tendencies, and preferences, which, in turn, significantly influence decision-making processes.

Second, Lukes challenges the two-dimensional view's reliance on observable conflict as a precondition for the exercise of power. He contends that power is not limited to instances where A compels B to act against B's will but is also exercised when A shapes B's desires and preferences, thereby preventing conflict from arising. In this sense, power is most effective when it operates invisibly, a point Lukes later reinforces by asserting that "power is at its most effective when least observable" (Lukes, 2005, p. 1). For Lukes, the ability to forestall conflict and shape the opposing side's desires represents the most efficient form of power.

Finally, Lukes questions the conceptualization of "grievances" within the two-dimensional framework, differentiating them from "interests." He argues that the absence of grievances, a key premise in Bachrach and Baratz's model, does not necessarily imply the absence of interests. Rather, Lukes posits that the suppression or prevention of grievances

may itself represent a powerful exercise of influence. He provocatively asks, “Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?” (Lukes, 1974, p. 24).

To summarize Steven Lukes’ conceptualization of power, he proposes a three-dimensional framework:

1. One-dimensional view: A forces B to do something that B would not otherwise do.
2. Two-dimensional view: A determines, dictates, or restricts the scope of what can be discussed – the agenda setting.
3. Three-dimensional view: A shapes the norms, interests, preferences, as well as desires of B to such an extent that B aligns with A’s interests without perceiving any conflict.

While Lukes views power as an ability or capacity, Michel Foucault offers a contrasting perspective, defining power as a relationship. A brief disclaimer is necessary: while Foucault is considered one of the most influential thinkers on power, one of the significant challenges in engaging with his ideas is the complexity of his language. Mark Philp, in his interpretation of Foucault's views on power, acknowledges that translating Foucault's texts is a particularly difficult task (Philp, 1983, p. 30).

Foucault explicitly rejects the conventional notion of power, stating: “I do not mean *Power* as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state. By power, I do not mean, either, a mode of subjugation which, in contrast to violence, has the form of the rule” (Foucault, 1978, p. 92). Philp interprets this statement to mean that power, as it manifests in norms and institutions, is not inherently fixed but is constituted through relationships (Philp, 1983, p. 33). For Foucault, power is not a stable or inherent ability; rather, it is a process involving change, struggle, confrontation, and the dynamics of power relations. While it might be

intuitive to think that power originates from authority, Foucault argues that power comes from below and eventually culminates in authority. Most importantly, the concept of power, in Foucault's view, is incomplete without intention and resistance. As a result, his texts often describe power as a form of oppression that must be resisted and transformed in order to liberate the individual and society from its constraints.

Another important work by Foucault, which is especially relevant for this study, is *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. This book does not focus solely on the construction of punishment institutions but explores how these institutions can constitute and transform individuals. For Foucault, the prison represents more than just a milder form of punishment compared to execution; it is an institutionalized form of power that encompasses control, surveillance, discipline, and more (Gerland, 1986, p. 849). In a sense, this book can be viewed as a chronology of punishment practices in France, Europe, and the US between the 18th and 19th centuries.

Foucault argues that substituting execution with imprisonment is not merely a shift in the severity of the penal system but a fundamental change in the purpose of punishment. While execution targets the physical existence of an individual to eliminate a perceived threat, imprisonment focuses on the "soul" of the individual (Gerland, 1986, p. 850). In other words, the prison becomes an institutionalized method of transforming certain personal traits of the individual.

Importantly, Foucault contends that the prison illustrates the profound transformations within modern societies. It marks a shift from traditional punitive approaches to a greater emphasis on correction and rehabilitation. In this light, the prison represents a fundamental change in societal attitudes towards punishment, especially since corrective measures require the involvement of various groups who seek to understand the root causes of crime and the behavior of the perpetrator.

A key, and somewhat unorthodox, notion proposed by Foucault is that the prison should not be viewed merely as a repressive institution but as an exercise of power that contributes to the betterment of society. He argues that this form of power should be seen as an instrument that facilitates the transformation of individuals into more socially beneficial beings. What is particularly significant for this study is that, for Foucault, power has the capacity to change both society and the individual.

Foucault proposes examining punishment through the interrelated concepts of the body, power, and knowledge. For Foucault, the "body" refers to the material entity that is physically captured and subjugated by institutions of domination. However, Foucault extends this concept to include institutions that target the internal aspect of the body, which he defines as the "soul." The subjugation of the soul, in turn, aims to exert control over the body by fostering "self-control." Unlike conventional views of power as an instrument attributed to particular classes or groups, Foucault conceptualizes power as a form of domination that emerges through social interactions. His focus is not on which individuals or groups possess power, but rather on the various forms and organizational aspects of power, which exist independently of specific political ideologies and can manifest without overt conflict (Gerland, 1986, p. 853).

The final concept Foucault elaborates on is *knowledge*. In this context, *knowledge* refers to the study of the characteristics of the subjugated, including their fears, motives, and capabilities. This information is crucial for the process of subjugation, as a deeper understanding of the subjugated individuals facilitates greater control over them: the more is known about the subjugated, the easier it becomes to dominate them.

This final reference to the concept of knowledge is particularly significant to the scholarship on sharp power. Foucault's focus on studying the fears, motives, and other aspects of the subjugated clearly resonates with the nature of sharp power, which seeks to understand the deeply embedded traits of its targets and then exploit them for strategic advantage.

As David Baldwin notes in *Power and International Relations: A Conceptual Approach*, for reasons he does not fully explain, social constructivists engage the least with the concept of power. Unlike Alexander Wendt, who dedicated his major thesis to critically analyzing the basic ontological premises of the realist tradition in International Relations, Stefano Guzzini provides a more comprehensive discussion of power. Guzzini presents, as Baldwin describes it, a Lukes-plus-Foucault view of power (Baldwin, 2016, p. 145). Stefano Guzzini provides a nuanced and detailed examination of power that contrasts sharply with the realist tradition, aligning more closely with the social constructivist school of thought. (Guzzini, 2005, p. 496) identifies three critical dimensions for analyzing power: an analytical inquiry, which explores the meaning of

power; a performative inquiry, which investigates the empirical implications of power; and a conceptual genealogy, which examines the historical transformations of the concept through its interpretation and application. Adopting a constructivist epistemology, Guzzini underscores the socially constructed nature of knowledge and terminology, asserting that this social construction process shapes reality, which, in turn, informs and reconstructs knowledge. This reflexive interdependence between knowledge and reality lies at the core of his argument.

He critiques Felix Oppenheimer's attempt to describe power neutrally and objectively, a hallmark of positivist approaches. While Guzzini acknowledges the well-meaning intention behind such efforts, he warns that this method risks oversimplifying the complexity of power, thereby neglecting its conceptual richness. However, Guzzini also concedes that the attempt to preserve the intricacy of power carries its own challenges, particularly the risk of perpetuating ambiguity within the concept.

Although Steven Lukes provides a compelling and well-developed framework for understanding the behavioral dimensions of power, which significantly enriches the scholarship on sharp power, a more comprehensive grasp of the relational aspects of sharp power necessitates the inclusion of a social constructivist interpretation of power. Although Martha Finnemore does not explicitly reference either sharp or soft power, her analysis of the legitimacy of power provides a valuable perspective that contributes to the conceptualization of both. (Finnemore, 2009, p. 63) argues that power requires legitimacy and is inherently relational, rejecting the notion of unilateral or unipolar power. As a prominent scholar within the social constructivist school of International Relations, she asserts that the exercise of power is deeply embedded in the social fabric of international relations. This implies that the identity, legal systems, and nature of the actor significantly influence how power is exercised and projected.

Consistent with constructivist traditions and resonating with Edward Lock's work, Finnemore highlights the agency-structure dichotomy, emphasizing that power is meaningless without acceptance by the recipient. She posits that legitimacy is a prerequisite for the successful exercise of power, as unilateral projection is virtually ineffective without considering the conditions and responses of the target. This perspective is particularly pertinent to the study of sharp power, which not only encompasses the methods of influence employed by authoritarian states but also

underscores the vulnerabilities of target societies. Moreover, the agency-structure framework suggests that forms of power are dynamic, evolving through the feedback and reactions of those subjected to it.

Finnemore explores the concept of *hypocrisy*, describing it as a situation where actions contradict shared values or where overt intentions conceal hidden motives (Finnemore, 2009, p. 65). Using the 2003 Iraq invasion as an example, she notes that its justification was rooted in the American value system. While she does not fully blame the Bush administration, she argues that political leaders and decision-makers are often genuinely influenced by the dominant values of the societies in which they are socialized.

This perspective is significant to the sharp power debate, as it prompts a critical inquiry: what social factors, including norms and cultural dynamics, enable the creation and evolution of sharp power?

5 REFRAMING SHARP POWER: BRIDGING THREE-DIMENSIONAL AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST MODELS

5.1 DECONSTRUCTING AND RECONCEPTUALIZING SHARP POWER

As we can see, the conceptual debate surrounding sharp power is still in its early stages. It is early in the sense that no comprehensive examination of the term has been offered by the scholars involved in the field. While there is a vast body of literature addressing the concept of power—where it is examined, challenged, and scrutinized not only by multiple authors but also by dozens of representatives from various schools of thought and philosophical traditions in international relations and political science—there is little of substance in the scholarship on sharp power.

Four main tendencies can be identified regarding the concept: first, as noted earlier, the majority of authors uncritically adopt the initial definition of sharp power proposed by Walker and Ludwig. Admittedly, this definition is useful, as it succinctly raises concerns about the altered form of ideational influence traditionally described as soft power. The second tendency is that, following Walker and Ludwig's lead, authors juxtapose or associate the term with soft power without questioning this connection. This is problematic, as certain indicators of sharp power suggested by the authors do not align with the non-coercive means of influence that soft power encompasses. Lastly, most authors focus on empirical research rather than engaging in theoretical debate. While this is not inherently negative, as it allows for reverse engineering of the concept, the lack of conceptual debate—or the tendency to accept the notion of sharp power without challenging it—is a clear indication that the concept is still in the early stages of development.

The fourth and most significant tendency is that the majority of scholars follow Walker and Ludwig's line of reasoning, emphasizing the institutional weaknesses of democratic systems. For instance, many scholars adopt the initial notion of asymmetry in terms of access to knowledge fields. This perspective frames characteristics such as openness, media plurality, academic freedom, various forms of civil liberties, and other hallmarks of democracy—which are traditionally seen as strengths—as being perceived as vulnerabilities by authoritarian states. While this observation is undoubtedly valid, a notable issue arises: very few researchers highlight that sharp power also seeks to exploit ideas, public sentiments, and collective perceptions. Reports make it clear that authoritarian governments not only identify the institutional weaknesses of democratic systems but also perceive certain ideologies as inherently fragile. In other words, the ideational dimension of sharp power is frequently overlooked or entirely neglected in the existing literature.

The intention of this chapter is not to propose a new theory, but rather to outline the complexity of the phenomenon of sharp power, categorize its indicators according to the detected topics or themes, and to derive a definition that incorporates the most important indicators identified by researchers that shape the intuitive perception of sharp power.

Considering the literature—both academic and non-academic sources presented in the literature review chapter—it is possible to derive not necessarily a new definition of sharp power, but a more comprehensive articulation of a concept that has evolved over time. This is made possible by the extensive scholarship and reports provided by various researchers, academics, and think tanks. Although almost none of these sources have presented significant opposition to the initial definition of sharp power, nor have they offered a revised or new formulation of the concept, their contributions have greatly enriched the scholarship on sharp power.

A comprehensive set of indicators can be developed by analyzing reports on Chinese and Russian influence methods, as well as scholarly literature on sharp power. These indicators are presented as keywords, or short phrases derived from adjectives and descriptions used by researchers to characterize Russian and Chinese sharp power. They have been categorized according to the following classificatory principles: origins, domestic patterns, intentions, nature, tactics and methods, instruments, sectors affected, target groups, international patterns, narrative spread, and regions affected.

Before presenting the keywords themselves, the classificatory principles will be explained in detail to provide a clearer understanding of their scope and relevance. The categories of origins, intentions, nature, and certain aspects of narrative spread represent the *intensional* side of sharp power, focusing on its intrinsic characteristics and underlying motives. In contrast, domestic patterns, tactics and methods, international patterns, sectors affected, target groups, and parts of narrative spread highlight the *extensional* side, emphasizing observable applications and consequences of sharp power.

Each classificatory principle can be understood as follows:

1. **Origins** refer to the source and foundation of sharp power, encompassing the cultural, historical, and institutional contexts that have shaped its instrumental and ideational development.
2. **Domestic patterns** refer to the internal behaviors and policies of a state that exercises sharp power abroad. This category examines the political, social, and institutional frameworks within a country that enable the development of sharp power.

3. **Nature** describes the inherent characteristics of sharp power that distinguish it from other forms of influence, such as soft power.
4. **Intentions** address the objectives behind the exercise of sharp power, seeking to answer the question: *Why is sharp power deployed?*
5. **Tactics and Methods** highlight the strategies and mechanisms used to implement sharp power in practice.
6. **Sectors Affected** identify the domains of public life that are exploited to execute sharp power tactics.
7. **Target Groups** focus on the people or social groups that sharp power efforts aim to influence, ranging from individuals and communities to broader societal categories.
8. **Target Regions** represent the geographic areas or political systems that are most affected by or susceptible to sharp power, defining its geopolitical scope.
9. **International patterns** refer to the external behaviors and actions undertaken by states employing sharp power. This category highlights the detected strategies and activities that Russia and China engage to project influence over their targets.
10. **Narrative Spread** highlights the content and themes disseminated to achieve sharp power's objectives, focusing on the messages used to shape perceptions and attitudes.
11. **Vulnerabilities** refer to the underlying reasons why certain regions, countries, sectors, societies, or social groups are particularly susceptible to sharp power.

Sharp power indicators:

1. **Origin:** Undemocratic, authoritarian.
2. **Domestic patterns:** Control of academia, media, think tanks, high culture and pop-culture; failed soft power; attempt to compensate failed soft power; curbing media plurality; lower accountability to the populace; considering openness as a weakness, hostility towards openness and plurality, hostility towards civil and individual liberties; absence of fact-checking; preference for state control over individual freedoms; creating informational asymmetry.

3. **Nature and characteristics:** Manipulative, disruptive, coercive, undemocratic, authoritarian, malign, hostile, monopolistic, undemocratic, asymmetrical, ideational influence; high effectiveness in projecting influence; illegitimate influence, all-penetrating, cutting.
4. **Intent:** Weakening democratic institutions, weakening Western institutions; undermining democratic systems; fracturing societies, dividing societies; undermine political systems; devaluating liberal values; creating confusion; sowing doubt; discrediting democratic values and governments; discrediting the Western states; degrading the integrity of independent institutions; diminishing attractiveness of other states; attempt to compensate failed soft power.
5. **Tactics and methods:** Censorship, disinformation, co-optation, distraction, bribery, manipulation, propaganda, monopoly over the knowledge field; exploiting financial dependency; influence operations; elite capture; cyberattacks, covert tactics, espionage, persecution, forced compliance.
6. **Sectors affected:** Media, education, academia, publishing, internet, government, civil society.
7. **Target groups:** Political and economic elites, cultural elites, populations, diaspora, expats, foreign nationals, private sector, newly established media, academics, Russian speakers, Russian diaspora, Orthodox Christian societies in Europe.
8. **Target Regions:** Democratic states, developing democracies, weak democracies, new democracies, states with weak institutions, Middle East, North Africa, Latin America, Europe, Eastern and Central Europe, Baltic states, Balkans, the United States.
9. **International patterns:** intensifying ideological conflict; removing academic articles from libraries and online platforms; removing content from Wikipedia; restriction of free expression; censoring topics within academic discourse; distortion of political environment; embedding governmental narrative in films, literature, and journalism; technologies of smart cities and other infrastructural projects; controlling resident data; surveillance and censorship of expats; silencing expats; monitoring population and their personal data including personal messages, criminal records, health information, credit history, social networks; development loans; loans as means to subjugation; financial dependency to subjugate academics; subjugating new media outlets; Russian

media outlets abroad: Rossiskaya Gazeta, RT, Sputnik; Russian religious organizations and think tanks, including Russian Orthodox Church and Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, Russian motorcycle club Night Wolves, Victory Road rides; free information available from Sputnik; sowing disbelief in legitimacy or effectiveness of democratic governments, free information available from the Russian intelligence services; sowing doubts towards mainstream media; censoring sensitive topics to the CCP; Covid-19 disinformation campaigns; supporting left-wing and right-wing movements; supporting populist and anti-establishment movements; reflexive control, strategic dissemination of information.

10. Narrative spread: Depicting the Western system as equally flawed as the Russian system, attacking the reputation of NATO and EU, disinformation unrelated to China and Russia, Western media should not be trusted, Russia offers an alternative view, portraying NATO as a dysfunctional entity; portraying the West as morally inferior; anti-Occidental narratives; spreading Western-skeptic rhetoric.

11. Vulnerabilities of target sectors: public distrust towards established media; limited financial resources for media and academia; financial dependency; existing Eurosceptic sentiments; existing anti-establishment views; existing anti-migration views; existing xenophobic, or homophobic views; skepticism towards healthcare industry.

Drawing on the articles and reports analyzed in this section, we may propose a broader and more comprehensive definition of sharp power. While the initial interpretation correctly suggests that sharp power is an export or projection of authoritarianism, this refined definition builds upon it by incorporating additional perspectives emphasized by various scholars. Specifically, it seeks to encapsulate the institutional, normative, and ideational dimensions of sharp power as reflected in the academic discourse. *Sharp power is thus understood as a set of foreign policy tools employed by authoritarian governments, aimed at instrumentalizing what are traditionally considered the strengths of democratic systems—at the institutional, normative, and ideational levels. By exploiting the perceived vulnerabilities of target*

societies, these governments deploy sharp power to compensate for their failures in leveraging soft power effectively.

As this debate will be elaborated in detail in the chapter discussing all three concepts of power, let us briefly examine these levels here. At the *institutional level*, as suggested by Walker and Ludwig, authoritarian states penetrate the knowledge fields such of democratic systems such as media, academia, and think tanks. They see the very openness of democratic systems as a weakness and exploit it through practices like disinformation, censorship, co-optation, bribery, and intimidation.

At the *normative level*, sharp power challenges and redefines the foundational norms of democratic systems. For instance, it replaces openness with control and monopoly, undermines principles such as freedom of speech and academic freedom, and manipulates democratic ideals to justify the spread of malign narratives that deepen existing social divisions.

Most significantly for this study, sharp power functions at the *ideational level* by exploiting public opinion and societal sentiments. This includes manipulating religious beliefs or leveraging academic knowledge to influence both individual and collective perceptions.

5.2 DECONSTRUCTING AND RECONCEPTUALIZING SOFT POWER

Similar to the deconstruction of the sharp power concept, the indicators of soft power can also be outlined in the form of keywords or key phrases derived from the texts discussed in the literature review. These indicators are categorized using the same structure and classificatory criteria applied in the case of sharp power, with exceptions for certain criteria deemed irrelevant. Irrelevance arises either from the absence of appropriate indicators or from the non-applicability of specific criteria.

1. **Origin:** Primarily democratic, though partially undemocratic.
2. **Domestic Patterns:** Adoption of appealing political values; development of attractive institutions; definition of national interest to include appealing causes.

3. **Nature:** Attractive, appealing, persuasive, seductive, intangible, voluntary, and oriented toward public reception.
4. **Intent:** To foster voluntary compliance; exert influence without threats; shape others' desires and preferences; align international rules with one's interests; engage in agenda-setting.
5. **Tactics and Methods:** Cultural appeal; educational and exchange programs; cultural activities; public diplomacy; enhancing and creating a positive image; promoting desired values and norms; leading by example; shared values about justice and duty; making policies appear legitimate or morally authoritative; leveraging cultural and ideological attractiveness; encouraging aspirations for prosperity and openness; engendering cooperation through intangible attraction; inspiring admiration for one's values and dreams; and setting agendas.
6. **Target Groups:** Civil society, media, academia, educational institutions, and potentially governments.
7. **Target Regions:** Global in scope, with no specific geographic limitations; includes historical examples such as targeting the USSR and Soviet Bloc countries during the Cold War.

While it is not the intention here to overshadow Joseph Nye's interpretation of soft power—a task that would be both challenging and audacious—we may propose an articulation of the concept to support our comparison between soft power and sharp power. Drawing upon the provided texts, indicators, keywords, and notions associated with the concept, we can understand soft power as a country's *potential* to pursue its objectives internationally by enhancing its overall image. Notably, the advantages of soft power can benefit both governments and the broader populace, at both collective and individual levels. Although governments can significantly contribute to their country's soft power by fostering an attractive socio-political environment, soft power cannot be considered a foreign policy tool in the traditional sense. This is primarily due to the limited or indirect involvement of governments in its generation. Moreover, soft power cannot be adopted, implemented, or developed independently of broader domestic and international policies. Furthermore, it cannot guarantee specific outcomes,

particularly immediate ones, as it functions to create and enhance a country's general image and foster broad perceptions rather than directly influence specific groups.

In this context, we must differentiate between the mere *potential* to target specific groups and the achievement of desired outcomes. Soft power cannot be considered a foreign policy tool because it does not guarantee specific outcomes and often lacks the direct influence required to achieve immediate or targeted results. While educational and exchange programs may target students and scholars, media plurality domestically may aim to influence foreign media, and infrastructure subsidies and grants might engage entities ranging from municipalities to religious organizations, achieving a desired outcome involves more than merely targeting a specific group. Success in this context would mean influencing the target group in alignment with governmental objectives, such as discrediting adversarial governments. However, such targeted dissemination of narratives would no longer fall into the category of soft power but would instead align with the characteristics of sharp power, as previously defined. Soft power, therefore, is limited to fostering a positive relationship between the influencer and the target group—a goal that, while possible, is by no means guaranteed.

The term *potential* was chosen to describe the nature of soft power instead of *ability*, as suggested by Nye, for the following reason: *ability* implies that a country could effectively exert its soft power and achieve the desired outcome regardless of objective conditions, such as the international environment, the cultural and societal norms of the target, or the target's perception of the influencer. In contrast, *potential* conveys the idea of a positive expectation while acknowledging that success is not guaranteed. (Merriam-Webster, 2024) defines *potential* as “something that can develop or become actual; capable of development into actuality.” This distinction is crucial, as the descriptions of soft power emphasize that successful outcomes—whatever form success may take—are not assured, and their likelihood remains uncertain.

The efficacy of soft power is questioned by (Hall, 2010), who challenges the notion that the mere cultural appeal of the United States can reliably produce desired outcomes, particularly given the cultural, religious, normative, and customary differences between the U.S. and non-Western, often antagonistic states. While Hall provides a compelling basis for his skepticism, he excludes the economic environment of the influencer state from his analysis of political values. This raises a broader

question—not about attraction as a form of genuine affection and unconditional admiration, but rather as a form of enticement rooted in pragmatic and utilitarian considerations.

