At tempting to re-brand the branded: Russia’s International Image in the 21st Century

Greg Simons

The way in which international relations are being conducted in the 21st century is evolving from the earlier reliance on government to government communications and the use of hard power in order to achieve policy objectives. Currently there is a rush by countries around the world to build up their soft power potential and use attraction as a persuasion and means to attain their goals, Russia being one of these countries. This article focuses on a number of different PR programmes and events run as a means of trying to shift the national reputation and image to a more positive one. The actors and events described are viewed mostly through the lens of public diplomacy, government to people communication. I track a number of the different PR programmes that have been run through mass media and PR agencies. The aim is to gain an insight into the wider picture of Russia’s attempts to rebrand itself, and the successes and obstacles along the way.

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Keywords: soft power, public diplomacy, public relations programmes, Russian image and stereotypes, reputation, nation branding.

Increasingly, in the contemporary period where controlling information and perception is seen as the key to political success, information technologies are being developed and used to influence publics. This is due in part to the shifting notion of values. Previously, there was a greater deal of attention and value in tangible assets — physical and real structures. However, there is increasing attention and value placed in intangible assets — reputation, brand and other ‘virtual’ aspects. The focus of this article shall be attempts to try and rebrand Russia’s current image and reputation through a number of different means, and to understand the logic of attempting nation-branding on an object that is widely recognised (although can be considered as misunderstood in a number of contexts).

Joseph Nye’s soft power concept shall form a theoretical background and understanding to Russia’s nation branding attempts by providing an understanding to the shift in how power is exercised on the international stage. Countries around the world are using information technologies, such as PR and nation branding, in order to project a desired image on the international arena. Public diplomacy is the means of operationalising the attempts through Government to People Communication via informing, influencing and persuading foreign publics in order to realise policy objectives. The reasons for engaging in nation branding and PR campaigns are as diverse as the countries that engage in the practice. However, this still raises the central question, why do countries choose to brand or re-brand? Following from this question is the next logical step is how (method and practice) do they go about rebranding their image?

This article intends to try to trace and understand (in terms of possible motivations and results) attempts to improve Russia’s international image through various government initiatives in the post-Boris Yeltsin period. A first logical step in this process is to understand the nature of branding, and specifically, how it applies to a nation’s image. This is intended to give the reader an appreciation of the theoretical and practical considerations in the sphere of nation branding in a general context.

After laying the broader foundations of nation branding, the Russian context is brought into focus. Russia and ethnic Russians is not an unknown or at least unrecognised country and people, there are existing associated values, stereotypes and prejudices. This may mean that an existing image stands in the way of creating a specific desired image. What are the obstacles and problems that need to be overcome in order to generate the more favourable brand? Although examples of stereotypes are raised in this article it is not my intention to elaborate on them, and how they are formed and recreated. To do this subject
adequate justice, would require another article. The final step is to outline a number of practical ways and means of trying to realise the more favourable international image.

**NATION BRANDING**

In order to orientate this article, it is necessary to define what is meant by the term brand. According to Norman Stone “a brand can be a stand-in for experience, a promise you expect to be fulfilled, a strategic image statement, a proxy for reputation. In other words, PR.” (Stone, 1995, p. 72) This term is most often associated with the business/commercial sector and the numerous products and services that are promoted through the mass media daily. This raises an important issue, to make the brand character unique and favourable so that it stands out from the other competing brands.

Thus the brand’s reason for being, its vision, core values, and know-how must be clearly defined, internalised and communicated. Country branding plans exhibit the clear, simple, differentiating propositions often built around emotional qualities expressing some kind of superiority, which can be readily symbolised both verbally and visually. (Akotia, 2010)

Before a brand can be promoted though, the issue of reputation needs to be considered. Reputation is generated through such elements as national economic performance, government track record, national/international security and integrity (the aspects of reputation listed for business have been adapted to nation branding) (Stone, 1995, p. 87). If a country is newly established it may not contain these elements in the current form (although there may be some historical influences). However, a country with a long history and a high international profile shall have established stereotypes and image.

