



Victoria Teliga

Ukrainian-Russian dialogue: the case for cultural diplomacy?

У цей час, коли відносини між Україною та Росією дуже напружені, значна увага приділяється пошуку політичного вирішення кризи. Дана стаття досліджує потенціал та обмеження культурної дипломатії як механізм налагодження зв'язків у нинішній ситуації. Надається характеристика під-

ходів Росії та України до використання їхньої історії та культурної спадщини (або нехтування ними) для досягнення цілей внутрішньої та зовнішньої політики. Наводяться рекомендації стосовно того, як Україна могла би посилити маркетинг свого культурного продукту, що сприяло би встановленню необхідного діалогу та майбутньому налагодженню стосунків між Україною та Росією.

Ключові слова: культурна дипломатія, м'яка сила, культурна спадщина, зовнішня політика, культурні зв'язки.

At a time of significant strain in Russia-Ukraine relations, the focus has largely been on finding a political solution to the crisis. This article, by contrast, explores the role of and prospects for cultural diplomacy, as well as its limitations, as a means of building bridges in the context of the current situation. It reviews how Russia and Ukraine approach their history and cultural heritage and use them (or don't) to further their domestic and foreign policy objectives. Recommendations are made as to approaches Ukraine could take to enhance its cultural offerings and, in so doing, facilitate the dialogue and understanding necessary to build pathways for reconciliation.

Key words: cultural diplomacy, soft power, cultural heritage, foreign policy, cultural relations.

“Cultural diplomacy” as a term is relatively new, though as a practice it has existed for centuries. It is commonly understood to mean the following: “the exchange of ideas, information, art and

other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding.”¹

¹ Cummings M. Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey. Cultural Diplomacy Research Center for Arts and Culture, 2003 / C. P. Schneider. Culture Communicates: US Diplomacy That Works. – Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', 2004. – P. 1.

The potential of cultural diplomacy to build trust between nations and establish important trade and business ties is being increasingly realized in today's globalized world. Many countries have established designated institutions around the world whose mission is to promote a positive image of the respective nation, foster business and cultural ties, and attract tourists to the country. Some examples of such institutions include the British Council (UK), the Goethe-Institut (Germany), Instituto Cervantes (Spain), the Confucius Institute (China), and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (United States).

As an important tool to counter misunderstandings and stereotypes, cultural diplomacy has significant potential to contribute to crafting a rapprochement between countries embroiled in a crisis. This article explores the prospects and limitations of cultural diplomacy in bridge-building efforts to reconcile relations between Ukraine and Russia.

Cultural relations between Ukraine and Russia in the context of the current crisis

The relationship between Ukraine and Russia has deteriorated dramatically since the Maidan protests, followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea and its ongoing support for separatists in eastern Ukraine.

From a cultural diplomacy perspective, this crisis presents a very interesting case. Cultural diplomacy initiatives are usually aimed at establishing common bonds of language, literature, and values as crucial components of building political and diplomatic relationships. However, in the case of Ukraine and Russia, the strong common bonds are already there. Just in the past century, the two countries have shared a history as part of one of the world's superpowers; both contributed to its outstanding achievements in culture, science, and technology, and both went through a difficult transition after its collapse. Of the fifteen states that arose from the ashes of the Soviet Union, Russia and Ukraine have arguably the closest cultural connection.

Currently, promoting their different historical and cultural narratives is becoming an increasingly important component of achieving their internal and foreign policy goals. However, Russia's and Ukraine's respective approaches to using cultural ties and history as a means of influencing audiences at home and abroad differ substantially. Whereas Russia successfully utilizes a whole arsenal of techniques that have already been tested in other countries in the post-Soviet space (as well as further abroad), Ukraine appears to have been caught off-guard in the turmoil of military conflict, an economic crisis, corruption, and efforts to

implement urgently needed reforms. With every indication that the conflict in eastern Ukraine is turning into a "frozen" one, it is crucial for Kyiv to adopt a holistic approach to engaging with Russia and the separatist-controlled areas, and cultural diplomacy should be an important part of the Ukrainian strategy.

