

## “That’ll Teach Them”: Investigating the Soft Power Conversion Model through the Case of Russian Higher Education

Original article

DOI: 10.31992/0869-3617-2022-31-1-120-140

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**Abstract.** While the international environment remains characterized by the desire of states to strengthen their position, the literature has revealed a growing preference for soft power instruments over military intervention. Higher education has been repurposed as a tool to achieve foreign policy goals, with many states embracing the international norm on *world-class universities* in an attempt to improve their international competitiveness and their image abroad. This paper considers the soft power conversion model of higher education and attempts to determine its effectiveness through a case study devoted to Russian Higher Education. A survey of foreign students starting their studies and of another finishing their studies in three leading Russian universities reveals that receiving a higher education in Russia may contribute to aligning students’ positions with the Russian perspective on international issues diffused in these universities as was confirmed by surveying a control group of Russian students. These preliminary findings suggest that the benefits of internationalizing national higher education systems are not just reserved to the norm initiators (US, UK) but extend to second wave norm adopters (Russia, China).

**Keywords:** soft power conversion model, higher education, foreign policy, world-class universities

**Cite as:** Crowley-Vigneau, A., Baykov, A.A., Kalyuzhnova, E. (2022). “That’ll Teach Them”: Investigating the Soft Power Conversion Model through the Case of Russian Higher Education. *Vysshee obrazovanie v Rossii = Higher Education in Russia*. Vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 120-140, doi: 10.31992/0869-3617-2022-31-1-120-140.

## Конверсионная модель мягкой силы российского высшего образования

Научная статья

DOI: 10.31992/0869-3617-2022-31-1-120-140

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*Аннотация.* В научной литературе мирополитического профиля сохраняется устойчивый интерес к мягким, несиловым инструментам проецирования внешнего влияния, несмотря на то, что международная обстановка всё более отчётливо характеризуется усилением тенденций к комплексной междержавной конкуренции. В этом контексте высшее образование всё чаще рассматривается в качестве инструмента достижения целей внешней политики. Так, многие государства усвоили международную норму об университетах мирового класса и стали внедрять её, стремясь повысить свою глобальную конкурентоспособность и улучшить свой имидж за рубежом. В данной статье рассматривается конверсионная модель «мягкой силы» высшего образования и предпринимается попытка оценить её эффективность. Опрос иностранных студентов из трёх ведущих российских университетов, только приступающих к учёбе в России, и тех, кто уже завершает свою подготовку, показывает, что получение высшего образования в России может способствовать «выравниванию» позиций студентов с официальной российской точкой зрения на ключевые международные проблемы. Данный вывод был дополнительно подтверждён опросом контрольной группы российских студентов. Эти предварительные заключения свидетельствуют о том, что преимущества интернационализации национальных систем высшего образования не только «зарезервированы» для инициаторов соответствующей нормы (США, Великобритания), но и вполне применимы к тем государствам, которые выступают её реципиентами (Россия, Китай).

*Ключевые слова:* конверсионная модель мягкой силы, Россия, высшее образование, внешняя политика, университеты мирового класса

*Для цитирования:* Crowley-Vigneau A., Baykov A.A., Kalyuzhnova E. “That’ll Teach Them”: Investigating the Soft Power Conversion Model through the Case of Russian Higher Education // Высшее образование в России. 2022. Т. 31. № 1. С. 120–140. DOI: 10.31992/0869-3617-2022-31-1-120-140

### Introduction

Widely used and abused by public figures and government officials, the concept of soft power has polarized the academic community for decades. Proponents of soft power, when faced with

difficulties in explaining how a country’s language, education and overall attractiveness can convert into a foreign policy advantage, have shown how different types of power support and enable each other, with a new focus put on

smart power as a reconciliation of hard and soft power [1]. Detractors of soft power argue that the concept has no explanatory power if soft power cannot produce effects independently from hard power, emphasizing that its understanding is founded on unverified assumptions linked to changes in people's behaviour [2] and that there are too few empirical findings to back it up [3].

This paper considers a component of soft power, higher education, and attempts to determine whether initiatives to create world-class universities and to attract foreign students could lead to an improvement of a country's image abroad and global prestige. The decision to set this study in Russia was motivated by the need for more cases analyzing soft power in non-Western countries and interest in determining whether Russia can benefit in terms of image from the intensive and costly internationalization programs it has launched.

The soft power conversion model of higher education into a foreign policy asset rests upon two main assumptions, the first being that foreign students change their perceptions while studying abroad in favour of their host country and the second being that if and when they take a position of influence in their home country, they will adopt positions favourable to the development of friendly relations with the country in which they studied. This paper addresses the first assumption by trying to determine if and how students change their worldview during their studies abroad.

Based on a survey of foreign students starting their bachelor studies and of another finishing their bachelor studies in three leading Russian universities, the authors reveal that receiving higher education in Russia may contribute to aligning students' positions with the Russian perspective on international issues diffused in these universities. After receiving a higher education in Russia, foreign students were more sceptical about intervening in other states' internal affairs to promote democratization, more likely to value the role of the UN and to privilege hard power factors over cultural and historical factors

than their first-year counterparts. This study reveals not only that foreign students' perceptions of the international system evolved during their studies in Russia but that their worldview became more in line with the perceptions of the control group of Russian students.

This paper first considers the existing literature on the conversion model of higher education into soft power and highlights the impact of the norm on world-class universities on the internationalization of higher education and on states' foreign policy. It then analyses the Russian context, including the government's attempts to change the country's global image and the tools it used to develop its soft power capacities including Project 5-100, the country's main excellence in higher education initiative. The authors present the methodology and the findings of the survey conducted in Russian universities, which attempts to determine whether foreign students change their worldviews when studying abroad. The last section discusses the findings of the study and their implications for the field.