In his 2017 interview, Nye addressed the issue that the intangible nature of soft power had frequently led to misinterpretations by both commentators and scholars (USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2017). Nye emphasizes that soft power is often closely intertwined with hard power, which, in its own right, forms a part of a country's foreign policy. This interconnection lies in the ability of hard power—whether military strength or economic influence—to shape a country's reputation and, consequently, its soft power. For instance, the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, particularly the chaos it left behind, is frequently regarded as a significant blow to the United States' trustworthiness and reliability among its partners, as well as to its perceived dominance and competence among adversaries (Kertzer, 2021). While this may appear to be a minor observation, it is critically important, as it underscores that soft power is not a static asset but an ability, or a *potential* to influence others, one that can either be strengthened or diminished. Indeed, while a government can bolster its soft power by, for example, enhancing its military capacity, soft power itself can suffer when the reputation or competence of that military is undermined.

The emphasis on the non-instrumental nature of soft power is what fundamentally distinguishes it from sharp power. While the differing intentions, sources, tactics, methods of influence, and other aspects are equally significant and will be examined in the upcoming chapter, it is the instrumentalization of influence efforts that transforms soft power into sharp power.

An important notion emphasized by scholars is the role of necessary conditions for the success of soft power, particularly cultural or ideological proximity. Todd Hall, for instance, illustrates this with the case of the American movie *Black Hawk Down*. While the film was intended to portray the heroism of American soldiers, Somali cinema-goers reportedly cheered during scenes depicting the deaths of American troops (Hall, 2010, p. 200). Similarly, Nye highlights Bollywood's contribution to Indian soft power in Afghanistan, where cultural similarities with India are evident (Nye, 2004, p. 10). In contrast, one cannot argue that Indian cinema has achieved comparable success in Western societies or that it has significantly enhanced India's image there.

While Hall is skeptical of the significance of a country's cultural and political attractiveness, both Hall and Nye overlook the rational, pragmatic motivations of individuals, which are no less significant than attraction itself. If political values or culture can attract people, why should the economic interests of target societies be dismissed? For instance, despite the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the hostile sentiments many Georgians harbor toward Russians, Russia remains the leading destination for over half of Georgian migrants (OECD iLibrary, 2024). Although this debate extends beyond the scope of international relations—raising questions about the meanings of love and attraction—it serves as a reminder that attractiveness and soft power appeal manifest in various forms, not necessarily through political or ideological alignment.

6 COMPARING SOFT AND SHARP POWER

Considering the debates presented in the literature review section, a more systematized framework for understanding soft and sharp power can be developed. To properly compare these two concepts, it is necessary to establish a common ground—a framework that encompasses both. For this purpose, Lukes' three-dimensional view of power will be applied to analyze the behavioral dimensions of these concepts. This approach provides a categorized and nuanced understanding of the commonalities and differences between soft and sharp power.

Following this behavioral analysis, a social constructivist perspective will further explore the relational nature of both concepts. As highlighted in the literature review, scholars addressing both soft and sharp power predominantly focus on the behavioral aspects of power within these concepts. Many, particularly those investigating sharp power, conceptualize power as a largely unilateral phenomenon. They emphasize the authoritarian origins of sharp power and primarily consider the openness of democratic systems as the key factor on the receiving end. While this perspective is valid, it overlooks crucial elements, such as the vulnerabilities and causes

of receptiveness among target groups, as well as the unintended ways in which these groups, through their responses, influence the authoritarian states in return.

6.1 APPLYING THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL VIEW

As suggested in the opening paragraph of the literature review, earlier inquiries into power provide a more nuanced interpretation of these two sub-branches. It is argued here that sharp power encompasses all three dimensions of power proposed by Lukes, whereas soft power partially aligns with the second and third dimensions of his framework.

Let us begin with the first dimension of power. Drawing on Dahl, Lukes conceptualizes power at its most basic level as a coercive form of influence, wherein A compels B to do something that B would otherwise not do. The coercive aspect of power is particularly significant, as it highlights a key distinction between soft and sharp power. While Nye adopts Dahl's interpretation of power, he argues that soft power represents the antithesis of coercive influence, relying exclusively on attraction as its mechanism. In contrast, sharp power integrates coercion as a fundamental feature.

For instance, scholars of sharp power identify tactics such as restricting certain topics within academic research, suppressing media discourse, or creating financial dependencies to compel specific groups to propagate desired narratives. While it is theoretically possible for such actions to occur voluntarily, in practice, they are frequently enforced through mechanisms like blackmail, intimidation, or financial coercion. Thus, the first major distinction between soft and sharp power lies in their respective reliance on non-coercive and coercive means of influence.

Lukes' two-dimensional view of power, following the first coercive dimension, introduces a form of influence where powerholders dictate what can and cannot be discussed. This concept, referred to as agenda-setting, originates from the work of Bachrach and Baratz and is notably adopted by Joseph Nye, albeit with a distinct

interpretation. Nye incorporates agenda-setting into his framework of soft power, arguing that it emerges when a country presents desirable and attractive attributes of its political environment, whether domestic or international. For instance, nations often advocate for strengthening democratic principles, thereby not only promoting democracy but also fostering the perception that they themselves embody these ideals.

This projection creates an allure for democracy, commonly associated with higher living standards, the rule of law, stronger economic performance, and the protection of human rights. Simultaneously, it emphasizes what is deemed significant. This distinction is critical in understanding how agenda-setting functions within both soft and sharp power. In the context of soft power, agenda-setting is exemplified by offering ideals or virtues deemed desirable—an attempt to present a model of excellence to be emulated. Importantly, these virtues are subjective, defined by the influencer's perspective rather than an objective standard.

In contrast, sharp power employs agenda-setting by suppressing or excluding topics from discussion. In practice, this often entails censorship, silencing dissent, or persecution. For example, reports indicate that both Russia and China—especially China—actively seek to remove sensitive topics from academic discourse. These efforts extend beyond censorship to include intimidation (Peterson, 2017). Another example is China's attempts to modify content on platforms like Wikipedia to align with its narratives (Dewey, 2013). This dual approach to agenda-setting—promoting ideals in the case of soft power and restricting discourse in the case of sharp power—represents a fundamental distinction between the two forms of influence.

Sharp power tactics also encompass the strategy of presenting a narrative or role model as an exemplar. This approach can be observed in Russia's attempts to justify its war in Ukraine by promoting a narrative of moral superiority grounded in the adoption of Orthodox Christian and other religious norms (Mojzes, 2023). This notion demonstrates that while soft power involves agenda-setting by offering topics for discussion, sharp power encompasses both aspects of agenda-setting: simultaneously removing certain topics and introducing others. In other words, sharp power operates across a much broader spectrum of agenda-setting options compared to soft power.

The three-dimensional view of power is arguably the most relevant framework for analyzing both concepts. While the first two dimensions of power necessitate overt conflict, antagonism, or grievances, Lukes posits that power is most effective when it shapes the desires and perceptions of its targets, thereby preempting the emergence of explicit grievances. According to Lukes, power functions not merely by addressing conscious interests but by shaping the underlying biases that guide decision-making, which are themselves embedded within social and cultural constructs.

Soft power aligns with this conceptualization insofar as it not only seeks to attract but also actively contributes to the construction of socio-cultural norms and political principles that resonate with the values of the influencing state. Sharp power, by contrast, operates in the same dimension of power but is driven by fundamentally distinct objectives. Rather than fostering alignment with its own norms and values, the practitioner of sharp power capitalizes on the vulnerabilities of the target society, including its fears, doubts, resentments, and broader discontent.

As previously discussed, the objectives of sharp power may range from destabilizing the social cohesion of the target society to undermining the credibility of adversarial states. In this regard, sharp power extends beyond the overt coercion and mere control over the agenda; it fundamentally shapes how individuals and communities construct their understanding of reality.

The notion of influencing preferences and biases at an unconscious level holds significant importance, particularly for the concept of sharp power. Authoritarian states, notably Russia, have sought—often successfully—to conduct operations that shape public perceptions and emotions at the subconscious, or as Lukes describes it, unconscious level. A prominent example of such efforts is the concept of *reflexive control*. As (Marin, 2024) outlines, these methods of influence, originally developed by the KGB, have been effectively employed by Russia in the Baltic states and beyond. The practical implications of this unconscious dimension of power—specifically sharp power—will be examined in detail in the subsequent chapter.

6.2 INTERRELATION NATURE OF SOFT AND SHARP POWER

Even though Steven Lukes' three-dimensional analysis of power enriches the understanding of both soft and sharp power, his focus remains on questions such as What is power? and How does power function? It is reasonable to argue that he does not delve deeply into the relational nature of power. While Lukes does not explicitly adopt a constructivist ontological framework for power, as is common among thinkers from critical schools, he does emphasize the significance of social constructs in shaping biases and unconscious decisions. This emphasis can be interpreted as an indirect reference to the agency-structure dichotomy.

Similarly, Nye does not explicitly incorporate a constructivist framework when discussing soft power. However, he argues that successful soft power requires cultural similarity or the acceptance of receptive audiences. By considering not only the influencing side but also the receiving side of soft power, Nye implicitly acknowledges the inter-relational nature of power.

The concept of power is often associated with authority, particularly due to its frequent pairing with adjectives such as *powerful*. This interpretation of power is commonly adopted by scholars exploring sharp power. However, they often overlook the Foucauldian understanding of power, which posits that power is not solely disseminated from the top down but also emerges from below (Foucault, 1978). This notion is particularly significant for two reasons: first, sharp power scholarship tends to ignore the fact that authoritarian states not only impose sharp power over specific groups or industries within democratic societies but are also unintentional recipients of feedback—albeit unintentional and implicit—from these very democratic targets. Second, scholars often emphasize the authoritarian origins of sharp power, focusing on institutional, governmental, and political systems that adopt authoritarian principles. What they fail to account for is the role of societal and cultural factors in shaping not only these systems but also the specific traits, attributes, and manifestations of sharp power itself.

While much of the sharp power literature focuses on the institutional damage it inflicts on democratic systems, Foucault's distinction between the physical and ideational aspects of power provides a broader perspective. In his analysis, the practice of execution targets the body as a physical entity, whereas the prison system aims to

subjugate the soul (Gerland, 1986, p. 850). This dual perception of power can be applied to sharp power, emphasizing that its effects extend beyond mere institutional damage to include profound ideational impacts.

This perspective is especially relevant when considering Foucault's reference to power as the study of the fears and weaknesses of the subjugated. As various reports and this research will demonstrate, sharp power relies heavily on exploiting the fears of its targeted groups, further underscoring its ideational and psychological dimensions.

The significance of the recipient in the exercise of power is highlighted in Finnemore's interpretation (Finnemore, 2009). She conceptualizes the legitimacy of power as the successful imposition of power, contingent upon its acceptance by the target. When Finnemore's notion of legitimacy is combined with Foucault's understanding of power as knowledge and applied to either soft or sharp power—particularly through the lens of Guzzini's agency-structure dichotomy—it expands both concepts beyond the traditional understanding of unilateral influence exerted by one actor over another.

In the case of soft power, Finnemore's legitimacy and Foucault's knowledge underscore the actor's awareness of the target's perceived weaknesses, enabling the actor to construct an agenda tailored to those vulnerabilities. Often, these weaknesses are identified as deficiencies in democracy, lack of media plurality, absence of the rule of law, or poor human rights conditions. Consequently, agendas promoting democratic norms and liberal values are offered to these targets. Realists frequently criticize this absolutist or universalist view held by the majority of decision-makers or theorists in democratic societies—namely, the assumption that democracy and human rights are universally desired. For instance, John (Mearsheimer, 2018), in *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, critiques what he terms *liberal hegemony*, a foreign policy doctrine embraced by the United States after the Cold War.

Similarly, when sharp power is projected onto a chosen target, it identifies what the authoritarian regime perceives as weaknesses. However, unlike soft power—which seeks to strengthen the country's image and foster attraction—sharp power focuses on discrediting adversarial states, undermining democratic institutions, and eroding confidence in democratic norms. Rather than building its own credibility, sharp power

practitioners exploit societal vulnerabilities, such as economic hardships, deeply rooted fears, anti-establishment sentiments, pre-existing social divisions, anxieties tied to collective identities, related phobias, and polarized political dynamics.

What Finnemore's notion of legitimacy, in combination with the constructivist notion of reflexivity, suggests is that not only do authoritarian states impact target groups, but the targets also influence and shape the actions of the influencers. This reflexivity is discussed in the subsequent chapter, which illustrates how the Russian political elite, once part of the atheistic Soviet system, transformed into a God-fearing and religiously submissive class due to the projected narrative of moral superiority. A similar logic can be seen in the case of soft power, where the U.S. government, during the Cold War, liberalized its domestic policies to project a morally and ethically superior image of the United States (Dillard, 2012, pp. 39-41).

6.3 SUMMARIZING THE SOFT POWER-SHARP POWER COMPARISON

Considering the debates and literature analysis provided above, a brief summary of the comparison between the two concepts can be offered. While soft power can be described as an ability—or rather a potential ability—to influence others that operates somewhat independently from direct governmental involvement, sharp power is primarily a foreign policy tool designed to achieve very specific goals.

Soft power can be an effective method of influence in many instances; however, its outcomes are never guaranteed. This is due to the fact that the effects of a country's soft power may manifest over an extended period or diffuse so broadly that they become difficult to detect or are no longer recognized as significant. For example, certain forms of acculturation brought about by globalization—such as changes in lifestyle, fashion, or eating habits—are no longer perceived as major aspects of Western influence, despite their observability.

In contrast, sharp power is characterized by its specificity. It incorporates clear objectives, targets particular sectors, and focuses on specific groups within those sectors. It often yields immediate results, while its overall impact can have both short-term and long-term repercussions. For instance, Julia Baer-Bader highlights that by

targeting European societies and spreading misleading information about COVID-19 and vaccines, Russia pursued two objectives: first, to discredit European governments by portraying them as exceptionally ineffective in managing the COVID-19 crisis; and second, to depict their technological and scientific innovations as unsuccessful and fruitless (German Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). While these objectives produce immediate, visible, and tangible outcomes, the long-term impact can be interpreted as Russia's attempt to erode trust in democratically elected governments and equate their perceived inefficiencies in pandemic management with its own shortcomings.

Another key difference between soft power and sharp power lies in how they exploit weaknesses. As (Foucault, 1978) suggests, power is not merely the ability to impose ideas but also the knowledge of the target's weaknesses. As previously noted, decision-makers in democratic systems, shaped by their cultural and socio-political norms, have their own understanding of what constitutes a weakness—such as economic underdevelopment, lower living standards, or human rights abuses. They construct their agenda according to these perceived needs of target societies. In contrast, sharp power seeks to exploit weaknesses not only in terms of economic vulnerabilities but also in ideational struggles. This includes capitalizing on public distrust toward established institutions, discrediting other states, or exacerbating divisions within already polarized societies.

In this context, we may draw on the logic proposed by Alexander (Wendt, 1992) in his seminal *Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics*. One of the key theses in Wendt's work is his critique of rationalist schools of thought, which traditionally view states as either power maximizers or security maximizers, as per offensive and defensive realist frameworks. Instead, Wendt assigns power an instrumental meaning, arguing that states pursue interests shaped by their social norms. Security or power, being a prerequisite for achieving these interests, serves as a means rather than an end. In other words, Wendt differentiates between the instrument (the means) and the intention (the end goal).

Applying Wendt's logic to sharp power, the identification and exploitation of weaknesses should not be regarded as the overarching objective of a sharp power state. Rather, these are methods or tactics employed to achieve broader goals. Of course, these goals and tactics may overlap at times, making strict categorization challenging. For

instance, efforts to weaken democratic institutions, undermine political systems, or divide societies—phenomena often highlighted by scholars of sharp power—can function both as intentions and as instruments. Despite this conceptual ambiguity, it is reasonable to argue that sharp power differs from soft power in terms of its intentions, whether instrumental or ultimate.

7 REFLECTION OF RUSSIAN SHARP POWER ON THE DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

As outlined in the literature review and the subsequent discussion, existing scholarship on sharp power tends to overlook the relational or reflexive aspects of the concept. Most scholars in this field focus on empirical research, which offers valuable insights, yet they fail to address a crucial element: reflexivity. Specifically, while much of the literature emphasizes how sharp power is exercised and imposed on democratic societies—highlighting the harm it inflicts on democratic institutions—there is little focus on the contributing factors to the formation of sharp power. Questions such as how sharp power is shaped and how it influences authoritarian systems remain underexplored. Investigating these dimensions could provide valuable insights into what sharp power actually represents, particularly in terms of the ideological or socio-political antagonism between authoritarian and democratic systems. This aspect is especially significant in light of Walker's and Ludwig's repeated references to the ideological clash between Western (democratic) and authoritarian regimes.

The argument presented in this section is that sharp power may not only be shaped by the Russian government, which is influenced by cultural factors and dominant collective perceptions within the Russian socio-cultural discourse, but that sharp power itself—as a tool of foreign policy—can also influence the formation of identities, interests, and roles at both individual and collective levels. This argument draws on the classical agency-structure dichotomy central to the social constructivist school of International Relations (IR). For instance, Alexander Wendt argues that without the Cold War dynamics, which included not only military rivalry but also ideological hostility, the United States and the Soviet Union might have developed identities and interests that differed significantly from those historically known (Wendt,

1992). According to Wendt, the foreign policies of states are influenced by shared values, norms, interests, and, most importantly, self-perceptions in relation to other states. These attributes, he suggests, are integral to the formation of national identities. In simpler terms, identity can be understood as the inter-relational process through which states interact with one another. As international relations are inherently fluid, so too are national identities—context-dependent and subject to change.

The identity formation of states based on their foreign policy doctrines is a central focus of Kalevi Holsti's Role Theory. Scholars in his field initially proposed four main roles, or descriptive categories, for states: bloc leaders, allies, satellites, and non-aligned. However, after analyzing the reports and speeches of the heads of 71 states, Holsti expanded the typology, suggesting that states could occupy up to 16 distinct roles. Drawing on the principles of individual identity formation from the sociology tradition, (Holsti, 1970) argues that state identities are primarily shaped by what he terms *role conceptions* and *role prescriptions*. *Role conception* refers to an individual's self-perception of their own values and preferences, whereas *role prescription* pertains to the expectations others have of the individual. While these two sources of behavior are interrelated, Holsti identifies "role conception" as the primary object of interest in international politics, as governments often make foreign policy decisions based on how they perceive their state's role, frequently overlooking or underestimating the expectations of others, though these are still considered in the process.

These considerations lead to the conclusion that Role Theory encompasses the following key concepts: role performance—decisions and actions taken by an individual; role conception—the individual's self-perception and understanding of their personal role; role prescription—externally imposed expectations; and position—the arrangement or setup of role prescriptions. But how is the *national role* shaped? Holsti identifies multiple factors that contribute to the construction and framing of a *national role*. He argues that national roles can be influenced by geographical positioning, military, economic, and technological capabilities, as well as natural resources. In addition to these more tangible elements, which are often discussed in geopolitics and international relations, Holsti suggests that ideational factors also play a significant role in shaping national identity (Holsti, 1970). These factors include political traditions, national perceptions of history, culture, and religion, prevailing ideologies, and the personal views, sentiments, and socio-economic perspectives of political leaders.

Similar to Wendt, Holsti, and other constructivists, (Finnemore, 2009) and (Guzzini, 2005) propose that political decisions made by elites are often influenced by various aspects of national identity, including upbringing, cultural traits, values, collective perceptions, fears, aspirations, etc.

This social constructivist framework is crucial for two reasons. First, it prompts us to question how the mere exercise of sharp power shapes the Russian political elite, its discursive representation, and its self-ascribed role conception. Second, it raises the issue of how the socio-cultural characteristics of Russian society—such as values, beliefs, customs, and norms—shape the individuals involved in the decision-making process and, in turn, influence the patterns of sharp power internationally.

The selection of religion or religious discourse as a case study for examining Russian sharp power stems from the Kremlin's evident shift toward emphasizing ideational aspects in international affairs. The 21st-century shift away from conventional foreign influence, which traditionally relied on hard power and was characteristic of Russia, is often mistakenly attributed to General Valery Gerasimov. In his 2013 article Gerasimov argued that the evolving rules of warfare had elevated the significance of non-military forms of influence. He advocated for combining military and non-military methods to gain an advantage in an increasingly digitalized world (Gerasimov, 2016). However, Eugene Rumer contends that Gerasimov's contribution lies primarily in operationalizing ideas already conceived by Yevgeny Primakov, a former Russian Foreign Minister (Rumer, 2019).

According to Rumer, the Primakov doctrine not only envisions an alternative world order aimed at undermining U.S. dominance—a notion consistent with Petro's thesis—but also seeks to establish control over the post-Soviet space while replacing traditional hard power with hybrid forms of influence. In Primakov's framework, hybridity involves integrating military and non-military methods of influence. Although neither Primakov's nor Gerasimov's original writings explicitly mention the term *soft power*, Rumer applies the concept to their doctrines, suggesting that soft power, when combined with hard power, plays a crucial role in Russia's strategy. He associates soft power with tools such as informational warfare and disinformation, highlighting the frequent mischaracterization of soft power as a non-military counterpart to hard power. This misinterpretation reinforces a false dichotomy between the two. Rumer argues that

these non-military methods of influence, often labeled as soft power, are central to Russia's foreign influence strategy. Indeed, hybrid methods of warfare, particularly those involving disinformation and manipulation, were integral to Russian foreign and domestic policies long before the articulation of Gerasimov's ideas—let alone the use of disinformation during the Cold War.

It is challenging to establish a chronological sequence to determine which emerged first: the religious narrative in Russia's foreign policy, religious militarism in the country's domestic political and social life, or the religiosity of the Russian political elite. Although the increasing prominence of religion in Russia's domestic politics is evident, the genuine belief of individual Russian politicians, or opinion-makers remains also uncertain. Arguably, this uncertainty is not only irrelevant but also peripheral to the analysis. Peter Gourevitch, whose approach shares similarities with constructivists in highlighting the influence of the international system on policymakers' beliefs, does not, however, align with the constructivist tradition. As a structuralist or neo-institutionalist, Gourevitch emphasizes rationality over authenticity in his ontological stance. For the purpose of this study, it is crucial to note that (Gourevitch, 1978) does not suggest that the international system directly shapes the personal beliefs of individuals. Instead, he views decision-makers as rational actors whose beliefs—shaped by international dynamics—inform their choices and actions. Applying this framework to the case of Russian sharp power, the question of whether Russia's political leadership has undergone a genuine religious transformation is of secondary importance. What is clear is that individuals formerly associated with the Soviet-era nomenklatura have adopted a noticeably religious demeanor and rhetoric in their public personas.

7.1 THE RELIGIOUS TURN IN RUSSIAN POLITICS AS A SHARP POWER REFLECTION

The post-World War II United States offers a compelling example of how foreign policy, international affairs, and most importantly the international rivalry can drive socio-political changes within a country. (Brenes & Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2021) suggest that to survive the Cold War—not only in terms of economic and military

rivalry with the Soviet Union but also in the ideological contest—the United States had to address domestic societal issues, including racial discrimination, gender inequality, and the marginalization of minorities. Liberalism emerged as the dominant ideology to counter the rigid control of Communist regimes, providing a moral foundation for American claims of superiority and exceptionalism. This period also witnessed a growing liberalization of social norms and a notable shift in focus from the public good to individual rights and freedoms. For instance, in the 1950s, a relatively conservative American society experienced a period of anti-communist hysteria, which came to be known as the Red Scare. During this time, Joseph McCarthy, a hardline Republican, developed and enforced policies targeting individuals and their families across various sectors, including politics, journalism, intellectual life, cinema, literature, and the military (Miller Center, 2024). One may argue that, while far less severe than Stalinist purges, McCarthyism created a pervasive climate of fear and self-censorship.

