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RUSSIA'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY EFFORT: WHAT THE KREMLIN IS DOING AND WHY IT'S NOT WORKING

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Since 2005, the Kremlin has allocated millions of dollars to various public diplomacy initiatives in an effort to improve Russia's international image. However, the Western media and mainstream public opinion are still highly unsympathetic toward Russia. After analyzing some basic theories of nation-branding and public diplomacy, this article argues that Russia lacks a clear and consistent public diplomacy strategy, as there is a disconnect between what the Russian government does and says in the domestic arena and the image that the Kremlin is trying to project to international audiences. Russia is still struggling to overcome the legacy of the Soviet era, and any efforts to overcome the bipolar climate of the Cold War and cooperate multilaterally have been contradicted by its reluctance to abate an 'us-vs.-them' mentality. The Kremlin's inability to execute effective media campaigns further agitates anti-Russian prejudices in the West and hinders the country's efforts to improve its international reputation.

INTRODUCTION

A 2003 survey commissioned by the Putin administration asked Americans to name the top ten items they associated with Russia. The top four

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responses were communism, the KGB, snow, and the mafia. Another poll conducted that year on the global awareness of Russian brands even more poignantly showed that Russia's image was in need of repair: the only "brands" foreigners could think of were Kalashnikov rifles and Molotov cocktails (Evans 2005).

Since then, in a drive to improve Russia's image, the Kremlin has invested millions of dollars into various public diplomacy initiatives. These range from internationally-broadcasted news stations in English and Arabic to promotional events displaying Russia's rich cultural and athletic triumphs. However, according to recent polling data from Gallup, Russia's reputation abroad has become increasingly unfavorable since 2004, despite Russia's increased funding and efforts to improve its image. In February 2005, Gallup reported that 61 percent of non-Russian respondents held a favorable opinion of Russia and 33 percent held an unfavorable opinion. By February 2009, the percentage of respondents with favorable opinions of Russia dropped to 40 percent, while the percentage of respondents with non-favorable opinions jumped to 53 percent (Saad 2009). This suggests that, in just four years, Russia's image among foreign observers drastically slid.

This article explores the reasons why Russia's efforts to strengthen its image as a trustworthy and cooperative partner among Western audiences have been, thus far, unsuccessful. Specifically, I examine how the Kremlin shapes its message and image to Western audiences, including through mediums such as presidential speeches and the behavior of Russian officials. Recent political events suggest that Russia's communications policy with the West is marked by a number of inconsistencies, with the Kremlin sometimes retreating into stony silence or at other times sending out mixed messages when confronted with political crises. For example, during the 2006 gas crises with Ukraine and the 2008 Russian-Georgian War, when it was arguably crucial for Russia's top officials to formulate and convey a clear message explaining their actions to foreign audiences, the Kremlin instead oscillated between aggressive rhetoric and more conciliatory behavior.

After reviewing some basic theories of nation-branding and public diplomacy, I go on to argue that Russia lacks a clear and consistent public diplomacy strategy. This, I argue, can largely be attributed to a disconnect between what the Russian government does and says in the domestic arena and the image that the Kremlin tries to project to Western audiences. Russia is still struggling to overcome the legacy of the Soviet era, during which the state sought to unite people behind a common enemy rather than common

values. Any efforts to overcome the bipolar climate of the Cold War and cooperate multilaterally have been contradicted by Russia's reluctance to abate an 'us-vs.-them' mentality. The thesis of this article is that the Russian government's failure to project clear and consistent messages agitates existing anti-Russian prejudices among Western publics and hinders the Kremlin's efforts to improve the nation's reputation and image.

DEFINING TERMS: PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND PLACE BRANDING

'Public diplomacy' is a relatively new term that has increased in popularity among policy makers, academics, and mass media alike since the end of the Cold War. Scholars first used the term in 1965 to label the process by which international actors seek to accomplish foreign policy goals by engaging with foreign publics. Tuch defines public diplomacy as a "government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and cultures, as well as its national goals and current policies" (Tuch 1990, 3).