Public diplomacy is another information tool at the state’s disposal. It is closely related to public relations, using a number of the same methods and objectives. It differs from traditional diplomacy that focuses on a government to government relationship, by seeking direct contact with citizens of another country. There is an attempt to attract people to an idea or cause (soft power) rather than coercing them or using force (hard power). Tactics employed include (but not restricted to) cultural exchanges, lobbying, advertising, websites and state visits. Objectives are also varied, but may include increasing awareness, changing attitudes or opinions and managing reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 299).

The concept of nation branding (as envisaged by Anholt) is relatively new, and is not deeply theorized at this stage. What is the aim of nation branding and what does it involve? Jaffe and Nebenzahl (2001, which is cited in Fan) defined “the aim is to create a clear, simple, differentiating idea built around emotional qualities which can be symbolised both verbally and visually and understood by diverse audiences in a variety of situations. To work effectively, nation branding must embrace political, cultural, business and sport activities”
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(Fan, 2006, p. 3). Thus when it comes to the issue of nation branding, the question arises, nation as a state or nation as a people?

A nation’s image is used to promote and realise such commercial goals as increased exports and tourists. New Zealand has used its Clean Green image in order to generate increased tourism and increase its attractiveness as a tourist destination. Nation brands have also been used in the political sphere as well, such as the Evil Empire (Soviet Union) and the more recently coined Axis of Evil (Iran, Syria and North Korea).

Simon Anholt, who is practically engaged in nation branding, lists five broad reasons as to why nation branding is seen as being needed by states.

Introduction — the place is not known to a target audience. Therefore the focus is upon highlighting sectors and attributes that shall fulfil the government’s objectives.

Targeting — it may be the case that the ‘wrong’ audience is receiving the message. This requires a more accurate re-targeting of another audience in terms of target audience demographics (right countries, decision makers, business sectors ... etc.).

Correction — a country may be known, but for the wrong reasons. Therefore the brand needs to be ‘corrected’ via expanding and revitalising images, and enhanced awareness of key qualities.

Improvement — this is the case when a negative image exists. The brand needs to be improved in order for a more positive perception in the target audience to take hold. Ways and means of achieving this correction depend on whether the perception is founded or unfounded. If founded, the problems can be contextualised (to allow better understanding) or de-emphasized (to distract or ‘forget’). When unfounded, the problems are either refuted/suppressed or simply ignored (Anholt, 2006, p. 98).

This division of different reasons does not imply that a single case is motivated by a single reason, one of those listed above. A single country may be affected simultaneously by several of these listed reasons. However, a nation branding campaign must be based upon a message that is both believable and true. Otherwise the target audience shall not change their perception and attitudes. (Bernays, 2005) PR and other information technologies cannot ‘magically’ turn something negative into something positive.

Mathias Akotia, the chief executive officer of Brand Ghana Office, argues that nation branding is not something that is new (even if the term is). One example that he gives comes from France in 1789 when the core values of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality were expressed by the new revolutionary authorities. Renaming can also take place, such as Rhodesia became Zimbabwe and its capital Salisbury was renamed Harare. (Akotia, 2010) This is an attempt to rebrand a nation in the wake of a revolution that was followed by a
regime change. It is an attempt to project a coherent image (what the new France stands for) to the French people and perhaps also to the wider world. Some current examples of nation-branding include:

- South Africa — Alive with possibility
- Spain — San Siro
- India — Incredible India
- Thailand — Amazing Thailand
- Estonia — Positively transforming
- Egypt — Destination Egypt
- Malaysia — Truly Asia
- Costa Rica — Peaceful destination
- Iceland — Iceland naturally
- Bolivia — The authentic still exists (Akotia, 2010).