Despite the near-national hysteria and widespread fear of being labeled a communist, American society managed to overcome the period known as McCarthyism. A pivotal turning point occurred when CBS figures Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly openly confronted Senator Joseph McCarthy (Naranjo, 2024). They criticized him for ruining careers, marginalizing individuals, and fostering fear through baseless accusations of being enemies of the state. This bold confrontation set off a chain reaction that ultimately shaped American cinema, literature, and journalism, making these fields more individualistic, independent, and liberal.

The same logic applies to the case of Russian sharp power: akin to the American context, Russian domestic political culture has been significantly shaped by international rivalry and the narratives embedded within the framework of Russian sharp power. The most illustrative example of how sharp power has backfired within the Russian system is the adoption of a religious stance, emphasizing Orthodox Christian values and a reliance on Christian morality. This approach positions Russia not only as an ideological antagonist in the conservative-liberal debate but also as a morally superior actor in contrast to the consumerist and hedonistic West.

Peter Pomerantsev, in *This Is Not Propaganda*, underscores the substantial emphasis that Russian leaders, intellectuals, and academics place on the concept of ideology. He observes that “Russians believe the collapse of the Soviet Empire was not

the result of poor economic policies, human rights abuses, or systemic falsehoods, but rather due to ‘information viruses’ introduced by Western security services through Trojan-horse concepts such as freedom of speech and economic reform (Operation Perestroika)” (Pomerantsev, 2019). Religion, which may provide a foundation or at least a façade for moral superiority, can be regarded as a substitute for the Communist ideology of the Cold War era.

Although Russia is often perceived as an inherently conservative or religious society—a perspective better examined in cultural studies—the first explicit shift of Russia’s foreign policy towards conservatism and religiosity occurred in 2013. This shift was marked by Vladimir Putin’s speech at the Valdai Club international summit, where he articulated an isolationist stance, asserting that Russia could no longer depend on foreign values. While Putin predictably criticized contemporary liberalism, he also rebuked conservatives nostalgic for the pre-1917 Russian Empire.

In his address, Putin emphasized the interplay of military, economic, and ideational factors in Russia's political trajectory. He remarked, “Our progress is difficult to imagine without *spiritual, cultural, and national self-determination*. Without these traits, we will not overcome challenges at both local and international levels, nor will we succeed in the global competition” (Kremlin, 2013). Putin voiced concerns about globalization's impact on Russian national identity, arguing that “practice has shown that the idea of a nation cannot be created according to the rules of market economy” (Kremlin, 2013).

The most striking element of this speech was Putin’s direct criticism of the West, accusing it of abandoning Christian values: “...without the *virtues of Christianity*... people will lose their sense of dignity. We see how many Euro-Atlantic societies have turned against the Christian values that were once the cornerstone of Western civilization” (Kremlin, 2013). This rhetoric suggests that, despite ideological antagonism, Putin perceives Russia as part of Western civilization, largely due to shared religious traditions. However, this view appears contradictory to the nationalist and conservative rhetoric often employed domestically. To reconcile these contradictions, Putin underscored the multicultural nature of Russian society, emphasizing equal representation of all traditional religious denominations.

In fact, the absence of multiculturalism in Russia's socio-political landscape has played a crucial role in establishing the Russian Orthodox Church as the dominant religious entity in the country. The persecution of religious minorities in Russia has a long history that predates both the Soviet Union and the modern Russian Federation. During the Tsarist era, particularly in the 19th century, the state-controlled Russian Orthodox Church, under the leadership of figures like Constantine Pobedonostsev, launched extensive campaigns against various Protestant movements within the country (Polunov, 2012).

In the 1990s, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia made a nominal attempt to establish a multicultural and pluralistic society. However, this was not pluralism in the classical sense; rather, it was what (Blazer, 2003) describes as *managed pluralism*. This approach involved government-imposed restrictions on specific activities across political, economic, social, and media spheres. Despite these efforts, the Russian Orthodox Church, in collaboration with the state apparatus, continued to view minor religious groups as a growing threat to its authority and influence (White & Palkin, 2017).

The intricate relationship between the state and the Church raises an important question: what are the mutual interests driving this partnership? On one hand, the Church benefits from financial and economic support, enabling it to expand its influence. On the other, the ROC serves to validate and legitimize governmental policies and decisions, thereby reinforcing the political authority of the Kremlin. This dynamic is further exemplified by the active involvement of the Church in promoting state officials. For instance, Patriarch Kirill II, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, referred to 12 years of Putin's leadership as a "miracle of God" (Reuters, 2012).

Religious groups, particularly those perceived as having Western affiliations, have been framed as significant risks to Russia's political stability and national integrity. Reports by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) have consistently categorized Russia as a major violator of religious freedoms. The 2021 report highlights numerous cases where state entities targeted and systematically persecuted religious minorities, especially Jehovah's Witnesses. These actions included banning and prohibiting their activities, censoring their

communications, and designating the group as an extremist organization (The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2021, p. 38).

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which had positioned itself as an atheist state promoting science, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) experienced a resurgence in public appreciation and received substantial support from the government. During the Soviet era, significant assets and lands owned by the Church were confiscated by the state. Although the reparation process under Boris Yeltsin's leadership was relatively gradual, a pivotal policy introduced in 2010 during Vladimir Putin's presidency significantly expanded the Church's ability to reclaim its former possessions (Kishkovsky, 2010).

(Anderson, 2016) suggests that while religious organizations in many South American, Asian, or African countries either criticize their respective governments or act as intermediaries between the government and the opposition, this has never been the case in Russia. Despite the significant oppression imposed by Soviet rule on religious leaders and practitioners, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and its leaders aligned themselves with the state. Anderson attributes this development to two key factors: first, ROC representatives feared the government's potential release of archival documents revealing the KGB's involvement within the Church and the presence of planted collaborators; second, religious leaders began to experience nostalgia for the stricter, more conservative social norms of the Soviet era, which, although not necessarily grounded in religious beliefs, were part of the dictatorial rule of that time.

Anderson notes that Vladimir Putin attempted to follow what Blazer describes as "managed pluralism" by adopting a somewhat antagonistic stance toward the Church. Initially, he sought to invite the Pope to Russia, despite strong opposition from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). He was also hesitant to introduce religious education in schools, even while referring to Russia as a multi-cultural, multi-confessional society. In fact, it was not until Dmitry Medvedev's four-year tenure that religious instruction was introduced in public schools: in 2009 a presidential directive was issued permitting the ROC to teach in Russian schools (Yakovleva, 2014). By 2012, the ROC had established a presence in the school systems of 19 regions. This initiative aimed not only to introduce Orthodox Christianity to younger generations and enhance the Church's reputation but also to solidify its authority. Moreover, the curriculum

developed by the ROC underwent strict governmental review and supervision (Kollner, 2016). This collaboration emphasized the dual purpose of promoting religious education while fostering national sentiment, unity, and a sense of unconditional patriotism.

The major turning point in the consolidation of relations between the state and the Church came with the 2012 massive demonstrations in Moscow. The Kremlin appeared unprepared for the level of public discontent, especially when public figures, including influential representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), began voicing concerns about the fairness of the parliamentary elections. Patriarch Kirill II intervened on the side of the Kremlin, framing the public protests as orchestrated by a small, foreign-backed minority. In an effort to repay the Church's support, in 2013, the State Duma passed a so-called *blasphemy law*, significantly strengthening the position of the Church (National Secular Society, 2013).

The nature of sharp power, as defined by Walker and Ludwig through the concept of informational asymmetry, is evident in the "blasphemy law," which restricts freedom of expression on religious matters while allowing the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to maintain a hostile stance toward Western values. In the early 2000s, ROC leadership was openly critical of Western democratic norms. For instance, Vsevolod Chaplin, a close ally of Patriarch Kirill II and former spokesman for the ROC, criticized democracy as a system that rejected the concept of God and operated on unhealthy competition and disagreement (Chaplin, 2004). Similarly, Metropolitan Kirill Gundyayev, before becoming head of the ROC, began criticizing Western human rights norms in 2006, particularly focusing on preventing Russian youth from exposure to sexual "deviations" under the guise of human rights (Pravmir, 2006).

7.2 GEOPOLITICS OF CHRISTIANITY: RUSSKY MIR AND Z-ORTHODOXY

Anti-Westernism, intertwined with a near-fanatical level of religiosity, occupies a prominent place in Russian geopolitical thought. While there is ongoing debate regarding the extent to which Vladimir Putin is influenced by grand geopolitical theories that often resemble conspiracy narratives, there is substantive evidence pointing

to his frequent invocation of Ivan Ilyin, a mid-20th-century Russian philosopher. Known for his esoteric views, Ilyin equated Orthodoxy with Russianness and openly expressed admiration for Fascist ideology. Importantly, he vehemently opposed Ukrainian statehood, asserting that Russians and Ukrainians were intrinsically bound by religion. Historian Marlène Laruelle, however, contends that Ilyin's role in shaping Putin's worldview has been exaggerated, largely due to the writings and public lectures of American historian Timothy Snyder (Maass, 2023). Nevertheless, Putin quoted Ilyin in 2022 during his speech announcing the annexation of four Ukrainian regions: "And if I consider my homeland to be Russia, it means that in the Russian way I love, contemplate and think, in the Russian way I sing and speak; that I believe in the spiritual forces of the Russian people and accept its historical destiny with my instinct and my will. Its spirit is my spirit; its destiny is my destiny; its suffering is my grief; its flourishing is my joy" (Taylor, 2022).

Challenging Laruelle's critique, Anton (Barabashin, 2018) argues that while Putin himself may not adhere strictly to an ideological worldview, his inner circle—owing to their educational and intellectual exposure—is likely familiar with teachings such as those of Ilyin. Although speculative, it seems improbable that Putin, known for his calculated use of implicit language and symbolism, would frequently reference Ilyin coincidentally. His personal initiative to repatriate Ilyin's remains to Russia in 2005 further underscores the philosopher's symbolic importance (Laufgraben, 2022).

Religion also serves as the cornerstone of Alexander Dugin's worldview, a figure often referred to, perhaps anecdotally, as Putin's ideologist or *the most dangerous philosopher of modern times*. Following Ilyin's line of thought, Dugin views Ukraine not as a sovereign state with a distinct ethnic identity but as a mere geopolitical buffer—a "sanitary cordon" essential for protecting the grand Eurasian-Russian region. Dugin emphasizes the primacy of religion in defining Russian identity, declaring, "Russians should realize that they are Orthodox Christians in the first place, Russians in the second place, and only in the third place, people" (Dunlop, 2004). Rejecting the use of state-centered terminology in Russian nationalism, Dugin instead advocates for a religious lexicon that underscores the messianic role of the Russian people. He integrates the ideas of Belgian geopolitician Jean Thiriart, who argued that Soviet Russia represented the last bastion of European civilization against the encroachment of rootless, consumerist, and hedonistic American influence.

This anti-Western rhetoric became even more pronounced after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, culminating in somewhat anecdotal, if not extreme forms during the 2022 invasion. In 2024, the World Russian People's Council (Всемирный Русский Народный Собор), led by Patriarch Kirill, issued a policy paper that framed the so-called *Special Military Operation* as a struggle to defend the "spiritual space of Holy Rus," declaring a *holy war* against the alleged enemies of the Christian world (Chawryło, 2024). This decree was immediately rejected by the World Council of Churches, which asserted that war is incompatible with God's nature (Vatican News, 2024). On one hand, (Chawryło, 2024) argues, the decree sought to mobilize the public domestically by ascribing to the war a messianic purpose; on the other, it aimed to persuade critics, or the undecided portion of the population, that the war against Ukraine was justified as it served the defense of the *Russian World*.

It is important to note that the anti-Western rhetoric has played a significant role in shaping Russian national identity, even prior to the Putin era. For example, Nikolay Danilevsky, a 19th century pan-Slavic intellectual, in his work *Europeanization – a Disease of Russian Life* (*Европеизация - болезнь русской жизни*), argues that Russia's national identity emerged from its ideological and physical struggle against European military rivals (Danilevsky, 2004). This ideological and religious antagonism supports claim of (Anderson, 2016) that the Russian state and clergy have traditionally viewed religious minorities as a threat to their authority. Moreover, as Maria (Snegovaya, 2014) observes, anti-Western sentiment is not only propagated by the state but is also ingrained at a societal level. The celebration of figures such as Alexander Nevsky, who is revered for his victory over Catholic invaders from Germany and Sweden, and the Russian National Unity Day, commemorating resistance to Polish-Lithuanian forces, further embed this anti-Western sentiment in Russian culture.

Besides discrediting the West as a morally inferior antagonist to Russia, one explanation for Russia's adoption of religious rhetoric in its foreign policy narrative is provided by Nicolai N. Petro. He argues that by incorporating religious, cultural, and civilizational narratives into its foreign policy, Russia seeks to revise the existing world order (Petro, 2018).

The *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* is a document adopted and signed by President Vladimir Putin in 2013. According to the document,

various countries in the Middle East and North Africa have returned to their civilizational roots, which have been significantly shaped by local religions. As religious sentiments rise across the globe, the world faces an increasing threat of cultural and civilizational clashes. To prevent such conflicts and avoid global chaos, the document argues that international politics must shift its focus from the hierarchical values imposed by the West to a model of multiculturalism, allowing each country to express and defend its own position (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013).

Petro identifies three problematic aspects in the differing views of Russia and the West regarding the international order, which he terms *frictions*. First of all, he argues that as various civil and individual liberties, along with human rights, became integral to Western domestic affairs, the West began promoting and attempting to establish this model globally (Petro, 2018). In other words, Western powers pursue the concept of Democratic Peace. As long as the Democratic Peace Theory is viewed as a core Western, particularly American, foreign policy doctrine, Russia harbors significant concerns regarding the current global order.

The second friction outlined by Petro is the unchecked and pervasive desire of Western powers to promote democracy globally. The West's advocacy of democracy and liberal values is perceived as a morally justified act, leading to interventions in other states under the guise of defending human rights, often without the sanction of international law. Unsurprisingly, Russia emphasizes the importance of adhering to international law and established legal norms.

The last friction relates to the Western standards of international relations. Petro argues that the contemporary model of global governance is dominated by Western values, norms, and narratives. Russia views this unilateral approach as both problematic and unjust. In contrast, Vladimir Putin advocates for a pluricultural international order, which acknowledges cultural and civilizational diversity on a global scale. While the West supports multicultural societies domestically, Russia promotes a global pluricultural model, grounded in the idea of cultural and civilizational equality.

It is noteworthy that Petro does not perceive a fundamental ideological clash between the Russian Orthodox Church and liberalism. Rather, he highlights that the

Russian clergy emphasizes the relevance of Enlightenment philosophy, albeit through a Christian moral lens (Petro, 2018, p. 320). The core opposition between Russian Orthodoxy and Western liberalism stems from the West's embrace of secularism, which Petro argues has led to the dilution of moral, spiritual, and ethical values, leaving liberalism void of true morality and purity.

In his earlier work, Petro argued that religiosity within the context of Russia's foreign policy created not merely a narrative but a moral framework (Petro, 2015). This framework, Petro posits, relies heavily on the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to gain validity. A central concept outlined by Petro is the notion of the Russian World, or *Russky mir* (Русский мир), which carries dual meanings within political and religious prisms. For the Kremlin, *Russky mir* refers to Russians living abroad and bears significant geopolitical implications. For the Church, the term has a spiritual connotation, signifying a messianic duty entrusted by God to establish the "Holy Rus." Despite these distinct interpretations, the two meanings of *Russky mir* work synergistically to support the Kremlin's geopolitical ambitions. The concept of *Russky Mir* (Russian World), though not explicitly articulated in these terms, can arguably be traced back to the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 (Pieper, 2020, p. 764). The underlying narrative used to justify Russia's invasion of a sovereign nation was centered on the defense of Russian nationals abroad. This justification was bolstered by the fact that, for years preceding the invasion, Russia had been systematically distributing Russian passports to Georgian citizens residing in the breakaway regions of Georgia.

In addition to traditional national interests, Russia possesses what he terms a "national sense of honor," which revolves around spiritual freedom and includes the defense of Orthodox Christianity. Petro's reasoning aligns with the principles of Role Theory, as introduced by Kalevi (Holsti, 1970). Similar to Holsti's argument that a country's national identity is shaped by socio-cultural factors and subsequently conceptualized by its leadership, Petro highlights several instances in which Vladimir Putin emphasizes the importance of Orthodox Christianity in Russian life and identifies Russia as an "Orthodox Power" (*Православная держава*).

An important document that integrates Russian foreign policy with religious elements is the 850-page text titled *Russian Doctrine*, authored by Russian intellectuals with close ties to the Russian Orthodox Church (Kolstø & Kolov, 2024). Among these

intellectuals is Oleg Platonov, known for advocating an imperialistic vision of Russia's future. The doctrine encompasses social, economic, and religious dimensions, as well as a vision for foreign policy. A key assertion made by the authors is that Russia represents the pinnacle of empire, as all other empires have ceased to exist. They argue that the imperial form is the only viable framework for Russia to endure as both a state and a nation.

These almost metaphysical ideas are common tools in the Kremlin's rhetorical arsenal. As Lilia Shevtsova notes, "for the Kremlin, ideas are instrumental. If an action is deemed necessary, ideas will be found to justify it" (Shevtsova, 2015, p. 25). If religiosity or the concept of *Russky mir* can be traced historically or associated with specific individuals or governmental strategies, a more contemporary and obscure symbol with a similarly metaphysical connotation emerged following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The letter "Z," which does not exist in the Cyrillic alphabet, has become a pervasive symbol in Russian society. It appears on murals of residential buildings in Moscow, in propaganda videos produced by the Ministry of Defense, and on black-and-orange ribbons resembling those used to commemorate the Soviet victory in World War II. The symbol has also become an accessory for Russian television personalities and public figures. Commentators widely interpret the "Z" as a pro-war or pro-"special military operation" emblem. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, the "Z" originates from the abbreviation *Za pobedu* (за победу), meaning "for victory" (Dejevsky, 2022). In fact, the symbol was first observed on Russian tanks and armored vehicles at the frontline, intended to differentiate them from enemy equipment. However, its use has since transcended its military origins.

(Ostashchuk & Litkevych, 2023) propose the term "Z-Orthodoxy" to underscore the intersection between the Russian Orthodox Church's endorsement of the war in Ukraine and the ideological implications of the "Z" symbol. They argue that at institutions such as the Moscow Theological Academy, the clergy has shifted its focus away from scripture, theology, and biblical teachings, instead prioritizing ideological alignment. The adoption of the "Z" symbol by the Russian Orthodox Church, they suggest, serves as a linguistic and visual representation of its alignment with the pro-war ideology.

On a related note, another significant geopolitical development concerning Orthodox Christianity that has raised concerns for the Kremlin is the separation of the Ukrainian and Russian Orthodox Churches. On January 6, 2019, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, head of the global Orthodox Church, granted autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a form of ecclesiastical autonomy (BBC, 2019). Although Vladimir Putin downplayed the significance of the "tomos" in an interview (Kremlin.ru, 2019) his earlier emphasis on religious and cultural aspects in his 2013 speech makes it difficult to dismiss the significance of the ecclesiastical split.

Nicu Popescu, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Moldova, alongside Kadri Liik, views this ecclesiastical split as an extraordinarily meaningful geopolitical event (Popescu, et al., 2019) Popescu argues that this development resulted in Russia not only losing a third of its parishes and nearly 40 million believers but also in losing its role as the leader of the Orthodox Christian world. As previously discussed, Russia has openly declared its ambition to represent the global Orthodox Christian community on the pluricultural stage.

Beyond the loss of religious influence, the church split further deepened the rift in Russo-Ukrainian relations. As Patriarch Kirill II of the Russian Orthodox Church remarked, "It is impossible for us to separate Kiev from our country, as this is where our history began. The Russian Orthodox Church preserves the national consciousness of both Russians and Ukrainians" (Orthodoxia Info, 2018). By losing Ukrainian believers and a substantial portion of parishes, Russia not only lost a critical soft power tool for communication with Ukrainians but also saw its broader geopolitical influence diminish.

The division between the Ukrainian and Russian churches is deeply embedded in Russian sharp power strategies. Both the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Kremlin view this schism as a grievance not only against Ukraine and its people but also against the broader concept of the *Russky mir* (Russian World), of which Ukraine is considered an integral part. A recurring Kremlin narrative frames the alleged persecution of Russians as a justification for the war, portraying Ukraine's actions as an affront to Russian identity. The geopolitical dimension of Russian religiosity is evident in the inclusion of Belarus and Moldova within the ideological boundaries of the *Russky mir* (Rousselet, 2023). While ideational factors, such as religion and the Russian

leadership's collective memory regarding Ukraine, play significant roles (Vovk, 2022), the war's primary objective appears secular—maintaining control over Ukraine. Nevertheless, the narrative of a "Holy War" serves a dual purpose: legitimizing the invasion and reinforcing the idea of Russia's defensive struggle against morally corrupt adversaries who threaten its identity, values, and religiosity.

To assert moral superiority, both the Kremlin and the ROC emphasize the alleged moral decline of the West, often suggesting a reference to LGBTQ+ rights as antithetical to Christian values. A statistical analysis by (Tsaturyan, 2024) conducted based on the data provided by the Levada Center demonstrated a correlation between state-propagated homophobia and heightened anti-Ukrainian sentiment among the Russian population even well before the full-scale invasion of 2022. This homophobic rhetoric gained prominence during the 2014 Maidan protests, when state-controlled Russian media framed the demonstrations as a foreign-orchestrated effort to integrate Ukraine into Europe and legalize same-sex marriage (Chisholm, 2023).

Internationally referred to as *Euromaidan* to highlight the protests' pro-European aspirations, Russian media mockingly labeled the events *Gayromaidan*, a derivative of *Gayropa* — a derogatory term with the intent to equate Europe with homosexuality. This rhetorical strategy sought to discredit both Ukraine and the West. Interestingly (Chisholm, 2023) argues that this tactic inadvertently strengthened LGBTQ+ rights in Ukraine, as homophobia became increasingly associated with the Kremlin and its leadership.

The Kremlin's critique of Western "moral decay" is not limited to media narratives; President Vladimir Putin himself has repeatedly made such claims. In his 2023 Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin accused the Ukrainian leadership and its Western allies of attacking not only Russia, but the Russian Orthodox Church and traditional family values. He portrayed these actions as part of a broader moral decline and positioned Russia as a defender of Orthodox Christianity and traditional values. Notably, he quoted Jesus Christ, stating: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Putin, 2023).

Although one may consider that such rhetoric primarily targets domestic audiences, it clearly embodies a sharp power tactic. Based on the revised definition of

sharp power, Russia seeks to exploit the institutional and ideological realities of democratic societies. This approach involves leveraging various forms of public and individual liberties, as well as the tradition of and willingness to engage in open debate—specifically targeting existing social grievances within Western societies. As (Hart & Hinck, 2023) suggest, in such statements, Putin attempts to resonate with conservative Western audiences or individuals dissatisfied with domestic societal disputes, particularly those surrounding recent polarization over identity politics, sexuality, and related issues. By positioning himself as a defender of conservative morality and traditional family values, Putin has garnered significant approval from segments of the American conservative community.