### **Conversion of higher education into soft power**

#### ***Soft power and higher education***

The concept of soft power when applied to foreign policy refers to a state's capacity to use persuasion rather than coercion to achieve its goals [4, p. 8]. By shaping the preferences of another country through its leaders and its population, a state gains a unique capacity to promote its interests by ensuring that that country will offer it its political support [5]. The decentralization of the world system has led to significant changes both in the hierarchy of states and the way they manifest their power [6]. While the ability to exert 'hard power' (or the use of military force or economic pressure) is still considered to be an essential factor contributing to a country's international status, a state's capacity to use cultural and political attraction to promote its agenda of world politics has become a matter of interest to scholars [7]. J. Nye underlined how education,

innovation and economic performance were becoming more relevant factors of power than geopolitical factors such as the size or natural resources of a country [8]. The distinction between soft and hard power can be vague, particularly when considering economic influence, with the main distinction being that financial aid and loans have to be non-conditional to be categorized as soft power [9]. Educational aid is widely accepted to be soft power [5]. Soft power has for main vectors public diplomacy, bilateral and multilateral diplomacy [10] and targets two levels, the elites and the general public, leading the distinction between higher soft power and low soft power [11]. Soft power can be exercised by governments 'public soft power', but also by individuals and businesses 'private soft power' [12] and can take the form of official targeted institutional investments or indirect investments allocated to specific individuals [13]. As the concept of soft power became widely used, it has been 'stretched and abused as a concept' [14] to the dismay of its creator [15]. The focus on attraction and co-opting rather than persuasion [16; 2] and the distinction between soft power and smart power (that brings together hard and soft power resources) [1] reflect efforts to clarify the terminology. By identifying the separate components of soft power (resources, instruments, reception and outcomes), recent studies have highlighted the impact of individual actors on soft power and opened the way for an empirical evaluation of the efficiency of each of its underlying mechanisms [3].

Higher education has been attributed the power to produce significant soft power [10]. Nye noted that upon their return home after receiving a higher education abroad, students are expected to promote the language and culture of their host country [10, p. 12]. The erosion of the Soviet Union has been linked to a combination of hard and soft power factors, with the increase in international educational exchanges described as effectively serving US foreign policy interests [10]. A government's ability to use higher education as a soft power rests on its

country's history and culture, but also on the characteristics of the educational system including the norms that regulate it [5]. Not only is the soft power potential of a country rooted in its ethnic, religious and cultural traditions, it depends on a country's ability to socially and technologically keep up with the mainstream of the time, its capacity to spread and compete beyond its boundaries and participate in international mobility flows [5]. The concept of soft power in higher education has become increasingly popular among policy makers, which has in turn led to a whole range of new interpretations of the term but also to clarifying the ways in which higher education is expected to develop a country's soft power. The US Secretary of State Colin Powell noted in 2001: "We are proud that the high quality of American colleges and universities attracts students and scholars from around the world. These individuals enrich our communities with their academic abilities and cultural diversity, and they return home with an increased understanding and often a lasting affection for the United States. I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here."<sup>1</sup> British Prime Minister Tony Blair also noted in 2006 that the UK as a whole benefits from attracting foreign students and that through student exchanges "friendships and links are forged, and relations are strengthened between our peoples and countries at many different levels. Many of the foreign leaders and ministers I meet are graduates of our universities"<sup>2</sup>. More recently, Boris Johnson spoke of the "kindly gunboats of British soft power" emphasizing the productive influence of British education, the English language and UK cultural export in shaping minds across the

<sup>1</sup> Powell, C. (2001). Statement on International Education Week. Available at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2001/4462.htm> (accessed 21.12.2021).

<sup>2</sup> Blair, T. (2006). Why we must attract more students from overseas. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2006/apr/18/internationalstudents.politics> (accessed 21.12.2021).

globe<sup>3</sup>. Language policies and cultural centers remain to this day an important part of many countries' diplomatic arsenals [17]. The popularity of soft power is reflected by ratings designed to compare various aspects of countries' performance, for example the "serving world leaders educated abroad" index yearly released by the Higher Education Policy Institute reveals a current trend of the US replacing the UK as the main educator for foreign leaders<sup>4</sup>.

The academic literature has been criticized for not clarifying the theoretical soft power conversion mechanisms ("Nye doesn't provide a persuasive model to explain how states shift potential soft power resources to realized power") and for not providing empirical evidence that this conversion actually happens [5, p. 22]. A study of British political discourses revealed that international students when studying abroad are expected to change their allegiances and adopt the political stance of their host countries, an approach which has been criticized for assuming that universities perform a predefined ideological role rather than open up the horizons of their students [2]. The soft power conversion model also rests on two more assumptions, the first being that when they return home, foreign students will assume a position of influence in business, politics or other sectors and the second being that their time in the host country, both the education received and the positive experience associated with their stay, will lead them to develop trade and political links with the host country [2]. While

it has inspired a lot of policymaking, the soft power in higher education model has not been the object of empirical studies to support its validity. Studies on international students indicate that some students do not socially integrate [18] and may not form positive associations with the host country [19]. While negative foreign student experiences have been studied [20; 21], their impact on a host country's soft power has not been fully explored. Studies have however shown that attempts to promote a country's soft power through non-educational means (for example sports) can backfire and damage a country's reputation leading to "soft disempowerment" [22]. Additionally, affinities with host countries may pre-exist receiving a higher education abroad: a positive attitude towards host countries may be a factor for choosing to study there rather than a result of the time spent there [23]. This review of the literature reveals that the lack of empirical testing of the higher education soft power conversion model has led to each underlying assumption being questioned by scholars and to the validity of the entire framework being put into question. However, the fact that some students do not change their political identities while abroad, that others have bad experiences and that alumni do not always assume positions of influence upon their return home, does not in itself invalidate the soft power conversion model, which requires empirical testing.

#### *The norm on world-class universities*

World-class universities have been characterized as an international norm, which emerged post-WW2 in the West and spread around the world with many countries launching government-funded excellence in higher education initiatives to make their universities globally competitive [24]. Globalization sparked an intense competition between universities for the most talented students and faculty members and the need for constant innovation to be economically competitive led to pressure for universities to perform competitive research [25]. American Ivy league universities, together with a se-

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, B. (2016). Britain the soft-power superpower of global liberalism. Available at: <https://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2016/10/britain-the-soft-power-superpower-of-global-liberalism-boris-johnsons-conservative-conference-speech-full-text.html> (accessed 21.12.2021).

