WORKING PAPERS

Building a Sphere of Influence in Their Neighbourhood

The Soft Power of Turkey and Russia

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Abstract

How do rising powers construct or maintain their spheres of influence? What factors are crucial to enhance their power? While material factors such as the size of the economy and the military still matter greatly, non-material factors such as ideas, values, and a country's projected image, are increasingly relevant and intertwine with material ones. The concept of soft power is useful to explore these non-material factors, but an effort to de-westernise the concept is needed, in order to make it applicable to case studies such as Turkey and Russia. Hence, the aim of this working paper is twofold: on the one hand, it conducts an in-depth analysis of the concept of soft power, exploring its relation with hard power, its gaps and its importance for today's global and regional politics; on the other hand, it re-elaborates the concept and finds ways to operationalise it for the study of rising powers. The paper argues that the use of some concepts (especially 'hegemony' and 'common sense') elaborated by political theorist Antonio Gramsci, coupled with the study of national identity narratives – two areas of study previously not linked – can pave the way to the analysis of the soft power of rising powers.

Keywords: soft power; identity narratives; Gramscian theory; rising powers; Turkey; Russia

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1 Introduction

How do rising powers construct or maintain their spheres of influence? What factors are crucial to enhance their power? While material factors such as the size of the economy and the military still matter greatly, non-material factors such as ideas, values, and a country's projected image, are increasingly relevant and intertwine with material ones. The concept of soft power is useful to explore these non-material factors, but an effort to de-westernise the concept is needed, in order to make it applicable to rising powers, especially if they are not liberal democracies. The paper argues that the use of some concepts (especially 'hegemony' and 'common sense') elaborated by political theorist Antonio Gramsci, coupled with the study of national identity narratives – two areas of study previously not linked – can pave the way to the analysis of the soft power of rising powers. Soft power is 'the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes' (Nye 2011: 20-21). The concept – coined by Harvard Professor Joseph Nye – has been used by scholars and especially practitioners of International Relations (IR) for more than 25 years now. Its study is of capital importance for academic reasons, but it has key policy implications, too. As far as academic questions are concerned, it is important for enhancing the general understanding of power, which is a key, but highly debated concept in IR. As for its policy implications, if soft power is the ability to achieve political ends through attraction and preference-shaping (Nye, 2011), it is not surprising that many countries are striving to bolster or restore it. Furthermore, some argue that in a world where the use of force is becoming more costly (both because of financial and political constraints) or less efficacious, contemplating forms of non-coercive power is increasingly important (Bially Mattern 2005; Ding 2010; Gallarotti 2011). The paper proposes a reinterpretation of the concept that makes it applicable to rising powers, and especially to two strategic neighbours of the EU: Russia and Turkey. The focus on these two cases is justified by, firstly, their importance on the global political arena - and for the EU in particular; and, secondly, by their attempt to differentiate themselves from liberal and Western powers, sometimes offering worldviews that challenge the EU's. Hence, the aim of

this paper is twofold: on the one hand, it conducts an in-depth analysis of the concept of soft power, exploring its relation with hard power, its gaps and its importance for today's global and regional politics; on the other hand, the paper sets up a theoretical framework useful to the study of rising powers. The first section focuses on the latest formulation of the concept by Joseph S. Nye in his 2011 book *The Future of Power*. The second section looks at the bigger picture, by placing soft power in the general power debate and digging especially into three concepts that inspired Nye; these 'seminal concepts' are Max Weber's 'charisma', Steven Lukes' third face of power, and Antonio Gramsci's 'hegemony' and 'common sense'. The third section looks into the two main gaps of the concept, namely the difficulty of operationalising and 'measuring' it, and the difficulty of applying it to illiberal states. The fourth section seeks to find a suitable theoretical framework in order to de-westernise and operationalise the concept of soft power for two rising powers like Turkey and Russia. Finally, the paper claims that the use of Gramscian insights, coupled with the study of national identity narratives – two areas of study previously not linked – can pave the way to the analysis of the soft power of rising powers.

2 Joseph Nye´s Soft Power

What is soft power? Since he first coined the concept (Nye 1990), Joseph Nye came back to it in many essays and books (see for instance Nye 2004; 2008) with the aim of fine-tuning and expanding it. In one of his most recent books, The Future of Power, Nye (2011: 20-21) offered a longer, more formal definition of the concept. Fully defined, 'soft power is the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes.'