7.3 REFLEXIVE CONTROL AS A SHARP POWER METHOD

The religious dimension has been deeply embedded within Russian sharp power strategies, extending beyond the aforementioned examples to encompass deliberate manipulation. Catherine Wanner contends that Orthodox Christianity has been strategically utilized in military operations targeting Ukrainian civilians and soldiers, particularly during the annexation of Crimea. She provides evidence of unidentified soldiers, devoid of formal insignia, who referred to themselves as the "Orthodox Army" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024). According to Wanner, this identification aligns Orthodox Christianity with Slavic identity, thereby marginalizing Ukrainians and Russians belonging to non-Orthodox Christian denominations. This dynamic, she argues, transcends state-sponsored persecution of religious minorities by fostering societal norms in which specific religious and ethnic affiliations become mechanisms for legitimizing actions against these groups.

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict holds significant importance in discussions of Russian sharp power. So-called *influence operations*, often described as a core component of Russian sharp power, became particularly active following the Ukrainian crisis, which escalated with the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbass region. As outlined in the literature review, while Russia predominantly focuses on Russian-speaking communities abroad, such as those in the Baltics, Eastern Europe, and

Central Asia, it also seeks to project influence on non-Russian-speaking populations in Central and Eastern Europe. Péter Krekó, Lóránt Győri, and Edit Zgut present an investigative study exploring how far-right groups in Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland propagate pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments. Their findings indicate that these groups, which initially targeted ethnic, religious, or other minorities, shifted their focus after the Ukrainian crisis, aligning themselves with anti-NATO and anti-EU rhetoric, expressing admiration for Vladimir Putin, and directing hostility toward Ukraine (Krekó, et al., 2017, p. 9).

Russia has also been suspected of supporting secessionist movements, such as Californian separatists or Italy's Lega Nord (Kramer, 2017). While identifying individuals involved in disseminating pro-Kremlin narratives, including Béla Kovács, Nela Lisková, and Martin Sellner, as well as other political parties, or NGOs, the authors emphasize an important aspect of Russia's influence operations: the need for narratives to appear validated by real-world grievances. As a result, many of these efforts aim to provoke revisionist sentiments among the populations of the aforementioned countries. These efforts involve not only right-wing social and political movements but also a surge of fake news on social media, focusing on territorial disputes, ethnic tensions, and social conflicts (Krekó, et al., 2017, pp. 10-14). Notably, while Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia have become accustomed to countering Russian influence operations, Hungary and Austria have been more reluctant to address such activities.

This is a typical example of *reflexive control*—a concept frequently highlighted by scholars as one of the less decisive aspects of sharp power. *Рефлексивный контроль*, or reflexive control, is a psychological influence strategy deeply embedded in Russian military doctrines and trainings. Although its roots trace back to Soviet times, it was systematically studied in the 1990s. According to the Royal Military College of Canada, drawing on Russian military publications, reflexive control involves “transmitting motives and grounds from the controlling entity to the controlled system that stimulate the desired decision. The goal of RC is to prompt the enemy to make a decision unfavorable to him. Naturally, one must have an idea about how he thinks” (Giles, et al., 2018, p. 5).

This concept is particularly significant because it goes beyond merely disseminating falsehoods to deceive a target, which, while potentially achieving a desired outcome, is relatively simplistic. Reflexive control instead requires a deeper engagement with the perceptions, grievances, and resentments of the target, particularly at a societal and collective level. The information projected is meticulously tailored, not only to align with known biases and desires but also to exploit subconscious tendencies, thereby achieving a more profound and lasting psychological influence.

Dmitry Adamsky, who studies hybrid warfare and, in particular, New Generation Warfare (NGW), suggests that "informational struggle, in the Russian interpretation, comprises both technological and psychological components designed to manipulate the adversary's picture of reality, misinform it, and eventually interfere with the decision-making process of individuals, organizations, governments, and societies to influence their consciousness" (Adamsky, 2015). According to Adamsky, for Russia, the battlefield of modern warfare extends beyond traditional domains such as land, air, and sea to include the consciousness of societies, governments, and individuals.

In his discussion of Russian official NGW textbooks, Adamsky highlights three critical aspects that illuminate the extent of Russia's commitment to informational warfare: informational space – encompassing any field or sphere of life that broadly influences societal perceptions; information – the content that affects people's understanding, subsequently influencing their decision-making processes; informational infrastructure – referring to the channels or mediums of communication, including digital platforms, virtual spaces, media, culture, and more. This framework underscores the comprehensive nature of Russia's approach to informational warfare, emphasizing its multifaceted and deeply integrated strategies.

Giles, et al. (2018) emphasize the Russian effort to remain undetectable in their operations. This impression of undetectability is achieved through the creation of a false sense of validity. It involves not only disseminating falsehoods but also providing seemingly credible evidence that aligns with and reinforces the pre-existing beliefs of the target audience to such an extent that they willingly accept the falsehood. Here, Steven Lukes' three-dimensional view of power becomes evident: he argues that the most undetectable—and therefore the most effective—form of power occurs when an

individual willingly subordinates their own desires to align with those of another (Lukes, 1974).

One of the key methods—or intended outcomes—highlighted by the authors is the discrediting of adversarial leadership, the disorientation and demoralization of populations, and the exacerbation of existing social divisions. Whether one refers to these as methods or outcomes is of secondary importance, as the two are not mutually exclusive; a method can serve as an intended outcome, and vice versa. This strategy is executed through the use of specific, emotionally charged language, such as equating Ukraine or the Baltic states with the Nazi regime of the 1930s and 1940s. On one hand, this narrative amplifies historical grievances and consolidates domestic support within Russia. On the other hand, it sows doubt among populations in adversarial countries regarding their moral righteousness, fosters a self-regulating mechanism of demotivation, reduces the willingness to offer support, and further entrenches existing divisions. Here, Steven Lukes' three-dimensional view of power becomes evident: he argues that the most undetectable—and therefore the most effective—form of power occurs when an individual willingly subordinates their own desires to align with those of another.

Religion, as a classical reflexive control mechanism, played a significant role during the annexation of Crimea, particularly in negotiations with the local Ukrainian military defending the region. An investigative report by *Meduza* details the involvement of Russian Orthodox priests in these negotiations. According to one member of Russia's military intelligence Special Forces units, it was decided that Father Dimitry Vasilenkov, who served in the St. Petersburg episcopate, would participate in the discussions (Yapparova & Kovalev, 2020). The St. Petersburg episcopate typically handles relations with the military, police, and intelligence agencies—referred to in Russia as the *siloviki* (a term denoting officials in security and enforcement agencies). Vasilenkov himself admitted to *Meduza* that he visited Crimea in March 2014. He has also been involved in other conflicts, including those in Luhansk and Donetsk in Ukraine, as well as Georgia, Chechnya, and Syria (Evocation, 2024). Since the onset of the war in Ukraine, he has been actively engaged in recruiting soldiers and advocating for what he calls “spiritual mobilization.”

According to report of *Meduza*, Vasilenkov was not the only priest involved in these efforts. Interviews conducted with veterans of both Russian and Ukrainian military units revealed that dozens of priests and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) participated in Crimea-related negotiations (Yapparova & Kovalev, 2020). An insider from Russia's Ministry of Defense noted competition among different episcopates to have their representatives included in these negotiations. As is customary, all priests took leave and visited the peninsula voluntarily, with many instances of their involvement going undocumented.

The primary narrative used to persuade the Ukrainian military and the Crimean populace to switch sides emphasized brotherhood under the banner of Orthodoxy: "You do not have the right to shoot because before you stand your Russian brothers, and you will have their blood on your hands." This rhetoric of brotherhood, deeply rooted in Orthodox Christianity, had long been promoted within the Ukrainian Church and the Simferopol episcopate, which has historically been under the control of the ROC.

At a broader scale, attempts to implement reflexive control operations can be identified years prior to the Ukrainian crisis and the Maidan events. Researchers point to two overarching discursive strategies propagated by Russia, both of which consist of multiple narratives that occasionally intersect. The first, as previously mentioned, is the religious narrative emphasizing the brotherhood of Ukrainians and Russians, united through their shared Orthodox faith as a marker of common identity. The second is more nuanced, targeting Western institutions, norms, and values. These narratives were primarily disseminated through state-owned television networks and private media outlets, such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *RIA Novosti* (Pikulicka-Wilczewska & Sawka, 2016, pp. 174-175). This pervasive influence was a significant factor behind the widespread restrictions imposed on Russian TV channels following Yanukovich's flight to Russia.

Narratives denouncing the West pursued multiple objectives. Primarily, they sought to undermine the credibility of Western governments and their critiques of Russia. A recurring emphasis was placed on exposing perceived Western hypocrisy, arrogance, and lack of moral integrity. For example, one narrative highlighted that President Woodrow Wilson's efforts to promote the principles of liberal democracy were designed for the global stage, while the U.S. itself failed to address systemic issues

faced by racial and ethnic minorities and other marginalized groups. Such claims served to delegitimize the moral authority of the U.S. government to critique Russia's foreign policy, actions in Ukraine, and systemic human rights abuses.

As (Walker & Ludwig, 2017) suggest in their foundational article, one of the defining features of Russian sharp power is its attempt to equate Russia with other great powers—not necessarily by portraying Russia as virtuous, but by depicting other powers as equally flawed. Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sawka (2016, pp. 176-177) observe a similar pattern in their work: Russia emphasizes the double standards of the U.S., which criticizes Russia's actions in Ukraine while deploying its troops in distant regions of the world. According to the authors, this framing simultaneously portrays the U.S. as inconsistent and morally questionable while normalizing Russia's behavior as comparable to that of the U.S.

Mockery of specific Western leaders or representatives, aimed at discrediting their competence, is another frequent strategy on Russian television. Russian journalists often depicted Putin as patiently enduring the alleged ignorance of French journalists as a prelude to engaging with European and American counterparts. This portrayal not only undermines confidence in Western political leadership but also casts doubt on the credibility of Western journalism.

A typical example of sharp power employing reflexive control is the case of RT (formerly known as Russia Today) targeting the American audience by exploiting both the popularity of conspiracy theory subcultures and the skepticism within U.S. society regarding the events of 9/11. The language used was deliberately provocative, as seen in the framing of questions like, "How did the Bush administration benefit from the suffering of ordinary Americans?" (Yablokov, 2022). This approach not only sows doubt about American leadership but also positions the American public as victims allegedly exploited by their own government at the expense of their lives. Similarly, the question, "Did the U.S. intelligence know about the terrorist attacks, and if it did, why was nothing done to prevent it?" seeks to generate distrust in American intelligence services by suggesting either gross incompetence or willful negligence. Yablokov argues that RT's slogan, "Question more," aligns closely with the rhetoric commonly used by conspiracy theorists, further enhancing its appeal to such audiences.

While the U.S. is typically depicted as a sponsor of genocide and the perpetrator of numerous war crimes, Europe is portrayed as a captive of American warmongering. Sergey Lavrov, for instance, argued that Europe's potential remained unrealized due to the United States' relentless pursuit of international dominance (Hutchings & Szostek, 2014). According to Lavrov's reasoning, this unchecked ambition was the primary obstacle to a robust alliance between Europe and Russia.

7.4 COVID-19 DISINFORMATION AS A SHARP POWER EXAMPLE

As suggested by the title of Peter Pomerantsev's book, *This Is Not Propaganda*, the author argues that the influence operations employed by authoritarian regimes, particularly Russia, extend beyond the traditional understanding of propaganda.

It is important to distinguish between propaganda and disinformation—two terms that are often used interchangeably and are commonly associated with Russia's hybrid warfare. Even scholars analyzing the concept of sharp power frequently use the term *propaganda* to describe Russia's influence operations. To clarify the distinction between these two related concepts, (Lendvai, 2024) proposes that propaganda can be understood as the dissemination of information or ideas that present only a partial argument with the intent to influence people and shape their opinions. Disinformation, on the other hand, is defined as “an attack on the integrity of knowledge,” with the deliberate objective of deceiving its audience.

The intent behind sharp power efforts to divide societies and amplify pre-existing concerns is evident in the disinformation campaigns conducted by Russia during the Covid-19 pandemic. Vas and Navarro (2024) examine the similarities between Russian disinformation trends related to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and those observed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their research highlights that in both cases, Russia primarily utilized social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and, to a lesser extent, TikTok. By analyzing the fluctuations in the frequency of these campaigns, the authors found that Russia and its affiliates displayed similar behavior during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021) and the active phase of the war in Ukraine (2022–2023).

The study concludes that while the primary aim of disinformation campaigns during the war in Ukraine was to foster the perception of Ukraine as a common enemy, the objective during the pandemic was to provoke audiences by reinforcing their existing beliefs, regardless of what those beliefs were. Interestingly, the findings reveal that individuals skeptical of vaccination were more likely to support Russia's invasion, suggesting a correlation between susceptibility to disinformation and alignment with pro-Russian narratives.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated containment policies were exploited to reinforce Kremlin foreign policy narratives, instill fears, and propagate conspiracy theories. For instance, the One World Think Tank, an outlet affiliated with the Russian state-owned Peoples' Friendship University, expressed concerns that the pandemic could be used by the United States to stage color revolutions aimed at overthrowing rival governments (EUvsDisinfo, 2020).

In addition to disseminating neutral-toned articles and leveraging media anchors, Russia employs its so-called *intelligentsia*—a curated group of hundreds of representatives from culture, literature, media, and cinematography—to spread disinformation aimed at discrediting or marginalizing the West. During the height of the pandemic, prominent filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov reiterated a widely circulated conspiracy theory on the Rossiya 24 channel. He claimed that COVID-19 vaccination was part of a plan orchestrated by Bill Gates to implant microchips in billions of people for population control (Mikhalkov, 2020).

In its COVID-19 disinformation efforts, one can discern one of the most pervasive narratives in Russian foreign policy: the claim that Georgia and Ukraine possess chemical weapons. From the earliest days of the pandemic in January 2020, Russia began disseminating disinformation alleging that the virus had been developed in NATO-sponsored laboratories, specifically citing the Lugar Lab near Georgia's capital (EUvsDisinfo, 2020). Shortly thereafter, one of Russia's largest state-owned channels, RenTV, broadcast information targeting Russian-speaking audiences, claiming that similar biological laboratories engaged in virus research were operational not only in Georgia and Ukraine but across Asia. These accusations extended to the Baltic region and Eastern European countries. Subsequently, RT's Arabic branch began spreading claims that American-sponsored biolabs were also operating near Russia, China, and

Iran. The suggested rationale for building such facilities abroad was a purported fear among U.S. leaders that a virus could leak within their own territory.

This narrative exemplifies Russian sharp power strategies. It deliberately omits evidence, relies on speculation rather than verified data, and plays on the existing distrust of major powers among global populations. By portraying the West—particularly NATO and the United States—as violators of international law and as entities willing to sacrifice other nations to advance chemical weapons research, this disinformation aims to discredit these actors. Additionally, it implicates them as the cause of widespread humanitarian and economic catastrophes, reinforcing anti-Western sentiment and undermining global trust in Western leadership.

Furthermore, this narrative parallels the accusations made by the Bush administration regarding Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Considering that a key tenet of Russian sharp power is to equate Russia with other major powers, often portraying all sides as equally flawed, this can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to convey the notion that if the United States was allowed to unilaterally invade Iraq based on ultimately unfounded claims, then Russia should be considered similarly justified.

One notable strategy involved concealing the number of COVID-19 cases in Russia. The Kremlin instructed local media to remove “fake news” related to COVID-19, declaring that there was no epidemic within the country. Concurrently, Russian media sought to portray the Russian and Chinese governments as more prepared and responsible, emphasizing their efforts to deliver vaccines not only to their own populations but also to EU member states.

In one example, video footage showed individuals in Italy tearing down the EU flag and replacing it with the Russian flag as a gesture of gratitude for Russian aid. State-owned Russian media prominently highlighted the delivery of aid to Italy, emphasizing the movement of Russian military vehicles along NATO roads. These examples illustrate that Russia's strategy extended beyond enhancing its international image; it also sought to portray local governments, including those at the EU level, as incompetent or indifferent to the needs of their populations.

While Russia employed various sharp power methods abroad, these efforts had a significant negative backlash on Russian society. A striking 61% of Russians came to believe that COVID-19 was not a respiratory infection similar to other SARS-CoV variants, but rather a newly developed biological weapon (Levada Center, 2021). Despite being the first country to announce the development of a domestically produced vaccine in 2020, the population remained hesitant to seek medical care. Consequently, although the vaccination process was launched at the beginning of 2021, by the end of that year, only 36% of the population had received at least one dose (Roshchinina, et al., 2022). By January 2023, Russia had one of the lowest vaccination rates in Europe (Statista, 2023).

7.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This discussion highlights the inter-relational nature of sharp power. While it is primarily deployed as a foreign policy tool, its influence extends significantly into the domestic sphere. As noted earlier in this chapter, one of the most prominent manifestations of sharp power is the adoption of a strong religious discourse by political leaders and public figures. Although sharp power is ostensibly directed at foreign audiences with the aim of discrediting the West, its domestic repercussions are evident. For instance, it has contributed to a widespread belief among the Russian population that COVID-19 was a biological weapon.

8 SPEAKING TO THE WEST IN ITS OWN LANGUAGE: RUSSIAN STRATEGIC DISCOURSE AND THE RE-SIGNIFICATION OF WESTERN IDEAS

This chapter partly builds on an earlier publication by the author (Pareishvili, 2026), but substantially revises and expands that argument within the dissertation's

broader framework of Russian sharp power, democratic openness, and the appropriation of Western knowledge.

This chapter develops a discourse analysis of selected speeches, interviews, and public interventions by Vladimir Pozner, Fyodor Lukyanov, Sergey Lavrov. These figures occupy different positions within the Russian discursive field. Pozner represents a Western-facing public intellectual whose authority rests on his image of independence, cultural familiarity, and ability to speak to Western audiences in a recognizable idiom. Lukyanov functions more as a para-official expert voice, translating Kremlin-compatible narratives into the language of international relations, multipolarity, strategic necessity, and great-power politics. Lavrov, by contrast, represents official diplomatic discourse, where similar arguments are converted into the formal vocabulary of sovereignty, security, hypocrisy, and civilizational difference. Following the discourse-analytical logic developed by Milliken and Campbell, the chapter does not treat these statements as isolated opinions. Rather, it examines how Russian public figures, intellectuals, and officials selectively appropriate Western academic and ideological vocabularies in order to defend, normalize, and legitimize Russia's geopolitical ambitions.

Along with Russian voices, this chapter examines several Western academics whose arguments are selectively appropriated within Russian strategic discourse. It focuses on several interconnected themes: the neorealist argument that NATO expansion provoked Russia, the discourse of Russophobia, and the civilizational portrayal of Russia as a distinct cultural-historical world. Although these themes are discussed separately, they are not independent. They often overlap and are advanced by the same figures, together constructing Russia as threatened, misunderstood, and defensively reacting to Western pressure.

This discursive strategy also resonates with a broader transformation of Western public debate, especially in the United States, where conservative and anti-liberal worldviews have gained renewed visibility since Trump's election. Conservatism here should not be understood only as a set of traditional values, but also as a style of political reasoning that often presents itself as commonsensical, direct, anti-elitist, and suspicious of expert complexity. Sensitive issues such as war, sovereignty, gender, immigration, censorship, and foreign policy are increasingly discussed not only by

scholars or diplomats, but also by influencers, comedians, podcasters, and YouTube personalities, including Joe Rogan, Konstantin Kisin, Theo Von, and others. The importance of these figures lies not in their theoretical sophistication, but in their ability to translate complex political questions into accessible and seemingly commonsensical narratives. Many viewers who are not part of academic or policy-making circles, but who are nevertheless politically engaged and electorally relevant, encounter international politics through podcasts, interviews, short clips, and informal commentary rather than through academic literature. This creates a communicative environment in which arguments that appear simple, intuitive, and anti-elitist often travel more easily than theoretically complex or historically nuanced explanations. In this context, realism becomes especially attractive because it can be reduced to a small number of easily understandable claims: great powers defend their spheres of influence; NATO expansion threatened Russia; Ukraine is a proxy; and moral judgments are less important than geopolitical necessity. Such arguments do not need to reproduce realist theory in its full academic form. Their political usefulness lies precisely in their simplified form, which allows them to circulate among audiences that may be only superficially interested in international relations but still shape broader public opinion and political outcomes.

This phenomenon is not limited to YouTubers or online commentators; it also involves prominent figures within American international relations. For instance, in 2025 John Mearsheimer took part in a televised discussion titled *Ukraine Will Be Eliminated* (Al Arabiya English, 2025). Even more significant was the presence of the second guest, Sergey Karaganov, a foreign-policy adviser to Vladimir Putin, which illustrates how realist arguments can circulate alongside Kremlin-aligned strategic narratives.

The aim of this paper is not to provide a full critique of international relations theory, since such a task would require a separate philosophical and metatheoretical discussion. Nevertheless, it is important to briefly address why realism becomes so easily available for political appropriation. Critical and constructivist critiques of realism are useful for explaining why realist language becomes so easily available for political appropriation. Authors such as Richard Ashley, Robert Cox, Alexander Wendt, and Campbell have all criticized realism for leaving aside many of the historical, cultural, normative, psychological, and identity-related dimensions through which

international politics is actually experienced and interpreted. Ashley (1984) and Cox (1981) both point to realism's tendency to present historically contingent power relations as if they were natural features of international politics. As discussed already in the methodology section, Campbell (1998) suggests that threats are not simply objective conditions but are produced through discursive boundaries between the self and the other. Their critiques differ in emphasis, but they point to a similar problem: realism tends to simplify an exceptionally complex field by reducing it to an intuitive logic of anarchy, power, security, and self-help. This simplification is politically consequential. International conflicts are not shaped only by military balances or security dilemmas, but also by memory, humiliation, recognition, language, religion, and even symbolic-cultural disputes, such as the contested origin and ownership of borscht. These seemingly minor cultural questions can become politically charged because they touch upon identity and historical belonging. Realism's strength, therefore, is also its weakness: it offers a clear and commonsensical explanation but often does so by excluding precisely those social and cultural meanings that generate animosity in the first place.

As sharp-power scholars have repeatedly noted, the Kremlin has supported both left-wing and right-wing movements in target societies. This suggests that Russian influence strategies are not driven by a consistent ideological commitment to conservatism, even if Russia often presents itself as a defender of traditional values. Rather, ideological positioning appears largely instrumental: Moscow supports actors and narratives that can intensify polarization and undermine trust in Western institutions (Richter, 2022, p. 664). This flexibility was also reflected in Vladimir Putin's remark before the 2020 U.S. presidential election, when he suggested that Russia could work with Joe Biden because the Democratic Party shared certain similarities with the Communist Party, of which Putin himself had been a member for two decades (Brennan, 2020).