<sup>4</sup> Hillman, N. (2020). HEPI's Annual Soft-Power Ranking, 2020: The UK slips further behind the US. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/08/27/hepi-annual-soft-power-ranking-2020-the-uk-slips-further-behind-the-us-2/> (accessed 21.12.2021).

lect number of UK universities, acted as leaders in promoting this new trend. Their competitive position on the higher education market is linked to a combination of factors including the popularity of English-speaking destinations, the historical reputation for providing a high-quality education and their dynamic economies. The rise in tuition fees, particularly in Anglo-Saxon universities, was a response to the growing cost of the services rendered, the increased demand for university places and the value associated with a diploma when seeking employment. Increasing tuition fees was associated with a decrease in applications and in attendance [26] but also with a boost in academic performance [27]. The focus on partnerships with businesses and on meeting stakeholder demands also contributed to changing the organizational model of universities [28]. An analysis of British policy documents reveals that the desire to develop soft power through higher education is linked to concerns of becoming irrelevant in the world stage as developing countries gain in influence [2]. The competition of universities was reinforced globally by global ratings, which claim to objectively assess the performance of universities based on a number of key indicators [29].

While the norm of world-class universities was created mainly by American and British elite universities, governments in other countries realized that in order to sustain economic growth and remain relevant, they should create universities of a new model. The terminological uncertainty surrounding the concept of 'world-class universities' [30] and its western bias [31] were addressed in a World Bank publication, which noted that universities could reach excellence, regardless of their location, if they were international, produced competitive research published in peer-reviewed journals, attracted the best students and faculty members and were in active cooperation with businesses [32]. Other European countries launched support programs in an attempt to make their universities globally competitive [33]. They were mirrored by China with its projects 211, 985 and double first-class strategy aimed at improving the im-

age of Chinese higher education abroad [34] and catching up with the West [35]. Launched in 2012, Russian project 5-100 has similar soft power ambitions [36].

While it began as an independent process in a number of western Anglo-Saxon universities, the internationalization and competitive strive for excellence in higher education grew beyond its initial scope and became a matter of concern for governments and universities worldwide. Non-western countries have gone from perceiving the ideology of world-class universities as an instrument of Western domination to a tool to further their own foreign policy agendas, as illustrated by a study on how Russian flagship universities are being used to foster soft power [37]. The number of countries to consider higher education as an effective way to promote their national interests on the world stage is on the rise [7]. While some countries doubtlessly find it easier for cultural, linguistic, historical and other reasons to convert their higher education into soft power, the wide adoption of the norm on world-class universities reflects countries' desire to develop their capacities to compete on the global arena. The lack of empirical findings regarding how useful higher education may be in improving a country's soft power stands in stark contrast with the man-power and funds spent to boost national universities' performance on the international arena. Based on this analysis, we can add to our previous question about the empirical foundations of the soft power conversion model a distinction between norm creators (US, UK) and norm adopters (France, China, Russia...).

### Russian context

#### *Russian attempts to develop soft power*

Russia starts to take an interest in developing its soft power in the 2010s as reflected by V. Putin's 2012 speech on Russia and the Changing World: "*Exporting education and culture will help promote Russian goods, services and ideas; guns and imposing political regimes will not. We must work to expand Russia's educational and cultural presence in the world, es-*

*pecially in those countries where a substantial part of the population speaks or understands Russian”<sup>5</sup>*

This extract reflects Russia’s desire to yield political influence in the international system and its specific understanding of soft power. Global political leadership depends on a country’s “ability to nurture purposefully its neighbours or competitors” and Russia wants to participate in “defining the values and rules of this world order” [38]. While Russia’s influence is designed to have a global reach, the focus is put on developing the allegiance of Russian speaking populations, which is reflected in policy measures to support educational ties with CIS countries. The 2013 Russian concept of foreign policy makes developing soft power officially a policy priority by referring three times the term ‘soft power’. The relatively new focus on soft power in the Russian government results from the perception that the country lags behind in terms of soft power in the international community while it can hold its own as regards hard power capacities [39]. Russia’s image and global attractiveness has been officially recognized by the government as requiring specific policy attention, which should help it overcome stereotypes, promote the Russian language and overcome its perception as an aggressor. Russia has developed different instruments to reach its soft power goals including the Russian World foundation, student scholarships, bilateral civil society forums (such as the Trianon Dialogue and the Sochi Dialogue), with an emphasis put on reaching out to populations rather than the political class [40]. Russia’s vocal promotion of soft power does not however preclude the use of hard power and the government has tried on various occasions to use them jointly [40]. This simultaneous use of soft and hard power seems to bring us back to Nye’s smart power, according to which one type of power enables another [1]. Their combination, which de facto helps

<sup>5</sup> Putin, V.V. (2012). Russia and the Changing World. Rossiiskaya Gazeta, February 27 Available at: <https://rg.ru/2012/02/27/putin-politika.html> (дата обращения 28.12.2021). (Russ.).

overcome the soft power conversion difficulties, but may lead to suspicion and distrust among targeted communities [41].

While Russia’s soft power has been described as largely understudied in the academic literature, several schools of thought exist on the subject [40]. Some studies point out the continuity of Russia’s soft power strategies from the Soviet Union to the present day [42]. Others focus on the semantic differences between Nye’s understanding of soft power and that of the Russian government [43; 44]. Region-specific analysis of Russia’s soft power is an increasingly popular approach, with an emphasis put on how foreign policy measures influence ‘compatriots’ in specific countries [45–49]. Topical studies of foreign students in Russia and soft power suggest that bonding with local students will increase the likeliness foreign students will return home with a sense of loyalty to Russia [50]. The bulk of the literature on Russian soft power – as with soft power in general – remains however theoretical, with a focus put on discourse analysis and few authors engaging in empirical assessments of its efficiency.