Often misused as a 'synonym for anything other than military force' (Nye 2011: 81), Nye argues that the term actually stands for a particular means of influence: the one that a country can achieve through its culture, its values and domestic practices; and the perceived

legitimacy of its foreign policies (the three sources of soft power). Nye carefully distinguishes soft power from propaganda, namely 'the conscious, methodical and planned decisions to employ techniques of persuasion designed to achieve specific goals that are intended to benefit those organizing the process' (Taylor 2003: 6). Indeed, Nye (2011) states that credibility of the soft power actor is crucial when it comes to enhance its legitimacy: if a country appears to be acting out of a narrow self-interest, it is likely to be seen as doing propaganda, rather than exerting soft power, and that would but harm the state's image. Soft power is not just about persuasion or the ability to convince people by arguments. Persuasion is close to the agenda-setting power. But soft power goes a step further: it is the power to attract that is usually coupled with acquiescence. Attraction is complex, and very difficult to measure. In some instances, it might even not be positive – for example, Nye mentions the attraction that India exerted on Great Britain in the nineteenth century, but led to colonial subjugation rather than soft power (Nye 2011: 92). However, the attraction envisaged by Nye's soft power is always positive, closer to the concept of 'allure'.

According to Nye, persuasive power is based on attraction and emulation and associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions. Cooper (2004: 173) also emphasises the importance of legitimacy for the concept of soft power: state activities need to be perceived as legitimate in order to enhance soft power. Nevertheless, the difference between tangible and intangible resources is not what differentiates hard from soft power. For Realists, power can also stem from some intangible sources: one can think, for instance, of Waltz' 'competence'. [1] Nye himself (2011: 21) recognises that the relationship between tangible and intangible power resources 'is not perfect. Intangible resources such as patriotism, morale and legitimacy strongly affect the military capacity to fight and win. And threats to use force are intangible, even though they are a dimension of hard power.' Hence, resources commonly linked to soft power can produce hard power behaviours. Conversely, 'a tangible hard power resource such as a military unit can produce

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[1] Although 'these intangible measures rely on actual material capabilities to be effective, hence muscle is the key to power for Realists' (Gallarotti 2011: 7).

both command behaviour (by winning a battle) and co-optive behaviours (by attracting), depending on how it is used.'

In order to better understand Nye's concept, it is important to look at its 'genesis'. The next section will trace the origins of soft power by asking the following questions: what place does soft power occupy in the long-standing IR debate about power? What concepts in social sciences influenced Nye or can help analysts to grasp and apply the concept of soft power better? The answer to these questions about soft power's past will contribute to enhance its future as an analytical category.

3 Looking Back: Analysis of the Power Debate and the 'Seminal Concepts'

The term 'soft power' was coined by Nye in the 1990s, but its origins can be traced well before that. In his analysis of power in international politics carried out during the interwar period, Edward H. Carr already argued that power over opinion is not less essential of military and economic types of power, given to the 'broadening of the basis of politics, which has vastly increased the number of those whose opinion is politically important' (Carr 2001: 120). Once analysed the concept formulated by Nye, it is necessary to look at the broader picture: the debate on soft power is indeed embedded into the more general debate on power, and several concepts in social sciences had an impact on its formulation.

The next two sub-sections will firstly touch upon the main approaches on power, and then explore what I call the 'seminal concepts', that is, concepts that have been previously formulated by other authors, and have affinities with and seem relevant to the study of soft power. These sections cannot be exhaustive – the debate on power is incredibly rich of contributions, and it would be impossible to mention or extensively cover all of them; they rather aim to frame the discussion to the most relevant ideas that help a better understanding of soft power.

3.1 The Debate on Power

Power is one of the most studied, but also controversial and least well-defined concepts in International Relations (Baldwin 2013, Gallarotti 2011). The discipline has been concerned from its very start with this topic, and the development of a 'power theory' is seen by many as parallel to the development of Realism: in fact, "ever since Carr delivered his devastating rhetorical blow against the "utopians" and claimed power for "realism," the discipline of international relations has tended to treat power as the exclusive province of realism' (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 40). But apart from the realist one, other theoretical approaches have tried to grasp the essence of this concept, although it is not an easy task: power is one of the most widely used concept, but there is also a certain lack of conceptual clarity and the danger of conceptual overstretch.