Public diplomacy scholar Nicholas Cull sets out a taxonomy of public diplomacy's components and their interrelationship. These components are: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange, and international broadcasting. From these five, Cull especially emphasizes the importance of listening, which he defines as an actor's attempt to "manage the international environment by collecting and collating data about publics and their opinions overseas and using that data to redirect its policy or its wider public diplomacy approach accordingly" (Cull 2008, 32). Since no amount of good publicity can compensate for bad policy, argues Nye, the link in the public diplomacy structure that connects research to policy is crucial (Nye 2004). In the long term, the actions taken by an international actor are more persuasive than its words.

Public diplomacy is often defined as public relations or marketing carried out by a nation-state and directed at foreign audiences. Indeed, many terms and strategies common in the public relations field are applied to public diplomacy. Foremost among these is the idea of managing the brand of a product or service. In the case of public diplomacy, this product is the government and its policies, while a government's image and reputation are called a 'nation brand.' Nation branding expert Simon Anholt defines a nation brand as "the context in which messages are received, not the messages themselves" (Anholt 2006, 272). He argues that publics have neither the expertise, habit, nor desire to even-handedly contemplate the

actions of a foreign government, and their responses to this government's policies are likely to be shaped by their preconceived notions of the country as a whole. Therefore, stories that reinforce people's negative perceptions of a country usually receive considerable attention, while information that does not reaffirm prejudices tends to be disregarded. On the flip side, a good nation brand can deter foreign publics from focusing on negative press about a country (Anholt 2006).

In an age when information and communication technology has broadened participation in the political discourse, the nature of diplomacy is certainly becoming more public, making it all the more imperative that countries have a public diplomacy strategy. Governments have to keep up with the 24-hour news cycle and be aware that the messages and images they convey are under constant scrutiny from every corner of the globe. Public diplomacy is therefore taking an increasingly significant political role and goes beyond mere slogans and other vehicles of mass communications that have long been associated with propaganda or spin-doctoring. A successful public diplomacy campaign requires integrating a country's key stakeholders, including government agencies, major corporations, NGOs, artists and celebrities, into a system of brand management that supports a single, long-term national strategy. Only when such coordination is achieved can a country have "a real chance of affecting its image and making it into a competitive asset rather than an impediment or a liability" (Anholt 2006, 274).

The following sections of this article will draw upon these key theories of public diplomacy and nation branding to analyze Russia's efforts to boost its national image.

LOSING THE MEDIA WARS

In 2006, Russia's international reputation had hit an all-time low. The Kremlin's clumsy interference in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine heightened tensions with the European Union, while the Putin Administration's continued attacks on the freedom of Russian media, abolishment of regional democratic governance, and crackdown on domestic and international nongovernmental organizations sent alarming signals to the world that Russia was quickly moving away from democracy. With Russia in line to host the 2006 G8 summit in St. Petersburg, "many experts and politicians questioned the rationale for Russia's participation in the G8, and the possibility that Russia would become its chairman looked like a joke" (Baev 2005, 93).

The dispute that erupted between the Russian state-owned gas

supplier Gazprom and Western-backed Ukraine over natural gas prices in 2006 served as the final warning to the Kremlin that it could no longer ignore Russia's image problem. The conflict started in March 2005, when the two parties were unable to reach an agreement on the terms of a new supply contract for the next year. Unwilling to negotiate further, the Russians cut gas exports to Ukraine on January 1, 2006. Paul Cohen, senior vice president at the leading U.S. public relations agency Ketchum, which was hired to handle Russia's public relations in the wake of this conflict, explains the Russian perspective as follows: the Kremlin believed Western powers had been pushing Gazprom to stop subsidizing gas for former Soviet Union countries, including Ukraine, and instead sell it at the market price. Gazprom officials therefore maintained that they negotiated in good faith and simply did what the United States and the European Union were urging them to do. Cohen says Ukraine and its Western sympathizers, on the other hand, insisted Russia was using gas as a political weapon to punish Ukraine for turning westward (Cohen 2008).