#### *Russia’s soft power in higher education*

Russia’s use of soft power in higher education can be traced back to Soviet times, well before the concept was coined and entered political discussions. Higher education was considered to be an “ideological weapon” during the Cold War and the Soviet Union developed an education export strategy, offering foreign students in communist countries scholarships to study free of charge in Soviet universities [38]. Experts recognize that the Soviet Union had a significant amount of soft power, which was progressively undermined by the hard power measures it took until the block itself disintegrated [51]. After the economic crisis of the 1990s, Russia still retained the soft power potential emanating from its ties with CIS countries and the capacity to attract foreign students. The prestige of Russian universities and the good ‘value for money’ of higher education in Russia are assets universities have tried to build up upon with initiatives such as the CIS university

network, the BRICS university network and the SCO network university [52; 53]. Russia's integration in the Bologna Process contributed to harmonizing its educational standards with the EU, facilitating student exchanges and joint research. Leading Russian universities worked to develop joint programs with foreign universities offering students sought-after dual degree diplomas. The soft power mission of universities was explicitly recognized by universities, with the Rector of MGIMO University Anatoly Torkunov stating: "Offering education services to foreign students is one of the key soft power instruments of any state. It is the university years that shape young people's values and view."<sup>6</sup> In 2020, Russia hosted 262 thousand tertiary students from abroad, representing 4,7% of global mobile students (UNESCO 2021). The trend goes towards a greater attraction of foreign students, with figures increasing by 43% since 2014 (from 183 thousand)<sup>7</sup>. Russia's soft power efforts in higher education may be regarded with suspicion, particularly by countries trying to assert their statehood such as the Baltic States which perceive Russia's initiatives as hard power wrapped in a soft power design [40]. While soft power can flow through civil societies without governmental intervention, the existence of historical and psychological problems sometimes makes this impossible and governments have to resort to "formalized dialogue institutions" to promote mutual understanding, as with the case of Russia and the EU [41]. Russia's efforts to attract foreign students are part of a larger soft power strategy aimed at gaining recognition on the global stage for the quality of the country's higher education system. Project 5-100 launched in 2012 by the Russian govern-

ment is an ambitious excellence in higher education program, reflecting the country's resolution to develop world-class universities by improving its research, transparency and quality standards.

### Survey on changes in foreign students' perception of Russia

#### *Methodology*

We identified in the academic literature a gap related to the conversion of soft power potential into foreign policy capacity and the absence of empirical studies measuring soft power in higher education. We attempted to partially address this gap by carrying out a survey of foreign students studying in Bachelor programs Russia and analysing the changes in their perceptions of Russia and its place in the world during the course of their studies. The higher education soft power conversion model rests upon two main assumptions: (1) that foreign students change their perceptions while studying abroad in favour of their host country and (2) that if and when they take a position of influence in their home country, they will adopt positions favourable to the development of friendly relations with the country in which they studied. This paper intentionally addresses only the first assumption, trying to determine, based on a case study, if and how students change their worldview during their studies.

The choice of Russia as a country to set the case study is motivated by two factors: First, in spite of the development of research on soft power in BRICS countries and smaller nations, the core of the research still focuses on the United States and western European countries [22; 54]. Studies of Russian soft power are mostly theoretical and few offer a specific focus on higher education. Second, Russia is a second wave adopter of the international norm on world-class universities and it is interesting to determine whether countries, which did not initiate the norm can benefit in terms of foreign policy from implementing it. In other words, can all countries gain from the trend of the internationalization of higher education and improve their global standing or is it a zero-sum game.

<sup>6</sup> Torkunov, A. (2013). Education as a Soft Power Instrument of Russia's Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/education-as-a-soft-power-instrument-of-russia-s-foreign-pol/> (accessed 21.12.2021).

<sup>7</sup> Study in Russia. Available at: <https://studyinrussia.ru/en/actual/articles/a-record-number-of-international-students-chose-russia-in-2020/> (accessed 21.12.2021).

In order to determine the changes in student perceptions of Russia and its place in the international system, we surveyed groups of first year foreign students having just joined three leading Russian universities' Bachelor programs and groups of fourth year foreign students completing these same courses in the same universities. The decision not to survey one and the same group of students at the start and the end of their studies was motivated by the need to reduce respondents' awareness of the goal of the survey, which could create a significant bias in their responses. Being asked to fill out the same or a similar questionnaire twice would increase students' awareness of the goal of the study. Fourth-year students would automatically think back to the answers they previously gave and, in some cases, would work out that their changes in worldview were being analyzed, impacting the reliability of the findings. Prior experiences of being in an experiment increase 'demand characteristics', a bias occurring when subjects try to gain knowledge of the hypothesis being tested and respond by lending support to or in rarer cases attempting to sabotage the experiment, thus in both cases negatively impacting the reliability of the data [55; 56]. Nevertheless, in order to ensure the comparability of the first- and fourth-year student groups, the researchers made sure the samples were similar in terms of age, nationality of origin, gender and social background.

The need to conceal from respondents the goal of the study to avoid a bias [57] impacted the design of this study but also choices made in the formulation of the survey. Indeed, the survey consists of indirect questions related to student perceptions of the international system, and avoids addressing directly the issue of Russia's place in it. This was done to avoid 'courtesy bias' [58] and ensure that students did not feel like there was a wrong or right answer to be questions being asked. Several additional precautions were taken: while students were contacted by the Dean's office of their university, the cover letter accompanying the survey clearly stated that they were not being tested,

that the study had academic purposes and that responses were anonymous and could not be traced back to them. While background information was used in the research, respondent anonymity was ensured throughout the study.

The survey was also conducted on a control group of Russian students of these same programs to ensure that they, as Russians, did indeed select the answers considered by the authors as being in line with the Russian worldview. In order to avoid an age-related bias, the sample of Russian students included an equal number of first- and fourth-year BA students. The survey was rolled out during the 2020–2021 academic year in three leading Moscow universities: Moscow State Institute of International Relations, the Higher School of Economics and Moscow State University. In all, 675 student responses were registered, corresponding to a satisfactory 94% response rate. All students were enrolled in social science courses (International Relations and Political Science) during which they are expected to more exposed to Russian political views than in other specializations.

The survey consists of seven questions [Appendix 1] focusing on International Relations issues such as the main component of a state's power (Question 1), the most legitimate pillar of international order (Question 2), whether it is right for governments to promote the democratization of other states (Question 3), what means can be rightfully used by states to defend their compatriots abroad (Question 4), the cause of the break-up of the Soviet Union (Question 5), a country's main foreign policy leverage (Question 6), and the causes of the standoff between Russia and the West (Question 7). These questions address issues that Russian scholars or the Russian government have a specific take on that reflects their worldview. 'Russia' is only mentioned as the answer to one question of the survey out of the seven questions and is not the answer that Russian students are expected to give (nor the one they do indeed give according to our control group).