The definition of power changes according to the scholarly tradition adopted. Until relatively recently, the power of a state was conceived to be assessed by certain established factors (population, territory, wealth, armies...) This conception serves as a basis for 'elements of national power approach' described by Morgenthau in his book Politics Among Nations, where states were seen as power-maximisers and seeking to produce a balance of power. This approach was further developed by other distinguished Realist scholars such as Waltz or Mearsheimer, which basically see 'power resources' or 'capabilities' as the key element of a country's power strategy. For instance, Mearsheimer (2001: 55) believes that 'power is based on the particular material capabilities that a state possesses.' For him, these material capabilities are essentially 'tangible assets' that determine a nation's military strength.

This viewpoint is challenged by the 'relational power approach', which sees power as a type of causation, a relation in which actor A alters the behaviour – broadly understood in order to include beliefs, expectations, preferences etc. – of B (Baldwin 2013). This tradition de-constructs power and sees it as multi-faceted, multi-dimensional concept. Belonging to this tradition, the political scientist Dahl (1957: 202-203) gave one of the most famous

definitions of power: 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.'

A classical categorisation of power that well synthetises decades of debate on the issue divides power in four 'faces.' The first face of power contemplates success (the achievement of the desired outcome) in the decision-making process. The second face highlights the ability of managing the agenda, both including and excluding the issues to be treated. The media, for instance, do have this ability. These first two faces of power follow Dahl's definition of power as something that can be used to get someone to do something that he would not do otherwise. Conversely, the third face of power – which will be depicted in more detail in the next section – describes how power can allow an actor to shape the preferences of another actor in order to achieve an outcome. The fourth face of power offered that power is expressed diffusely through the discourses that create social meaning and make society possible. According to Digeser (1992), power is not an exercise carried out by interested agents, but a discursive process through which agents and their interests are produced in the first place.

In a very influential article, Barnett and Duvall (2005: 45) claimed that cross-fertilisation, that is, drawing upon various conceptualisations of power produced by different theoretical schools, is actually the best approach to 'move away from perpetual rivalry in disciplinary "ism" wars and toward dialogue across theoretical perspectives.' According to the scholars, power is the 'production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate.' By putting the accent on the Bs and their fate, and de-constructing the social relations through which power takes place (it can be interaction of specific actors or social relations of constitution) and their effects (specific/direct or diffuse/indirect), they create a 'taxonomy of power' that divides power into four concepts: compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive. Although more precise to a certain extent, these four concepts trace the aforementioned categorisation of 'four faces' of power.

3.2 Seminal Concepts

This glimpse of the debate of power was instrumental to frame theoretically the concept of soft power. Theories do not happen in a vacuum, and the development of the concept of soft power owes a great deal to some ideas generated in the past. This sub-section will focus on three ideas in particular that have connections and seem relevant to the study of soft power: Max Weber's charisma, Steven Lukes' third face of power and Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony.

Weber (1978) divided authority in three types: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. Traditional authority is legitimated by the sanctity of tradition (for example, feudalism). Legal-rational authority is empowered by a formalistic belief in the content of the law (legal) or natural law (rationality). Obedience is not given to a specific individual leader - whether traditional or charismatic - but a set of uniform principles. An example of legal-rational authority is bureaucracy (political or economic). On the other hand, we have charismatic authority when a leader is able to inspire others with his or her mission and vision. Therefore, the individual must have certain extraordinary (real or perceived) characteristics. Weber cited the head of a new social movement, and one instilled with divine or supernatural powers, such as a religious prophet, as examples of charismatic leaders.

Weber's concept of 'charisma' recalls the concept of soft power, and indeed Nye recognises that charisma is a form of soft power. But he also argues that charisma alone does not explain the full picture. In current usage, 'the word charisma has become a vague synonym for "personal magnetism" rather than an operational concept.' This 'inadequate explanatory value of charisma alone', led leadership theorists in the 1970s and 80s to formulate a broader concept of 'transformational leader,' one that is able to mobilise power for change by appealing to their followers' higher ideals and moral values rather than baser emotions of fear, greed, and hatred. Therefore, charisma is only part of the transformational leader's toolset. He must also have 'an element of "intellectual stimulation" – broadening followers' awareness of situations and new perspectives – and "individualized consideration" –

providing support and developmental experiences to followers rather than treating them as mere means to an end' (Nye 2006: 5-6). This transformational, inspirational leader will, according to Nye, rest more on soft rather than hard power resources.

