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# POLITICAL REGIONAL STUDIES

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## RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN THE BALTIC STATES THROUGH THE LENS OF RESEARCH: TRADITIONS, COMPETITION, CONFRONTATION

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*In this article, we aim to analyse the research discourse in the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) as regards Russian soft power, which is considered as hard power, and to compare the theses that dominate this discourse with the actual interactions between Russia and the three states in media, education, and culture. Each Baltic country has built a system of political and legal restrictions to diminish the effect of Russian soft power, which is considered in terms of hard power, i.e. as a threat to national security. The current forms of Russian soft power are becoming less productive in the region and their use in the negative political context of bilateral relations has the opposite effect for Russia — the country loses in reputation and image. The main factor at play is the information content of the Russian-language media space. At odds with the historical and political views of a significant part of the Baltic States' ruling class, it is becoming the target of counteraction. At the same time, Russian high and mass culture and, partly, educational services are in demand from both Baltic Russian speakers and ethnic Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians. Our analysis shows that the views of Baltic researchers that Russian soft power is politics-driven and foreign to the region are exaggerated and biased. In its turn, Russian soft power in the Baltics retains the potential to aid the country's foreign policy, being a complement to the latter rather than its direct tool.*

**Keywords:**

soft power, effect of soft power, Russian foreign policy,  
Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania

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The current situation in world politics and international relations is yet another proof that the influence of a state in the world arena depends on not only politics, the economy, and military capacity, but also the ability to be attractive to partners. Today, it is important for a state to have something to offer to its partners, to present its potential in a proper light, and to spread knowledge about it. Joseph Nye gave a classical description of the essence of a state's attractiveness and suggested some techniques to achieve it within his soft power concept presented in the 1990 book *Bound to lead: the changing nature of American power* [1].

According to Nye, soft power is 'the ability of states to attract others to their side, seeking to support their own agenda in international relations by demonstrating their cultural and moral values of the attractiveness of the political course and the effectiveness of political institutions'. In his opinion, soft power has three sources: 'its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)' [2, p. 221]. The British researcher Simon Anholt, who introduced the concept of nation branding, believes that attractiveness of a state translates into power in the world arena, thus enabling it to outperform its competitors in attaining foreign policy goals with fewer efforts [3, p. 2]. Melissa Nisbett [4], Michael J. Waller [5], Jonathan McClory [6], Rhonda Zahrna [7], and others have further explored this aspect of state power outlined in Nye's concept. Studies into national brands and nation branding (Nicolas Papadopoulos [8], Gyorgy Szondi [9], and others), which focus on the capacity of a state to gain financially from its attractiveness and the attractiveness of national companies and products in the world market, have advanced research in the area. Anholt distinguishes six natural channels through which countries communicate with the world. These are tourism promotion; export of goods and services; national policy; technology for investment and recruitment of international talent; the reputation of the people and the state in the world; cultural exchange, the reputation of the national culture in the world, and export of culture and sports [10, p. 4].

Zbigniew Brzezinski famously discusses soft power (although without mentioning the term) as a facet of American global power in *The Grand Chessboard*. He writes: 'Whatever one may think of its aesthetic values, America's mass culture exercises a magnetic appeal, especially on the world's youth. Its attraction may be derived from the hedonistic quality of the lifestyle it projects, but its global appeal is undeniable. American television programs and films account for about three-fourths of the global market. American popular music is equally dominant, while American fads, eating habits, and even clothing are increasingly imitated worldwide. The language of the Internet is

English, and an overwhelming proportion of the global computer chatter also originates from America, influencing the content of the global conversation. Lastly, America has become a Mecca for those seeking advanced education ... Graduates from American universities are to be found in almost every Cabinet on every continent' [11, p. 38].