Regardless of Russia's confidence in its side of the story, in the media frenzy that followed the dispute, the Kremlin failed to pull together a coherent crisis communications strategy. For instance, the Kremlin made no effort to talk with reporters or arrange press conferences. Consequently, the Russian perspective was not conveyed to the Western media or publics. "Russia was certain in its rightness and didn't make an effort to contact think tanks and media until a few days later, and then it was too late," said Cohen (2008). Ukraine, in contrast, immediately launched a well-organized media campaign, calling press conferences and reaching out to key reporters to voice their point of view. As a result, Western journalists primarily reported the Ukrainian storyline, and the image of Russia as an aggressor that used its control of gas pipelines as a political weapon prevailed in the media.

Joseph Nye, a leading scholar on soft power and public diplomacy, warns that many governments make the mistake of explaining domestic decisions only to their internal audiences and fail to realize the effects of their actions on their country's international image. He reasons that the most important element of public diplomacy is explaining the context of domestic and foreign policy decisions to foreign publics and, for this to happen, it is critical to work closely with the foreign press corps (Nye 2004). Taking Nye's advice into account, one can conclude that Russia's failure to promptly form a coherent public relations strategy and convey its point of view to foreign media delivered a major blow to Russia's brand image, as the Ukrainian version of the story dominated in the press and was

accepted by Western publics as the truth. Even then-deputy press secretary to Putin, Dmitry Peskov, conceded that Russia had a communications problem with the West. “The situation surrounding the conflict between Gazprom and Ukraine probably demonstrated most clearly that we are not always understood correctly,” Peskov said at the time. “Many analysts ... accused Russia of using its gas and natural resources as a means to put political pressure on some countries, whereas this is purely a business question” (Bigg 2006).

A few years after the Gazprom incident, during the August 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict in South Ossetia, Russia repeated many of the same public relations mistakes it had made in 2006. The five-day war began when Georgian forces tried to retake the capital of South Ossetia, a pro-Russian region that had won *de facto* autonomy from Georgia in the early 1990s. Russia responded by sending ground troops into the region and initiating a bombing campaign across parts of Georgia. Both sides tried to paint the other as the aggressor: Georgia said it launched the attack because a Russian invasion was under way, while Russia claimed it sent troops into the disputed area to protect civilians and peacekeepers after the Georgian offensive had begun (Barnard 2008, 1).

Although Russia secured a military victory in the end, it can be said that Georgia won the media war (Armstrong 2008). As soon as the conflict began, the Georgian leadership launched a comprehensive and well-planned media campaign designed to portray their country as a “tiny neighbor battered by imperialists in Moscow” (Zawadzski 2009, 1). Georgian officials made great efforts to accommodate Western journalists, slipping updates under the doors of reporters’ hotel rooms and holding media briefings every day (Armstrong 2008). The country was quick to show off its biggest publicity asset, President Mikheil Saakashvili, a “Western-educated politician who not only speaks flawless English, but also knows how to reply in the concise, well-rounded sentences that the global media loves” (Eyal 2008, 1). By generating media coverage from the Georgian perspective, an emotional and charismatic Saakashvili captured the attention of Western audiences, who quickly became sympathetic to the Georgian cause (Armstrong 2008).

The Russian camp under President Dmitry Medvedev, on the other hand, failed to pull together a sophisticated communications strategy to relay Russia’s version of the conflict to international audiences. Rather, Russia largely overlooked foreign audiences and instead aimed its media coverage of the war at home audiences in order to generate national support for the government’s actions (Armstrong 2008). Furthermore, Russian

officials made little effort to work with foreign journalists and prohibited them from reporting from Russian military positions. As noted by Svetlana Babaeva, head of the U.S. bureau of the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti, such aloofness toward the Western media was further aggravated by the fact that Russian officials were often unprepared to create, publicly deliver, and explain a message.

With both the Georgian and Ukrainian conflicts, Russian officials felt that they had a good reason to act the way they did. However, Russia came out looking like the evil wrongdoer because the Kremlin failed on both occasions to formulate a comprehensive media strategy explaining Russia's foreign policy decisions or objectives. As a result, an anti-Russian attitude was palpable in the Western media outlets, which have since used both incidences as fodder for criticizing Russia.

KREMLIN IMAGE-BRANDING INITIATIVES

Kremlin advisors and top bureaucrats have consistently blamed Western journalists for the country's bad reputation. The Kremlin views itself as the victim of aggression, with the Western media leading the charge. Putin aide Sergei Yastrzhembsky said in 2001 that "Russia's outward image is ... gloomier and uniformly darker compared with reality. To a great extent, Russia's image in the world is created by foreign journalists who work in our country" (Evans 2005).

