

**Corvinus University of Budapest**

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**Russian Sharp Power**  
**When the Soft Becomes Sharp**

**Thesis Booklet**

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## **I. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION FOR THE SELECTION OF THE TOPIC**

The dissertation examines the concept of Russian sharp power in relation to soft power, power, domestic authoritarian practices, and Russian strategic discourse. Its starting point is a conceptual problem that has become increasingly visible in the study of contemporary international influence: the tendency to classify almost any non-military or non-economic influence as soft power. Joseph Nye's original formulation of soft power was based on attraction, credibility, political values, culture, and the perceived legitimacy of foreign policy. In much subsequent political and academic usage, however, soft power has often been reduced to a simple non-military opposite of hard power. This reduction creates analytical confusion, because practices such as disinformation, censorship, manipulation, intimidation, narrative distortion, and the strategic exploitation of open information spaces contradict the voluntary and attraction-based logic of soft power.

The emergence of sharp power scholarship, especially through the work of Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, was an important response to this conceptual confusion. Their argument was that authoritarian influence should not be mistaken for soft power when it penetrates, manipulates, or distorts the political and informational environments of democratic societies. Existing scholarship has been especially strong in showing how authoritarian states exploit media plurality, academic freedom, publishing, civil society, and open public debate. However, the dissertation argues that this literature remains incomplete if sharp power is understood only at the institutional level. Democratic openness is not merely institutional. It is also intellectual, normative, and ideational.

The dissertation therefore approaches Russian sharp power as a form of authoritarian influence that instrumentalizes what democratic

societies usually treat as strengths: openness, pluralism, self-criticism, academic freedom, media diversity, civil society, and public debate. The Russian case is particularly suitable for this inquiry because Russia possesses substantial cultural, historical, linguistic, and religious resources, yet these resources have not translated into durable soft power in the Nye sense. The dissertation argues that Russia's soft-power weakness stems not from the absence of cultural tradition, but from the lack of broader political attractiveness. Censorship, repression, human rights violations, the decline of rule of law, military aggression, and the limited attractiveness of contemporary Russian political life have all damaged the credibility of Russian political values and foreign policy.

The topic is also justified by the post-2014 and especially post-2022 deterioration of Russia's international image. Russia's annexation of Crimea, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the expansion of domestic censorship, the persecution of dissent, and the deepening militarization of public discourse all intensified the need to distinguish between attraction-based influence and manipulative authoritarian influence. The dissertation treats Russian sharp power as a compensatory strategy: where attraction is weak, 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 research also contributes to the debate by linking sharp power to socio-cultural and discursive dimensions. Russian sharp power is not examined only as an external foreign-policy instrument, but also as a phenomenon shaped by domestic authoritarian norms, political culture, historical narratives, and elite self-perceptions. The dissertation therefore investigates the religious and civilizational turn in Russian politics, the role of *Russkiy Mir* and Z-Orthodoxy, reflexive control, COVID-19 disinformation, the discursive use of Russophobia, and the appropriation of Western academic knowledge.

These cases show that Russian sharp power works not only by spreading falsehoods, but also by reshaping the interpretive framework through which Russia, the West, Ukraine, and democracy itself are understood.

A further justification for the topic is the dissertation's focus on the appropriation of Western academic knowledge. Democratic societies produce theoretical plurality, critical scholarship, anti-hegemonic traditions, postcolonial critique, neorealist arguments, and civilizational debates. These are legitimate and necessary parts of democratic intellectual life. Yet Russian strategic discourse can selectively detach such arguments from their original context and redeploy them in order to justify Russian foreign policy, relativize aggression, weaken Ukrainian agency, and portray Russia as reactive rather than revisionist. In this sense, the dissertation argues that Russian sharp power exploits not only the institutional openness of democratic societies, but also their intellectual openness.

## **II. THE METHODS USED**

The dissertation applies a qualitative, interpretivist research design. Its aim is not to measure Russian influence statistically or to expose specific disinformation operations in an investigative sense. Rather, it seeks to clarify the conceptual distinction between soft power and sharp power, to identify the socio-cultural foundations of Russian sharp power, and to interpret how Russian strategic discourse constructs political meaning. This makes an interpretivist approach suitable, since the study is concerned with meanings, narratives, identities, and the political use of concepts.

The first methodological layer is conceptual analysis. The dissertation deconstructs soft power and sharp power by identifying their attributes, indicators, sources, intentions, methods, targets, and effects. This process is described as a form of reverse operationalization. Instead of starting with a fixed definition and then

applying it to cases, the study reconstructs the concept of sharp power from the way it is used across academic articles, reports, policy analyses, and empirical studies. The purpose is to move from a broad and relatively underdeveloped background concept toward a more systematized concept that can be meaningfully compared with soft power.

The second methodological layer is comparative conceptual analysis. Soft power and sharp power are compared through the broader concept of power, especially through the work of Robert Dahl, Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, Steven Lukes, Michel Foucault, Stefano Guzzini, Martha Finnemore, and Alexander Wendt. Lukes' three-dimensional view of power is particularly important because it helps distinguish direct coercion, agenda-setting, and the deeper shaping of preferences, perceptions, and desires. This framework shows that sharp power can operate through coercion, suppression of topics, and manipulation of the target's understanding of reality. Soft power, by contrast, is treated as a potential for attraction that works through credibility, legitimacy, and voluntary alignment.

The third methodological layer is social constructivist interpretation. The dissertation treats sharp power as relational and reflexive. It is relational because influence does not operate unilaterally: the vulnerabilities, fears, grievances, and interpretive frameworks of target societies matter. It is reflexive because sharp power does not only project influence outward; it also feeds back into the identity, rhetoric, and self-perception of the authoritarian actor. This is why the dissertation examines Russian domestic religious and civilizational discourse as part of the broader sharp-power phenomenon.