In Russia, the concept of soft power attracted considerable interest in the 2000s when the national leadership embraced the need to restore Russia's influence in the world. Vladimir Putin, at the time the Prime Minister, was the first to use the term at the highest level. He did so in his article *Russia and the changing world* (2012). However, the term took on a slightly different meaning in his interpretation. In particular, Putin defined soft power as follows: 'a complex of tools and methods to achieve foreign policy goals without the use of force, through information and other means of influence.'<sup>1</sup> Later, the notion was integrated into official documents. Russia's Foreign policy concept of November 30, 2016, states that ' [i] n addition to traditional methods of diplomacy, "soft power" has become an integral part of efforts to achieve foreign policy objectives. This power primarily utilises the tools offered by civil society, as well as various methods and technologies — from information and communication to humanitarian and other types.'<sup>2</sup>

The Russian researcher Marina Lebedeva pinpointed a serious problem in how soft power is contemplated in Russian literature. In her opinion, it is the dramatic difference between theoretical approaches to the phenomenon. The realistic approach identifies soft power with propaganda and other methods of non-military influence. 'Nye clearly discriminates between the realistic interpretation of soft power, when various means, including attractiveness, are meant to advance a country's interests, on the one hand, and the situation when interactions result in mutual benefits and cooperation between the parties (the neo-liberal approach), on the other' [12, p. 215]. Nye advocates the neoliberal approach in which soft power is viewed as based on objective attractiveness, whereas interactions between the parties suggest cooperation and result in mutual benefits and collaborative advantage. In Russia, soft power is mostly interpreted as the use of non-military means to influence the other party [12, p. 213]. This understanding is in line with the realistic approach.

<sup>1</sup> Putin, V. V. Rossiya i menyayushchiysya mir [Russia and the changing world]. *Moskovskie novosti* [Moscow news]. February 21, 2012. URL: <http://www.mn.ru/politics/78738> (accessed 16.01.2019).

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. The Foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation of 2016. Official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. URL: [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248) (accessed 16.01.2019).

In Russia, the systematisation and theoretical contemplation [13; 14; 15] of the resource potential of soft power began in the 2010s. Efforts have been made to create mechanisms for projecting it to the international political environment, including the Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

In this article, we aim to analyse whether the image of Russia's soft power in the Baltics, as presented in the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian research discourse, is consistent with the actual collaborations in the media, education, and culture. Our central hypothesis is that, despite the politics-driven confrontation and natural competition among the soft powers of various actors in the Baltics, Russia's soft power maintains the potential for being attractive to and sought after by both the titular nations and the local Russian speakers.

## **Russia's soft power in the Baltics as viewed by Baltic researchers**

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Political relations between Russia and the Baltics today are outright confrontational; there are increasing downward trends in trade and economic co-operation. Both Russia, on the one hand, and Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, on the other, are prone to conflict in their bilateral relations; this virtually incapacitates Russia's official diplomacy in the Baltics.<sup>3</sup> The agents (mass media, NGOs, foundations) and resources of Russia's and the Baltics' soft power (cooperation in education, science, culture, and sports) have become almost the only means to support regular dialogue that has shifted to the area of public diplomacy.

Russia's soft power projection in the Baltics has some unique features. At the system level, these features influence whether this soft power projection will be successful or not as regards the immediate goals of the policy: to improve the image of the country, to create a favourable environment for political dialogue and economic relations, and to build trust and credibility.

Most Baltic researchers of soft power focus on its practical aspects. Many have explored Russia's soft power as applied to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Among them are Andis Kudors, Gatis Pelnens, Diāna Potjomkina, Toms Rostoks, and Andris Sprūds [16] in Latvia; Vytautas Isoda, Agnija Grigas [18], and Nerijus Maliukevičius [19] in Lithuania; Urmas Paet [20], Karel Kaas, Emmet Tuohy, Julian Tupay, and Juhan Kivirähk [21] in Estonia. Baltic researchers view Russia's soft power as a threat to national security.

The way Russia uses soft power in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania has been studied by leading Baltic experts in international relations and security, as well as major Western research institutions since the early 2010s. The most active

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<sup>3</sup> Russian News Agency TASS. Russian ambassador in Estonia: Tallin frightens people with 'Russian spies'. February 8, 2018. *Tass*. URL: <http://tass.ru/opinions/interviews/4939214> (accessed 16.01.2019).

and thorough analysis is characteristic of the works written in the past five years; this is explained to a significant degree by the effect of the Ukrainian crisis. In particular, Sprūds and Rostoks mention ‘constructed’ attractiveness among the properties of Russia’s soft power [16, p. 8–29; 21, p. 16]: such attractiveness is laboured and, instead of interest, it arouses suspicions. Maliukevičius emphasises that Russian interpretation has deprived Nye’s concept of its commitment to dialogue, long-term constructive relations, and the cooperation paradigm. In his opinion, Russia has reduced the concept to a sum of political technologies used to achieve a country’s own (unilateral) short-term goals [19, p. 124].