These slogans reveal not only the name of the country seeking branding/re-branding, but an expression of values and goals (political, economic, perception change) as defined by the government. Other examples, in the post-Soviet sphere, include Kazakhstan’s active advertising campaign in international media under such catch phrases and slogans as land of democracy and the Heart of Eurasia. (Marat, 2009, p. 1123) A significant problem faced by the Central Asian states is the association with the Soviet past, which is at times mocked, as in the film Borat. The Baltic States have undergone a process that attempts to remove the Soviet associations, such as the above mentioned example of Estonia.

**THEORETICAL FRAME**

A theoretical frame is needed in order to try and bring together the diverse strands of this article; nation branding, international relations, foreign policy and influence. Seemingly the most appropriate tool for this task is Joseph Nye’s concept of Soft Power. Nye already noted a shifting measure in the definition of power in his 1990 article. He remarked that:

Traditionally the test of a great power was its strength in war. Today, however, the definition of power is losing its emphasis on military force and conquest that marked earlier eras. The factors of technology, education, and economic growth are becoming more significant in international power, while geography, population, and raw materials are becoming somewhat less important. (Nye, 1990, p. 154)

A number of trends that are responsible for the diffusion of power were noted by Nye: economic interdependence, transnational actors, nationalism in weak states, the spread of technology, and changing political issues (Nye, 1990, p. 160). Power is beginning to transform and be found in more intangible forms. “National cohesion, universalistic culture,
and international institutions are taking on additional significance. Power is passing from the \textit{capital rich} to the \textit{information rich}” (Nye, 1990, p.164) The issues of communication, reputation, influence and persuasion become a vital part of the equation.

This second aspect of power (to get other actors to change in particular instances) — which occurs when one country to get other countries to want what it wants — might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants’ (Nye, 1990, p. 166).

Nye lists the intangible power resources as being culture, ideology, institutions (national and international) and foreign policy (Nye, 1990, p. 167). In getting other actors to do what the actor wants (or at least, not to challenge or resist) requires a sense of legitimacy in the eyes of others. “If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow” (Nye, 1990, p. 167). These elements can be found in the reputation or brand of a country, which can either make a country more or less attractive to an external audience. As Nye concisely states, “soft power rests on the ability to set the agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others.” According to Nye “soft power arises in large part from our values. These values are expressed in our culture, in the policies we follow inside our country, and in the way we handle ourselves internationally” (Nye, 2002-2003, p. 552).

The nature of soft power and the ability to make use of it is therefore dependent upon sets of internal and external factors, as they are perceived by others.

\textbf{Operationalisation Frames}

The theoretical frame that is described above needs a means with which to be operationalised and the goals, along with it the goals that have been established. The appropriate means of enacting the nation-branding programmes that are designed to change the perception of targeted publics towards the country concerned is \textit{Public Diplomacy}.

\textit{Strategic Issues Management} is a necessity (which values, subjects and reputations to promote and those to downplay), given the broad nature of the task that is to be undertaken. This concerns that fate of a country, how it is received by audiences (in terms of the values and characteristics that are associated with it), and how it is able to influence events and people in order to achieve foreign policy goals. Strategic issue areas in this article focus upon political and economically oriented events. The relevancy of \textit{Public Diplomacy} over other forms of governmental communicative action is stressed by the fact that it is Government to People communication (G2P) and not government to government. It is a foreign public and not a foreign government that is the intended object of influence.

However, for public diplomacy to be effective there needs to be sufficient physical and psychological means to convey the desired image for the effect that is desired. By physical, this means the tangible assets that are required to send messages, TV, radio,
newspapers, the internet … etc. With regard to psychological means, it is those intangible assets that are required in order for a message to be successful (considering the senders agenda in this instance). Intangible assets include issues like reputation, trustworthiness, brand and message recognition. An example of this can be the use of key influencers (well known or recognised public figures, either as individuals or professions that are trusted in society) in order to deliver a message, so as to maximise the possible chances for success. The brand known as Brangelina (Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie) are a good example of the use of key influencers in order to influence a target audience into fulfilling the sender’s agenda.