Answers from our control group of Russian students largely confirmed expectations regard-

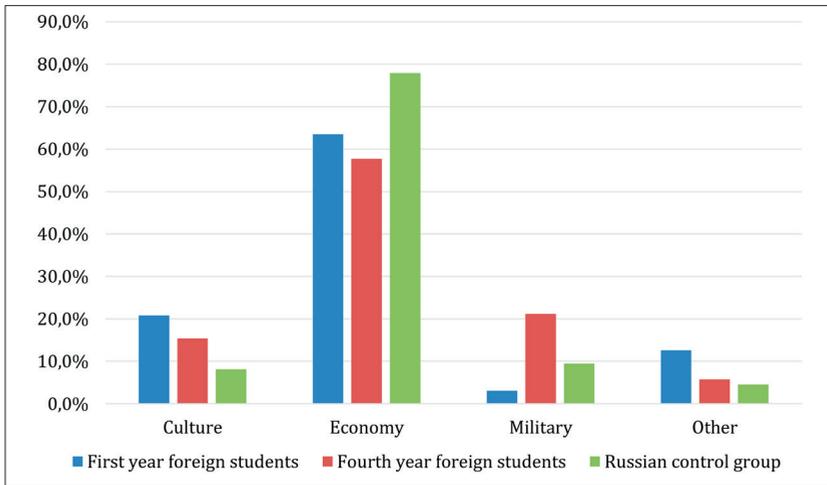


Fig. 1. The main component of a state's power

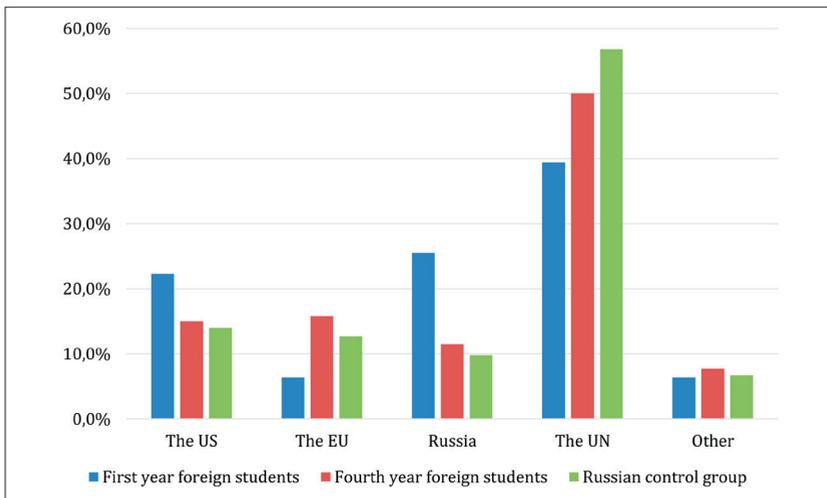


Fig. 2. The most legitimate pillar of international order

ing what would be considered in line with the Russian worldview (the list of their answers can be found in *Table 1*) but led nonetheless to some adjustments in the initial assumptions. The Russian worldview perceives economic and military force as the main component of a state's power: while these were the first two answers selected by Russian students, economic power (77.9%) very much predominated over other factors (military 9.5%). The Russian view that the United Nations as the most legitimate pillar of international order was confirmed by the con-

trol group (56.8%) as was the fact that Russians disapprove of governments intervening in the internal affairs of other states to promote democratization (56.1%). Russian students took as expected a strong stance on defending the rights of their compatriots abroad, with two thirds advocating the use of hard power (military or economic measures) if necessary. The majority of Russian students put down the break-up of the Soviet Union to internal factors (economic weaknesses of the USSR 68.3%) rather than foreign influences (3.7%), in line with the

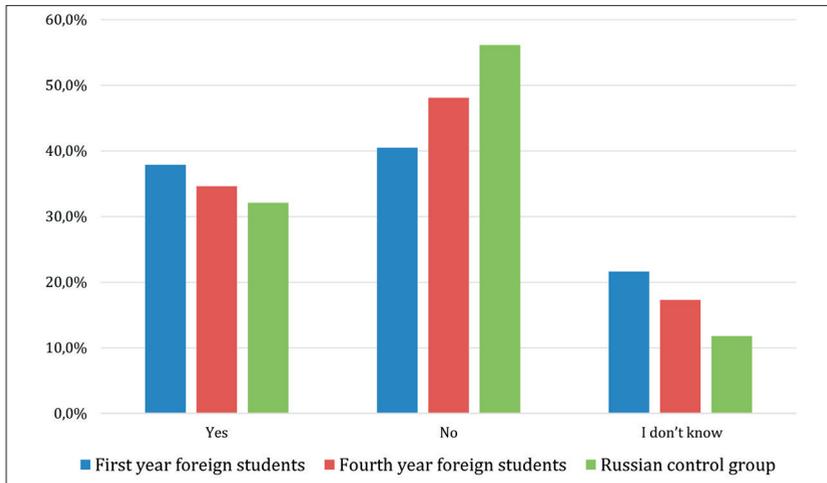


Fig. 3. The right for governments to promote the democratization of other states

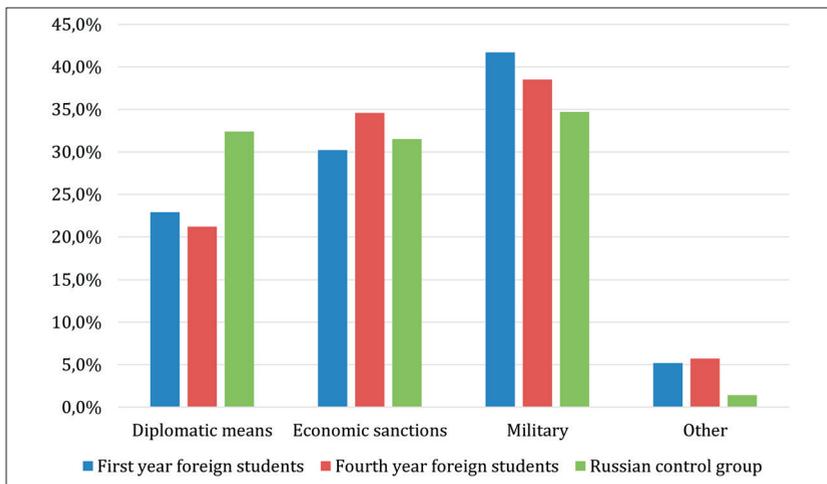


Fig. 4. Ways of defending the rights of compatriots abroad

Russia position that the Cold War was not won by the U.S. Economic power was selected as a country's main foreign policy leverage (71.9%). The standoff between Russia and the West was attributed by Russian students primarily to foreign policy choices on one or both sides (58.5%) while cultural factors such as a history of Russophobia and/or anti-western sentiment and the Cold War legacy were less popular options (one of the two options was selected by 33.4% of students). The answers from the control group serve as a base line to assess whether foreign stu-

dents' positions change to be more aligned with the Russian worldview.