The Swedish researcher Gudrun Persson concludes from her analysis of official Russia’s soft power policy documents that Russia understands soft power as a resource to strengthen military influence if a conflict arises. The attractiveness of Russia’s soft power is manipulative rather than objective [21, p. 16]. What distinguishes Russia’s soft power from that of other states is that the country ‘wants to influence without being influenced’. Russia rejects any possibility of influence from another state [21, p. 29].

The perspective of the Baltic political elites and expert communities on Russia’s soft power in their countries breaks down into the following points:

Russia’s understanding of what soft power is and how its mechanisms function differs from that accepted by the international research community and in the political practice of the leading states of the West;

viewed as a form of ‘non-military influence’, soft power is part of the general policy towards the Baltics, which seeks to undermine the political, economic, and civilizational choice of the three countries; this choice is not yet irreversible because of persistent infrastructure dependence on the ‘former metropole’ and the remnants of the political and business culture of the past era [18, p. 14];

Russia’s soft power in the Baltics targets the countries’ ethnic Russians; it is channelled through Russian governmental institutions and publicly financed NGOs, which create network structures in culture, education, sports, through Russian TV channels and radio stations, and through cultural influence (the promotion of an alternative discourse on the controversial periods in the shared 20th-century history and of nostalgia for the Soviet era and the then prosperity);

Russian culture, both high and low, is viewed as virtually the only positive component of Russian influence in the Baltics (it enriches the cultures of the latter); this influence, however, often derives from the Soviet legacy and, therefore, can be ideologically laden; Russia may use this influence to advance its interests and achieve purposes hostile to the Baltics;

Russia’s soft power in the Baltics is not very effective. Its long-term prospects are limited because of the shrinking Russian-speaking space. Young people are not interested in learning Russian and are increasingly preferring to

obtain higher education at home or in the EU. The ruling elites of the Baltic states view fluency in Russian as a problem or a threat rather than an additional source of economic competitiveness. The use of Russian in everyday life and education is considered (very much in line with the “occupation doctrine”) as a Soviet relic subject to elimination. The transition of both secondary and higher education to the national languages, which is almost completed today, should play a central role in eradicating such relics.

Annual reports of the Baltics’ national security agencies declare Russia’s soft power a threat. On the one hand, this wrecks the prospects and impairs the efficiency of soft power in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. On the other hand, the demonisation of Russia distorts the perception of the current international political reality and thus makes policies inefficient.

## **Mass media and media space**

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In this respect, a conspicuous example is the attempts to counter Russian-language content (in the Baltics, this does not always mean content produced in Russia<sup>4</sup>) in the media space. These include restrictions on the work of Russian and Russian-language mass media and direct personal pressure on the journalists. Among the affected mass media are the hubs of the *Sputnik* multimedia group, which belongs to the *Rossiya Segonya (Russia Today)* news agency. Moreover, the public authorities overseeing mass media tend to stop the broadcast of Russian TV channels or local Russian-language programmes focusing on social and political issues.

Baltic researchers, however, admit that Russian programmes, which run on cable channels, are popular in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Most of the Russian content is entertainment, concerts, and series. Russian programmes outstrip their German and US counterparts as regards the price/quality ratio [19, p. 122]. Over 50% of national minorities of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia (Russians, Jews, Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Karaites, and others) and about 10–30% of the titular nations prefer Russian shows to any other alternatives [22, p. 19].

Although the Baltics see the influence of Russian-language mass media as a threat to security, the employees of the latter believe that Russian-language mass media have little effect on the political and economic life of the three

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the *15min* daily, which is published in Lithuania in Russian and Lithuanian, is part of the Norwegian media holding *Shibsted* (it also owns *Eesti Media*, the largest media group in Estonia, which includes the largest newspaper *Postimees*, *Channel 2*, etc.), or the Estonian channel *ETV+* launched specially for broadcasting to the Russian-speaking audience. Such media, however, are not considered as potential agents of Russia’s “soft power”.

countries.<sup>5</sup> According to Baltic researchers, however, Russian-speaking mass media are unreliable sources of information because being financed by Russian public authorities and foundations, they are under the direct influence and control of Russian information policy actors [21, p. 4].