According to some scholars (Baldwin 2013), Nye's concept of soft power is also closely related to Lukes' third face of power. Lukes argued that the third dimension of power consists of deeply rooted forms of political socialization where actors are led to follow (sometimes unconsciously) the will of the power-projecting country, even against their best interests. Power as domination – the third dimension – contemplates how the powerful states secure the compliance of weaker ones through means that fall outside of or go beyond material coercion. The very relevant difference between the two ideas becomes now clear. Lukes, a Marxist, believes that this process of preference-shaping is ultimately another, more subtle form of domination. It in fact installs a false consciousness among the most vulnerable actors (the Bs). A typical example from Marxist theory would be the ruling class persuading the working class that what the ruling class want is actually what they want too. What is in place is actually a process of manipulation leading others to do something they might not actually want to do by changing what they want. Soft power might be therefore seen as 'soft domination', following Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which also relates to the third face of power.

The Italian Marxist Gramsci created the concept of cultural hegemony in the Prison Notebooks, translated into English in 1971. In Gramscian terms, hegemony means the success of the dominant classes in presenting their definition of reality, their view of the world, in such a way that other classes accept it as 'common sense'. Gramsci (1971: 326) defines 'common sense' as the 'most widespread conception of life and morals', a traditional and local worldview. Although he underscores the passivity with which people accept a particular worldview as common sense, contrary to the active role that he ascribes to intellectuals, he also asserts that every social stratum, not only the lower ones, has its own 'common sense'. Hence, hegemony is a way to establish domination through material and

immaterial (including discursive) elements. However, hegemony differs from domination, as the latter is exercised directly through the state apparatus, and as such it speaks to the opposition State/Civil Society; hegemony, on the other hand, refers to the control exercised by the dominant group throughout society. As the supremacy of a social group manifests itself as 'intellectual and moral leadership' as well as 'domination', any groups who present an alternative view are marginalised: 'The "normal" exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent' (Gramsci 1971: 155). While the coercive power of states legally enforces punish groups who do not "consent" either actively or passively, the 'spontaneous' consent given by the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant group 'is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production' (Hoare and Nowell-Smith 1971: 12).

Nye (1990) acknowledges the importance of Gramsci's concept, but he seems to reject its 'element of adversarial manipulation, which would be an illiberal means of generating compliance--i.e., fooling subordinate nations. Hence, there is most definitely a strong conflict of interests in this radical vision of power' (Gallarotti 2011: 15). On the contrary, soft power generally does not present such a strong conflict of interests: Nye's conviction of the existence of 'universally good' values, such as democracy and the rule of law, that are beneficial not only for the As, but also for the Bs. This can be a problem when trying to apply soft power to illiberal states. The next section addresses this gap; but firstly it touches upon another analytical shortcoming of the concept, that is, the difficulty to assess – let alone 'measure' in positivist terms – soft power, due to its volatile nature.

4 'Soft Theory'? The Two Main Gaps of Soft Power

The concept of soft power has been drawing criticism from many fronts, to the extent that some of its critics refer to it as 'soft theory' (Gallarotti 2011). Leslie Gelb (2010: 69), for instance, argues that soft power has become too inclusive, as it 'now seems to mean almost everything' because economic coercion and military power have been introduced 'through the back door,' and that soft power now includes not only such elements as leadership, persuasion, and values, but also concepts like 'military prowess.' Sceptics of the concept from the realist side argue that hard power remains the most effective foreign policy tool. Gray (2011: ix) states that hard power must remain the essential instrument of policy as soft power is unsuitable for policy directions and control as it relies too much on the foreign countries' perception.