### Preliminary Findings

First-year foreign students, fourth-year foreign students and the control group when answering the question on the main component of a state's power (Fig. 1) all choose economic might as the main answer. The evolution from first to fourth year did not increase the similarity with the control group. However, the minority answer of culture as a main factor of power,

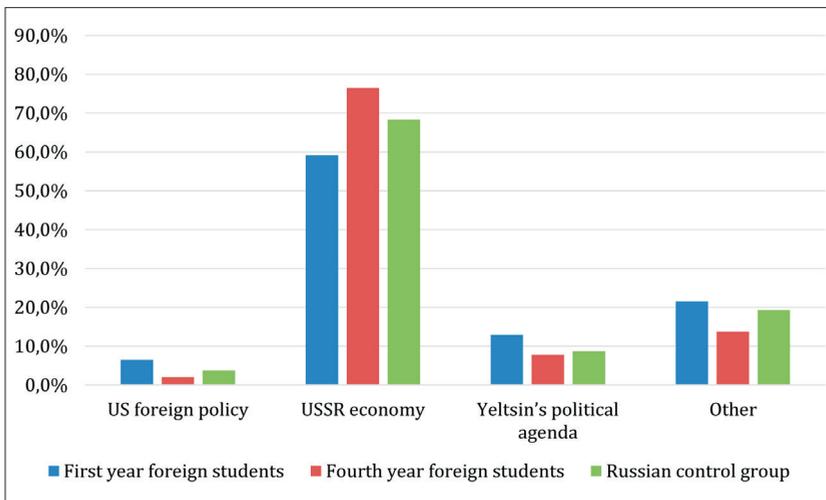


Fig. 5. The main cause of the breakup of the Soviet Union

while selected by 20.8% of first-year students, drops to 15.4% among fourth-year students, making it slightly more in line with the response of the control group (8.1%). This evolution may indicate that foreign students receiving a higher education in Russia start to perceive “hard” factors of power as relatively more important. The sharp increase in the choice of the military as a main factor of power (3.1% among first-year students versus 21.2% among fourth-year students) confirms this hypothesis (9.5% of the control group selected the military as their first choice).

Answers to the question about the most legitimate pillar of international order (Fig. 2) reveal the UN as a first choice among all groups of students, with 56.8% of the control group selecting this option, versus 39.4% of first-year students and 50% of fourth-year students. This increased belief in the legitimacy of the UN in the international system after studying in Russia appears as statistically significant and brings foreign students more in line with the response from the control group. The selection of Russia by 25.5% of first year students (against 11.5% of fourth-year students and 9.8% of Russian students) confirms the idea of a positive bias towards Russia before foreign students start their studies in the host country but also suggests a

desire to select what they assume to be the “right answer” or to please. The choice of the US by 22.3% of first-year foreign students versus 15% of fourth-year foreign students and 14% of the control group reveals that foreign students having studied for four years in Russia are less likely to select the US as a legitimate pillar of international order.

Answers to the question on whether governments have the right to promote the democratization of other states (Fig. 3) reveal that foreign students are more likely to answer a clear cut “no” as a result of their studies in Russia (40.5% for first-years versus 48.1% for fourth-years) and are less likely to answer “yes” (37.9% versus 34.6%). The answers of fourth-year foreign students are also more in line with the control group of Russian students than those of first-year foreign students. Results suggest that completing a higher education in Russia may make students more sceptical about intervening in other states’ internal affairs to promote democratization.

Answers to the question regarding the ways of defending the rights of compatriots abroad (Fig. 4) reveal that the first answer selected among all groups is that compatriots should be defended by any means necessary even military. While the control group is split roughly evenly