At the same time, a ban on Russian-language mass media in the Baltics seems impossible: each of the three states has considerable ethnic minorities (even if they are not recognised as such) for whom Russian is the native tongue. Thus, such a ban would contradict the EU language policy.<sup>6</sup>

A lack of linguistic cohesion in Latvian and Estonian societies, which was apparent as early as the late 1980s/the beginning of the 1990s, gave rise to two isolated information spaces [23, p. 98]. In the Baltics, Russians (Russian speakers) and members of the titular nations support diametrically opposite positions in the information-intensive and value-laden confrontation between Russia and the West, which is, in effect, an all-encompassing struggle of discourses. The above pertains to 60–65% of each group. The members of the titular nation are more consolidated as regards value and ideology. Russian speakers have a broader range of opinions: 25–35% do not support Russia's position [24].

Russian-language mass media (as well as those in the titular languages) exist in a highly competitive space. For instance, a cable TV package available in the Baltics offers a selection of channels from Russia, the EU (*German Deutsche Welle* and *ZDF*; Polish *TV Polsat*, *Polonia*, and *TV Belsat*), and Belarus (*Belarus TV*), as well as global English-language channels (*BBC*, *CNN*, *Discovery*, and *Animal Planet*) and European media (*Euronews* and *Eurosport*). Ethnic groups, however, prefer television in their native tongue and tend to trust it more than they trust information in the language of the ethnic majority (or in any other language). Any imaginary or actual agent and resource of Russia's soft power will face a competitive environment in the Baltics.

## **Education**

Education is another area of soft power. Capable of influencing the value systems of students, education is key to future relations between Russia and the Baltics.

<sup>5</sup> Tarasenko: Russian-langauge Lithuania media must work towards a better image of Lithuania. *Rubaltic.ru*. 20.08.2013. — URL: <http://www.rubaltic.ru/article/kultura-i-istoriya/tarasenko-litovskie-smi-na-russkom-yazyke-dolzhny-rabotat-na-obraz-litvy20082013/> (accessed 16.01.2019).

<sup>6</sup> Language policy, European Parliament [Electronic resource] // europarl.europa.eu. URL: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/142/language-policy> (accessed 16.01.2019).

The value systems of the youth, however, belong to the realm of pragmatism. Young people want a good education, a high-paying job, and bright career prospects. Therefore, they appreciate visa-free entry to Western European countries for work or study. In 2004, 788 applicants from Latvia enrolled at EU universities. In 2012, about 2,000 Latvians made this choice. Latvia sees this threefold increase as a sign of the population's loyalty to the EU [16, p. 226]. Applicants from Latvia prefer universities in Germany, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, France, and Spain. A similar number of Lithuanians and Estonian apply to European universities each year: 2500–3000 and 1000 people respectively. Baltic students receive support from EU academic exchange foundations and programmes. About twenty programmes are available in the Baltics, among them Comenius, Erasmus+, Erasmus Mundus, Leonardo da Vinci, and Tempus.

The number of Baltic students at Russian universities is insignificant (see Table 1). The same applies to federal study grants to Baltic citizens willing to enrol to bachelor, master, PhD, and non-degree programmes at Russian universities (see Table 2). Moreover, the Baltic states are attempting to control the number of students coming to Russia. Until 2005, the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research shortlisted candidates. Since that year, the Pushkin Institute NGO, which is affiliated with Rossotrudnichestvo and the Russian Ministry of Education and Science, has selected applicants from Estonia. This change limited the ability to control applicant lists. In response, the Estonian side demanded that official information on candidate selection be provided [21, p. 57].

*Table 1*

**Number of Baltic students at Russian universities  
in academic years 2005/2006–2016/2017  
(people)**

Country	2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007	2007/ 2008	2008/ 2009	2009/ 2010	2010/ 2011	2011/ 2012	2012/ 2013	2013/ 2014	2014/ 2015	2015/ 2016	2016/ 2017
Latvians	367	408	488	517	626	647	731	682	755	676	488	671
Lithuanians	599	510	509	427	456	520	481	507	656	503	509	414
Estonians	310	322	271	272	338	355	416	369	522	552	271	389
<i>Total</i>	1276	1240	1268	1216	1420	1522	1628	1558	1933	1731	1268	1474

*Source:* Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation. *Eksport rossiyskikh obrazovatelnykh uslug: statisticheskiy sbornik. Vypusk 8. [Export of Russian educational services: statistics book. Issue 8].* 2018. Moscow. Sotsiotsents. P. 41.