Since 2005, Putin has intensified Russia's efforts to counter negative coverage in Western media and improve the nation's image. The resulting public relations campaign strategy has largely been to present positive stories about Russia via Russian-backed media networks, promotional events, and discussion forums between top-level Kremlin officials and leading Western journalists. "The campaign is designed to counter what the government and many people here see as unrelenting and unfair Western criticism of declining political freedoms under President Vladimir Putin," writes Peter Finn, Moscow correspondent for *The Washington Post* (Finn 2008, 1). The campaign's main instrument for image improvement has been the state news agency, RIA Novosti, which, according to Finn, has become part of a "massive effort by Russia to build and project to the world an image of a country where the economy is booming and democracy is developing."

Svetlana Babaeva of RIA Novosti said that initially, in addition to serving as a news agency, RIA Novosti was also involved in organizing publicity events, such as "The Russian Winter Festival" in London's Trafalgar Square. Babaeva said that such events, which featured top Russian Olympic athletes, dancers, and Kremlin guards, were designed to give foreign audiences a

chance to experience different sides of Russian culture and life and present Russia as a “normal country” (Babaeva 2008).

The next major nation re-branding initiative came in April 2005 with the launch of the news channel Russia Today, which is sponsored by RIA Novosti and positioned as “the first 24/7 English-language news channel to bring the Russian view on global news.” Generously endowed with resources from state funds, Russia Today quickly developed into a major news portal, comparable to Al Jazeera English or Germany’s DW World, and currently broadcasts in English and Arabic, with plans to expand into Spanish. The majority of Russia Today’s broadcasts is devoted to Russian and international news, but the channel also airs documentaries, travel shows and commentaries on present-day life in Russia. According to Margarita Simonyan, Russia Today’s editor-in-chief, the station was born out of the desire to present an “unbiased” portrait of Russia and “make Russia clearer for understanding” (CBC News 2006). However, to this end, the station is often criticized by Westerners and Russians alike for applying a positive spin on stories about Russian authorities and for refraining from broadcasting stories that cast a negative light on the Kremlin leadership. As Finn writes, “At first glance it looks a lot like CNN, but it can be a breathless cheerleader for the Kremlin” (Finn 2008, 1).

Regardless of the hype around these expensive media ventures, Babaeva, who has considerable experience working with the Kremlin corps of journalists, said that Russian officials are by and large disappointed with the results, as Western perception of Russia has not changed despite millions of dollars poured into such programs. “I remember very well that during Putin’s first term, there was a strong desire to explain Russia’s position and attitude. In that period, Russia Today was created,” she said (2008). Yet, since then, the Kremlin has grown increasingly frustrated because the West still does not accept, understand, or want to understand Russia. According to Babaeva (2008), “There is a feeling that we are explaining, but the whole world still hates us, so why should we explain?”

According to scholars like Nye (2004), no amount of good press can cover up bad policies. As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words, and a communications strategy cannot work if it is contradicted by a nation’s behavior or policies. In the case of Russia, the number of highly publicized public relations debacles is endless. Western media headlines are continually awash with stories about the crackdown on Russian media, corruption among officials, attempts to suppress Western NGOs, limitations on free speech, contract killings, and anti-Western youth rallies. Since, as discussed previously, publics tend to focus on negative cover-

age that reinforces their stereotypes and disregard positive coverage, it is almost impossible to overcome bad press by simply using counter-press. This fact can explain the frustration that Babaeva was describing: despite well-funded public diplomacy initiatives that try to present the Russian perspective, the negative image of Russia persists.

Nye (2004) argues that for public diplomacy to be effective, it has to involve a two-way flow of information. Biased information that is simply disseminated in a one-way, top-down manner is considered propaganda. If Russia is pinning all its hopes on initiatives like Russia Today, then it is offering little more than propaganda. Rather than simply painting a positive image of a country through good press or cultural events, a government must carefully research what foreign audiences are saying and then take this into account when formulating policies and media campaigns. Cull notes, "While no actor could sustain a foreign policy driven entirely by the whims of its target audience, the actor would do well to identify the point where foreign opinion and its own policy part company and work hard to close the gap or explain the divergence" (Cull 2008, 47). If Russia is to truly re-brand its image, it must curb its tendency to be overly defensive to Western criticism and instead be more receptive to what foreign audiences are saying. Only then can policies and messages be effectively tailored to recreate Russia's nation brand.