According to World System Theory, which was developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, the world is divided into three different zones — core, peripheral and semi-peripheral nations. The specific area to apply this theory is in the area of the production of high and popular culture (films, art, literature, music, TV entertainment and sport). Core nations are considered to be those that are capital intensive, high wage, high technology production involving lower labour exploitation and coercion. The European Union and the United States are examples of core nations. Peripheral nations are labour intensive, low wage, low technology production involving high labour exploitation and coercion. Many African countries and large parts of Asia fit into this category. Semi-periphery nations display both core-like and periphery-like activities. China, India and Russia are representatives of semi-periphery nations (McPhail, 2010, p. 24-26).

Core nations are able to influence the other two categories of nations through their cultural and popular production, through exporting the values and attitudes that are expressed in those products. In addition, they are able to influence the opinion and perception of core nation audiences about semi-peripheral and peripheral nations by generating news and information on them. In this instance the information is being ‘imported’ for a domestic audience by core nations. Therefore, the audience is influenced by images and perceptions imposed upon the subject, if it is covered at all. For instance Walt Disney and Astrid Lindgren’s stories influenced children around the world (McPhail, 2010, p. 27). The Soviet Union did possess a potential level of influence in terms of popular and cultural production, which was significantly and adversely affected by the Soviet collapse in 1991.

The Russian film industry has been undergoing a revival, currently some 250 films are made per year. Some of these films have made an impression on the international stage, such as Night Watch (2004) (Mikhaylov, 2009). But many are inaccessible for a large part of the foreign audience owing to issues of language and topics that are unfamiliar to that audience (involving Russian patriotism for example). Therefore, to some extent the potential audience can be smaller than for English language films. The profile of Russian movies, film directors and actors is gaining a gradually greater global profile. Russian classical literature,
arts and culture are well established and known, names such as Chekov, Pushkin and the Bolshoi Theatre need no introduction for many. However, in terms of contemporary pool of key influencers, Russia lacks world renown names (and in effect brands), such as those in Hollywood to be the face of various PR and information campaigns.

In terms of physical assets needed to send the message to foreign audiences, Russia is in the process of accruing a sizeable capability, which shall be discussed in further detail later in the article. Coming back to the issue of public diplomacy, there are numerous ways of seeing and understanding the concept and practice. To give a very concise and to the point definition, it is “an international actor’s attempts to advance the ends of policy by engaging with foreign publics.” This is achieved through “public understanding, informing and influencing foreign audiences” (Snow in McPhail, 2010, p. 90). One of the iconic figures in American public diplomacy was the former war correspondent, Edward Murrow, who was chosen by President Kennedy to head the United States Information Agency (which he did from 1961 to 1964). He took a very specific approach to the task of influencing foreign audiences.

American traditions and the American ethic require us to be truthful, but the most important reason is that truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst. To be persuasive, we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful. It is as simple as that (Snow in McPhail, 2010, p. 90).

One of the problems encountered by Russian public diplomacy relates to the credibility, and therefore the believability of the messenger. This is especially the case, if the messenger is tied to the Russian authorities owing in no small part to the strong anti-democratic reputation that has been gained in the post-Yelst in era (from the year 2000). Additionally, the strong reactions by public officials to what is seen as being criticism from foreign sources, such as Putin’s reference to circumcision when a journalist pressed him on events in Chechnya (in response to questions from a French journalist in 2002.

**PR Campaigns: Rebranding Russia**

A brand is a public face (persona) of a product and this is symbolic in conveying a sense of certainty and commitment that is suggested by the brand persona. Branding a nation is much more difficult owing to a plethora of different (and at times inconsistent) images that make achieving a unified brand persona problematic to achieve. There are many potential points of reference that influence its persona and character that are at play in any given nation. This exerts an effect upon how a nation can be promoted.