Table 2

**Government grants for foreign citizens and compatriots  
from the Baltic states enrolled at Russian universities**

Country	2007/ 2008	2008/ 2009	2009/ 2010	2011/ 2012	2014/ 2015	2015/ 2016	2016/ 2017	2017/ 2018
Latvia	85	85	130	130	87	80	144	126
Lithuania	85	85	130	112	124	90	92	73
Estonia	85	85	130	85	90	55	87	82

Source: Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation. *Eksport rossiyskikh obrazovatelnykh uslug: statisticheskiy sbornik. Vypusk 8. [Export of Russian educational services: statistics book. Issue 8].* 2018. Moscow. Sotsiosents. P. 286.

Russian researchers, in their turn, have emphasised that the grant process run by the Ministry of Education and Science is not sufficiently transparent, albeit it includes several selection rounds, which reduces the efficiency of study grants to foreign nationals as an element of Russia's soft power in education. 'It is unclear what principle underlies the awarding of most study grants. The current system of federal grants to international students, although beneficial for universities and students, may lack efficiency from the perspective of 'soft power.' Rossotrudnichestvo was responsible for approximately 650 study grants. Most grants, however, were awarded using other channels, among them Russian embassies and ministries of education of foreign states' [25, p. 58].

Young Russian speakers, whom these grants target, are a heterogeneous group. According to the young Latvian activist Margarita Dragile, young Russians in Latvian constitute several groups, which have different interests and visions of the future of Latvia: 1) 'citizens of Europe' willing to move to the West; 2) people planning to 'succeed as professionals in Latvia', primarily, in the political sphere; they are ready to play by the book, i.e. to assimilate; 3) Russia-oriented people and people willing to emigrate to the country; 4) people who see themselves both as Latvian citizens and as bearers of Russian culture. All these categories are rather passive in socio-political terms. 'As little as 3% of young people are involved in the social and political processes aimed to change the situation.'<sup>7</sup> Young members of the titular nation, however, play a more active role in the social and political life of their country.

<sup>7</sup> RuBaltic.ru. Dragile: cooperation between Russian and Lithuanian youth must develop [Online resource]. RuBaltic.ru. 19.08.2013. Available at: <http://www.rubaltic.ru/article/obrazovanie-i-nayka/dragile-neobkhodimo-razvivat-sotrudnichestvo-molodezhi-rossii-i-latvii/> (accessed 16.01.2019).

Local right conservative politicians and enforcement agencies have exerted significant pressure in recent years on the universities communities, youth organisations, and even schools<sup>8</sup> that work with Russian organisations, international youth camps, and summer schools. A conspicuous example is the words of the former Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Ambassador of the European Union to the Russian Federation, Vygaudas Ušackas: ‘Sadly, we have to admit that, when it comes to Russian universities, Lithuanian universities do not demonstrate the activity expressed in student exchange and research programs with universities of other EU member-states. I hope this is not the consequence, as some rectors have mentioned, of the “political encouragement from the top” to give up connections and any type of relations with Russian universities’.<sup>9</sup>

The educational environment and the student community constitute a space where young people, during four-ten years of study, become integrated into the socio-cultural environment of the receiving country. A dynamic space of socialisation is the People’s Friendship University of Russia. The success of this approach depends on language immersion. No or insufficient command of the language (this happens if the language of the study is English) hampers socialisation.

In most cases, students coming to Russia from the Baltics are native Russian speakers and bearers of Russian culture. Thus, the export of Russian educational services virtually does not concern the ‘titular’ youth. Not only does it not help the culture and values of the latter and young Russian speakers to converge; it widens the gap between them. Graduates of Russian universities can hardly hope for a career in public service or politics: a Russian degree translates into a spoiled biography amid an almost paranoid fear of Russia.

Business offers more opportunities to graduates of Russian universities. Fluency in Russian and an understanding of life in the country and its socio-political context, which one may gain as a student, are an asset for a businessperson. For example, Latvian organisations often require their employees to speak three languages: Latvian, English, and Russian. A survey carried out by the Latvian HR agency CV-Online Latvia in spring 2015 showed the following:

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<sup>8</sup> Delfi. Details of police search at two Russian schools revealed [Online resource]. *ru.Delfi.lt*. December 3, 2014. Available at: <http://ru.delfi.lt/news/live/proyasnilos-u-kogo-proveli-obyski-v-dvuh-russkih-shkolah.d?id=66568056> (accessed 16.01.2019).