Others treat the concept as a synonyms of culture, and highlight the problems of using it as a means to achieve a country's interests: historian Niall Ferguson (2003) has dismissed soft power as 'non-traditional forces such as cultural and commercial goods', by which he means the influence of big brands like Coca Cola or Levi's. He believes that in the formulation made by Nye, soft power is too 'soft' to obtain real results, and when it becomes strong, namely cultural imperialism, its driving force is actually hard power: 'Soft Power is merely the velvet glove concealing an iron hand' (Ferguson 2004: 24). In fact, some believe that what Nye and Neoliberals call soft power is nothing but a masked cultural imperialism. Concerning the basic concept of culture, Janice B. Mattern (2005), for example, pointed out that a country's attraction and a country's culture are not natural but constructed. By relying on an essentialist notions of culture and identity, Nye communicates a benign picture of US hegemony and does not allow the capturing of 'not-so-soft' aspects of soft power (in terms of not so beneficial effects for the power-recipient states). Drawing upon dependency theory, we could also make the point that sometimes what pushes the power-recipient states to follow the power-projecting ones is the lack of political and economic alternatives: if we accept dependency as a structural feature of the current world order, then weaker actors

find themselves facing a binary choice: either to integrate to the structure of the capitalist international economy or to face political and economic exclusion. In this sense, distinguishing the effects of soft power (free choices taken by the power-recipient states) from the structural lack of alternatives might prove difficult. The next two subsections will linger over two gaps in particular: the difficulty of assessing soft power and the difficulty to apply the concept to the analysis of illiberal states' foreign policies.

4.1 How Hard it Is to Assess Soft Power

A problem highlighted not only by academicians, but also policy advisors and policy-makers, is the difficulty of utilising soft power as an analytic tool. The main issue at stake seems to be the difficulty of assessing soft power[2]. In fact, even if certain aspects of soft power activities can be measured, the effectiveness of many other cannot. One reason for that is that 'as it pertains to political values, soft power as an analytic category is in itself highly problematic, given the fact it is interwoven with discursive struggles over political identity' (Hall 2010: 206). Furthermore, a formal adherence to the political values of the power-projecting states does not translate automatically in foreign policy outcomes.

The truth is that we currently lack precise instruments to assess the impact of soft power policies: 'A fundamental knowledge base for modelling soft power issues does not really exist, even among experts. Nor is it possible to pin down experts on specific data points required by a model. The result can be a model with a false level of precision that would not be a dependable predictor of future events' (Deane and Harlow 2009: 6). The policy

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[2] Even if the assessment (or even the measurement) of a country's power is easier if power is understood as capabilities, the translation of material capabilities into actual influence or concrete foreign policy outcome is not straightforward, as the wars in Iraq in 2003 and Vietnam in the 1960s prove. Furthermore, at times some classical indicators of hard power (such as the size of the territory or the population, the presence of energy resources etc) do not tell much about the actual influence of a country. A small and energy-poor country such as the Vatican, for instance, draws its influence from the wealth it accumulated throughout the centuries due to its historic political and religious role, as well as from immaterial factors such as prestige or religious significance.

implications of this problem are clear: policy-makers cannot have a direct validation of the effectiveness of soft power policies. Gallarotti (2011: 39) tries to warn policy-makers of the complexity inherent to the process of soft power. Many of the benefits of soft power are in fact 'indirect and longer term: two signature characteristics of complexity. This in turn makes the benefits of such soft power that much more difficult to ascertain and evaluate.' He also claims that such benefits are pervasive, and in the end it is worth seeking to implement soft empowerment strategies. However, he is not very successful in illustrating how to achieve these benefits. According to the scholar, the process requires 'more thorough evaluation and a pronounced commitment on the part of decision makers to fully scrutinize the relative effectiveness of policy options bearing on use of power resources. This makes a more complete inventory and assessment of national power necessary, one that in fact covers the various manifold possibilities for soft empowerment.' Hence, his recommendations remain too vague, and limit their scope to the mere acknowledgement of the complexity of the problem.

Todd Hall (2010) points out that this scarce 'usability' of soft power in the academia is due to its very nature. He says that, despite its popularity and although certain attributes entailed in it indeed enhance its attraction as a category of practice, the concept of soft power does not match the parameters of categories of analysis. The terms 'category of practice' and 'category of analysis' were originally delineated by the sociologists Brubaker and Cooper. The former describes the 'concepts that seem intuitive to social actors, in the sense that they reflect common folk assumptions that actors make about how the world functions and what constitute valid ontological categories.' These are categories that might vary depending on the social context, such as the concept of 'criminality'. Conversely, 'categories of analysis' are the 'experience-distant categories used by social analysts', which 'try to identify objects or groups of phenomena according to similarities rooted in shared, specifiable attributes or mechanisms that are discrete from the outcomes they are purported to explain.' He carries on explaining why the concept is popular as a 'category of practice': it is a concept that has a political utility, through which is possible to explain the predominance of the US even when