The fourth methodological layer is discourse analysis. The discourse-analytical part draws mainly on Jennifer Milliken and

David Campbell. Both authors are used because they treat language not as a neutral description of reality, but as a productive force that constructs threats, identities, legitimacy, and political possibilities. Following this logic, the dissertation examines how Russian official and para-official discourse constructs Russia as defensive, victimized, morally superior, and civilizationally distinct, while representing the West as hypocritical, expansionist, morally degraded, or hostile to Russia's identity.

The empirical material is purposively selected rather than exhaustive. It includes official state discourse, especially statements by Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov, and para-official or Kremlin-compatible commentary by figures such as Vladimir Pozner and Fyodor Lukyanov. These figures are examined because they communicate with both domestic and international audiences and because their discourse combines political messaging with concepts familiar to Western academic and public-intellectual debate. The dissertation also uses Russian academic discussions of soft and sharp power, including the works of Konkov, Kosiakina, Lebedeva, Grebenyuk, Leonova, Makhmud, Naumov, and Belousova, in order to show how Western power vocabulary is reinterpreted in Russian discourse.

The research period focuses mainly on the deterioration of Russia-West relations after the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This period is especially relevant because Russian sharp-power narratives became closely tied to Ukraine, NATO expansion, Russophobia, civilizational confrontation, Western hypocrisy, and the alleged moral decline of liberal democracy. The study uses academic works, policy reports, public speeches, interviews, official documents, media materials, and statistical or institutional reports as supporting material.

### III. SCIENTIFIC RESULTS OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation produces the following main scientific results:

- It clarifies the conceptual distinction between soft power and sharp power. The dissertation argues that the difference 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 they 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.
- It proposes a broader understanding of sharp power as a set of foreign-policy tools used by authoritarian governments to exploit the institutional, normative, and ideational strengths of democratic systems. At the institutional level, sharp power penetrates 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 academic knowledge itself.
- It shows that Russian soft power has significantly declined not because Russia lacks culture, history, language, or religious tradition, but because these resources are no longer sufficiently supported by political attractiveness, legitimacy, openness, credibility, rule of law, or an attractive foreign policy. The dissertation therefore interprets Russian sharp power as a compensatory mechanism: where Russia cannot generate attraction, it seeks to weaken the attractiveness and credibility of others.
- It demonstrates that Russian academic and official discourse often instrumentalizes soft power. Rather than treating soft power as a

partly autonomous capacity rooted in social attractiveness, Russian discourse frequently treats society, language, culture, diaspora networks, educational institutions, and humanitarian organizations as resources to be coordinated, mobilized, and directed by the state. This state-centric understanding blurs the boundary between attraction-based soft power and manipulative forms of influence.

- It identifies the domestic socio-cultural foundations of Russian sharp power. The dissertation argues that Russian sharp power reflects domestic authoritarian patterns, including the monopolization of information, the management of civil society, the control of public discourse, the securitization of dissent, and the instrumentalization of religion and civilizational identity.
- It shows that Russian sharp power is reflexive. It is not only projected outward against democratic societies; it also reshapes domestic identity and elite rhetoric. The religious and civilizational turn in Russian politics demonstrates how narratives initially used for external confrontation feed back into domestic self-understanding, strengthening the image of Russia as a besieged moral civilization.
- It interprets the Russian Orthodox and civilizational narrative as part of the sharp-power environment. Orthodoxy, Русский мир, Z-Orthodoxy, and anti-Western religious rhetoric function not merely as cultural markers, but as political and geopolitical languages through which Russia presents itself as spiritually authentic, historically entitled, and morally superior to the liberal West.
- It demonstrates that Russian sharp power often operates through doubt rather than attraction. Russian influence does not necessarily seek to persuade audiences that Russia is admirable or that its policies are preferable. Often, its objective is to make target societies distrust their institutions, question mainstream

media, doubt democratic competence, and view all political systems as equally corrupt or manipulative.

- It shows how Russian discourse appropriates Western academic and intellectual traditions. Neorealist arguments about NATO expansion, left-wing and anti-imperialist critiques of U.S. power, civilizational critiques of liberal universalism, and liberal vocabularies of victimhood and discrimination are selectively extracted and recontextualized within Kremlin-compatible narratives.
- It demonstrates that the cases of Vladimir Pozner, Fyodor Lukyanov, and Sergey Lavrov reveal a recurring discursive pattern: Russia is portrayed as reactive rather than revisionist; NATO enlargement is framed through realist security logic; Ukrainian 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.
- It adds a new layer to the concept of informational asymmetry. Russia restricts foreign influence, independent academia, media pluralism, and political dissent domestically, while simultaneously exploiting the intellectual openness of democratic societies. Western academic freedom produces critical theories of NATO, hegemony, liberal universalism, colonialism, capitalism, and Western foreign-policy failures; Russian sharp power selectively turns fragments of these debates into weapons of narrative legitimization.
- It argues that the defence of democratic openness requires conceptual precision. Democratic societies should not abandon openness, pluralism, academic freedom, or self-criticism, because doing so would validate the authoritarian claim that openness is weakness. Rather, they need a clearer distinction between

attraction and manipulation, criticism and propaganda, academic debate and its strategic appropriation.

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## **V. LIST OF OWN PUBLICATIONS ON THE TOPIC**

Pareishvili, O., 2026. From Soft Power to Sharp Power: Weaponising Western Academic Knowledge in Russian Political Discourse. *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 20(2), pp. 31-57.