<sup>9</sup> Delfi. Lithuanian universities say cooperation with Russian institutions weak because of academic differences [Online resource]. *Ru.Delfi.lt*. August 17, 2015. Available at: <https://en.delfi.lt/culture/lithuanian-universities-say-cooperation-with-russian-institutions-weak-because-of-academic-differences.d?id=68751214> (accessed 16.01.2019).

57% of respondents believed that young people who are not proficient in the Russian language face discrimination in the Latvian labour market;

14% noted that they had been refused employment because of insufficient Russian language skills;

49% believes that Russian language skills were the key to success in the labour market;

only 10% of the economically active population think that fluency in Russian does not affect employment prospects.<sup>10</sup>

This situation gave rise to quite paradoxical amendments to the labour law, which were prepared by the nationalistic alliance Visu Latvijai — TB/LNNK. These amendments prohibit employers from requiring employees to speak a foreign language if it is not part of their job responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> Practically, these measures are aimed to give the ‘titular’ youth a competitive edge. As a result of the systemic Latvianisation of culture and education over the past decades, young Latvians are less proficient in Russian than members of national minorities and thus have bleaker prospects of employment. According to the 2011 census, Russian is the ‘language spoken at home’ for 55.8% of Riga residents, 60.3% of the residents of Latgale, and 37.2% of all the Latvians.<sup>12</sup> The Russian language is a competitive advantage and an employment requirement in various areas of services and trade: banking, consulting, tourism, logistics, retail, and others. Many businesses are still Russia-oriented since the country continues to play a central role in all the spheres of life in the Baltics.

## Culture

Vladimir Kolosov et al. emphasise that, in the Baltics, ‘the European space of institutions intricately overlaps the post-Soviet space of fears and public sentiments’ [26, p. 77]. This circumstance affects culture, which is a traditional resource of Russian ‘soft power’ in the three countries.

<sup>10</sup> Mixnews. Survey: young people who do not speak Russian discriminated in labour market [online resource] // *Mixnews.lv*. 14.04.2015. Available at: <http://www.mixnews.lv/ru/society/news/2015-04-14/174066> (accessed 16.01.2019).

<sup>11</sup> Nr: 1167/Lp12 Grozījumi Darba likumā // LR Saeima. URL: <http://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS12/saeimalivs12.nsf/webSasaiste?OpenView&restricttocategory=1167/Lp12> (accessed 16.01.2019).

<sup>12</sup> At home Latvian is spoken by 62% of Latvian population; the majority — in Vidzeme and Lubāna county // Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. 26.09.2013. URL: <https://www.csb.gov.lv/en/statistics/statistics-by-theme/population/census/search-in-theme/1442-home-latvian-spoken-62-latvian-population> (accessed 16.01.2019).

According to the Latvian researcher Gatis Pelnens, three tiers of Russian culture are visible in today's Baltics: '1) deep-rooted traditions of Russian "high culture"; 2) historical identification with the Soviet Union; 3) modern, developing and in some sense "westernized" culture with particular qualities specific for Russia'. These three cultures speak to all everyone in today's Latvia. From the perspective of soft power, the very presence of Russian culture in the country is effective. High culture resonates with the intelligentsia and the political, academic, and creative elite. Modern culture arouses interest from a general audience who attend concerts of Russian pop musicians and watch Russian dance and ice shows. Soviet culture evokes nostalgia in older age groups. In a contemporary package (hoodies, T-shirts, mugs, matryoshkas with images of Soviet leaders and such), Soviet culture proves attractive enough to younger generations [27, p. 190].

The 2012 Swedish report *The Security and Defensibility of the Baltic* stresses that the Russian entertainment industry is popular in the Baltics because, at a lower price, it offers quality similar to that of content originating from the US and leading EU countries [28, pp. 19–20]. Latvian researchers have come to the same conclusion: Russian mass culture (movies, series, cartoons, TV shows, fashion) reaches the home of each Latvian through a TV screen. Moreover, it is rather popular among Latvians [21, p. 95] regardless of the political limitations imposed by the Baltic states.

