

Universalism and uniqueness in contemporary soft power strategies

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Abstract

The author analyses the principles and regularities of the competition of soft power strategies of different states as an actual problem of comparative political science. The article addresses the question of determining principles and key elements of competing soft power strategies in the system of international relations, which is of current interest in comparative political science. As a methodological basis of the analysis was used the H. Hotelling's law of spatial competition and its political implications, formulated by A. Downs. The author examines two contrasting tendencies: drift of the content and strategies of soft power of different states towards unification and convergence of communicated values and standards, or on the contrary increase of ideological and value polarisation in the wake of escalating international and global tensions. The principles and rules of spatial competition by H. Hotelling and A. Downs have been applied for typology of national strategies of soft power to evaluate their effectiveness and segmentation of potential audience for maximum impact. It was concluded that, due to the polymodality and civilisational diversity of the world, universalist soft power projects today can only have limited success, with significant costs and reputational losses, while attracting value-close countries and pushing away the others. This division provides the basis for the international clustering by interests and values.

Keywords: comparative political science, values, spatial competition, soft power, Hotelling's law, political competition, political stability

Uniwersalizm i oryginalność we współczesnych strategiach *soft power*

Streszczenie

Autor analizuje zasady i osobiwości strategii *soft power* różnych państw jako problem badawczy politologii porównawczej. Artykuł podejmuje problematykę określenia zasad i kluczowych elementów konkurencyjnych strategii *soft power* w systemie stosunków międzynarodowych, które są aktualnie przedmiotem zainteresowania nauk politycznych. Podstawą metodologiczną analizy jest prawo przestrzennego zróżnicowania H. Hotellinga (znane jako prawo/model Hotellinga) i jego polityczne implikacje, sformułowane przez A. Downsa. Autor bada dwie przeciwstawne tendencje: dryfowanie

treści i strategii *miękkiej sily* różnych państw w kierunku unifikacji i konwergencji komunikowanych wartości i standardów oraz przeciwnie – wzrost polaryzacji ideologicznej i wartości w następstwie eskalacji napięć międzynarodowych i globalnych. Zasady i reguły przestrzennego zróżnicowania H. Hotellinga i A. Downsa zostały zastosowane do opracowania typologii narodowych strategii *soft power* w celu oceny ich skuteczności i segmentacji potencjalnych odbiorców dla uzyskania maksymalnego efektu. Stwierdzono, że ze względu na polimodalność i cywilizacyjną różnorodność świata, uniwersalistyczne projekty *soft power* mogą mieć ograniczony sukces, przy znacznych kosztach i stratach reputacji, przyciągając jednocześnie kraje mające zbliżone wartości i odpychając inne. Podział ten stanowi podstawę do grupowania „baniek informacyjnych” nie tylko według interesów, ale także wartości.

Słowa kluczowe: politologia porównawcza, wartości, zróżnicowanie przestrzenne, *soft power*, prawo Hotellinga, konkurencja polityczna, stabilność polityczna

Soft power resources that constitute the power potential of the political subject have crucial significance for political analysis (De Martino 2020). As it is noted by P.B. Parshin, “One can possess soft power as a resource. Possession of soft power offers multiple opportunities to the one who is endowed with it” (Parshin 2015: p. 15). Spanish researcher J. Noya concludes that soft power is not a type of authority, but rather a source of it; even military structures can be regarded as soft power sources, as long as they serve in this power’s interests (Noya 2005).

The way soft power strategies are developed and implemented in certain countries is a matter of current interest in political research, as any policy in this area can display particular features and characteristics depending on national identity, and how people from different cultures and historic backgrounds perceive soft power.

Many researchers note that soft power strategy implementation is inextricably linked with the way recipients interpret information. Russian scholar O.G. Leonova argues that cultural expansion may prove to be useless in the event of a drastic conceptual divergence with the recipient society’s cultural and historical heritage (Leonova 2014: p. 20). Unfamiliar concepts are not necessarily denied by a recipient; they can become reshaped while going through the prism of national and civilisational attitudes, characteristic of a certain country or nation, and continue functioning in a modified form. The institution of democracy, and the electoral, cabinet and party systems in Russia and other non-western countries can serve as a good example of such modified concept, differing from that of the West (Leonova 2015: p. 88).

