How soft power turns into malign influence and foreign interference?

Mira Milosevic
European Parliament: Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (February 1, 2021)
Concept of soft power and its instruments in Russian strategic thinking

- Soft power is the effort to strengthen linguistic, cultural, economic and religious affinities with other states and to engage different interest groups.

Five main instruments of soft power:

(1) public relations and public diplomacy;

(2) the media;

(3) the Russian Orthodox Church;

(4) commissions devoted to "correcting distorted history" (the interpretation of the struggle against the Nazis, or the Stalinist legacy);

(5) foundations, associations, clubs and congresses to coordinate and to promote cultural and scientific cooperation, Russian language and culture beyond Russia’s borders (Russky Mir)
Two examples of how soft power turns into malign influence and foreign interference

1) Interference of the Russian Orthodox Church in Montenegro

2) Historical propaganda on WWII and its embodiment in march as a giant procession of Immortal Regiment
The Russian Orthodox Church

Examples and Working methods

- Religion plays a key role of political legitimatization

Examples:

- Orthodox Church in Ukraine (Russian Orthodox Church and Ukrainian Orthodox Church)
- Orthodox Church in Montenegro (Serbian Orthodox Church and Montenegrin Orthodox Church)
The Low on Freedom of Religion (Montenegro)

(December, 2019) - nationalization of Church property (ownership before 1918)

- Manifestation against the Low
- Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian government,
- Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government
How soft power turns into foreign interference: Working methods (tactics)

kombinacinya ("Combination")

Combination of different instruments of active measures in operation of political influence = support for manifestation against the Montenegro’s government and Low on Freedom of Religion:

- disinformation (media)
- propaganda (ROC; SOC)
- Use of tradition, historical and cultural links to justify interference
“Orthodoxy Is Defended in Montenegro”

There is a clear parallel in the attitudes of the SOC and the ROC to the Orthodox churches of Montenegro and Ukraine. They deny the existence of a Montenegrin or Ukrainian identity, and therefore of the Montenegrin or Ukrainian nation and state.
IMPACT

Montenegro represents a special target for the Kremlin because Russia’s influence is diminishing there.

The Kremlin’s main objectives in Montenegro:

1) to foster division among the population
2) to present the Kremlin as a great protector of the Serbs and the Orthodox Church in the Balkans,
3) to weaken the young Montenegrin state and democracy in order to discredit a NATO country.
IMPACT

The SOC was able to bring together citizens who were angered by the government’s offensive against the church as well as citizens dissatisfied with the autocratic government of Milo Djukanovic (30 years in power).

Russian malign influence in Montenegro is hard to measure because the Kremlin exercises this influence through proxies such as the SOC, local media, and, to a lesser extent, the government of Serbia.
Narratives on WWII: working methods

1) Historical propaganda
2) Bessmertniy Polk ("The immortal Regiment")
Narratives on WWII: historical propaganda

1) **World War II** started in September 1939 and ended in Europe on 8 May 1945.
2) **The Great Patriotic War** started on 22 June 1941 with the Nazi-German attack on the Soviet Union and ended with its surrender to the Soviet Union on 9 May 1945.

- **Almost two years are unaccounted for from September 1939 to June 1941.**
Objective: to shape the memory of WWII; the myth of saving Europe
Objectives / Attribution

Objectives: Historical propaganda= to shape the memory on WWII

- Orthodox Church = weaponization of tradition

- Historical propaganda and the Orthodox Church as instruments of foreign interference are part of the Russia’s concept of foreign strategy.
What could best prevent or counter foreign interference?

FOREIGN INTERFERENCE STARTS AT HOME

- Sharing a cultural religious and political background with Russia facilitates the influence of the Kremlin.
- Pay particular attention to its comparative vulnerabilities and advantages, because vulnerabilities are what make the Kremlin’s interference possible.
- Pay attention to “proxies” - Orthodox Church / Media
- “Naming and shaming “
- Pay more attention to IMPACT of Russia’s interference