Even without excessive theorization, Putin's discourse suggests a noticeable interest in unorthodox political ideas. In 2000, he invoked the *Golden Billion*, a conspiracy theory associated with Sergey Kara-Murza, which portrays the world as divided between a privileged billion and the exploited majority (Putin, 2000). The notion resurfaced in 2022, when Nikolai Patrushev, then Secretary of Russia's Security Council, linked liberal norms to the interests of the *Golden Billion* (Ivanov, 2022).

Although we cannot say with certainty what influence conspiracy theories have on Vladimir Putin's decisions, what is significant is the widespread acceptance of such narratives among the Russian population. The VCIOM (All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion) estimates that one in every three Russians believes in conspiracy theories (RBC, 2022). This suggests two things: first, that the Kremlin exploits the popularity of conspiratorial narratives to manipulate its own population. Shevtsova argues that the Kremlin's ideological shift—particularly its adoption of a religious, antiliberal stance—was intended to distract society from the country's socio-economic problems. Alternatively, it is possible that the political elite, including President Putin himself, are genuinely influenced by the appeal of conspiracy theories. The latter assumption is worth considering, as Peter Knight describes the function of conspiracy theories as a means of explaining global events, reinforcing the *us versus them* mentality, justifying scapegoating, or playing the psychologically comforting role of the victim—where everyone is to blame except the self (Knight, 2000). Putin's tendency to distort reality or reinterpret history on his own terms has been apparent well before the publication of his *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* essay.

8.1 VLADIMIR POZNER'S CASE

Vladimir Pozner is a revealing example of what Harley (Blazer, 2003) calls Russia's *managed pluralism*. His public authority does not rest on open loyalty to the state, but on a more ambiguous position: he appears independent, Westernized, intellectually sophisticated, and willing to criticize parts of the Russian system. This limited criticism is central to his credibility. Pozner regularly criticizes corruption, bureaucracy, poor governance, infrastructural failures, and the older Soviet-style political class that still shapes parts of Russian public life. At the same time, because he himself partly belongs to this Soviet intellectual generation, his criticism can appear self-reflective rather than purely oppositional. It gives him the image of a serious and honest commentator, while remaining compatible with the boundaries of the Russian media system.

Pozner's background strengthens this image. As a citizen of France, Russia, and the United States, and as a speaker of French, Russian, and English, he can address both Russian domestic audiences and English-speaking publics with unusual ease. His earlier role as a recognizable voice of Soviet external communication is also important. He often speaks critically about that period, which helps him distance himself from crude propaganda and present himself as someone who has learned from the past. His appearances on the *Donahue* show in the 1980s already displayed this style: he criticized both the American and Soviet systems, creating a language of equivalence in which the two sides appeared similarly ideological, flawed, and morally compromised (Yale University, 2018).

The limits of this pluralism are visible in his discussion of state television. Pozner has admitted that he could not invite certain people, including Alexei Navalny, to his programme (Moller-Nielsen, 2024). Yet he also denied that this amounted to censorship, explaining that he had never seen a formal list of banned guests, but simply understood that some names were unacceptable. This distinction is highly revealing. In a managed media environment, censorship does not always need to take the form of an explicit written prohibition; it can operate through informal boundaries, professional expectations, and tacit knowledge. Pozner can therefore criticize domestic governance while still remaining within the system. On foreign policy, however, his discourse often moves much closer to the official Russian position, especially when he explains Russia's behaviour through NATO expansion, Western arrogance, and Moscow's allegedly defensive response to external pressure.

Pozner's 2018 lecture at Yale University is a useful illustration of how Russian sharp power can operate through familiar Western intellectual vocabularies rather than through direct propaganda. The setting itself is significant: a Russian media figure speaks to an American academic audience and frames Russia's political development through concepts and references that are already recognizable within Western debates. The lecture, *How the US Created Vladimir Putin*, which has attracted almost 10 million views on YouTube, already signals its central argument through the title. Russia is not presented as the primary author of its own political trajectory; rather, the United States is positioned as the actor whose decisions helped produce the conditions under which Putin emerged.

Pozner begins by presenting himself as an independent and impartial observer, stating that he is “not representing anybody or anything” (Yale University, 2018). This self-positioning is important because it establishes trust before the argument itself unfolds. His credibility depends on the appearance of distance from official state discourse, even though he remains closely associated with Russia’s state-controlled media environment as the host of a major political talk show. In this sense, the lecture does not work through open ideological assertion, but through the performance of moderation, independence, and analytical balance. He also presents himself as belonging to a disappearing profession of independent journalism, which he suggests is under pressure in both Russia and the United States, thereby creating another form of equivalence between the two political systems.

Pozner extends this argument to the American media environment by presenting examples of negative Russia coverage in *The New York Times* and *Time Magazine*. He claims that he asked researchers to search *The New York Times* for any positive article about Russia between 2015 and 2017, but that they could not find even one (Yale University, 2018). From this, he concludes that American journalism has also become distorted by narrative discipline, ownership concentration, and ideological conformity. The move is analytically important because it produces another equivalence between Russia and the United States: Russian media may be state controlled, but American media are presented as similarly unfree, shaped by conglomerates, political consensus, and anti-Russian hostility. In this framing, Pozner does not deny propaganda; rather, he universalizes it, suggesting that both sides manufacture reality through selective media representation.

The core of Pozner’s argument rests on a realist understanding of the security dilemma. NATO enlargement is represented as a direct threat to Russian security, while Russia’s later behaviour is framed as a reaction to Western pressure rather than as an expression of imperial ambition. What is largely absent from this framing is the perspective of the states that sought NATO membership, many of which did so precisely because of their historical experience of Russian domination or coercion. This omission is important from a discourse-analytical perspective. Following (Campbell, 1998) and (Milliken, 1999), threats are not simply objective facts waiting to be recognized; they are produced through language, selection, emphasis, and exclusion.

Pozner reinforces this logic through references to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Monroe Doctrine. These examples allow him to present Russian behaviour not as exceptional or uniquely aggressive, but as part of a general pattern of great-power conduct. The argument is that the United States itself would never tolerate hostile military infrastructure near its borders; therefore, Russia's opposition to NATO expansion should be understood in the same strategic terms (Yale University, 2018). In this framing, moral distinction disappears. The United States and Russia are placed within the same category of power politics, where major states do whatever they consider necessary to protect their security. This is significant from the perspective of sharp power because it produces moral equivalence between Russia and its adversaries. Rather than defending Russia directly, Pozner relativizes its actions by suggesting that all great powers behave similarly when their spheres of influence are challenged.

Pozner's narrative constructs NATO expansion as the central danger, while marginalizing the security concerns of Russia's neighbours. His reference to George Kennan's 1998 warning that NATO enlargement would mark "the beginning of a new Cold War" further strengthens this move by presenting the Russian position as something already anticipated and validated by an authoritative American voice.

This is a clearly Mearsheimerian argument rooted in the core neorealist paradigm. In one joint interview, when asked whether Ukraine and Georgia should have the right to decide whether they want to join NATO, John Mearsheimer immediately answers "No," calling this "a foolish way of thinking about international politics" (VICE News, 2018). He then repeats his familiar analogy: if China or Russia created a military alliance with Mexico, the United States would never tolerate it. The very same example of the Monroe Doctrine is provided by Pozner in his Yale speech.

Similar to Pozner, the same argument is suggested by Stephen Cohen, who presents Western discourse on Russia as irrational, exaggerated, and detached from Russia's own security perceptions. In his 2018 interview with Aaron Maté, Cohen rejects the fear that Russia intends to invade the Baltic states, disputes the dominant Western interpretation of the 2008 Georgia war and the 2014 Ukraine crisis, and frames Russia as reacting to NATO expansion, Western-backed pressure, and post-1991 betrayal (Cohen, 2018). He also challenges claims that Putin personally orders the killing of journalists and opposition figures, arguing that such accusations are repeated

without sufficient evidence. Like Pozner's Yale lecture, Cohen's discourse relocates responsibility from Russian aggression to Western misperception, panic, and provocation. The wider relevance of this interview is also strengthened by Maté's later work, including his book *Their Blood, Our Bullets: The Hidden Story of the US–Russia War for Ukraine*, which develops the argument that the United States instrumentalizes Ukraine in order to weaken Russia. This reinforces the broader pattern in which Russian strategic narratives find validation through Western voices, making Kremlin-compatible claims appear less like state propaganda and more like internal Western critique.

By the eve of the full-scale invasion, Pozner's earlier image of Russia as a reactive power had developed into a more explicit accusation that the West was actively interested in provoking a Russian attack on Ukraine. In a February 2022 interview, he argued that an invasion would bring Russia no strategic benefit and would instead destroy what remained of its international standing: "Russia attacking Ukraine is something that the West is interested in ... It would be total destruction of any kind of respect for Russia. There's nothing to win and a lot to lose. And there are people who say that's exactly what the West wants" (Kelly, 2022). This formulation moves beyond the standard neorealist claim that NATO expansion produced Russian insecurity. It implies that the West benefits from escalation itself, since war would weaken, isolate, and morally discredit Russia. A similar logic later appears in Aaron Maté's argument that the war serves Western interests by using Ukraine as the battlefield through which Russia can be exhausted and weakened. In both cases, responsibility is shifted away from Russian agency and toward a Western strategy of provocation.

Richter's (2022). observation that Russian sharp power supports both left-wing and right-wing movements in target societies is important because it shows that the Kremlin's ideological positioning is primarily instrumental rather than doctrinal. Richter argues that Russia backs left-wing, right-wing, populist, and anti-establishment sentiments in the West in order to destabilize incumbent governments and weaken social cohesion. This logic also helps explain Pozner's discourse. Although Pozner's main foreign-policy argument is drawn from a relatively simplified neorealist paradigm — NATO expansion, security dilemma, great-power reaction, spheres of influence — he does not rely on realism alone. He also criticizes the United States for its hegemonic and imperial behaviour (Yale University, 2018), thereby indirectly echoing the language of postcolonial and anti-imperialist thinkers such as Noam Chomsky and Edward Said.

Chomsky's position is rooted in a left-wing, anti-imperialist critique of American power. He has consistently portrayed U.S. foreign policy as interventionist, coercive, and structurally imperial, especially in relation to weaker states. Unlike Mearsheimer, Chomsky does not operate within a conservative or neorealist epistemology. Mearsheimer's argument rests on great-power politics, anarchy, and security competition, while Chomsky's critique is moral, anti-imperial, and focused on domination, propaganda, and the violence of U.S. hegemony. Yet despite these differences, both can become useful for Russian discourse because they converge on one crucial point: Ukraine is rarely treated as a fully autonomous political actor. Although Chomsky clearly condemns the invasion as a "criminal act of aggression," his explanation still shifts much of the analytical focus toward the United States and NATO (Chomsky, 2022). In his discussion with Bill Fletcher Jr., he frames the United States as a hegemonic power whose allies follow its line because of American dominance. This overlaps strongly with Pozner's logic: Russia's actions are condemned or regretted, but they are made intelligible primarily as reactions to Western pressure, broken promises, and U.S. geopolitical arrogance.

In the Mearsheimerian version, Ukraine becomes a geopolitical buffer whose choices are subordinated to the security interests of great powers. In the Chomskian version, Ukraine is often framed as an instrument of U.S. power, used by Washington to weaken Russia. In both cases, Ukrainian agency is diminished. Ukraine appears less as a society resisting invasion and more as a pawn within a larger confrontation between Russia and the United States.

This is where Richter's (2022) point becomes directly relevant to Pozner. Russian discourse can appeal simultaneously to the right and the left because it does not need ideological consistency. For conservative or realist audiences, it emphasizes sovereignty, spheres of influence, and the dangers of NATO expansion. For left-wing and anti-imperialist audiences, it stresses American hypocrisy, militarism, and neocolonial domination. Pozner's discourse combines both registers: Russia is presented as a great power reacting defensively to NATO, while the United States is depicted as a hegemonic actor whose moral claims conceal imperial interests.

Overall, Pozner's discourse illustrates how Russian strategic narratives can be presented through familiar Western intellectual traditions rather than through overtly

ideological language. His argument is clearly rooted in the realist tradition: NATO expansion, the security dilemma, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Cuban Missile Crisis are used to portray Russia as a reactive, and ultimately innocent, power responding to external pressure. At the same time, Pozner constructs a moral equivalence between Russia and the United States, presenting both as great powers that behave according to the same logic of security and influence. What is especially notable is the selective nature of this reasoning. When discussing American foreign policy, Pozner adopts a left-wing, progressive, or critical vocabulary of hegemony, imperialism, and media manipulation. Yet when similar behaviour is associated with Russia, it is reframed as defensive necessity. In this sense, Russia is not absolved by denying power politics, but by universalizing it.

8.2 FYODOR LUKYANOV'S CASE

Alongside Vladimir Pozner, Fyodor Lukyanov represents another important figure whose position can be understood through Harley Balzer's notion of "managed pluralism." Unlike direct representatives of the Russian state, Lukyanov's authority rests on his status as an expert, editor, and internationally visible interpreter of Russian foreign policy. He is editor-in-chief of *Russia in Global Affairs*, a journal consciously modeled on *Foreign Affairs*, and serves as research director of the Valdai International Discussion Club, one of the most important platforms through which Russian foreign-policy thinking is presented to international audiences. His regular presence at forums such as the Munich Security Conference further reinforces his role as a bridge between Russian strategic discourse and Western policy debate. Lukyanov's significance lies in his ability to speak the language of international relations theory, especially realism, while presenting Russian positions as sober strategic analysis rather than ideological justification.

In this respect, Lukyanov's function differs from that of more openly propagandistic media figures. His discourse is not based on emotional mobilization or crude anti-Western rhetoric, but on the performance of expertise. He appears as

someone capable of explaining Russia to the West in a language that Western foreign-policy elites already recognize: balance of power, security interests, spheres of influence, multipolarity, and strategic miscalculation. This makes his position especially relevant for sharp power analysis. The persuasive force of his arguments depends less on direct loyalty to the Kremlin than on his capacity to translate Kremlin-compatible assumptions into the more respectable vocabulary of international affairs.

Lukyanov's 2014 intervention in *The New York Times* is especially revealing because it denied Ukrainian agency at the level of national identity itself. Writing shortly before the annexation of Crimea, he argued that Ukraine had not yet become a consolidated nation capable of formulating a coherent national interest, and that it should not be forced to choose between Russia and the West (Lukyanov, 2014). The importance of this argument is not simply that it questioned Ukraine's geopolitical orientation, but that it cast Ukraine as politically unfinished and internally fragmented. Through an American newspaper, Lukyanov addressed Western readers not as an official state representative, but as an independent Russian foreign-policy intellectual. Yet the argument he advanced closely anticipated one of the central Russian narratives later used to weaken Ukraine's claim to full sovereignty: that Ukraine is not a stable political subject, but an artificial or incomplete entity shaped by external forces.

This makes the article a clear example of how sharp power can operate through elite intellectual channels rather than only through media manipulation or disinformation. Lukyanov does not openly call for Russian intervention, nor does he present the argument in the language of annexation or conquest. Instead, he reframes Ukraine's sovereignty as premature, unstable, or geopolitically problematic. The effect is to make Ukrainian self-determination appear less legitimate, because Ukraine is presented as lacking the internal unity required for autonomous decision-making. In this sense, the denial of Ukrainian agency is not a secondary feature of the argument, but its central political function.

A similar logic appears in Lukyanov's description of Ukraine as a *trophy* in a geopolitical struggle between Russia and the European Union (Lukyanov, 2014). Although the contemporary Russian narrative more often frames Ukraine as the object of confrontation between Russia and the United States, Lukyanov's earlier formulation already placed Ukraine within a wider great-power competition. Ukraine is not

primarily treated as a society with its own political will, historical memory, or security concerns. Rather, it becomes the terrain on which larger actors continue their rivalry. This is a recognizably realist interpretation of the 2014 crisis: the conflict is presented less as a Ukrainian revolution or a struggle over domestic political choice than as the product of external competition between Russia and the West. The result is again the marginalization of Ukrainian agency, since Ukraine appears mainly as an object of geopolitical management.

This framing also helps explain why Lukyanov's discourse fits the broader pattern found in Pozner and Mearsheimer. All three interpret Ukraine through the logic of strategic location rather than political subjectivity. In this framework, the central question is not what Ukrainians fear, remember, or desire, but how Ukraine's alignment affects the balance between larger powers. Such reasoning does not necessarily deny sovereignty in formal terms, but it empties sovereignty of practical significance. Ukraine may exist as a state, but its choices are treated as dangerous when they contradict the security preferences of a neighboring great power.

This pattern remains visible in Lukyanov's later wartime commentary. In 2025, he continued to reject the idea that Russia's primary objective in Ukraine was territorial expansion, instead presenting the war as a question of security, neutrality, and demilitarization. In this formulation, even the possible recognition of Russian-occupied territories becomes secondary to the broader strategic issue: preventing Ukraine from functioning as a military platform of the West. Lukyanov's argument therefore retains a realist logic, but now in a more explicit wartime form. His reference to Stephen Walt further strengthens this positioning, since it places Russia's claims within a recognizable neorealist vocabulary. The war is not presented as a war against Ukraine alone, but as part of Moscow's larger confrontation with the West (Lukyanov, 2025).

The shift from 2014 to 2025 is therefore less a change in argument than a radicalization of the same underlying framework. In 2014, Ukraine was portrayed as an unstable borderland that should not be forced to choose between Russia and Europe. By 2025, the same logic is expressed through the language of demilitarization, neutrality, and Russia's struggle against the West as a whole. The continuity is important: Ukraine's autonomy remains subordinated to the security architecture imagined by

Moscow. Lukyanov's discourse thus normalizes the idea that Russia's security concerns override Ukraine's political choices.

In the *Die Weltwoche* interview, Lukyanov's reference to Iraq becomes more than a general accusation of Western hypocrisy (Die Weltwoche, 2025). By comparing Russia's conduct in Ukraine with the U.S. invasion of Iraq, he places both wars within the same moral field, while implying that Russia has acted with greater restraint. This move closely overlaps with Chomsky's argument in the *New Statesman* interview, where Chomsky also compares Ukraine and Iraq and suggests that Russia's military campaign has been less destructive than the American war in Iraq (Vock, 2023). Chomsky's broader claim that Ukraine is not a fully free actor, but depends on what the United States determines, further reinforces the same logic: the war is interpreted primarily through American power rather than Ukrainian agency. Lukyanov's argument therefore combines two familiar registers. On one level, it uses realist language to present Russia as a state defending its security. On another, it adopts an anti-imperialist critique of U.S. hegemony, where Western condemnation of Russia is weakened by America's own record of intervention and destruction.

Lukyanov does not need to prove that Russia is morally innocent in an absolute sense. Instead, he places Russia and the United States within the same moral category of great-power behavior. If the United States acted militarily in Iraq, then Western condemnation of Russia can be presented as selective, hypocritical, or politically motivated. This does not directly justify the invasion of Ukraine, but it changes the terms of judgment. The question becomes not whether Russia violated Ukrainian sovereignty, but whether the West has the moral authority to condemn it.

Taken together, Lukyanov's discourse demonstrates how Russian strategic narratives can be translated into the language of international expertise. Like Pozner, he does not simply repeat official slogans. He frames Russia's position through concepts that circulate widely in Western academic and policy debates: realism, security, neutrality, great-power rivalry, and Western double standards. This makes his discourse particularly useful for Russian sharp power. It speaks to Western audiences in a familiar language while reproducing several core Russian assumptions: Ukraine lacks full agency; the West forced a geopolitical choice; NATO and the Western bloc created

Russia's security dilemma; and Moscow's actions, however tragic, should be understood as defensive reactions rather than imperial aggression.

8.3 SERGEY LAVROV'S CASE

Unlike Pozner and Lukyanov, Sergey Lavrov represents the official diplomatic voice of the Russian state. Yet his discourse follows a similar pattern of argumentative flexibility. NATO expansion is repeatedly presented as the main catalyst of Russia's confrontation with Ukraine and as the central reason why Moscow was allegedly forced to defend its security. However, when Finland and Sweden began moving toward NATO membership, Lavrov downplayed the significance of this development by arguing that it did not fundamentally change the situation, since both countries had already been cooperating and training with NATO (Reuters, 2022). This elasticity is important because it shows that the NATO argument functions less as a consistent analytical principle than as a selective justification used when it supports Russia's preferred narrative.

Lavrov also constructs moral equivalence between Russia and the United States, but in a much more direct, controversial, and provocative manner than Pozner or Lukyanov. Several months after the invasion of Ukraine, speaking in English to an international audience, he stated: "...if you 'cannot sleep' because of the Russian conflict, there are some [*advices*] to calm you down. First, imagine this is happening in Africa. Imagine this is happening in the Middle East. Imagine Ukraine is Palestine, imagine Russia is the United States" (Dutton, 2022). The comparison performs several discursive moves at once. By invoking Africa and the Middle East, Lavrov appeals to postcolonial and left-wing critiques of Western selectivity, suggesting that Western societies are morally disturbed by Ukraine only because the war is taking place in Europe. By equating Ukraine with Palestine and Russia with the United States, he places Russia's invasion within a familiar anti-imperial vocabulary while simultaneously invoking a realist logic in which great powers behave similarly when defending their perceived interests. The result is not a denial of power politics, but its

moral universalization: Russia is made to appear less exceptional because the United States is portrayed as having acted in comparable or worse ways.

Lavrov's discourse also reveals a selective understanding of sovereignty (United Nations, 2022). Formally, he speaks the language of sovereign choice, but in practice this sovereignty is reduced almost entirely to Ukraine's foreign-policy orientation. The central question becomes whether Ukraine has the right to join NATO, host Western military infrastructure, or align itself strategically with the Euro-Atlantic bloc. Much less attention is given to other dimensions of sovereignty, especially Ukraine's territorial integrity, political self-determination, and the right of Ukrainian society to define its own security interests independently of Moscow. This resembles the logic of Surkov's idea of "sovereign democracy," where sovereignty does not primarily mean democratic self-government in a liberal sense, but the state's capacity to protect itself from external influence and preserve political autonomy against Western interference (Shekhovtsov, 2019). In Lavrov's case, however, this logic is projected onto Ukraine in reverse: Ukrainian sovereignty is treated as legitimate only when it does not contradict Russia's security claims. As a result, Ukraine's independent foreign-policy choice is portrayed not as an expression of sovereignty, but as evidence of Western control.

Lavrov's discourse represents the official consolidation of the narratives that appear in more flexible form in Pozner and Lukyanov. As foreign minister, he translates claims about NATO expansion, Western hypocrisy, Russophobia, sovereignty, and civilizational difference into the formal language of Russian diplomacy. Yet his argument remains highly selective. Ukraine's sovereignty is recognized only when it concerns formal neutrality or non-alignment, but largely denied when it concerns territorial integrity, self-determination, or the right to define its own security orientation. At the same time, Lavrov repeatedly places Russia and the United States within the same moral category, using Iraq, Palestine, Africa, and the Middle East to expose Western hypocrisy and weaken the moral distinction between Russian aggression and Western interventionism. His discourse therefore does not simply defend Russia; it seeks to transform the moral framework through which Russia is judged

8.4 CIVILIZATIONAL ARGUMENT IN RUSSIAN DISCOURSE

Lavrov's extensive use of Christianity-based political views is not a recent or isolated phenomenon. In recent decades, it has become common for concepts and ideas developed in academic traditions to be incorporated into foreign policy doctrines or to shape the public language of decision-makers. For example, the notion of soft power was explicitly and extensively adopted by Hu Jintao during the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007. Although the effectiveness of Chinese soft power remains debatable, it is clear that China has attempted to develop and institutionalize non-military or non-kinetic instruments of influence.