The Duality of the Russian Message

Another major factor inhibiting Russia's ability to wage a successful public relations campaign is the Kremlin's lack of a consistent communications strategy and an inclination to alternate between a highly nationalistic rhetoric that is traditionally for domestic consumption and a more conciliatory, progressive rhetoric that positions Russia as a cooperative partner. On several occasions when dealing with the West, the Kremlin has initially played hardball and acted unilaterally on its own impulse. But then, out of fear of losing credibility among Western democracies, it has subsequently softened its words and hurried to make amends. As one scholar writes, "There is a duality in the Russian personality: on one side is the spiritual, generous, nature-loving Russian; on the other is the cynical, cruel Russian who distrusts his neighbor and betrays friendship for survival and personal gain" (Schecter 1998, 16). Such duality and inconsistency has frustrated Western media and policy makers alike, thereby agitating anti-Russian media bias and hindering Russia's campaign to improve its image.

According to numerous political analysts, such a situation has already developed twice since the rise to power of new leadership in the United

States and Russia. The first incident occurred on November 5, 2008, just hours after Barack Obama was elected president, when Russian President Dmitry Medvedev delivered his first state-of-the-nation address. In the speech, which one journalist labeled a “disastrous act of public diplomacy” (Frolov 2008), Medvedev heavily criticized the United States, blaming it for both the August 2008 war in Georgia and the recent global financial crisis. He said, “It must be admitted that the tragedy in Tskhinvali was, among other issues, a result of an overweening U.S. administration that is intolerant to criticism and prefers a unilateral path to policy making.” In addition, the Russian president threatened that if the United States were to deploy a missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, Russia would respond by deploying a missile unit in Kaliningrad and installing a radio-electronic device to scramble America’s missile-defense system. Medvedev’s speech made no mention of Obama’s win.

The Western media immediately called attention to the aggressive, anti-American rhetoric in Medvedev’s address. *The Moscow Times* wrote, “Medvedev’s clueless speech, filled with lots of U.S.-bashing, made it much more difficult for those on Obama’s team who argued that the relationship with Russia, badly bungled by the administration of President George W. Bush, needed the priority attention to be repaired” (Frolov 2008). *The Economist* added that the timing of Medvedev’s speech was meant to show that Russia’s agenda is unaffected by America’s presidential election, saying that it “smacked of rival attention-seeking: even as the world listened to Barack Obama’s victory speech, Mr. Medvedev was laying out a Russian version of democracy” (The Economist November 6, 2008).

Despite this aggressive approach, a few days later Medvedev softened his tone, announcing his desire to strengthen relations with America and his belief that the changing of the guard in the White House was a chance for a fresh start (Bruno 2008). “In my state-of-the-nation address I mentioned that Russia has no anti-Americanism. But there are some difficulties in understanding each other,” he told members of the media at a press conference in Washington on November 8. “We would like to overcome this, exactly this, with a new administration” (Bruno 2008, 2).

When questioned as to why Medvedev sent out two very different messages to the United States within just a few days, Paul Cohen of Ketchum answered that the state-of-the-union was designed for domestic consumption. “There are some things communicated with domestic audiences in mind that will not work internationally,” he said (Cohen 2008).

Babaeva, on the other hand, posits that the speech was a deliberate plan to announce Russia’s attitude and create a kind of negotiation frame with

the new administration. She admits, however, that if this was the case, the public relations consequences and the uproar it caused among journalists were poorly anticipated (Babaeva 2009).

Regardless of the circumstances, Medvedev's decision to give an anti-American state-of-the-union address shows that the Kremlin's public diplomacy strategy lacks coherence and proper guidance. In the age of global information technology, where any news can be instantly broadcast to any corner of the globe, it is difficult to understand how Kremlin advisors could purport that the speech was only for "domestic consumption." It is not difficult to forecast that such a public address by a Russian president would immediately be picked up and scrutinized by the international media. This is yet another example of the Kremlin's failure to take into account the foreign press corps when explaining domestic policy decisions.