its material capabilities are shrinking relative to other emerging powers, and it allows at the same it to market its values very well. In place of a theory of soft power principally based on attraction, which is very ambiguous, he suggests instead to 'disaggregate the concept into separate "soft powers", each with a discrete pathway of influence' (Hall 2010: 207). These concepts are institutional, reputational, and representational power. All three of them are linked to Nye's formulation, but are easier to operationalise: for instance, we can use the membership of an organisation as an independent variable to measure the institutional power, surveys for the reputational, and use discourse analysis for measuring the representational one. This is certainly a useful de-construction of the concept of soft power that helps operationalising it, but it does not solve some of the general issues linked to the academic usage of the concept. For instance, polls can 'measure the existence of trends in potential soft power resources, but they are only a first approximation for behavioural change in terms of outcomes' (Nye 2011: 95). Moreover, some authoritarian governments might control public opinion, making the results of polls less reliable, while in some countries polls might even be not available.

4.2 The Soft Power of Rising Powers: How to Study Turkish and Russian Soft Power?

One of the most debated issues about soft power is its applicability to rising powers, especially if they are non-liberal, even authoritarian countries. Over the past decade, studies over the soft power of China, Russia, Turkey and even Saudi Arabia have proliferated. These countries are different among themselves, but they all have in common a non-liberal, in some cases even authoritarian, form of government. Yet, they have increasingly adopted the rhetoric of soft power in their public discourse, sometimes emulating US and EU policies and style of cultural and public diplomacy. This paper intends to sketch a theoretical framework to analyse two particular cases: Turkey and Russia. Not only do both countries share with the EU several common 'neighbourhoods' and zones of influence (the Western Balkans, the

South Caucasus, the countries included in the EU's Eastern Partnership), but also a large number of global and regional security challenges. In order to get a deep understanding of the dynamics occurring in the regions that are of great strategic relevance to the EU, it is therefore crucial to understand the motivations and ambitions of relevant actors, such as Turkey and Russia.

Hence, the reasons for studying Russian and Turkish soft power are manifold: First, they show some important similarities. Both countries are crucial players in the international arena, are labelled as rising powers with imperialistic past, have similarly highly centralised governments, with a strong leader, and fit in the category of illiberal democracies – that is, democratically elected regimes 'routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms' (Zakaria 1997:22). Second, both are generally seen as not having soft power or relying more on hard power, ignoring their soft power understanding and impact would lead to a partial vision of their power strategies. Finally, both countries are of crucial importance to the EU: while they keep strong links to the EU, they are now diverting the 'European path'. Their activities and ambitions in their neighbourhood impact the EU's greatly.

However, can we really speak of a Russian or Turkish soft power? The concept was created around American foreign policy, and it seems intrinsically linked to democratic values. Following Nye's definition explained in the previous section, soft power has three main sources: an appealing culture, political values that it reliably upholds, and foreign policy that is imbued with moral authority. What happens when those values are not liberal and democratic? Here there is certain ambiguity in the literature. On the one hand, Nye (2011) does acknowledge the soft power potential of states like China or Russia. We can certainly say that China, for instance, achieves enhancing its soft power mainly through hard power means, particularly economic power. This is evident in the developing world, especially in Africa, where huge Chinese aid is granted with almost no political conditionality (but access to energy resources). At the same time, China's authoritarian institutions and political values

could also be attractive to political elites in other authoritarian states. The mix of economic development and lack of political freedoms cementing the ruling elites and their supporters is in fact an attractive model for many autocratic leaders in Africa and elsewhere.

On the other hand, it looks very hard to conciliate the non-liberal outlook of some wannabe soft power actors with a vision of soft power being based on liberal values (Gallarotti 2011). Recently Nye (2013) declared that Russian and Chinese leaders do not get what soft power really is, therefore they are not able to exploit its potential. According to the scholar, whereas much of America's soft power is produced by civil society, not from the government, in the case of China and Russia the Communist Politburo and the Kremlin respectively are the main soft power actors. If civil society is meant to be the main actor enhancing a country's soft power, how can it do so, considered the political constrictions it faces in these countries?