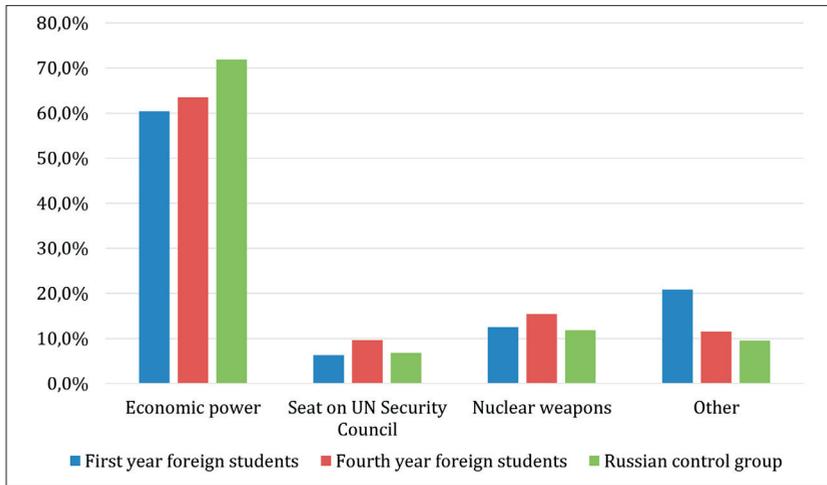


Fig. 6. A country's main tool of policy leverage

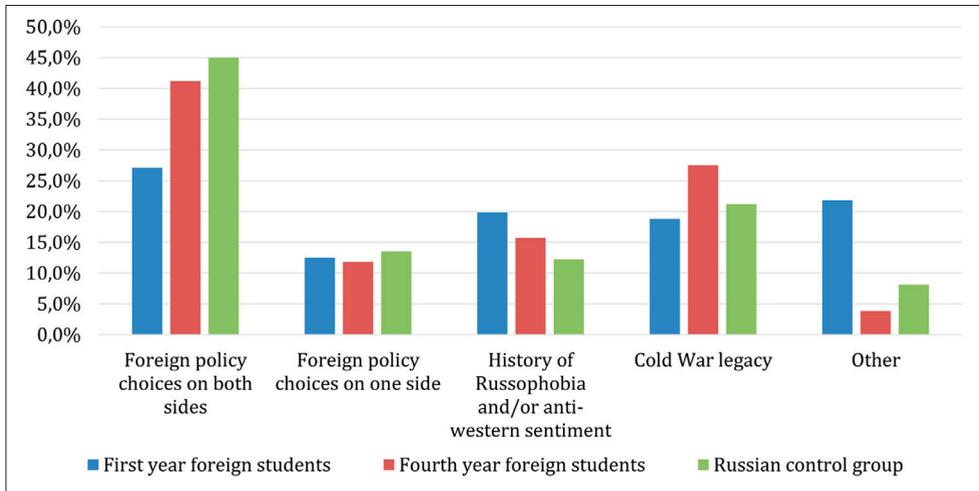


Fig. 7. The main cause of the standoff between Russia and the West

between the three options, first-year students are more likely to approve of the use of military means (41.7% versus 34.7% of the control group). During their studies in Russia, students move slightly away from military means and become more numerous in limiting the support to compatriots to economic sanctions (34% of fourth-year students versus 30.2% of first-year students). Responses among all groups appear as similar and no significant evolution in the worldview of students has been detected based on this question.

Answers to the question on the main cause of the breakup of the Soviet Union (Fig. 5) indicate that students after studying in Russia are more likely to embrace the Russian worldview on this question and take a stance that is more in line with the control group. While a minority of first-year students (6.5%) attribute the breakup of the USSR first and foremost to US foreign policy, few fourth-year students still share this opinion (2.0%). Fourth-year students put more emphasis on economic weaknesses as the cause of the downfall of the USSR (76.5%)

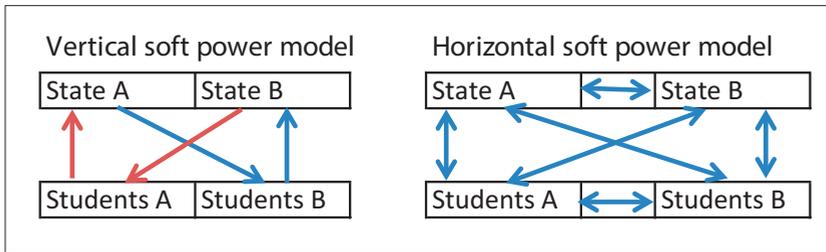


Fig. 8. Vertical and horizontal soft power models

than first-year students (59.1%). The positions of fourth-year students appear in line with the Russian position on this issue (that the breakup of the Soviet Union was not due to external factors) and with the answers of the control group (68.3% of which selected economic weaknesses as their primary answer).

Answers to the question on a country's main tool of policy leverage (Fig. 6) reveal economic power as the first choice among all categories of respondents. While fourth-year students are more likely to emphasize the importance of a seat of the UN Security Council and of nuclear weapons than first-year students, this evolution is not statistically significant as the Russian control group selected these options less frequently even than the first-year foreign students.

Answers to the question on the main cause of the standoff between Russia and the West (Fig. 7) reveal that all groups favoured the answer "foreign policy choice on both sides". 53.0% of fourth-year foreign students versus 39.6% of first-year foreign students blamed the standoff on current foreign policy choices (on one or on both sides). This evolution in perceptions brings foreign students more in line with the Russian perspective (options selected by 58.5% of control group). This confirms that after studying in Russia, foreign students are more likely to embrace the Russian perspective that the confrontation between Russia and the West is not predetermined by historical or cultural factors but that it results from contemporary foreign policy choices.

When considered jointly, the results to the seven questions of the survey reveal a statistically relevant tendency for fourth-year for-

eign students to adopt answers closer to those of their Russian peers after having studied for four years in Russia than first-year foreign students. While first-year foreign students were more likely to emphasize the importance of culture as a factor of power than other surveyed groups and to put down current political trends to cultural and historical factors, fourth-year students privileged or were more likely to select options underlining the importance of hard power factors such as economic might, military power, nuclear weapons and having the ability to veto decisions on the UN Security Council. More significantly, after studying in Russia, foreign students were less likely to name the U.S. as a legitimate pillar of international order and to support the right of governments to promote the democratization of other states.

### Discussion

This study reveals that foreign students' perceptions of the international system evolved during their studies in Russia and their worldview became more in line with both the worldview of the control group of Russian students and the Russian official line on a number of issues. While a change in worldview does not guarantee these foreign students will promote in the future Russia's interests; it nonetheless shows that they were receptive to what was taught and suggests that they integrated into the community of their host country. This study is a first step taken in the direction of empirically testing the soft power conversion model in higher education and suggests that, under the right circumstances, higher education abroad may lead to a change in worldview favourable to the

host country. Causality mechanisms have been identified and the empirical data reveals that the first stage of the soft power conversion model (provoking changes in the worldview of foreign students) can yield results. This evolution in student perceptions should be not associated with the idea that universities inculcate their principles in foreign students. The change in perception can be put down to them acquiring a better understanding of Russia's worldview and how its positions on the world stage stem from cultural and historical factors. The vertical soft power model according to which a state A teaches foreign students from state B and these students from state B then have an impact on state B, has been criticized in the literature for its Cold War undertones [2] and appears anachronistic in an interdependent world. The reality of soft power involves networks constantly communicating at multiple levels, with states and students mutually impacting each other's understandings of the world system, as illustrated by the horizontal soft power model suggested by the authors [Fig. 8]. Governments preserve regardless an important role as they create platforms and incentives for network exchanges. While countries with high levels of soft power may have other means to diffuse their worldview, countries with underdeveloped soft power, suffering from a stereotypical image abroad, may find higher education an effective means to inform about the realities of the country.