Russia and the "Russian World"

Russia has long realized the importance of soft power and has established a broad variety of institutions tasked with improving its image and promoting its interests overseas. They include the Russian World Foundation; the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo), and a twenty-four-hour English language news network, Russia Today (RT).

The international image that Russia is currently projecting serves its domestic and foreign policy goals. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it went from being a superpower to suddenly becoming a weakened state. And ever since then, Russia has been going through an identity crisis. The idea of the "Russian World" (Russkiy Mir), which was developed in the 2000s and has now become a foreign policy imperative, represents an effort to fill this void. It depicts Russia as having a special civilizational mission to defend traditional conservative values, as opposed to sharing liberal or Western values, which are viewed as foreign to Eastern Christian civilization.¹ The Russian World concept has a flexible notion of geography and defines "Russian people" fairly loosely. In his annual address to the Federal Assembly back in 2005, President Vladimir Putin spoke of "compatriots," numbering in the "tens of millions," who stayed in former Soviet states after the demise of the Soviet Union and whose rights Russia is obliged to defend.²

The concept of the Russian World successfully serves domestic policy goals by offering Russia's people a convenient explanation of the country's problems. The narrative that all of Russia's difficulties in the 1990s were engineered by the Western world to harm Russia finds many supporters among conservative and nationalist segments of the population.

In the foreign policy context, the Russian World concept now underpins the Russian approach to cul-

¹ Здіорук С. І., Яблонський В. М., Токман В. В. та ін. Україна та проект «русского мира»: аналіт. доп. [S. I. Zdiioruk, V. M. Yablonskyi, V. V. Tokman, et al., Ukraine and the "Russian World" project: Analytical report]. – Національний інститут стратегічних досліджень. Серія «Гуманітарний розвиток». – Вип. 1. – К., 2014.

² Annual address to the Federal Assembly, 25 April 2005.

tural diplomacy. However, rather than seeking merely to promote the Russian language abroad, as practiced by the cultural diplomacy institutions of other countries for their respective languages, the Russian World concept aims to integrate people who speak Russian – the implication being that they all belong to the same nation and Russia is responsible for defending their rights and interests.¹

In the post-Soviet space, Russia appears to be increasingly intent on reestablishing its regional hegemony and retaining former Soviet states in its sphere of influence. Culture and historical heritage are heavily exploited by the Kremlin to further this agenda. The idea that all post-Soviet states have a common past, with Russia being a “uniting center” and “leader”, is actively promoted in government-sponsored films, TV programs, and books. These products, which are usually freely available, including in Ukraine, provide audiences with Russia’s version of historical events. For example, they often depict Ukrainians unfavorably, as simpletons who speak an odd language that is implied to be merely a dialect of Russian.²

The term “Novorossiya”, which Russia uses to refer to the separatist-controlled territories of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, illustrates Moscow’s use of history as a foreign policy tool. For a brief period in the eighteenth century, “Novorossiya” was the name of an administrative unit of the then Russian Empire that included the territory of modern-day southeastern Ukraine. The name, which has been officially out of use for two centuries, has now been brought back into use by Russia to give the separatists a historical narrative on which to base their claim.

With Russia’s commitment to and investment in cultural diplomacy, its contribution to the Russian position in the current crisis is easily recognizable.

Ukraine’s cultural diplomacy: Years of neglect

Today, even though it has been twenty-four years since it became an independent state, Ukraine still does not have a designated cultural diplomacy institution to foster friendly ties with other countries and advance its political and economic interests overseas. As a result, despite having a rich history and heritage, prominent achievements in science and technology, and being home to a number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Ukraine’s vibrant culture remains quite unknown abroad.

Kyiv is now paying a high price for failing to realize earlier the potential of Ukrainian culture as a means of giving the country a sense of national identity internally and projecting a positive image externally. Russia, on the other hand, has been skilfully using the legacies of centuries of a shared history with Ukraine to influence Ukrainians and to develop its image as a leader of the post-Soviet region in the international arena. As a result, misunderstandings and stereotypes about Ukraine now abound and have proliferated at home and abroad.

Domestically, years of independence have been lost as Ukraine’s successive governments have failed to unite Ukraine, thus maintaining the divide between the eastern and western parts of the country (with the former being viewed as pro-Russian and the latter as pro-Western). This divide has been widely exploited in elections, with the usual rivalry being between pro-Russian and pro-European candidates. The consequences of this neglect are dire for Ukraine, with the west and east of the country partially blaming each other for the current crisis.