Today we can witness actualisation of two opposite tendencies of information policies and strategies of soft power of political actors. The first trend is the formation of “informational bubbles”, further segmentation and clustering of information space, ideological and value content of soft power of different countries. The opposite trend is further convergence of content, value content and soft power strategies of different countries competing for influence in the world.

The main goal of the article is to evaluate these trends and develop a heuristic model of segmentation of national strategies of soft power based on the models of game theory and collective action theory, in particular, the Hotelling–Downs spatial competition model.

Methodology

In this context, it is crucial to find out to what extent the tendencies of further unification of soft power content, value creation and strategies among nations competing for regional and global influence are objective. At a first glance, the tendency of international competition to drift towards standardisation of soft power content and methods is triggered by the processes of globalisation, information revolution, creation of a global information space, as well as competing countries' natural imitation of the leading nations' actions. Such scenario may have a convincing theoretical underpinning: according to the law of spatial competition, as suggested by American economist H. Hotelling, in the natural process of increasing competition it is rational for the rivaling sides to make their promoted products as similar as possible. Hotelling's law was formulated in 1929 in an attempt to explain why local shops in small towns were, as a rule, located in noticeable proximity (Hotelling 1929). Hotelling concluded that competition will keep growing until it reaches the Nash equilibrium, i.e. until the shops find themselves side by side at the halfway point in the same street. Further developing these ideas, in the middle of the 20th century, American political scientist A. Downs proposed the "median voter theorem". Taking the US voting system as an example, Downs concluded that competition in the context of the two-party system leads to ideological convergence of the two parties. To succeed in the elections, the parties map out their programs to embrace the preferences of the typical "median" voter (Downs 1957).

The drift of states' foreign policy competition in the direction of unification of soft power content and technologies observed in the 2000s was due to globalisation processes, the formation of the single planetary information space, and could also be explained by the natural copying of the actions of the leading countries by their competitors.

Thus, a question arises: on a short-term horizon, is there a possibility of further integration of the content of different countries' national soft power policies? Is it feasible for nations to share and transmit outside a specific universal set of values and attractors with only slight variations, with an ambition to create standardised "success and appeal" benchmarks, targeting the "median" contemporary individual or society as a whole? It may be noteworthy that major soft power comparative ratings are based on this not entirely unambiguous assertion. Then again, which soft power strategy is more reasonable: to compete with today's leaders on their turf or endeavor something of their own, sometimes radically different and even the opposite?

Contrary the task of further segmenting and targeting external soft-power influence of political actors is becoming more urgent considering civilisational diversity of the world in the conditions of increasing international competition.

Analysis and results

To a certain degree, a drift toward convergence of preferences of different people worldwide, and consequently, national soft power strategies and content, is indeed

taking place. For instance, this process manifests itself in universal aspirations towards democratic values and increasingly similar standards of economic prosperity and consumption. As former head of "Rossotrudnichestvo" K.I. Kosachev noticed: "The basic principles of democracy, human rights and freedoms are approximately in the same category. They are fixed in the fundamental international legal documents – the UN Charter, conventions and treaties and therefore cannot be construed as someone's property (in this particular case as property of the West), or as an individual feature of someone's soft power. Freedom, democracy, lawfulness, social stability and respect for human rights have become "the consumer goods basket" of the modern world, which everyone would like to have. Any idea rejecting this standard 21st-century set of values would certainly fail to stand. As the world's ideological bipolarity has become a thing of the past, people increasingly emphasize the uniformity of the basic values for a majority of nations, while understanding that there are differences in their *individual manifestation* due to national, historical and other specifics (a federative or a unitary state, a multi-ethnic or mono-ethnic country, etc.)" (Kosachev 2012).