Russia presents a somewhat similar case, in the sense that its political leadership frequently incorporates into official documents and public statements concepts originating in Western academic debates. As the previous discussion has shown, Russian political elites and commentators often rely on realist ideas when presenting Russia as a reactive power responding to Western provocation. Another important example is the selective incorporation of civilizational language. While several scholars have challenged Huntington's civilizational paradigm, including Marlene Laruelle, her work is useful precisely because it shows how the notion of civilization became increasingly visible in Russian official discourse. Laruelle examined the presidential speeches of Putin, Medvedev, and then Putin again between 2000 and 2014, finding that the term civilization appeared 288 times, particularly in relation to foreign policy and the presidents' broader ontological understanding of the international environment (Laruelle, 2020). She also notes that after the Russian translation of Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* in 2003, the concept gained further popularity. By 2008, it had entered *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, where the word civilization was used twelve times in reference to multi-civilizational relations, civilizational diversity, and inter-civilizational dialogue (Permanent mission of the Russian Federation to the international organizations in Vienna, 2008).

This shift can also be traced in Putin's evolving use of the term. According to Laruelle, whereas Russia had previously been described as part of Western or European civilization, since 2013 official speeches increasingly began to portray Russia as a distinct Christian civilization. This discursive shift allowed the political leadership to

distance Russia more clearly from “liberal” Europe, while still claiming continuity with Christianity and European moral tradition (Laruelle, 2020).

The civilizational narrative is typically used for several interrelated purposes. First, it emphasizes the uniqueness of the Russian people and the Russian political mentality, suggesting that Russia cannot be fully understood through allegedly universal Western categories. This idea is visible in the discourse of sovereign democracy, which implies that Russia formally accepts internationally recognized norms, but interprets them in a distinctively Russian way. For example, at the 53rd Munich Security Conference, Lavrov defended sovereignty in a “post-West world order,” where all actors would show “respect for each country’s cultural, historical, and civilisational identity” (MFA of the Russian Federation , 2017). Here, beyond the Huntingtonian understanding of civilization, one can also detect elements of the English School, particularly Hedley Bull’s understanding of international society as a space where states recognize each other’s cultural and civilizational specificities. More generally, references to civilization and civilizational identity have appeared frequently in Lavrov’s discourse since the mid-2010s. For instance, in 2014 he stated that “it is hard to overestimate the significance of the intercultural, interreligious, intercivilisational dialogue in the formation of a stable and democratic global management system” (MFA of the Russian Federation, 2014).

Secondly, civilizational identity is used to assert the spiritual and ethnic unity of Russians and Ukrainians, thereby contributing to the justification of the war, which is often implicitly or explicitly framed as a civil war, a brotherly war, or a conflict within one historical-cultural space. Shortly after the annexation of Crimea, Putin referred to Grand Prince Vladimir the Great of Novgorod and Kyiv and argued that his turn to Orthodoxy “predetermined the shared cultural, value-based, and civilizational foundation that unites the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus” (Putin, 2014). In this framing, Ukraine is not represented as a fully separate political and cultural entity, but as part of a wider Orthodox and East Slavic civilizational space.

In a broader sense, the civilizational identity ascribed to both Russia and Ukraine by Huntington has been used, directly or indirectly, to legitimize Russian geopolitical ambitions. In 2014, Putin explicitly raised the idea of defending the Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine (The Kremlin, 2014). This was one of

the first moments in which he introduced the concept of Novorossiia, a term often used to describe historical Russian territories gained during wars against the Ottoman Empire and associated today with Donetsk, Luhansk, and other Russian-occupied regions of eastern Ukraine. Novorossiia is closely connected to the notion of Русский мир (Russian World), which carries a more ideological meaning than a strictly geographic one. For the state, Русский мир has geopolitical implications and is tied to language, citizenship, and the representation of Russianness abroad. For the Russian Orthodox Church, it is framed more through religious, spiritual, and cultural categories.

In both cases, Русский мир is invoked in Russian political discourse to support geopolitical ambitions. In 2008, for instance, Russia invaded Georgia under the pretext of protecting Russian speakers, who were also presented as Orthodox Christians and Russian passport holders (Pieper, 2020, p. 764). Indeed, Russian nationals were involved, as Russia had systematically distributed passports to Georgian citizens before and after the war. Similarly, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war in eastern Ukraine were justified, though not exclusively, through the idea of defending the Russian World and Russian-speaking populations.

Thirdly, civilizational narratives are used to reshape the ontological understanding of the international system by dividing the world along civilizational lines, with Russia portrayed as a unique and relatively self-contained civilization. Nicolai N. Petro argues that by incorporating a civilizational framework, particularly one grounded in religion, Russian elites seek to challenge the liberal world order by proposing a pluricultural alternative in which Russia represents the Orthodox civilization (Petro, 2018). Petro, who served in the administration of President George H. W. Bush, is also significant because his views are frequently published in influential Russian outlets, including Lukyanov's *Russia in Global Affairs*, or cited by prominent opinion-makers. This further demonstrates the appeal of civilizational, religious, and cultural-pluralist interpretations within Russian foreign policy discourse.

Petro's reference to Orthodoxy is not accidental. When Huntington divided the world into different civilizations, he separated the Catholic, Western part of Ukraine, predominantly Ukrainian-speaking, from its more Orthodox eastern part, largely populated by Russian-speakers, and grouped the latter with Russia and Belarus (Huntington, 1993). civilizational division can be detected in Russian political discourse

long before the 2022 invasion, as well as in academic discussions, including Petro's article, where he directly references Huntington's civilizational map of Ukraine (Petro, 2018). His title, *The Tragedy of Ukraine*, also echoes Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. These texts are published in both Russian and English, which makes them accessible to domestic as well as international audiences.

The fourth, and arguably most significant, function of religion-based civilizational identity is to present Russia as the ideological antagonist of the West and, at the same time, as its moral superior. This theme is central to Russia's sharp power discourse. Although claims about Russian moral superiority can be traced back to 19th-century Pan-Slavic thought, including Nikolay Danilevsky's *Europeanization – a Disease of Russian Life* (Европейничанье – болезнь русской жизни), its contemporary expression became more visible in the early 2010s. At the Valdai Club conference in 2013, Putin criticized the West on moral grounds, arguing that “without the virtues of Christianity” people would lose their sense of dignity, and that many Euro-Atlantic societies had turned away from the Christian values that once formed the foundation of Western civilization (Kremlin, 2013).

This religion-based civilizational identity is also central to the work of Alexander Dugin, one of the most visible figures in Russian nationalist and Eurasianist intellectual circles. Dugin famously stated that “Russians should realize that they are Orthodox Christians in the first place, Russians in the second place, and only in the third place, people” (Dunlop, 2004). Referencing Dugin is significant because he draws on the ideas of Jean Thiriart, who viewed Soviet Russia as the true bearer of European civilization, preserving moral values while confronting a hedonistic and consumerist America. In his earlier work, Petro similarly argued that religion entered Russian discourse not only as a narrative resource, but as a moral framework grounded in Orthodox Christianity (Petro, 2015).

To reinforce this claim of moral superiority, Russian officials and state media have frequently invoked LGBTQ+ themes, particularly after the events of 2014. The Euromaidan protests were portrayed by Russian state media as a Western-orchestrated attempt not only to pull Ukraine away from Russia, but also to impose liberal social norms, including the legalization of same-sex marriage. As a result, the derogatory term Gayromaidan gained traction in Russian discourse, emphasizing the alleged moral

inferiority of both the European Union and the United States (Chisholm, 2023). Tsaturyan finds that state-promoted homophobia has become increasingly widespread since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, particularly among individuals with strong anti-Ukrainian sentiments (Tsaturyan, 2024).

This aspect of the civilizational narrative is especially important for understanding its sharp power function. As multiple exploratory studies have indicated, sharp power strategies frequently aim to exploit existing societal rifts within target audiences. In this context, the incorporation of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, framed against Christian civilizational values, functions as a deliberate tactic through which Russian political discourse attempts to gain sympathy from conservative segments of Western societies; it is also a way of exploiting existing culture-war divisions within Western societies. By presenting Russia as a defender of Christianity, tradition, and the family, and by portraying the West as morally decadent, Russian discourse seeks to resonate with conservative-leaning audiences in Europe and the United States who are already dissatisfied with liberal-progressive politics. In this sense, the civilizational argument becomes a bridge between domestic legitimation and external influence. It transforms Russia's war-related narratives into a broader moral struggle and uses the internal divisions of democratic societies as an opportunity for political persuasion.

8.5 RUSSOPHOBIA IN RUSSIAN DISCOURSE

This subchapter examines how Russian discourse uses Russophobia as a relatively familiar language for Western audiences in order to justify Russia's allegedly *defensive* war against Ukraine. The term is effective precisely because it resembles Western moral vocabularies of phobia, discrimination, prejudice, exclusion, and victimhood. However, its function in Russian discourse is not only external. Sharp power is often described as the outward projection of authoritarianism, especially in relation to domestic control over information, censorship, and the monopolization of political narratives. In this sense, the domestic roots of sharp power are central: before authoritarian influence is projected outward, it is first produced and normalized

internally. Following this logic, Russia's sharp power cannot be fully understood without examining how its discourse of self-victimization emerged and became politically functional. (Bar-Tal, et al., 2009) argue that self-perceived collective victimhood strengthens a group's positive self-image, delegitimizes the rival, and provides moral justification for defensive or retaliatory action. This is particularly relevant in the Russian case after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the state that had served as a major source of pride, status, and historical achievement for many Russians disappeared while much of the outside world celebrated its demise. Within such a context, victimhood becomes a powerful psychological and political resource: it allows Russia to present itself as humiliated, misunderstood, and threatened, while framing its opponents as unjust, immoral, and hostile.

Volkan's concept of *chosen trauma* adds a useful psychological dimension to the discussion of collective victimhood. He uses the term to describe how a large group can preserve the memory of a historical injury involving humiliation, victimization, helplessness, or loss of dignity, land, and prestige (Volkan, 2001). Over time, such memories may become part of the group's identity and can be reactivated by political leaders when the group is presented as facing a new external threat. In the Russian case, this helps explain how post-Soviet loss, NATO expansion, Western criticism, sanctions, and accusations of Russophobia can be brought together into a broader narrative of repeated historical injury.

Robinson's analysis of *Russophobia in official Russian political discourse* shows how this logic became increasingly visible after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. Before this period, accusations of Russophobia were relatively limited and often referred to specific forms of ethnic discrimination or anti-Russian bias. After Putin's conservative-cultural turn, however, Russia was increasingly represented as a broader civilizational community grounded in tradition, historical memory, religion, and opposition to Western liberal universalism. This framework allowed Putin to revive and expand a sense of Russian victimhood: Russia was not simply criticized, but allegedly misunderstood, humiliated, morally rejected, and threatened by hostile external forces (Robinson, 2019). The accusation of Russophobia therefore helped transform Russia's confrontation with the West and Ukraine into a defensive struggle of a wounded civilization seeking recognition, dignity, and protection from further harm.

Lavrov's 2021 greeting to the third *Protecting the Future Moscow International Conference on Combating Xenophobia, Antisemitism and Racism* shows that Russophobia had already entered Russian official discourse before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In this statement, Lavrov places Russophobia in the same semantic field as nationalism, antisemitism, xenophobia, neo-Nazism, and radicalism, especially in relation to Ukraine and the Baltic states (Lavrov, 2021). The framing transforms political conflict into a moral and civilizational problem. Russia is presented not as a state involved in geopolitical confrontation, but as a multi-ethnic society whose people, language, and culture are threatened by discriminatory and extremist forces abroad. The wartime use of Russophobia after 2022 therefore did not appear suddenly; the invasion intensified an already existing discourse through which Russia portrayed itself, Russian-speaking communities, and Russian culture as targets of external hostility.

Lavrov later reiterated the same logic after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, when he claimed to be "amazed at the speed with which the West adopted a Russophobic position after the beginning of the special military operation, encouraging Russophobia in everyday life" (Lavrov, 2022). In this formulation, the reaction to Russia's invasion is not treated primarily as political opposition to the war, but as the rapid exposure of a deeper anti-Russian hostility. Western condemnation is therefore reframed as prejudice, while Russia is again positioned as the object of collective discrimination rather than as the initiator of aggression.

A useful example of the institutionalization of Russophobia is provided by the St Petersburg International Legal Forum session "Русофобия: нацизм XXI века" (Russophobia: Nazism of the 21st Century), where Russian officials and legal experts discussed Russophobia as a human-hating ideology, a form of neo-Nazism, and a phenomenon requiring legal codification and criminal liability (Forum, 2023). This official discussion demonstrates how the Russian discourse of Russophobia is moving from rhetorical accusation toward legal and institutional codification. Russophobia is not presented simply as a hostile attitude toward Russia, but as a broad, multidimensional phenomenon that allegedly threatens Russia, Russian citizens abroad, Russian culture, and even global security. The repeated comparison with Nazism and neo-Nazism is particularly revealing. By placing Russophobia in the same moral category as fascist hatred, Russian officials transform criticism of Russian state policy into a criminalized form of identity-based hostility.

This logic is significant for understanding the domestic roots of Russian sharp power. Before Russophobia can be projected outward as an accusation against the West, it is first consolidated internally as a discourse of collective victimhood. Russia is represented as a multi-ethnic civilization under attack; Russian citizens are portrayed as discriminated against; and Russian culture, from Dostoevsky to Tchaikovsky, is framed as being *cancelled* by a hostile West. At the same time, proposed solutions — criminal responsibility, legal offices, court cases, official documentation — show an attempt to institutionalize this victimhood. In this way, Russophobia becomes not merely a descriptive term, but a political instrument through which Russia delegitimizes external criticism, reinforces domestic solidarity, and justifies defensive or retaliatory measures.

Russia has also attempted to transform Russophobia into a criminal-legal category. Draft proposals suggested adding Article 136.1 “Russophobia” to the Criminal Code, targeting discriminatory actions against Russian citizens and *compatriots* abroad (The Moscow Times, 2023). Although this appears not to have become a standalone offence, it reflects the broader legal institutionalization of victimhood. In parallel, Russia already criminalizes the “discrediting” of its Armed Forces under Article 280.3, introduced after the invasion of Ukraine.

Russian political scientist Konstantin Pakhalyuk argues that the Kremlin uses *Russophobia* as an elastic political label through which criticism of Russian policy is reframed as hostility toward Russians as such (The Moscow Times, 2024). He suggests that after 2022, the term expanded to include not only discrimination against Russians, but almost any opposition to Russia’s war. In this logic, Russia is criticized not for what it does, but for what it supposedly is.

The Russian Foreign Ministry’s official presentation of “examples of Russophobia” illustrates how elastic and politically useful the term has become. The listed cases include, for instance, the Belgian defence minister’s claim that oil revenues represent Russia’s “Achilles heel,” since without income from energy exports Moscow would struggle to continue the war (Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation , 2026). Yet this is not necessarily an identity-based attack on Russians; it is a strategic observation about the material foundations of Russia’s war economy. Another example refers to the same Belgian minister citing Hungarian protesters chanting *Ruszkik haza* — “Russians go home.” The Foreign Ministry presents this as anti-Russian

hostility, but it does not explain the historical context behind the slogan. In Hungary, *Ruszkik haza* is inseparable from the memory of Soviet domination and the crushing of the 1956 revolution by Soviet troops. By omitting this context, the Russian MFA transforms an anti-imperial and anti-occupation slogan into evidence of ethnic or cultural hatred. This move shows how Russophobia discourse recasts criticism of Russian power as prejudice against Russians themselves. The German defence minister's statement that Russia represents a common threat from the Black Sea to the Arctic is framed by the Russian MFA as Russophobia, although the content of the statement concerns Russia's geopolitical behaviour rather than Russian identity. The criticism is directed at Moscow's attempts to assert historical claims and spheres of influence, not at Russians as a people. The Danish Prime Minister's, Mette Frederiksen's claim that the war concerns Russia's attempt to restore an earlier empire is another revealing case (Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation , 2026). Her statement criticizes Russia's imperial ambitions and the perceived security implications for Europe. Yet by presenting this as Russophobia, the MFA collapses a critique of imperial state behaviour into alleged hostility toward Russia as such.

Similar examples appear across statements by officials from major European powers, especially where criticism of Russia's invasion, sanctions evasion, imperial ambitions, hybrid warfare, or attacks on Ukrainian identity is treated as evidence of Russophobia. In this framing, ordinary political, military, and moral condemnation of aggression is reinterpreted as hostility toward Russia itself.

While the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs often lists post-invasion Western statements as examples of Russophobia, Putin extends the argument into the pre-war period. He claims that hostility toward Russians, particularly in the Baltic states, existed long before the special military operation (Tass, 2023). This move separates Russophobia from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and presents it instead as a deeper, pre-existing prejudice. Following Campbell, this is a form of threat construction: danger is not merely identified, but produced through discourse that defines who is vulnerable, who is hostile, and why defensive action appears necessary. In this formulation, Russia is positioned not as the source of insecurity, but as a state responding to the victimization of Russians abroad.

Similar rhetoric can be found among U.S. scholars, particularly Stephen Cohen and John Mearsheimer. Cohen suggests that “we demonize Putin, and we *Putinize* Russia, so we demonize Russia,” adding that “Russophobia is running amok” in the United States (VICE News, 2018). This formulation closely resembles the Russian official argument that criticism of Russian policy is often transformed into hostility toward Russia as such.

The circulation of Russophobia rhetoric in Western discourse shows how Russian strategic narratives can gain legitimacy through external voices. The point is not that Western scholars such as John Mearsheimer simply reproduce Kremlin propaganda, but that their arguments can be selectively appropriated because they already frame the war through NATO expansion, Western responsibility, and elite irrationality. In his discussion with Tucker Carlson, Mearsheimer explicitly refers to *Russophobia* in the West, especially among European and American elites, as an obstacle to accepting Russia’s likely victory in Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2025). This matters because a concept central to Russian official discourse appears here not through Russian state media, but within a major Western alternative-media platform and articulated by a prominent American realist scholar.

A comparable formulation appears in Jeffrey Sachs’s interview with Tucker Carlson, where Sachs describes Russophobia as a “concocted hatred” and links U.S. policy toward Russia to NATO expansion and the broader aim of weakening Moscow (Sachs, 2025). As with Cohen and Mearsheimer, the significance lies less in direct alignment with Russian state discourse than in the external validation such Western voices provide for Russian narratives of encirclement, humiliation, and anti-Russian prejudice.

Overall, the discourse of Russophobia demonstrates how Russian sharp power operates through the transformation of criticism into victimhood. The term allows Russian officials to shift attention away from Russian state behaviour and toward the alleged hostility of the West. In this framing, sanctions, military support for Ukraine, criticism of Russian imperialism, or concern for Ukrainian identity are not treated as political responses to aggression, but as evidence of a deeper prejudice against Russia as a people, culture, and civilization. This is why Russophobia is politically useful: it

creates a moral reversal in which Russia appears not as the source of insecurity, but as a wounded collective forced to defend itself.

At the domestic level, this discourse reinforces solidarity by presenting Russia as misunderstood, humiliated, and threatened. At the external level, it speaks in a language familiar to Western audiences, borrowing the moral vocabulary. Western societies often carry a strong historical consciousness of racism, colonialism, imperialism, antisemitism, fascism, and discrimination. Russian discourse exploits this moral sensitivity by translating its own grievances into a vocabulary that Western audiences already recognize: phobia, exclusion, prejudice, cultural cancellation, and collective victimhood. In this sense, the accusation of Russophobia seeks to activate the West's own fear of being morally hypocritical — of condemning Russia while allegedly reproducing the very forms of intolerance it claims to oppose.

8.6 SUMMARY OF THE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Taken together, the cases examined in this chapter show that Russian strategic discourse does not operate through a single ideological vocabulary. Rather, it moves flexibly between neorealist arguments about security, left-wing and anti-imperialist critiques of American hegemony, the language of Russophobia and victimhood, and civilizational claims about Russia's distinct moral and historical identity. This flexibility is central to its sharp-power function. Russia does not merely reject Western ideas from the outside; it selectively appropriates concepts, theories, and moral vocabularies produced within Western academic and political debate and re-signifies them for its own geopolitical purposes.

Pozner illustrates this through the performance of independence and moderation. By criticizing aspects of Russian domestic governance, he builds credibility, yet his foreign-policy discourse reproduces the central assumptions of Russian strategic narratives. NATO expansion, the security dilemma, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Cuban Missile Crisis are used to portray Russia as a reactive and ultimately innocent power, forced to respond to Western pressure. Lukyanov performs a similar role

through expert discourse. He translates Russian geopolitical assumptions into the language of international relations theory, presenting Ukraine less as an autonomous political community than as a geopolitical object within a wider confrontation between Russia and the West. Lavrov, by contrast, represents the official diplomatic consolidation of these narratives. His discourse is more confrontational, but it follows the same logic: Russia is framed as defending itself against NATO expansion, Western hypocrisy, selective sovereignty, and anti-Russian hostility.

The discourse of Russophobia deepens this moral reversal by reframing criticism of Russian state behaviour as prejudice against Russia as a people, culture, and civilization. The civilizational narrative extends this further by portraying Russia as a distinct moral-historical world resisting liberal Western universalism. These narratives overlap and reinforce one another: Russia appears geopolitically threatened, morally misunderstood, and civilizationally attacked. In this sense, what the West often treats as one of its strengths — theoretical pluralism, academic openness, self-criticism, and moral reflexivity — becomes vulnerable to selective appropriation. Russian sharp power works precisely by converting these Western intellectual and moral resources into instruments for legitimizing Russia's war and delegitimizing Western criticism.

9 FAILURE OF RUSSIAN SOFT POWER

This chapter seeks to illustrate one of the primary reasons—if not the central reason—why Russia has adopted sharp power practices. Scholars such as (Cole, 2018), (deLisle, 2020), (Fitzgerald, 2024), (Mankikar, 2022), Wu (2019) and others, including (Walker & Ludwig, 2017) in their foundational article, argue that Russia turned to sharp power methods as it failed to project a positive image internationally. This failure highlights the shortcomings of Russian soft power.

The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive measurement of Russian soft power, which would require a separate empirical study. Rather, it identifies several domains in which Russia's attractiveness has been weakened and shows how this decline helps explain the compensatory turn toward sharp power.

Nye's conceptualization of soft power can be understood as the ability of a country to attract others through its culture, political values, and foreign policy. As Nye frequently emphasizes, governmental involvement in soft power is inherently limited, as soft power requires a much longer period to yield results compared to straightforward political incentives. Moreover, direct governmental engagement in soft power initiatives is often perceived as propaganda, which can provoke skepticism among target audiences. Nevertheless, as a tool of foreign policy, soft power can be seen as a government's effort to present the virtues of its domestic socio-economic and political environment to the international community.