The controversy surrounding the Manas military base in Kyrgyzstan is another example of the duality of Russian diplomacy, with the discrepancies between the Kremlin's words and actions further fueling the fire of distrust in the West. When Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev announced his intention this past February to close the Manas military base, which was used by U.S. and NATO to transport troops and material in and out of Afghanistan since 2001, it was obvious to many that Moscow was behind the move. In addition to offering the struggling Kyrgyz government at least \$2 billion in credit below market rates, it was widely reported that Russia had covertly worked behind the scenes to instigate anti-American street demonstrations in order to pressure Bakiev into evicting the U.S. military from Manas. Once the announcement came, Moscow unabashedly offered the U.S. the use of its cargo planes and air space to resupply Afghanistan (Cohen 2009). In what Russia specialist Ariel Cohen describes as Tony Soprano geopolitics – "Use my trucks and garbage dumps or you can't do business on my turf" – the Kremlin signaled the West that to gain access to Central Asia, Western countries must pay the Kremlin for transit. This complicates U.S. efforts to send up to 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan – a key objective of the Obama Administration – as well as "raises questions about long-term strategic intentions of the Moscow leadership, and its willingness to foster a NATO defeat in Afghanistan" (Cohen 2009, 3).

Despite its covert aggressive political maneuvering in Kyrgyzstan, two months later at the G20 summit in London, Russia vowed to make a "fresh start" in relations with the U.S. and work together on issues such as the war in Afghanistan and efforts to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions. In an editorial by President Medvedev that appeared in *The Washington Post* on the eve

of his first meeting with President Obama before the G20 summit, the Russian president wrote, "Alexis de Tocqueville predicted a great future for our two nations. So far, each country has tried to prove the truth of those words to itself and the world by acting on its own. I firmly believe that at this turn of history, we should work together."

The two leaders then followed their meeting by releasing a joint statement that declared: "We, the leaders of Russia and the United States, are ready to move beyond Cold War mentalities. In just a few months we have worked hard to establish a new tone in our relations. Now it is time to get down to business and translate our warm words into actual achievements of benefit to Russia, the United States and all those around the world interested in peace and prosperity."

Although the photographs in the international media of Obama and Medvedev heartily laughing together may easily inspire the belief that a U.S.-Russia rapprochement is on the horizon, many political analysts are quick to argue that Medvedev is the boy who cried wolf. Russia's pressuring on the Kyrgyz to evict the U.S. at Manas, combined with its continuing offensive to maintain the upper hand in Georgia and other regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia, makes it difficult to believe that the declarations made at the G20 are sincere. As before, the discrepancy between the Kremlin's words and actions, which amounts to both poor foreign policy and poor public diplomacy, undermines the Kremlin's credibility. Even Secretary of Defense Robert Gates admitted that Russia was indulging in double standards: "On the one hand [Russia] is sending out positive signals that it is prepared to cooperate with the U.S. in Afghanistan, but on the other, it is working against America on the issues of the Kyrgyz air base" (Lozansky 2009, 2).

THE NEED FOR A NEW RHETORIC

It can be argued that there are two main factors contributing to Russia's proclivity to use aggressive behavior while also trying to ingratiate with the G20 club. The first is that Russia has not abandoned its centuries-old hegemonic mentality and rhetoric. The Kremlin wants to portray a powerful Russian motherland to the domestic population, with increasingly nationalistic and imperialistic rhetoric seen internally as a sign of the nation's vitality and resurgence. Putin and Medvedev have made no efforts to cover up their campaign to secure their purported sphere of influence, and aggressive moves to expand Russia's influence beyond its borders are widely supported by the population. "It must be admitted that the Russian ruling group is very successful in implementing its doctrine of being either

with the West or against it,” writes Russian political analyst Lilia Shevtsova (2008, 1). “By portraying their corporate interests as the national interests of Russia, the Russian elite has succeeded in using foreign policy to form a consensus which includes even critics of the regime.”