Internationally, even many of Putin’s critics view Ukraine as a passive entity and Russia as entitled to a certain sphere of privileged interest in the region, and express understanding for Russia’s concern about the erosion of its influence. Another misperception that Russia has been successfully popularizing is that Ukraine is an “artificial state” and that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people”.³ Unfortunately, this narrative has been adopted by many Western press correspondents, who appear to be more familiar with covering the region with Russia as the “center of gravity”. Now, when Ukraine is on the agenda for the first time in recent years, foreign journalists lack knowledge of Ukrainian history, politics, and culture, and often unintentionally misrepresent it in their coverage. Whereas Russian interpretations of history and culture in the region are abundant, those presenting an alternative to this narrative are exceedingly few (in any language). As a result, and in addition to the already significant burden of Ukraine’s mounting internal difficulties, Kyiv needs to address the lack of international knowledge and appreciation of the Ukrainian identity. To accomplish this, Ukraine should become more outward-looking and urgently take steps to promote greater awareness and understanding of the Ukrainian identity abroad, especially in Russia and the countries in the post-Soviet space.

¹ Здіорук С. І. та ін. Україна та проект «русского мира»: аналіт. доп. [Zdioruk et al. Ukraine and the “Russian World” project: Analytical report].

² Ibid.

³ Sherr J. *A War of Narratives and Arms* / Giles K., Hanson P., Lyne R., Nixey J., Sherr J., and Wood A. *The Russian Challenge*. – Chatham House Report, 2015.

Prospects for Ukrainian cultural diplomacy

While Ukraine's immediate priorities are likely to be strengthening its defense sector, tackling corruption, and implementing economic and social reforms, the importance of cultural diplomacy should not be overlooked. Ukraine's rich cultural heritage and vibrant cultural sector can contribute significantly to projecting the image of a new Ukraine at home and abroad.

Proper investment in the cultural and education sectors will provide an essential foundation for new cultural diplomacy initiatives by Ukraine. It will also help address a number of Ukraine's internal problems, such as some of the underlying divisions between the east and the west and the integration of internally displaced people. For example, Ukrainian museums, other heritage sites, and its creative industries can play an important role in uniting Ukraine, helping its society reassess the past and present and move toward reconciliation. Another important function of the creative sector is telling the Ukrainian story to the world, attracting tourists, and contributing to the national economy. The cultural sector's discourse should highlight the achievements of prominent figures, both past and present – writers, artists, singers, actors, filmmakers, athletes, fashion designers, activists – essentially everyone who contributes to and shapes the positive image of Ukraine abroad and of whom the country should be proud. Similarly, a stronger cultural sector and improved cultural offerings could contribute to the integration of internally displaced people and those living next to the territories occupied by separatists. Exhibitions, festivals, fairs, and performances will create more secure environments and help those affected by conflict escape stress and the surrounding chaos.

Investment in Ukraine's youth, the nation's future leaders and influencers, is crucial for expanding Ukraine's cultural diplomacy initiatives. Today's young people are the same age as independent Ukraine. They are less nostalgic about the Soviet past than previous generations, and more outward-looking. Young Ukrainians should be brought up to be tolerant of and open to other cultures, to speak foreign languages, to be globally aware, and to be comfortable with difference. A powerful mechanism for achieving this goal is academic exchange, which should be supported by the government, with the exchanges occurring both between universities in Ukraine and with educational institutions overseas. Educational exchange programs between universities and institutions in the western and eastern re-

gions of Ukraine may help minimize regional tensions within the country and counter mutual mistrust, which has been fueled in particular by the current conflict in eastern Ukraine. Considerable value is to be had in the different learning experiences and interaction with other Ukrainian youths that such exchanges may offer. It is also important to ensure that Ukrainian universities and institutions are open to students from Crimea and the occupied eastern regions. Ukraine should have a strategy of engaging with people who stayed in the occupied territories, especially if it wants to see them once more part of Ukraine in the future.