Other scholars criticise the very idea of 'attraction', which is at the heart of Nye's concept. Hall (2010) argues that 'attraction' is not a suitable causal mechanism upon which to soft power can act as a category of analysis. Kivimaki (2014) claims that 'attraction' is not a good fit to the analysis of Chinese soft power. As a consequence of that, recent Anglo-American studies suggest that China's soft power strategy has failed the country. However, China's approach and means to implement soft power are different from those of the US; therefore Chinese soft power strategy cannot be evaluated using liberal standards and need to be geographically and historically contextualised. As Kivimaki (2014: 6-7) notes:

> 'The idea of soft power as the power of "attraction" is historically specific and belongs to the structure of international relations after World War II. (…) In such a structure, soft power affected preferences (by means of attraction) regarding communism and capitalism. (…) However, beyond a historically specific context, soft power can be anything that compels countries to do things that the user of soft power wants them to do.'

The next section will deal with the problem of the applicability of soft power to illiberal states in more detail. Building on alternative readings of soft power, and especially on the neo-Gramscian concept of hegemony, it will propose a refined definition of the concept and its operationalisation through national identity narratives.

5 De-westernising Soft Power

This 'unfitness' of soft power when analysing illiberal countries is currently one of the hottest debates around the concept. There seems to be a growing awareness of the unsuitableness of Nye's concept when dealing with non-Western and non-liberal powers, and the need to find new appropriate theoretical lenses to decouple the concept from the form of liberal democratic government typical of the US. This is because there are currently bias that sees it solely as a tool of Western liberal democracies. The concept was in fact created around American foreign policy, and it seems intrinsically linked to *universal* democratic values. As a consequence, Nye's work can be 'bracketed within the (neo)liberal institutionalist research programme' (Sinkkonen 2015, 4)

In this regard, looking at alternative critical readings of soft power might be useful. For instance, Digeser (1992) builds on a Foucauldian notion of power to elaborate the above-mentioned 'fourth face of power'. In this form of power, subject, agency and structure are inextricably intertwined, and pervasive power networks in society make it difficult to determine what objective interests would be (Gallarotti 2011).

Talking specifically about soft power, Zahran and Ramos (2010) suggest integrating Gramscian insights and especially the concept of hegemony. As explained in the second section, hegemony focuses on the creation of consent within individual societies around some ideas and values, which are accepted as natural, becoming 'common sense'. According to Gramsci (1971: 362), is intrinsically local:

'every philosophical current leaves behind it a sediment of "common sense"; this is the document of its historical effectiveness. Common sense is not rigid and immobile but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions, which have entered ordinary life. Common sense creates the folklore of the future, that is, as a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given place and time'.

Therefore, it is a useful concept to assess the extent to which narratives of power-projecting countries are accepted by local audiences of power-recipient ones. [3]

A Gramscian approach allows us to depart from Nye's conceptualisation of soft power linked to 'universal' values, which makes it difficult to apply the concept to countries which do not share them: 'A more neutral analysis would recognize that any set of principles and values cannot be universal: ideas are always relative, they originate in a given society or culture, they are not absolute and usually mean different things for different people' (Zahran and Ramos 2010: 24). Following this approach, soft power would be the ability to influence discourses in such a way that particular policies, worldviews and narratives are framed as 'common sense', therefore paving the way to the establishment of power relations. This view directly implies that soft power, as phrased by Nye, is a just a 'softer' way to maintain or restore a dominant role in the international arena, through the claim of universal validity of some values. Nye's description of soft power openly rejects the basic Gramscian notion that coercion and cooptation are in practice inseparable. However, due to its focus on the actual process of consensus-building rather than on the specific value-outcome, the concept of hegemony is very useful to understand and apply soft power in the case of illiberal democracies.

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[3] It is important to stress that Gramsci's level of analysis is the domestic one, as he was referring specifically to the Italian context under Fascism. Neo-Gramscian scholars, on the contrary, understand common sense as a means for the 'transnational historic bloc' (not just a state or a group of states) to exercise hegemony *globally*.