Likewise, Babaeva noted, “I’m afraid that the Russian consensus is now based on the remaining Soviet image of a superpower. Russians think they need to live in a superpower. It’s difficult for them to understand that if you want to get something, you also need to give something to others. Russia considers any “giving” as a sign of weakness” (Babaeva 2009).

The second factor contributing to Russia’s dualistic rhetoric is that Russian leaders have traditionally formed their messages and united their people under the banner of countering a common enemy. Babaeva points out that the necessity of having a common enemy has even become a kind of historical factor in Russia. “While Americans used the approach from time to time – either when they really had the enemy or when it was time to increase national identity – Russians use this mode constantly” (Babaeva 2009). Likewise, Shevtsova (2008) argues that in Russia, “patriotism, focused on the idea of finding an enemy and opposing the hostile surroundings, has proved to be a very successful, although not a new, idea of consolidation.”

With such a belief and rhetoric on the domestic front, it is difficult to trust Medvedev when he speaks of multilateral cooperation. Nye cautions that while actions do need to reinforce words, it is also important to remember that “the same words and images that are most successful in communicating to a domestic audience may have negative effects on a foreign audience” (Nye 2004, 112). Western countries are hardly likely to lend a sympathetic ear to Russia if they are under threat and reminded of Cold War politics. If it wants to be seen as trustworthy abroad, the Russia leadership will have to move away from an aggressive, overly nationalistic rhetoric, which only serves to perturb Western audiences. As the respected Russian writer Viktor Erofejev writes, “The weakness of the current Russian policy is not that it fails to defend national interests, but that the Russian imperial discourse and the desire to speak from strength is in principle not translatable into other languages. It provokes only irritation” (Erofejev 2007, 2).

SEARCHING FOR A NEW ‘BRAND RUSSIA’

The cover of *The Economist* that was published a few days before President Obama’s first official visit to Russia in July 2009 depicts a smiling and waving Obama ascending a stairwell as if to board a plane. But instead

of heading into a plane, he is unknowingly heading into the mouth of a giant grizzly bear. The title of the accompanying article reads, "When Barack Obama goes to Moscow, he will find a sulky former superpower that no longer wants to be part of Western clubs" (The Economist July 2, 2009).

Up against the Western media's own media machine, which can be equally as guilty of perpetrating the Cold War rhetoric, Russia's task of improving its brand image is certainly a difficult one. The relentless portrayal of Russia as a Westerner-eating bear is wearisome to even many Westerners. However, if Russia is not a bear, then what is it?

Public diplomacy scholars like Anholt (2006) say that for a country to successfully run a public diplomacy campaign that can reshape its image in the eyes of the world, the message of the campaign must be understood, shared, supported, and reflected in the values and behavior of the people. Stories of successful nation re-branding campaigns include Germany and Japan, where following defeat and destruction in World War II, the government, businesses, and the general population were all united behind a common strategy to improve their national image, rebuild their identity, and integrate with the Western powers both economically and politically.

However, it can be argued that other than preserving its superpower status and sphere of influence, Russia does not have a national strategy or identity. As such, it is very difficult to change or improve the nation's brand image from that of a menacing bear if there is not a realistic and popularly-supported vision of what the country's brand should be instead. "There is a lack of feeling and understanding of what goals we want to move toward and for what values we are ready to live," says Svetlana Babaeva. "It is not clear what the strategic vision of Russia itself is and what the country wants to achieve and create based on its values, achievements, and goals. We only know that we want to stay a superpower, which others respect and fear. But this cannot be a goal" (Babaeva 2009).

As the days of the Soviet empire become a more distant past, the Kremlin's dependence on uniting the population through nationalistic superpower rhetoric will become increasingly hard to sustain. Demographics alone can offer an explanation as to why: in the next few decades, global aging specialists Neil Howe and Richard Jackson postulate that Russia will experience "the fastest extended population decline since the plague-ridden Middle Ages. Amid a widening health crisis, the Russian fertility rate has plunged and life expectancy has collapsed. By 2050, Russia is due to fall to the 20th place in world population rankings, down from the fourth place in 1950" (Howe and Jackson 2009, 1). The authors go on to raise the concern

that Russia's misalignment of geopolitical aspirations and demographic fundamentals may lead the country to behave unpredictably. They write, "If the problem isn't solved, Russia will weaken progressively – raising the nightmarish specter of a failed state with nukes. Or this cornered bear may lash out in fury rather than meekly accept its demographic fate" (Howe and Jackson 2009, 2).