For example, political expert C.V. Rivas believes that contemporary cultural and public diplomacy strategies of different countries cannot be successful unless they are based on a universal set of values, which Rivas calls as "cosmopolitical constructionism" (Rivas 2010).

Another global process that is taking place now is the connection of physical and information spaces of the world's countries and regions, including proliferation of the same goods, brands, entertainment, cultural and consumer patterns, as well as the formation of a global civil society (Vasilenko et al. 2013; Kouma 2019; Ivanov 2019).

At the same time, against the backdrop of these processes, it is becoming increasingly evident that to find your own inimitable identity, create your values, advocate and promote them in the age of globalisation and universalisation appears to be a more advantageous strategy for those countries that *de facto* have something to offer to other nations.

For instance, experts in the area of national branding claim that the most effective strategy of national image promotion is highlighting national specificity, especially the country's idiosyncrasy and uniqueness, as it was in case with the brand "Incredible India" and its respective image-building policy (Vasilenko et al. 2013).

Concurrently, too many factors now (including escalating international tensions, accompanied by a return to the Cold War confrontation rhetoric and the global division of the world into "friends" and "foes") are against the prospect of further universalisation of values and standards and, consequently, of the national soft power contents. As C. Prestowitz wittily remarked, "dreams that two countries served by McDonald's food chains will never come into conflict with each other" have not come true (Prestowitz 2005: p. 75).

As it is known, globalisation goes in perfect step with the process of alienation, separating the alleged first and third world countries, which increases the gap between their material values, notions of power and world outlook, leading to the collision of interests. In the past, the West tried to make the imminent cross-civilisational clashes look like a con-

flict between the "global humanity" and marginal rancorous groups that declared "jihad against the world" (Barber 1996). In fact, it is becoming more evident that living standards, broadcast by mass culture and world media, appear unattainable for the greater part of humanity, which often results in frustration leading to political destabilisation. In political science, this effect is being researched by different experts, for example, by T. Gurr in the framework of his "relative deprivation" theory (Gurr 1970; Islam 2021; Ivanov 2015).

It is also noteworthy that the Hotelling–Downs model can only be used partially to analyse such large-scale processes, as it is based on regular distribution of prospective consumers/voters. However, if we speak about their polymodal distribution (typical of competition on the global level), for some competitors, on the contrary, it may prove to be reasonable to drift away from the centralisation tendencies.

We can assume that certain bifurcation points, dividing countries and peoples according to their basic values, have been clearly marked out. These bifurcation points deny any possibility of compromise; primarily, these are the concepts of traditional family values, religion, and a wish to maintain national sovereignty and civilisational identity. As a result, states part with the illusory ambition of being equally appealing to the "entire global society" and face the need to decide on the priority vector of their soft power policy.

In other words, to achieve equal attention value among all countries and nations, or even the majority of them, is presumably unfeasible. In the contemporary global political landscape, one can witness an increasing number of axiological grid points and cross-civilisational split-ups, while certain attractors, which previously had been strongly associated with solely western countries, such as a market economy and democratic institutions, are losing this connotation.

Data collected in the framework of World Values Survey (a global research project, which has been exploring people's values and beliefs in almost 100 countries since 1981) may become a potentially valuable tool in investigating the stated problem. Analysis of World Values Survey's data made by political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel asserts that there are two major dimensions of cross-cultural variation in the world:

- "traditional values" *versus* "secular-rational values";
- "survival values" *versus* "self-expression values"¹ (Apsalone, Šumilo 2015: p. 279).

According to the value scores of different countries in these two dimensions, Inglehart and Welzel suggest their own "Cultural Map of the World".

Despite evident Eurocentrism and a certain ideological bias of the Inglehart–Welzel's value classification (for instance, it is not entirely clear why the authors include same-sex marriage support in the self-expression values, but do not include raising children in the same category), we deem it heuristically reasonable to apply Hotelling–Downs' spatial competition theoretical principles to the two-dimensional "Cultural Map of the World" developed by the WVS (see *Figure 1*).

¹ Official site World Values Survey, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>