Enhanced international academic mobility will help Ukraine's youth become global citizens and increase their employability. It will also foster better understanding of Ukraine abroad and increase the number of people who know and trust the country. It is predicted that, with globalization and advances in technology, peer-to-peer cultural interaction will continue to grow. In the future, countries will increasingly rely on their individual citizens to shape a positive image of their nation abroad, instead of leaving this role to traditional state-to-state diplomacy.¹

A designated institution should be established by Ukraine to oversee and manage cultural diplomacy initiatives. While the concept of such an institution has been discussed for a long time, it is high time for Kyiv to put it in place. Setting up a network of such organizations overseas, combined with a broader investment in culture and education and efforts to internationalize them, will help address many of Ukraine's internal social problems and the lack of awareness of Ukrainian identity and cultural heritage on the world stage.

Limitations of cultural diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy can provide an important platform for an effective dialogue in the context of the current crisis. However, this approach is not without limitations and challenges. A cultural heritage should be approached as a long-term asset that will not necessarily deliver immediate results.

For Ukraine's creative industries to realize their full contribution and be properly utilized, they will need to be modernized and internationalized, which will require time, funding, and expertise. Some of the first reform priorities for Ukraine's cultural sector should be an overhaul of its management, an increase in flexibility and opportunities for funding and profit-

¹ Holden J. Influence and Attraction: Culture and the Race for Soft Power in the 21st Century. – British Council, 2013.

generating activities, and ensuring that staff are equipped with modern skills.

Establishing a Ukrainian institution for cultural diplomacy and creating a network of such organizations abroad requires significant funding, which, in Ukraine's current economic situation, is very limited. In these circumstances, the government should begin by engaging with the Ukrainian diaspora and seeking to cooperate with existing Ukrainian initiatives abroad that are already quite successful. These include the Ukrainian Institute of America in New York, the Ukrainian Institute in London, and the Ukrainian centers that exist in many foreign universities. Dialogue and effective cooperation between these institutions and the embassies and all government departments involved is key to the successful establishment of an effective network of Ukrainian cultural diplomacy institutions overseas. Because funding, expertise, skills, and experience in this field are in short supply in Ukraine, new cultural diplomacy initiatives should be open to recommendations and assistance offered by the cultural diplomacy institutions of other countries working in Ukraine, international organizations, and development aid agencies.

Looking ahead

To harness the value of cultural diplomacy in the context of the current situation with Russia and to work toward improved dialogue and reconciliation, Ukraine's efforts to shape and promote the Ukrainian identity abroad should include the population in Russia. It is important to realize that the Kremlin is not the same as the Russian people, and their interests do not necessarily coincide.¹ It is strategically important for Kyiv to project a positive and tolerant image of Ukraine and to engage with those among Russians

who are willing to listen and to understand Ukraine. They can be reached by providing an alternative to the Kremlin's narrative and by showing that Ukraine does have its own rich culture, language, literature, history, and national identity.

Maintaining any kind of ties, including cultural ones, is limited in times of conflict. Both Ukrainian and Russian societies have become increasingly intolerant and mistrustful of each other, and these attitudes are understandable. Under these circumstances, the role of public intellectuals in both countries is to adopt a forward-looking approach to the issue and prepare the societies for reconciliation. The level of intolerance that currently exists in both Russian and Ukrainian societies, even internally, toward their own compatriots with different points of view, is frightening. The danger of the current situation, and the potential for a further and more alarming escalation of the crisis, cannot be ignored by the intelligentsia in both countries. Russian and Ukrainian societies will have to learn to live side by side in the future. It is the role of public intellectuals to steer their societies toward dialogue, as opposed to subscribing to information that serves political purposes and being passive objects in political games.

For both societies it is important to remain open to the opportunities for dialogues made possible through cultural diplomacy. Public intellectuals should then take the lead in maintaining the existing long-term connections and collaborations in education, culture, science, and other fields, and appreciate their long-term value. Arts and culture have the potential to reach much further than traditional diplomacy, and now is the time for both countries to begin trying to benefit from the common cultural bonds and to start working toward reconciliation.

¹ Wood A. Russian and Western Expectations / Giles K., Hanson P., Lyne R., Nixey J., Sherr J., and Wood A. The Russian Challenge. – Chatham House Report, 2015.