Although foreign students were found to evolve in terms of their perceptions of the international system during their studies in Russia, the need to create optimal conditions for the situation not to backfire and the modest scale of the changes lead to the legitimate question of whether soft power development programs are cost effective. The price to pay to convert soft power potential into soft power capability through higher education may be higher than other means of developing both soft and hard power. However incremental changes in foreign students' worldview may testify to the development of a strong sense of loyalty to the host country. There is no scale equivalency reflecting

levels of correlation between the two, however if students change their perceptions of the international system, this can be considered the tip of the iceberg and loyalty to the host country can be expected to have developed to a greater extent. Small changes in worldviews may in fact be motivated by high levels of respect and affection for a host country. Measuring the efficiency of soft power mechanisms in changing behaviour and in bringing about favourable political outcomes for host countries informs more specifically the debate on states' financial investments in developing world-class universities. It appears from this study that adopting the norm on world-class universities and competing on the global stage for recognition of the quality of a country's higher education system can yield soft power advantages. Hosting foreign students may have other advantages aside financial gains, not just for the US and Western countries (norm initiators and first wave followers) but also for second wave norm followers of this norm such as Russia and BRICS countries.

While the study findings suggest students re-shape their worldview during their studies in a host country, several limitations should be considered. First, the selected sample cannot be considered fully representative of the whole of Russia as students were selected from three elite Moscow universities and from humanities programs. Students in the exact sciences may not be sensitive to the same extent to cultural influences and studying in regional universities may lead to different outcomes. Second, only one aspect of soft power was investigated, whether students change their worldview and adopt positions more in line with their host countries after completing a bachelor program in that country. Another study is necessary to determine whether these students make decisions favourable to Russia upon acceding to positions of responsibility in their home countries.

Even though this study may open up more new questions than it offers answers, we believe it should be the starting point of a long line of empirical studies on soft power conversion. A follow-up of this study should consider whether

foreign students having studied in Russia are more likely to promote friendly relations with Russia both politically and economically. In the sphere of higher education, these findings could be confirmed by performing similar studies in other countries of different sizes and located in various geographical zones. Beyond the sphere of higher education, attempts could be made to measure other components of soft power including the impact of language centers abroad, the media, public people etc.

### Conclusion

This study addresses a gap in the literature on soft power by conducting an empirical case

study based in Russia on the soft power conversion model of higher education. The survey of a group of foreign students starting and of another finishing their bachelor studies in three leading Russian universities revealed that receiving a higher education in Russia does modestly contribute to aligning students' positions with the Russian perspective on international issues. These preliminary findings suggest that the benefits for host countries of internationalizing national higher education systems and attracting foreign students are not just reserved to the initiators of the norm on world class universities (US, UK) but extend to second wave norm adopters (Russia, China).

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*The paper was submitted 28.10.21  
Received after reworking 21.12.21  
Accepted for publication 23.12.21*

*Appendix 1*

**Survey questions**

1. What is the main component of a state's power?
  - 1) Culture
  - 2) Economy
  - 3) Military
  - 4) Other
  - 3) Through diplomatic, economic and if necessary, military means
  - 4) I don't know
  
2. What is the most legitimate pillar of international order?
  - 1) The United States
  - 2) The European Union
  - 3) Russia
  - 4) The United Nations
  - 5) Other
  5. What was the main cause of the break-up of the Soviet Union?
    - 1) US foreign policy
    - 2) Economic weaknesses of the USSR
    - 3) Yeltsin's political agenda
    - 4) I don't know
  
3. Is it right for governments promote the democratization of other states?
  - 1) Yes
  - 2) No
  - 3) I don't know
  6. What is a country's main foreign policy leverage?
    - 1) Economic power
    - 2) Seat on the UN Security Council
    - 3) Nuclear weapons
    - 4) I don't know
  
4. How should countries defend the rights of their compatriots abroad?
  - 1) Only through diplomatic means
  - 2) Through diplomatic and economic means (sanctions)
  7. What are the causes of the standoff between Russia and the West?
    - 1) Current foreign policy choices on both sides
    - 2) Current foreign policy choices on one side
    - 3) A history of Russophobia and/or anti-western sentiment
    - 4) The Cold War legacy
    - 5) I don't know

*Appendix 2*

**Survey answers**

	First year foreign BA students	Fourth year foreign BA students	Russian control group (first and fourth years)
<b>1. What is the main component of a state's power?</b>			
1) Culture	20.8%	15.4%	8.1%
2) Economy	63.5%	57.7%	77.9%
3) Military	3.1%	21.2%	9.5%
4) Other	12.6%	5.7%	4.5%
<b>2. What is the most legitimate pillar of international order?</b>			
1) The United States	22.3%	15.0%	14.0%
2) The European Union	6.4%	15.8%	12.7%
3) Russia	25.5%	11.5%	9.8%
4) The United Nations	39.4%	50.0%	56.8%
5) Other	6.4%	7.7%	6.7%
<b>3. Is it right for governments to promote the democratization of other states?</b>			
1) Yes	37.9%	34.6%	32.1%
2) No	40.5%	48.1%	56.1%
3) I don't know	21.6%	17.3%	11.8%

	First year foreign BA students	Fourth year foreign BA students	Russian control group (first and fourth years)
<b>4. How should countries defend the rights of their compatriots abroad?</b>			
1) Only through diplomatic means	22.9%	21.2%	32.4%
2) Through diplomatic and economic means (sanctions)	30.2%	34.6%	31.5%
3) Through diplomatic, economic and if necessary military means	41.7%	38.5%	34.7%
4) I don't know/other	5.2%	5.7%	1.4%
<b>5. What was the main cause of the break.up of the Soviet Union?</b>			
1) US foreign policy	6.5%	2.0%	3.7%
2) Economic weaknesses of the USSR	59.1%	76.5%	68.3%
3) Yeltsin's political agenda	12.9%	7.8%	8.7%
4) I don't know/other	21.5%	13.7%	19.3%
<b>6. What is a country's main tool of foreign policy leverage?</b>			
1) Economic power	60.4%	63.5%	71.9%
2) Seat on the UN Security Council	6.3%	9.6%	6.8%
3) Nuclear weapons	12.5%	15.4%	11.8%
4) I don't know/other	20.8%	11.5%	9.5%
<b>7. What are the causes of the standoff between Russia and the West?</b>			
1) Current foreign policy choices on both sides	27.1%	41.2%	45.0%
2) Current foreign policy choices on one side	12.5%	11.8%	13.5%
3) A history of Russophobia and/or anti-western sentiment	19.8%	15.7%	12.2%
4) The Cold War legacy	18.8%	27.5%	21.2%
5) I don't know/other	21.8%	3.8%	8.1%

The most informative answers/evolutions were highlighted in red.

Source: Author