In the context of Western democracies, governments, leaders, and associated actors often highlight the benefits and positive attributes of their societal norms, customs, political systems, rule of law, commitment to human rights, and contributions to the international community. In this sense, soft power, whether facilitated with or without direct governmental involvement, represents the capacity to generate attraction to particular cultural norms, political ideals, economic opportunities, or even military strength.

This chapter argues that Russia, given its significant shortcomings in the domains of culture, political values, and foreign policy—as defined by Nye's framework—has largely failed to exercise effective soft power. Rather than fostering a positive international image, Russia has either actively damaged its global reputation or ceased to offer elements that could appeal to the broader international community.

Marlène Laruelle suggests that Russia exercises what she terms "niche soft power." She argues that by adopting certain conservative narratives, mysticism, and messianism, and emphasizing its civilizational identity, Russia engages in a specific form of soft power targeted at particular audiences (Laruelle, 2021). Specifically, Russia focuses on audiences that either already have a favorable view of Russia or harbor resentment towards liberal values. Furthermore, without explicitly using the term *sharp power*, Laruelle asserts that Russia seeks to exploit the institutional and normative weaknesses of the West. Through state-sponsored media platforms, it disseminates its own narratives, which can be recognized as a classic example of sharp power in action. This once again illustrates that either there is a misconception regarding Russian soft

power, or Russia is exercising a new form influence that considerably deviates from the traditional soft power.

The operationalization of soft power indicators can be undertaken using the categorization of soft power sources proposed by Joseph Nye. According to Nye, a country's soft power is derived from three primary sources: its culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2004, pp. 10-14). This framework provides a useful lens for identifying potential shortcomings in Russian soft power. While additional aspects of Russian soft power could be considered beyond those outlined by Nye, this chapter will focus on the major elements that shape Russia's overall image and the general perception of the country.

It should be noted that when categorizing real-world indicators of soft power, certain aspects may overlap across the three categories. For instance, Russia's military involvement in Ukraine falls under the category of foreign policy; however, the damage to its reputation as a military superpower can also be linked to political values. In this context, political values should not be narrowly understood as limited to concepts such as the rule of law or human rights (though these are integral to the category). Instead, they also encompass broader attributes, such as a country's military strength, which reflects strong institutions, lower levels of corruption, scientific and technological advancements, a stable and well-performing economy, and high-quality education systems.

Another example of intersection becomes evident when examining Russian media. It fits into the category of domestic values, as it reflects the social and political norms of the country. Simultaneously, it aligns with the category of foreign policy, given its extensive use in disseminating the Kremlin's narratives to both domestic and international audiences. Additionally, it falls within the category of culture, as it provides the international community with exposure to Russian cultural characteristics, traditions, customs, and the perceptions of Russian society on domestic and global affairs.

(Ageeva, 2021) argues that Russian soft power weakened progressively as the Kremlin increased its involvement in the country's soft power initiatives. This involvement manifested in various ways: by adopting the concept of *Russky Mir*, which

shifted from its cultural origins to a more geopolitical framework; by integrating conservative discourse into its foreign policy narrative; by monopolizing information channels; and by using state-controlled media as tools of disinformation. These actions not only undermined Russia's soft power but also raised alarm among Western governments and societies. In other words, the Kremlin's attempts to *sharpen* Russia's *soft* power paradoxically led to its significant decline.

Ageeva suggests that the first signs of regression in Russian soft power appeared in 2007 when Vladimir Putin delivered his controversial speech at the Munich Security Conference. Although Dmitry Medvedev's presidency briefly sustained Western hopes for Russia's democratization, this optimism faded following the 2012 protests and the government's subsequent suppression of dissenting voices. However, the most significant deterioration of Russia's soft power occurred after the annexation of Crimea.

Despite these setbacks, there were occasional attempts by Western leaders to engage with Russia diplomatically, including the controversial decision to allow Russia to host the 2018 FIFA World Cup, which some saw as an effort to overlook its violations of international law. Ageeva also highlights the global skepticism surrounding Russian media outlets, particularly *RT*, which faced scrutiny and investigations by entities such as the UK's media regulators and France's security services. *RT* came under heightened criticism in the Baltic states, a region of particular strategic importance to Russia.

The decline of Russia's soft power became increasingly evident following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For instance, the 2024 Pew Research Center data on public opinion across 35 countries reveals overwhelmingly negative perceptions of Russia (Pew Research Center, 2024). As shown in Figure 1, with the exception of a few countries, public sentiment toward Russia remains predominantly unfavorable. Negative perceptions are particularly pronounced in European countries, the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Israel. On average, 65% of respondents across the surveyed nations hold an unfavorable view of Russia.

Another research demonstrates that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also eroded support among European right-wing populists, traditionally more sympathetic to Russia.

For example, support has declined by 49% in Italy, 34% in Poland, 28% in Spain, and 15% in Hungary (Pew Research Center, 2022).

9.1 CENSORSHIP AS A CAUSE OF RUSSIAN SOFT POWER DECLINE

One of the key premises of sharp power is the monopoly over the information landscape. Russia not only seeks to control and censor television, online platforms, and print media domestically, but it also actively promotes state-owned think tanks and NGOs. Additionally, it attempts to co-opt the institution of fact-checking. In November 2024, the state-owned news agency TASS, in collaboration with the government-organized non-governmental organization (GONGO) ANO Dialog, organized a forum titled *Dialogue on Fakes 2.0*. The event aimed to establish a global association of fact-checkers to combat alleged disinformation. However, such state-affiliated media platforms and fact-checking initiatives not only foster confusion and further propagate Russian disinformation but also undermine the reputation and credibility of fact-checking as an institution (Panizio, 2024).

The control of information and reality has been a hallmark of Russian tradition since the Bolsheviks seized power. As (Lipman, 2004) argues, history—even the most recent—has been continually reshaped, remodeled, and adapted to serve the interests of the Party, thereby reinforcing its position. A notable shift occurred during Gorbachev’s *glasnost*, which introduced some degree of freedom by allowing researchers access to archives and enabling the public to express curiosity openly. While the 1990s in Russia were marked by a dysfunctional government and widespread anarchy, Boris Yeltsin attempted to symbolize Russia’s victory over Communist rule. However, a return to Soviet-style censorship and historical revisionism became evident during Putin’s early tenure in the 2000s. One of the first indications of this shift was the directive to revise 107 history textbooks used in Russian schools, limiting teachers to choose from only three approved versions.

Over the past two decades, the Russian government has progressively tightened its control over the country’s information sphere. However, the first significant signs of

internet censorship and control emerged following the 2012 protests, during which demonstrators extensively used online platforms such as Telegram and Western social media channels to share and access information (Broderick, 2023).). In 2019, Russia enacted the so-called Sovereign Internet Law, which granted the government the authority to impose restrictions on specific online traffic. This law enabled state entities to shut down internet access at their discretion, based on the government's interests and perspectives.

Internet control in Russia reached unprecedented levels in 2024, ahead of the presidential election held in March of that year. In addition to restricting citizens' access to various communication platforms, the government implemented advanced digital tools to identify and block the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), which citizens employed to bypass nationwide internet restrictions and access information from non-governmental sources (Satariano, et al., 2024).

The latest Freedom House report on internet freedom classifies Russia as "not free" (Freedom House, 2024). According to the report, the government not only banned the use and promotion of VPNs and extended restrictions on specific websites, but it also deployed increasingly sophisticated tools to monitor and suppress activities related to the criticism of the Russian military and alleged disinformation. Furthermore, state authorities enhanced their capabilities to access and track individuals' location data, further consolidating their control over the digital landscape.

If media censorship on federal television channels primarily influenced the selection of topics, invited guests, and interviewees, the situation has significantly worsened since the invasion of Ukraine. The state has escalated its efforts, moving beyond censoring specific topics, words, or individuals, to launching a systematic crackdown on independent media within Russia. According to data from the (Open Observatory of Network Interference, 2024), 139 news websites were blocked in 2023, and this number increased to 279 in 2024. These figures include both Russian and foreign media outlets.

Institutional censorship should be understood as one of the main domestic conditions that diminishes Russia's soft power, because it weakens the autonomy and credibility of the very sectors that could otherwise generate cultural, intellectual, and

political attraction. In the media sphere, the foreign-agent and undesirable-organization frameworks have become instruments through which independent journalism is not only legally restricted, but also symbolically stigmatized as alien, hostile, or externally controlled (RSF, 2024). This is important because soft power depends on credibility, while a media environment built around legal intimidation and administrative vulnerability undermines the perception that Russian public discourse can operate independently from the state.

A similar logic is visible in Russian universities, where academic freedom has been narrowed through military censorship, ideological pressure, career insecurity, and the expectation that scholars avoid politically sensitive interpretations of the war and the state (Yatluk & Khukalenko, 2025). In this sense, institutional censorship does not merely silence particular arguments; it reshapes the conditions under which knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimized. This directly damages Russia's soft-power potential, since universities and intellectual life can generate attraction only when they are perceived as relatively autonomous, internationally open, and intellectually credible.

The war in Ukraine transformed not only the online and media realms but also revived the tenets of the Stalinist era. When Russian authors and members of the literary community began criticizing the government for its invasion of Ukraine—posting video documentation of Russian atrocities committed on Ukrainian soil—the government initially targeted these online posts (Yuzefovich, 2024). Authors critical of the regime were declared "foreign agents," and publishing companies and bookstores were instructed to label their books with a restrictive 18+ sticker. This fate befell authors such as Dmitry Glukhovsky, a Russian writer in exile who was sentenced to eight years in prison on charges of discrediting the Russian army. Similarly, Katerina Silvanova and Elena Malisova, despite not openly criticizing the war, were also declared "foreign agents" for co-authoring a book that was removed from bookstores under accusations of promoting "LGBT propaganda."

The publishing sphere illustrates the same tendency. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, literary censorship has become increasingly systematic, affecting authors, publishing houses, festivals, bookshops, and even the anticipatory decisions of cultural actors who avoid potentially dangerous themes before direct punishment occurs (Yuzefovich, 2024). Therefore, institutional censorship weakens Russian soft power not

simply because it restricts expression, but because it transforms culture, media, and academia from possible sources of attraction into extensions of political control.

Legal censorship represents one of the clearest ways in which the Russian state transforms dissent, independent civil society, and alternative interpretations of the war into matters of national security. The foreign-agent framework, initially directed at NGOs, has gradually expanded to include media actors, individual activists, and broader civic initiatives, thereby turning foreign connection or influence into a marker of political suspicion (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022). The legislation on undesirable organizations performs a similar function by criminalizing cooperation with selected foreign or international actors and further isolating Russian civil society from transnational networks (Human Rights Watch, 2025). After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this legal architecture was reinforced by war-censorship laws targeting “false” information about the army and the “discreditation” of Russian military actions (EUAA, 2026). As (Shertsoboeva, 2024) argues, these laws do not merely regulate information; they help construct a state-sanctioned version of truth in which loyalty becomes the condition of legitimate speech. This diminishes Russia’s soft power because political attractiveness cannot easily coexist with a legal order that treats independent judgment as a security threat.

Self-censorship represents the sociocultural dimension of Russian censorship, because it shows how formal repression gradually becomes internalized by individuals, institutions, and professional communities. While legal censorship operates through visible mechanisms such as foreign-agent designation, undesirable-organization laws, and war-related criminal or administrative provisions, self-censorship functions at a less visible level: individuals begin to anticipate the boundaries of permissible speech and adjust their behavior before direct punishment occurs. Freedom House explicitly links Russia’s post-2022 laws on “fake news” and the “discreditation” of the armed forces to an environment in which users avoid expressing non-official views about the war (Freedom House, 2024)

This is important for the present study because self-censorship demonstrates that censorship is not merely a legal or institutional practice, but a form of social discipline. Amnesty International similarly shows that critics of the war have faced criminal charges, administrative sanctions, dismissals, intimidation, and foreign-agent

designation, creating a broader climate of fear around anti-war expression (Amnesty International, 2023)

In this sense, Russian censorship weakens soft power because it damages the credibility of Russia's political values, while simultaneously revealing the domestic authoritarian logic that underpins Russian sharp power. The U.S. State Department likewise notes that censorship and self-censorship were widespread across television, print media, and the internet, especially regarding views critical of the government and its policies (U.S. Department of State, 2023) (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Therefore, self-censorship confirms that Russia's influence model is rooted less in attraction than in control over the production, circulation, and public interpretation of knowledge.

9.2 THE SOCIOCULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF RUSSIAN SHARP POWER: CASE OF ALEXEI NAVALNY AND YEVGENY PRIGOZHIN

As numerous authors have outlined, censorship is an inherent aspect of sharp power. Russia's case, which highlights the unlimited control over the information field, the internet, and even the literary community, is a clear example of how Russia practices this aspect of sharp power domestically. These methods are then projected onto the international community. However, it is crucial to understand how this particular tenet of sharp power is generated not only as a tool for informational control but also through the societal norms that contribute to this practice. This is especially relevant in the context of the explanation that sharp power never became part of the toolkit of democratic societies due to societal norms that oppose certain characteristics of sharp power.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Discourse on Language*, Michel Foucault argues that power, especially discursive power, extends beyond coercion to exhibit a productive nature by shaping what can and cannot be said (Foucault, 1971). This aligns with Steven Lukes' two-dimensional view of power, which includes coercion and agenda-setting as fundamental mechanisms. In the Russian context, where the government plays a central role in generating an alternative reality through

discourse, censorship and agenda-setting have become inseparable elements of political governance.

Censorship is often discussed as a governmental tool for silencing dissent or removing undesirable content from media and online spaces. However, the cases of Alexei Navalny and Yevgeny Prigozhin highlight a nuanced form of censorship orchestrated through discursive mechanisms. Although these two figures share little in common beyond their nationality, their shared treatment by Russian President Vladimir Putin underscores a deliberate effort to control public discourse. Foucault emphasizes that analyzing discursive practices—whether about specific individuals or diverse subjects—can reveal not only the content and context of statements but also the societal regularities they reflect. Moreover, Foucault’s concept of governmentality emphasizes that social norms and beliefs contribute to the establishment of behaviors. Incorporating this framework will attempt to explain how societal norms, of which the Russian president is a part, influence his behavior and how that behavior, in turn, shapes public opinion. This reflects the social constructivist epistemological premise of knowledge creation, which addresses the agency-structure dichotomy.

One of the clearest examples of direct censorship involving the president of Russia is the case of Alexei Navalny, whose name has never been mentioned by Putin. Navalny has been one of the individuals consistently excluded from Russian federal channels. In 2016, when opposition TV channels still existed in the media landscape, Navalny participated in a live debate with Vladimir Pozner, a former frontman of Soviet propaganda and one of the most decorated journalists in the country, who was allowed to say what others dared not. In a heated confrontation, Pozner admitted that despite his desire to invite Navalny to his show on the most influential Russian television channel, which is viewed by tens of millions of Russians, he knew this would not be appreciated by the heads of the channel (Moller-Nielsen, 2024). When Navalny asked Pozner whether this was censorship, Pozner replied that although there were several people who would never be invited to his program, the mere absence of a physical list of restricted individuals meant this was not censorship.

For decades, Vladimir Putin has referred to Navalny using phrases such as “a poor excuse for a politician,” “a certain political force,” “the character you mentioned,” and “this gentleman” (Walker, 2020). In 2017, he compared Navalny to Mikheil

Saakashvili, the former Georgian president known for his antagonism with Putin: “Those whom you’ve named are the same as Saakashvili, only the Russian version.” In 2020, when Navalny was poisoned by a nerve agent and transported to Germany for recovery, Putin referred to him as follows: “With regard to the patient of a Berlin clinic... this patient of a Berlin clinic has the support of the special services, those of the United States in this particular case. And if this is the case, then it gets interesting, and the special services should, of course, be looking after him” (The Moscow Times, 2024).

Putin’s circle followed suit by avoiding Navalny's name. For example, Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin’s spokesperson, referred to Navalny as “the above-mentioned citizen” and very rarely spoke out using his actual name. This orchestrated negligence can be understood as an attempt to restrict the rival politician's publicity. Even after Navalny’s death, Putin continued to avoid mentioning his name (Milov, 2024).

A similar fate was shared by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a former leader of the Wagner mercenary group and a long-time Putin associate. After the failed coup d’état staged by the Wagner group in 2023, Vladimir Putin, in his address to the nation, used multiple synonyms to avoid mentioning the name of Prigozhin, who had been awarded the Order For Merit to the Fatherland 2nd class by Putin in 2004 (The Moscow Times, 2023). In his address, despite openly acknowledging the Wagner group and expressing his appreciation for their courage in defending Novorossiia (New Russia, Russky Mir), Putin referred to Prigozhin as a “mutineer” and “traitor” (NBC News, 2023).

This tendency to avoid naming certain individuals is significant because it shows how Russian censorship functions not only by banning information, but also by regulating political visibility. Navalny and Prigozhin were not simply criticized by the Kremlin; they were denied full discursive recognition. This form of erasure reflects the domestic logic of Russian sharp power: opponents are not engaged as legitimate actors, but symbolically reduced, marginalized, or removed from the sphere of acceptable public speech. In this sense, the cases of Navalny and Prigozhin illustrate how censorship, agenda-setting, and discursive control operate together in the Russian political system.

9.3 MILITARY FAILURES AND THEIR IMPACT ON RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER

Although Joseph Nye coined the term *soft power* to contrast with *hard power*, he asserts that soft power does not entirely exclude hard power. Nye argues that a country's culture alone cannot establish a robust international image without acknowledgment of its military strength (USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2017). In other words, while soft power excludes the direct military influence of one country over another, it incorporates military prowess as part of a nation's general image of strength. This concept is particularly relevant in the context of Russia, where the Kremlin frequently portrays the country not only as a leader of the Orthodox Christian world and a defender of conservative values but also as a military superpower. This chapter suggests that Russia's soft power has been significantly undermined by its military failures in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Before the invasion of Ukraine, Russian commentators and public figures estimated that Kyiv would fall within a week to ten days. Even the decision to avoid labeling the conflict as a *war*, instead referring to it as a *Special Military Operation*, carried strategic intent. Historically, Russia has named its military engagements to convey particular narratives, such as the *Great Patriotic War* (World War II), the *operation on the restoration of constitutional order in Chechnya* (First Chechen War), and the *peace enforcement operation* (2008 invasion of Georgia). As (Gorobets, 2024) explains, Russia's imperial discourse resists associating the term "war" with Ukraine, as wars are traditionally fought against equals. Furthermore, (McDermott & Bartles, 2022) suggest that framing the conflict as a *Special Military Operation* was intended to signal that Russia had not fully deployed its military capabilities. However, this framing could not obscure the failure of the Russian army to achieve its initial objectives of *disarming* and *denazifying* Ukraine.

Kathryn Stoner argues that the damage caused by the war in Ukraine extends beyond the economy and military to Russia's long-term reputation, which will outlive Vladimir Putin (Stoner, 2022). She notes that Russia's image suffered not only from its invasion of Ukraine but also from its failure to seize control of the country within days.

The 2024 report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) provides a detailed analysis of Russia's military failures in Ukraine. The report identifies corruption, indifference, and incompetence within the military leadership as key factors contributing to operational failures. These include logistical issues, overestimation of Russian military capabilities, underestimation of Ukraine's defenses, and poor planning. Additionally, the report highlights intelligence failures in assessing Ukrainian public sentiment prior to the invasion (Cohen & O'Brien, 2024).

Russia's reputation as a military power also suffered from its failed endeavors in the Middle East. (Kozhanov, 2024) of Chatham House argues that the collapse of the Assad regime curtailed Russia's geopolitical ambitions in the region and undermined its image as a reliable military ally. This failure is particularly damaging given Russia's efforts to position itself as a guarantor of peace through state-controlled media. The reputational harm extends beyond the international arena to the autocratic governments that Russia traditionally supports. Even before the fall of the Assad regime, it can be speculated that Russia's role as a peacekeeper was questioned and even dismissed: the reputational consequences of Russia's military underperformance are also visible in the post-Soviet space, where Moscow's soft power has long depended not only on language, Soviet nostalgia, media influence, or economic ties, but also on its image as a reliable security provider. This dimension is especially important in the Armenian case. Armenia has been a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, and for many years its security dependence on Moscow formed one of the foundations of Russian influence in the South Caucasus. However, Azerbaijan's military pressure after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war exposed the limitations of this arrangement. While Russia could argue that the CSTO's collective-defence provisions did not formally apply to Nagorno-Karabakh itself, the situation became more damaging after Azerbaijani incursions into Armenia's internationally recognized territory in 2021 and 2022. Armenia tried to invoke the CSTO after the September 2022 incursion, but neither Russia nor the other CSTO members came to Armenia's aid (Waal, et al., 2024).

The symbolic damage was intensified by the collapse of Russia's peacekeeping credibility in Nagorno-Karabakh. Following Azerbaijan's 2023 takeover of the region and the forced displacement of more than 100,000 Armenians, Armenian public trust in

Russia declined sharply, while the Armenian government began openly reconsidering its dependence on Moscow (Waal, et al., 2024). Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan later stated that Armenia had frozen its participation in the CSTO because the organization had failed Armenia (Reuters, 2024). In a later speech, he connected the 2021 and 2022 Azerbaijani incursions, the occupation of more than 200 square kilometres of Armenian territory, and the forced displacement from Nagorno-Karabakh to the “indifference and inaction” of the CSTO (Prime Minister of Armenia, 2024).

This case is significant because it demonstrates that Russia’s declining military credibility affects not only adversaries, but also formal allies. In Nye’s terms, Russia’s foreign policy and security performance cease to generate attraction when they no longer appear legitimate, competent, or reliable. The Armenian case therefore illustrates a broader decline in Russia’s regional soft power potential: Moscow’s inability or unwillingness to protect a treaty ally weakens the perception that Russia can function as a guarantor of order in the post-Soviet space. At the same time, this failure helps explain the compensatory logic of sharp power. Where Russia’s role as protector becomes less persuasive, the Kremlin increasingly relies on coercive, manipulative, and divisive instruments to preserve influence in its surrounding regions.

Arguably, the greatest reputational blow suffered by the Russian defense forces was the Kursk operation launched by the Ukrainian army. Not only is this the first instance of Russian territory being occupied by a foreign force since World War II, but Kursk also holds significant historical and symbolic importance for Russians. In the collective memory of Russian citizens, as well as army officers and strategists, the Battle of Kursk against Nazi Germany represents a unifying moment for the nation, a demonstration of military prowess, and a turning point in the Great Patriotic War (Rumer, 2024). In 2023, Vladimir Putin personally inaugurated a memorial in Kursk to honor the heroes of the Soviet army. However, just a year later, the Kursk region came under the control of Ukrainian forces. This development not only casts doubt on Russia’s military capabilities but also serves to demoralize its soldiers and supporters.

Before the Middle Eastern and Kursk events, Russia experienced a moment of significant embarrassment and fear, as the stability of the Russian state seemed at risk when Yevgeny Prigozhin attempted a largely unsuccessful coup. This event was preceded by the infamous and almost anecdotal rivalry between Defense Minister

Sergey Shoigu and Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner mercenary group and mastermind behind the Russian Troll Factory. Prigozhin had openly criticized the defense minister and his associates for allegedly failing to supply Wagner fighters with the necessary ammunition (Taube, 2023).