These limitations include bans on performances by the artists whose publicly expressed political opinions differ from the official position of the Baltics. In 2014, shortly before the start of the New Wave contest for young performers, the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a blacklist of Russian citizens (the festival held in Jurmala from 2002 was a long-term, cost-effective project). The list included the Russian artists Iosif Kobzon, Oleg Gazmanov, and Valeria. In response, the Russian side moved the festival from Latvian Jurmala to the Russian city of Sochi. A similar situation occurred with the KVN<sup>15</sup> musical festival, which has been held in Svetlogorsk in the Kaliningrad region, instead of Jurmala since 2015.

Some annual projects, however, continue. These include the Golden mask theatre festival, which has taken place in Latvia and, since 2004, in Estonia. Within the festival, the best Russian theatres perform in the two countries. Russian companies perform in not only the capitals but also Liepāja and Ventspils (Latvia), Tartu and Narva (Estonia). The event is more popular among the ethnic majorities than among the local Russian speakers. Estonian researchers

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<sup>15</sup> Translator's note: KVN (Klub Vesolykh i Nakhodchivkh, 'Club of the Funny and Inventive People') is a Soviet and then Russian comedy talent show.

stress that the popularity of Russian theatre in their country has turned into a new trend among young Estonian actors and theatre and film directors. Most Estonian theatre stars studied at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts and most film directors at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography. Proficiency enhancement in Russia is the latest trend in the Estonian theatre community [21, p. 57]. The same applies to Latvian actors [29].

Since 2012, Narva (Estonia) has welcomed the Friendship Bridge festival of Saint Petersburg contemporary art. Another Estonian town, Jõhvi, has held the Slavic Wreath international song and dance festival since 2002. The event is a symbolic successor to Sergei Diaghilev's Saisons Russes. The Vilnius National Philharmonic Society has organised the annual Dialog of Cultures Christmas festival since 2005. Since the same year, Vilnius churches and cathedrals have housed the International Festival of Russian Church Musics.

There is a Russian cultural outpost in Latvia — Riga's Moscow House. Since 2011, the venue has hosted the Moscow Premier Russian movie festival. Several times a year, the Moscow House holds events honouring Russian authors, poets, and composers. It organises diaspora congresses, conferences, ceremonies awarding the winners of contests dedicated to memorable dates in Russian history, and other events. Estonia does not have a special venue that could serve as a centre of gravity for Russian culture. A Moscow House has been under construction in Vilnius since 2004: the project has not been completed for political reasons. The media has questioned the adequacy of such an institution in the capital of Lithuania: the Moscow House project was called 'another tool of the Kremlin to promote the compatriot support policy, which aims to build up Russia's presence beyond its borders'.<sup>14</sup>

Lithuania's soft power in Russia, however, is not politicised; it is more than welcome in the Russian cultural space. Moscow theatres successfully collaborate with Lithuanian directors. Among them are Rimas Tuminas (Vakhtangov Theatre), Mindaugas Karbauskis<sup>15</sup> (Mayakovsky Theatre), and Oskaras Koršunovas<sup>16</sup>. Russian theatres employ Lithuanian actors, for example, Ingeborga Dapkūnaitė and Liubomiras Laucevičius. The Lithuanian pianist Petras Geniušas regularly performs in Russia. The Lithuanian folk singer Alina Orlova

<sup>14</sup> Delfi. Kersanskas V. Ar Vilniui reikia daugiau Maskvos? [Electronic resource] // delfi.lt. URL: <http://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/lit/v-kersanskas-ar-vilniui-reikia-daugiau-maskvos.d?id=68789244> (accessed 16.01.2019).

<sup>15</sup> Mindaugas Karbauskis is the brother of Ramūnas Karbauskis, the chair of the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, which has the largest faction in the Seimas (54 out of 141 seats) following the 2016 election.

<sup>16</sup> And, until recently, Eimuntas Nekrošius (1952—2018).

is popular with a younger Russian audience. The Lithuanian figure skaters Po-vilas Vanagas and Margarita Drobiazko appear as regulars on Russian figure skating TV shows and on shows run by Russian figure skaters. The ballet performer of Lithuanian origin, Gediminas Taranda, was a principal dancer with the Bolshoi Theatre until 1993. Since 1994, he has headed the Imperial Russian Ballet company.