In the face of such great demographic, economic, and political change, it is certainly difficult to define what "Brand Russia" should espouse: A superpower with its own sphere of influence or a state that is willing to work multilaterally? A European society or a uniquely Russian world? A petrostate or a developing economy? A democracy or an autocracy? Russia's current public diplomacy efforts have done little to address this question or to engage the Russian public in a discourse about what their national brand identity should be. As is characteristic of the Kremlin, most public policy, including public diplomacy, is developed behind closed doors with no stakeholder process and implemented in a top-down manner. However, as public diplomacy scholars like Anholt (2006) contend, without a public discourse and stakeholder process, it is difficult to form an integrated system of brand management that supports a single, long-term national strategy. Instead of simply exporting all its nation-branding work to Western public relations firms, the Kremlin should first work with key constituents, such as Russian businesses, government agencies, NGOs, celebrities, and the Russian expatriate community, to form a more coordinated approach to improving Russia's image. Just as the Sony Corporation was integral to rebranding postwar Japan and making the "Made-in-Japan" label associated with high-quality and technology, the Kremlin needs to look beyond its walls and approach the public diplomacy challenge more multilaterally within its own country. After all, a country that is not able to establish a line of two-way communication with its own people will certainly have trouble engaging in a discourse with foreign publics.

CONCLUSION

It would be unfair to paint a completely bleak picture of Russia's imaging efforts and not mention the recent public relations success that the Kremlin achieved during the natural gas conflict with Ukraine in January 2009. In contrast to the communication missteps that the country took during the first natural gas conflict in 2006, the Kremlin adopted a sophisticated and well-prepared strategy to successfully fight the media war with Ukraine during the January gas disputes. Under the guidance of Ketchum, Gazprom created a website dedicated to explaining its position

(www.gazpromukrainefacts.com), held frequent news conferences, and within days had President Medvedev touring European countries and telling Russia's side of the story on CNN.

Russia's improved public relations efforts were not lost on the media. Following the incident, Sabina Zawadzki of Reuters wrote, "Russia has shown in its gas price row with Ukraine that it has learnt some lessons in how to handle the media since being widely portrayed as the aggressor during a similar dispute in 2006" (Zawadzki 2009, 1). Similar quotes could also be found in other top-tier media outlets.

It cannot be denied that Russia's ability to pull together a comprehensive public relations strategy enabled it to better compete in the media war with Ukraine. The Kremlin and Gazprom succeeded in getting their side of the story to Western audiences – essentially that Ukraine's Naftogaz was stealing gas and not paying the bills – and as a result, Kiev lost much of the European and U.S. sympathy it had enjoyed in 2006. However, ultimately, public relations strategies have only a limited capability to improve a nation's image (Anholt 2006). Although the media coverage about Russia's handling of the gas crisis was positive, it does not offset European concerns over its energy dependence on Russia. Instead, a bond of trust must be built and strengthened over time between Russia and its European and U.S. partners. In order to maintain this bond, Russia must send out a consistent message to the West that is reflected by its words and deeds both at home and abroad. As Nye writes, "A communications strategy cannot work if it cuts against the grain of diplomacy.... Public diplomacy that appears to be mere window dressing for the projection of hard power is unlikely to succeed" (Nye 2004, 110).

The Russian government has long been frustrated by the anti-Russian bias that permeates much of Western media and has blamed Western journalists for hindering their public diplomacy efforts. However, responding by simply turning out positive stories about the country or making empty declarations of goodwill has proven to be an ineffective tactic. A nation's ability to improve its image is not just about sending out a positive message; it is also about listening to and communicating with both domestic and foreign publics in order to create policies and take actions that are mutually beneficial. If Russia's efforts to change its negative image in the West are to work, the Kremlin must implement a meaningful public diplomacy strategy that integrates other stakeholders in 'Brand Russia' and that is communicated clearly and consistently through both words and actions. Only then is there hope that Russia can rewrite the Cold War rhetoric, foster mutual respect and trust with the West, and move forward in building a new nation brand.

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