Two months after this failed insurrection, Yevgeny Prigozhin's plane mysteriously crashed near Moscow, abruptly ending the career of the man once known as Vladimir Putin's personal chef (Bellamy, 2024). These episodes of open confrontation, mutiny, and Prigozhin's suspicious death clearly revealed not only the deep corruption within the Russian military but also major divisions among various factions within it—divisions that could no longer be contained and instead surfaced conspicuously.

The decline in Russia's reputation is further evidenced by public opinion data. Politico's Gregorio (Sorgi, 2023) reports that support for Russia among European countries has decreased by 62 to 79 percentage points since the beginning of the invasion. The only region where Russia retains a relatively favorable perception is South America. As the National Endowment for Democracy explains, this acceptance can be attributed to geographic distance and limited familiarity with Russian and Chinese domestic and foreign policies (Cardenal, 2017).

9.4 RULE OF LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS

As Nye suggests, one of the key aspects that appeal to foreign societies—and constitutes a significant portion of domestic political values as a source of soft power—is the rule of law. In other words, a government can indirectly enhance a country's soft power by fostering institutions that safeguard various individual and public liberties.

Jeffrey D. Kahn, in 2008, remarked, “I give a faint-hearted endorsement to the effect of Putin's past eight years on the rule of law in Russia... There are plenty of good laws on the books in Russia... But there is not enough law with a capital L in Russia.

There is not, for the most part, a legal culture” (Dresen, 2011). Kahn further emphasized that Russia's weak rule of law can be traced back to the Bolsheviks, who abolished the institution of courts and replaced legal practices with what they termed *революционный правосознание* (revolutionary legal consciousness) (Kahn, 2008).

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has struggled to establish a robust rule of law, and the situation has gradually deteriorated. A significant turning point came in 2012 during the protests following the parliamentary elections, which witnessed widespread human rights violations and arbitrary detentions. However, the situation worsened further when opposition leader Alexei Navalny returned to Moscow after recovering from a poisoning attempt involving a nerve agent (Roth & Connolly, 2021). During the 2021 demonstrations against Navalny's detention, (Human Rights Watch, 2021) reported that Russian law enforcement detained over 3,700 protesters in a single day—allegedly the highest number of detentions in a single day in Russian history. Although this was not the first instance of suppressing freedoms of speech, expression, and assembly, it marked one of the most significant crackdowns in the country's recent history. After nearly a year, in 2025, a Russian court sentenced Alexei Navalny's lawyers on charges of participating in an extremist group (Jochevá, 2025).

In 2023, the UN Special Representative to Russia reported that the government was not only silencing and persecuting dissent but also denying individuals the right to a fair trial. Between 2022 and 2023, over 20,000 anti-war protesters were detained on charges of defaming the Russian military. These individuals were subjected not only to arbitrary judicial processes but also to torture and sexual violence (United Nations News, 2023).

The 2023 report by Amnesty International highlights a significant deterioration in human rights and the rule of law in Russia. The report underscores issues related to freedom of expression and assembly, as well as the religious persecution of *Hizb ut-Tahrir* Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses, whose religious practices have been banned since 2017 under accusations of extremism. Similar to the findings of the UN report, Amnesty International details the widespread practice of unfair trials and the use of torture and sexual violence against anti-war protesters (Amnesty International, 2023).

The Russian government also persecutes sexual minorities by banning certain human rights groups and imprisoning activists. For instance, Roskomnadzor, the federal agency regulating Russia's online sphere, has prosecuted specific webpages for streaming movies and videos depicting LGBT relationships (Human Rights Watch, 2024). In addition to targeting LGBTQ+ content, law enforcement agencies and Roskomnadzor have intensified the arbitrary blocking of thousands of webpages identified as promoting anti-war rhetoric. Furthermore, the Russian government has implemented facial recognition systems and video surveillance technologies to identify individuals evading military service in the Russian army (TASS, 2023).

9.5 LANGUAGE, POPULAR CULTURE, AND THE LIMITS OF RUSSIAN CULTURAL ATTRACTION

Russia's cultural soft power contains an important internal asymmetry. On the one hand, Russian high culture retains substantial global prestige. Literature, ballet, classical music, theatre, and visual art are already embedded in the international cultural canon and can therefore circulate beyond the immediate political image of the contemporary Russian state. Ballet, classical music, and theatre are not always dependent on everyday linguistic accessibility, while Russian literature has long been mediated through translation. Popular culture, however, operates through a different logic. It depends much more heavily on language, slang, humor, rhythm, sexuality, youth identification, digital circulation, and the image of contemporary life attached to the cultural product. For this reason, Russian popular culture faces structural limitations that Russian high culture does not face to the same extent.

This point is consistent with Nye's own understanding of culture as a source of soft power. Culture does not become politically attractive simply because it possesses aesthetic value. Its attractiveness depends on context, audience reception, cultural proximity, and the broader credibility of the country from which it originates. Nye's example of Indian cinema in Afghanistan is useful in this regard: Bollywood contributed to India's soft power there not merely because Indian films were artistically appealing, but because they circulated within a region where cultural familiarity, social proximity, and India's broader image made them receptive to local audiences (Nye, 2004). In this sense, culture is not an autonomous or self-sufficient resource. It becomes

soft power only when it is supported by wider political, economic, social, and symbolic conditions that make the country itself appear desirable, credible, or at least relevant.

The contrast with Anglo-American popular culture is therefore revealing. American and British pop culture did not become globally dominant simply because it was artistically superior, although the quality of its music, cinema, television, and entertainment industries should not be dismissed. Its success was also rooted in structural advantages: large commercial markets, advanced recording and film industries, advertising systems, global distribution networks, and the growing international role of English. In popular music, English has acquired a specific supralocal function: Gibson argues that a form of American-derived “Pop Song English” has become a recognizable norm in popular singing, reducing regional variation and making English not only a language of communication, but also a performance convention (Gibson, 2023). This gave Anglo-American popular culture a linguistic advantage that Russian-language popular culture could not easily replicate.

Hollywood performed a similar function in cinema. Its global rise was not merely the result of isolated aesthetic success, but of industrial, economic, and geopolitical conditions that allowed American cinema to become a global commercial system. Melnick argues that Hollywood’s overseas expansion was connected to vertical integration, international revenues, and the ability of American films to advertise an American way of life and consumerism (Melnick, 2026). Popular culture was therefore transformed into an exportable commodity. Films, music, fashion, celebrity culture, advertising, and later streaming entertainment did not circulate as isolated cultural products; they projected a broader social imaginary associated with modernity, consumption, mobility, sexuality, rebellion, youth, informality, and individual self-expression.

This matters because popular culture travels most effectively when audiences can imagine themselves inside the social world represented by the cultural product. Rock music, pop music, hip-hop, Hollywood cinema, television series, fashion, and celebrity culture did not merely present entertainment; they presented lifestyles. During the Cold War and after it, Anglo-American popular culture could appear simultaneously commercial and rebellious, capitalist and anti-establishment, mass-produced and individualistic. This ambiguity was central to its soft-power value. Even when these

cultural forms were embedded in market capitalism, they often appeared to express freedom, spontaneity, sexuality, irony, and generational rebellion.

The Soviet historical legacy reinforced this asymmetry. It would be too simplistic to claim that all Soviet citizens “dreamed of the West” in the same way, yet it is reasonable to argue that a widespread late-Soviet imaginary associated the West with higher living standards, consumer abundance, fashion, music, and everyday comfort. Seliverstova describes this as the “Imaginary West,” a cultural construct formed through clothing, home decoration, music, and imagined practices associated with a supposedly better life beyond the Soviet border (Seliverstova, 2017). Tverdyukova similarly shows that Soviet campaigns against Western consumerism often produced the opposite effect, since scarcity and the low quality of domestic goods increased the prestige of foreign consumer products (Tverdyukova, 2023). In this context, Western popular culture was not simply foreign entertainment; it became a symbolic extension of a broader world of abundance, comfort, and informal freedom.

The Soviet Union, by contrast, was commonly associated with ideological discipline, political strictness, scarcity, and militarized state priorities. This does not mean that Soviet society lacked popular culture or cultural creativity. Rather, the problem was that the Soviet cultural image was rarely attached to the same fantasy of everyday abundance and individual self-expression that supported the global appeal of Western popular culture. Lee’s discussion of Soviet national priorities is useful here, as he traces a long-term shift from civilian consumption toward support for the military establishment from the late 1950s onward (Lee, 1981). This broader historical background matters because contemporary Russian popular culture continues to struggle against a reputational inheritance associated with state control, military power, ideological pressure, and limited everyday attractiveness.

The post-Soviet Russian state did not fully overcome this problem. Russian high culture continued to possess international prestige, but contemporary popular culture remained more linguistically regional and more closely tied to the post-Soviet space. Russian pop music, television, comedy, rap, YouTube culture, and entertainment formats often depend on Russian-language intimacy, regional references, post-Soviet memory, and shared cultural codes. This does not make them insignificant. They can be highly influential among Russian-speaking audiences, diaspora communities, and parts

of the former Soviet region. However, they do not possess the same global portability as English-language cultural products. This limitation is not merely linguistic; it is also political and reputational.

The situation became more problematic after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, when Russian cultural policy took a more visibly conservative and interventionist direction. Romashko argues that Russian cultural policy shifted from an earlier language of cultural diversity toward conservation, securitization, and the promotion of traditional national culture, with the conservative project between 2012 and 2016 increasing centralization and censorship (Romashko, 2018).

The state's relationship with popular music illustrates this tendency particularly well. Biasioli's study of "songwashing" argues that during Putin's fourth term, and before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian state-affiliated actors used contemporary popular music to their advantage by producing ambiguous messages that could appear youthful, modern, and partially critical while still resonating with state-endorsed narratives of Russian identity and destiny (Biasioli, 2023). This is important because popular culture can function as soft power only when it appears authentic, spontaneous, and relatively autonomous from the state. Once music, cinema, or entertainment become visibly subordinated to political expectations, their capacity to generate attraction decreases. They may still mobilize domestic support or speak to already sympathetic audiences, but they lose the broader credibility that is necessary for soft power.

This securitization of culture diminishes Russia's soft-power potential in two principal ways. First, it undermines the relative autonomy of cultural production. Popular culture normally derives much of its appeal from experimentation, provocation, irony, generational dissatisfaction, sexuality, and the capacity to create unexpected forms of identification. A cultural sphere organized around traditional values, patriotic discipline, and loyalty to the state is therefore poorly suited to generate the kind of rebellious and spontaneous energy that contributed to the global attractiveness of Anglo-American popular culture. Second, it weakens credibility. When external audiences perceive cultural production as monitored, restricted, or politically disciplined, they are less likely to regard it as an authentic expression of social life.

Under such conditions, culture loses its ability to function as soft power and increasingly appears as an extension of state messaging

Therefore, Russian popular culture should not be described simply as aesthetically weak or inferior. The deeper problem is structural, linguistic, political, and reputational. Anglo-American popular culture became globally successful because market capacity, English-language portability, commercial distribution, and the symbolism of freedom, sexuality, rebellion, and consumer choice reinforced one another. Russian popular culture, by contrast, remains more linguistically regional and increasingly constrained by state supervision, censorship, patriotic expectations, and the reputational consequences of the war. In this sense, Russian pop culture is not merely a weak cultural export; it is also an indicator of Russia's weakened political, social, and reputational attractiveness. Russian high culture can survive as canonized world culture, but contemporary popular culture depends on the attractiveness of contemporary Russia itself. When that contemporary image is associated with censorship, repression, militarization, and ideological conformity, popular culture loses much of its potential to operate as soft power.

9.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE FAILURE OF RUSSIAN SOFT POWER

Although a comprehensive investigation of Russian soft power would require much more extensive research, these sub-chapters clearly demonstrate that, despite being the successor of one of the most powerful empires in human history, Russia is not a significant soft power competitor among its peers. Despite its evident military and economic strength—which can also be viewed as remnants of Soviet-era inertia—it can be argued that Russia's domestic political values, lack of rule of law, high level corruption, military incompetence, damaged reputation, institutionalized phobias, government overreach in all spheres of public life, curtailment of public and individual liberties, suppression of dissent, and intimidation of large segments of its own population severely undermine its soft power. If soft power is the projection of cultural

and political virtues, the absence of these very virtues makes it exceedingly difficult to project soft power or derive any benefit from it. This, as scholars have noted, compels Russia to shift its foreign policy strategy toward employing sharp power methods.

Taken together, the sections discussed above suggest that the decline of Russian soft power should not be understood as the disappearance of every Russian cultural, historical, or symbolic resource. Russia still possesses globally recognized high culture, linguistic influence in parts of the post-Soviet space, and specific appeal among audiences already skeptical of liberal democracy. However, these resources are increasingly weakened by the broader political and reputational environment in which they operate. Censorship, legal repression, institutional pressure, self-censorship, declining academic and media autonomy, military underperformance, the failure to protect allies such as Armenia, and the deterioration of rule of law and human rights all undermine the credibility of Russia's political values and foreign policy. In Nye's terms, Russia's problem is not simply that it lacks cultural assets, but that these assets are no longer sufficiently supported by legitimacy, openness, credibility, or an attractive image of contemporary Russian society. This is especially visible in the contrast between Russia's canonized high culture and its much more limited popular-cultural appeal. The chapter therefore supports the broader argument of this dissertation: to compensate for its relatively declining soft-power capabilities, Russia increasingly attempts to discredit its opponents and portray them as equally flawed, hypocritical, or illegitimate, rather than competing with them by surpassing them in attraction, credibility, or political example.

10 CONCLUSION

This dissertation began from a conceptual problem that has become increasingly important in the study of contemporary international influence: the tendency to classify almost any non-military or non-economic form of influence as soft power. While Joseph Nye's concept was originally grounded in attraction, credibility, political values, culture, and the legitimacy of foreign policy, later uses of the term often reduced it to a

simple opposite of hard power. This reduction created a significant analytical problem. Practices such as disinformation, censorship, manipulation, intimidation, narrative distortion, and the strategic exploitation of open information spaces were frequently described through the language of soft power, even though they contradict the voluntary and attraction-based logic that Nye associated with the concept. The emergence of sharp power scholarship, especially through the work of Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, was therefore an important attempt to correct this conceptual confusion.

The main theoretical contribution of this dissertation has been to argue that sharp power should not be understood merely as a more aggressive version of soft power. Rather, it represents a distinct form of authoritarian influence that instrumentalizes the openness of democratic systems. The existing literature has correctly emphasized the institutional dimension of this problem: authoritarian actors exploit media plurality, academic freedom, civil society, publishing, public debate, and the accessibility of democratic information environments. However, this study has argued that the existing literature remains incomplete unless sharp power is also examined at the ideational level. The openness of democratic societies is not only institutional; it is also intellectual. Democratic societies produce theoretical plurality, self-criticism, critical scholarship, anti-hegemonic traditions, and open debate. These are among their strengths. Yet, as the Russian case demonstrates, these same strengths can be selectively appropriated, simplified, and redirected against democratic societies themselves.

For this reason, the dissertation has proposed a broader understanding of sharp power as a set of foreign policy tools employed by authoritarian governments to exploit the institutional, normative, and ideational strengths of democratic systems. At the institutional level, sharp power penetrates and manipulates open media, academic, cultural, and civil society spaces. At the normative level, it undermines principles such as freedom of speech, academic freedom, media plurality, and public trust. At the ideational level, it exploits fears, grievances, ideological divisions, and even academic knowledge itself. Sharp power therefore does not simply attempt to make Russia more attractive. Its more consistent objective is to weaken the attractiveness, credibility, and epistemic authority of democratic systems.

The comparison between soft power and sharp power has shown that the distinction between the two concepts cannot be located only in the field of activity. Culture, education, media, language, religion, academic debate, or public diplomacy are not automatically “soft.” Their meaning depends on how they are used. When these instruments generate voluntary attraction, trust, and admiration, they may contribute to soft power. When they are used to manipulate, censor, coerce, confuse, or strategically distort reality, they move toward sharp power. This distinction also reveals why Russian discourse often blurs the boundary between the two concepts. Russian academic and official discussions of soft power frequently treat it as a state-managed instrument of foreign policy, rather than as a broader and partly autonomous capacity rooted in social attractiveness. Society, culture, language, diasporas, universities, and humanitarian networks are commonly interpreted as resources that should be coordinated, mobilized, and directed by the state.

The Russian case is therefore particularly revealing. Russia possesses significant cultural, historical, linguistic, and religious resources, yet these resources have not translated into durable soft power in the Nye sense. This dissertation has argued that the weakness of Russian soft power stems not from the absence of culture or tradition, but from the lack of broader political attractiveness. Censorship, repression, the deterioration of rule of law, human rights violations, military aggression, institutional control, and the limited attractiveness of contemporary Russian political and cultural life have all damaged Russia’s international image. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine intensified this decline. Russia’s military underperformance in Ukraine, the symbolic damage caused by the Kursk operation, and Moscow’s inability or unwillingness to protect Armenia through the CSTO further weakened its image as a competent and reliable security actor. In this context, sharp power appears as a compensatory strategy: where attraction fails, Russia turns to discrediting others; where credibility is absent, it promotes distrust; where its own political model lacks appeal, it presents democracy as hypocritical, decadent, unstable, or no better than authoritarianism.

The empirical discussion of Russian religious and civilizational discourse further demonstrated that sharp power cannot be understood only as an external policy instrument. It is also shaped by domestic political culture and, in turn, reshapes that culture. The growing prominence of Orthodoxy, *Русский мир*, civilizational rhetoric, and Z-Orthodoxy illustrates how Russian political discourse constructs Russia as a

morally superior alternative to the liberal West. Religion functions not merely as a cultural marker, but as a political and geopolitical language through which Russia presents itself as spiritually authentic, historically entitled, and civilizationaly distinct. This development also supports the social constructivist premise of the dissertation: sharp power is relational and reflexive. It is shaped by domestic norms, historical narratives, and elite self-perceptions, but it also feeds back into domestic identity formation by strengthening the image of Russia as a besieged moral civilization.

The discussion of reflexive control and COVID-19 disinformation further highlighted the psychological and ideational dimensions of Russian sharp power. Russian influence does not necessarily seek to persuade audiences that Russia is admirable or that its policies are preferable. Often, its objective is more modest but more corrosive: to make target societies doubt their own institutions, distrust mainstream media, question democratic competence, and view all political systems as equally corrupt or manipulative. In this sense, Russian sharp power is not always pro-Russian in a direct sense. It can be effective even when it merely produces cynicism, confusion, polarization, and distrust. This is one of the crucial differences between soft and sharp power. Soft power depends on attraction; sharp power can operate through doubt.

The discourse analysis developed this argument further by examining how Russian political actors and Kremlin-compatible commentators appropriate Western academic and intellectual traditions. The cases of Vladimir Pozner, Fyodor Lukyanov, and Sergey Lavrov demonstrate recurring patterns: Russia is portrayed as reactive rather than revisionist; NATO enlargement is framed through realist security logic; Ukraine's agency is weakened or denied; Western foreign policy is equated with Russian conduct; and criticism of Russia is reframed as Russophobia, moral hypocrisy, or civilizational hostility. The significance of these examples is not that realism, anti-imperial critique, postcolonial theory, or civilizational analysis are themselves propagandistic. Rather, the problem lies in their selective extraction and recontextualization. Russian discourse appropriates fragments of Western academic knowledge and redeploys them as political instruments. It speaks to Western audiences in a language they recognize, suggesting that even Western theories and Western moral traditions confirm the Russian interpretation of the war, the West, and Ukraine.

This appropriation of academic knowledge reveals a further layer of informational asymmetry. Russia restricts foreign influence, independent academia, media pluralism, and political dissent within its own domestic space, while simultaneously exploiting the intellectual openness of democratic societies. Western academic freedom allows the production of critical theories about NATO, American hegemony, liberal universalism, colonialism, capitalism, civilizational hierarchy, and the failures of Western foreign policy. These critiques are necessary and legitimate within democratic scholarship. However, Russian sharp power selectively detaches them from their original academic context and incorporates them into a narrative designed to legitimize Russian foreign policy and delegitimize the West. Thus, the dissertation has shown that authoritarian sharp power does not merely attack democratic institutions from outside; it can also appropriate the intellectual products of democratic openness and turn them into weapons of narrative warfare.

The dissertation has also shown that Russia's soft-power limitations are visible not only in political values and foreign policy, but also in the sphere of contemporary cultural attraction. Russian high culture continues to possess significant global prestige, particularly in literature, ballet, classical music, theatre, and visual art. However, contemporary popular culture operates through a different logic. It depends on language, digital circulation, youth identification, humor, sexuality, informality, and the broader attractiveness of everyday social life. In this regard, Russian popular culture remains more linguistically regional and more closely tied to the post-Soviet space. Its global portability is further weakened by censorship, patriotic expectations, state supervision, and the reputational consequences of the war. This does not mean that Russian popular culture is aesthetically weak or culturally irrelevant. Rather, it means that contemporary cultural attraction depends on the attractiveness of contemporary Russia itself. When that image is associated with repression, militarization, ideological conformity, and limited political openness, popular culture loses much of its potential to operate as soft power.

The dissertation therefore confirms its central hypotheses. First, Russian soft power has significantly declined as Russia's political values, foreign policy, institutional credibility, rule of law, and international image have deteriorated. This decline has contributed to the increased reliance on sharp power as a compensatory mechanism. Second, Russian sharp power reflects domestic authoritarian norms and

socio-cultural patterns, especially the state's tendency to monopolize information, manage civil society, instrumentalize religion, and control public discourse. Third, Russian sharp power is reflexive: it is not only projected abroad but also reshapes domestic identity and elite rhetoric, as seen in the religious and civilizational turn of Russian politics. Finally, Russian sharp power exploits the intellectual openness of democratic societies by appropriating Western academic theories and critical traditions, transforming them into narratives that discredit the West, justify Russian foreign policy, and weaken the authority of democratic institutions.

At the same time, the dissertation has acknowledged several limitations. Soft power and sharp power are difficult to measure, especially because both operate through perceptions, interpretation, emotion, and long-term changes in trust or legitimacy. The study has also not attempted to provide a full comparative analysis of whether democratic states can engage in practices similar to sharp power, although this remains an important question for future research. Nor has it claimed to examine the entire range of Russian influence operations. Instead, the dissertation has focused on conceptual refinement and on selected empirical cases that illustrate the socio-cultural, discursive, and ideational dimensions of Russian sharp power.

Ultimately, the dissertation argues that sharp power should be understood not only as a set of malign techniques, but as a broader authoritarian mode of engaging with democratic openness. Its danger lies not merely in false information or hostile media activity, but in its ability to exploit the very conditions that make democratic societies intellectually and politically resilient: openness, pluralism, self-criticism, academic freedom, and public debate. The answer to this problem cannot be the abandonment of these values, because doing so would validate the authoritarian premise that openness is weakness. Rather, the conceptual distinction between soft and sharp power must be sharpened precisely so that democratic societies can defend openness without confusing attraction with manipulation, criticism with propaganda, or academic debate with its strategic appropriation. This, in the end, is the central purpose of the dissertation: to contribute to a clearer understanding of Russian sharp power as an authoritarian, ideational, and reflexive form of influence that operates by turning the strengths of democratic societies into instruments against them.

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