As an element of Russia's soft power, culture retains significant potential. An advantage of culture as a soft power resource is its attractiveness to the ethnic majorities in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Russia, however, has strong competition in the Baltics. In Lithuania, there are offices of the British Council (UK), Institut français du Royaume-Uni (France), Goethe-Institut (Germany), Det Danske Kulturinstitut (Denmark), Confucius Institute (China), and the European Union National Institutes for Culture. In today's political situation,<sup>17</sup> projects proposed by these actors may be more attractive to various Baltic audiences (including Russian speakers and 'euro-Russians') than their Russian counterparts since the former, although laden with different values, have no political component.

## **Conclusions**

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Today, the Baltics consider Russia's use of soft power in terms of hard power, i.e. as a threat to national security. Any success of Russia in this field reinforces that view. Naturally, the content available in the Baltics' Russian-language media space (including the content created in Russia) is often at odds with the political paradigms and cultural patterns regarded as the touchstone by most of

<sup>17</sup> Even the harmless cartoon *Masha and the Bear* has been declared 'Putin's propaganda. The show was banned in Riga (Sputnik Latvia. 'A very detective story: *Masha and the Bear* New Year special has been cancelled in Riga'. *Sputnik Latvia*. 04.12.2018. URL: <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/Latvia/20181204/10207435/Ochen-detektivnaya-istoriya-v-Rige-otmenili-novogodnee-predstavlenie-Masha-i-Medved.html> (accessed 16.01.2019)). The match between two Kontinental Hockey League teams (the Finnish Jokerit and the Moscow Spartak), which took place in October 2018 in the Tondiraba Ice Hall in Tallinn, produced a peculiar response. The editor-in-chief of the *Postimees* newspaper, Ott Järvela, published an article titled 'Visit by Jokreit, or Putin's political project KHL, unwelcome in Tallinn'. He wrote: 'The KHL in Tallinn means an interesting sporting event. I understand the enthusiasm of Estonian hockey lovers. It will be a pity, however, if such events evolve into a permanent collaboration between the capital of Estonia and the KHL. We do not need a Russian bastion of soft power. The monsters of the East do not look honest, they just do not. This applies not only to hockey but to sports in general' (Baltnews. Why KHL scared Estonia. *Baltnews (Estonia)*. 30.10.2018. URL: <https://baltnews.ee/tallinn-news/20181030/1017068145/Estonia-khl-match-rusofobiya.html> (accessed 16.01.2019)).

the local elites and organisations involved in countering Russia's soft power. At the same time, the Russian media functioning in a competitive space, Russian culture (both high and pop), and partly Russian educational services enjoy popularity and do not need much promotion.

While remaining essentially post-Soviet, the Baltics are making conscious steps to escape Russia's gravitational pull created by geographical affinity and a common history. It seems feasible to overcome the ephemeral Soviet identity by taking certain socio-political and cultural-educational efforts. Yet how is it possible to cancel out centuries of living side by side? In this sense, there is still significant potential for using soft power in the Baltics (or, plainly speaking, for exerting the influence that is traditional for neighbours with rich cultural and historical traditions).

Nevertheless, the central objectives of Russia's soft power (to preserve the Russian-language cultural and media space, to consolidate the Russian community, to maintain the *lingua franca* status of the Russian language in the Baltics, and to promote Russia's position in the media and research publications in order to improve the image of the country and its politics) will inevitably be perceived as threats. In practice, it leads to resource-consuming tilting at windmills of alleged Russian influence, and a conscious rejection of benefits associated with good neighbourly relations with Russia has produced tangible negative effects.

Although there is a considerable ethnocultural 'resource' of Russian speakers (euro-Russians) in the Baltics, due to political reasons, Russia has limited opportunities for the effective use of soft power in that region. The Russian speakers in the Baltics are not a homogenous group. The Old Believers, who have lived in the region before the Russian revolution, have little to do with the *limitichiks* — Soviet workers granted residence permits to staff local construction projects; the local intelligentsia originating from Moscow and Leningrad is very different from the retired military who decided to stay in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. For this reason, it is very difficult both to measure the efficiency of Russia's soft power and to evaluate the threat (if any) that, according to local researchers, it poses to the Baltics' statehood.

At the same time, the efficiency of Russia's soft power in the Baltics and other states depends on how successfully the Russian state and society develop. Joseph Nye saw soft power as both influence and attractive power. Fyodor Lukyanov rightly stresses that 'until Russia settles into its new identity, which has to replace the depleted Soviet and never-existent post-Soviet ones, its soft power will remain an array of technical measures, which are not useless but make no essential changes' [30].

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