Other scholars, despite not formally adhering to a Gramscian or Neo-Gramscian view, have also started to operationalise soft power in terms of narratives that manage to impose themselves internationally as 'natural'. Not only does this path offer a getaway from the Western-liberal biases of Nye's formulation of soft power, but it also provides an easier way to operationalise soft power instead of relying on the controversial (Kivimaki 2014) concept of 'attraction'. For instance, Hall (2010: 210) proposes to disaggregate soft powers in various conceptualisations rooted in different mechanisms; one of them, representational power, is the 'ability of states to frame issues, advance their own interpretations, and consciously seek to shape the beliefs of others. (…) Successfully perpetuating such frames of reference helps states in their efforts to shape international debates to their advantage. Representational power can thus be measured by comparing the message a state is attempting to propagate with the degree to which its target audiences accept the way it is framed.'

Roselle et al. (2014) claim for a greater attention to communication in IR, and argue that the concept of strategic narrative gives us useful insights on the study of soft power, especially in regard to how influence works in a new media environment. Even if Nye himself argues that international affairs has become a matter of 'whose story wins' (Nye, 2013), he does not – according to the authors – 'explore the nature of narratives or attempt to explain how a narrative becomes persuasive to target audiences' (Roselle et al. 2014: 71). They individuate three levels of narratives - 'International System Narratives', 'National Narratives' and 'Issue Narratives', which: (1) describe the structure of the world; (2) project the stories of individual states; and (3) provide interpretations of various 'problems' and suggest possible solutions. Ultimately, they argue, these strategic narratives enable political and military leaders the means to legitimize internationally war, conflict or peacebuilding.

Focusing specifically on Russian soft power, Feklyunina (2015) proposes a social constructivist take on soft power by anchoring it to the concept of 'collective identity'. Building on Roselle et al. (2014), she suggests a fourth narrative, that is, a collective identity narrative, which is not limited to an individual state or a nation, but uses other markers to

construct a shared understanding of common interests based, for example, on ideological ('we — supporters of Communism'), or civilisational markers ('we — European nations'). In order to assess whether soft power is at work in a relationship between two or more states, the scholar suggests to investigate the extent to which the discursively constructed collective identity projected by the first state is accepted or rejected by different audiences in the second state, and by examining the ability of these audiences to affect the process of foreign policy decision-making (Feklyunina 2015: 1).

6 Conclusion

This working paper looked at the concept of soft power, seen as a crucial asset for rising powers to build or maintain their sphere of influence. On the one hand, the paper described soft power through the analysis of Nye's formulation and its main gaps, but also through a broader analysis of the power debate and the 'seminal concepts' that influenced – directly or indirectly – the genesis of the concept. On the other hand, it sought to redefine the concept and the way it is operationalized, in order to fit the analysis of two rising powers that are of great importance to the EU: Turkey and Russia. To this purpose, it combined neo-Gramscian insights – especially the concept of hegemony, as suggested by Zahran and Ramos (2010) – and the study of national identity narratives. From a neo-Gramscian perspective, soft power would be the ability of a state or a group within the state to influence discourses in such a way that certain policies, worldviews and narratives are framed as 'common sense', therefore paving the way to the establishment of power relations. This way, soft power can be operationalized through the analysis of national identity narratives, as already suggested by Roselle et al. (2014) and Feklyunina (2015), and the extent to which these narratives are accepted by targeted audiences shows the effectiveness of a country's soft power. Assessing the latter is not straightforward. However, there are methods and methodologies that help the researcher in this task; if the selected level of analysis is the domestic one, methods focus groups and opinion polls can be used to assess the degree of acceptance of these narratives

by the population at large or targeted groups. If the focus is on political elites, then methodologies such as process-tracing can help establishing the link between a country's soft power and the achievement of a certain political outcome desired by the power-projecting country.

The approach suggested by this paper sought to reconcile two areas that were not previously linked. While Zahran and Ramos (2010) did not specifically use their neo-Gramscian approach for rising powers and especially illiberal countries (they were writing about US foreign policy) and largely neglected the question of how to operationalise soft power, authors who did focus on this type of countries (like Feklyunina) seem to ignore the contribution of neo-Gramscian theory (especially in terms of consensus-building) to their analysis of soft power through identity narratives. This working paper therefore aimed to bridge this gap, and contribute to an enhanced understanding of soft power and its use when analysing the foreign policies of rising powers such as Turkey and Russia.

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