A nation’s image is more likely to be pressed into service as a risk indicator or a conjunctive rule to reduce options than to operate as an emotional pull. It is too difficult to pull across an overall positive image of a nation that emotionally resonates with the
consumer sufficiently to affect behaviour over all the whole range of a nation’s products. (O’Shaughnessy & O’Shaughnessy, 2000, p. 60)

When it comes to effectively projecting a desired image to an international audience, the country in question needs to be in touch with international public opinion(s). The educational and informational efforts of the United States, for example, are coordinated through the United States Informational Agency (USIA). It is located in more than 140 countries, with over 200 offices, around the world. Its task is to also interpret overseas public opinion, delivering commentary and analysis to the federal government. The USIA is an independent foreign affairs agency within the executive branch of government that is reports directly to the president (USIA is known as the United States Information Service (USIS) outside of the United States. VOA broadcasts in some 50 different languages around the globe, reaching an audience of millions). (Cutlip et al, 2000: 493) There are a number of mass media assets associated with the USIA, including the radio station Voice of America (VOA). These assets give the agency the possibility to project their influence to international audiences.

One of the USIA’s critical tasks is to correct information and to counter propaganda that may prove harmful to US policy and interests. The USIA uses a number of different tools and assets at its disposal, including personal contacts, internet, print media, radio, TV, film, libraries, books and art to convey the official message. Two way communications are enabled through agency programmes, such as cultural and educational exchanges that involve scholars, journalists, students and cultural groups from around the world. A specific example of this came in the early 1980s when a story emerged in the Nigerian press that the US was building a weapon that would kill Blacks, but not Whites (Cutlip et al, 2000, p. 493).

Russia’s primary perceived problem in terms of its international image are the negative associations and stereotypes that exist (improving and correcting the image), therefore the campaigns to re-brand Russia fall into the broad category of reputation management. The likely avenue therefore is to try and gain a new and more positively received international public profile, to shed the old one and gain a new reputation. According to the article Reputation Shifting, there are a number of key factors that affect the stability of a reputation.

Reputational endowments:
- Historical precedence
- Distinctive support or anchoring
- Actor embeddedness

Reputational content characters:
- Condensation (degree to which the reputation elicits emotional response)
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Simplicity
Linkage to positive or negative social impacts
Content embeddedness

Reputational audience characters:
Familiarity to audiences
Segmentation of audiences
Audience reach (number, diversity, and dispersal of audience members)
Legitimacy
Credibility

Reputational opportunity/change factors:
Definitional stability
Environmental stability
Perceived costs in modifying reputation. (Mahon & Mitnik, 2010, p. 284)

The above, are factors that need to be taken into account when formulating an effective strategy to boost and enhance the reputation of the object or subject that is undergoing branding/re-branding. After weighing the factors and the desired outcome, the appropriate strategy for managing reputational change can then be considered. Mahon and Mitnick list five different available strategies for managing this change.

Discard — negative reputations are removed via shedding or dumping. Dumping is the complete purge of the undesired element(s), shedding is to modify those aspects considered negative.

Conceal — in this instance negative reputation is shielded from key external audiences so that they do not become holders or see others that are holders of negative reputation, managed through the process of obfuscation.

Redefine — a negative or suboptimal reputation is redefined into a reputation more likely to be more productive for the subject actor. This is attempted through morphing or transformation.

Transfer — positive reputations are transferred inside or outside the organisation. Whilst negative reputations are transferred outside the core organisation so that they are rendered harmless. Different strategies include firewalling, which is a form of concealment. Outsourcing, where positive reputations are transferred to outside units. Extension, where outsourcing is conducted via remote and possibly indirect action. Offloading, occurs when tactics such as scapegoating, disengaging or distancing are utilised. Insourcing includes a diverse set of tactics such as cooptation, appropriation,
importing, bonding (merging), and socialisation of reputations. A barrier is established between the newly created desirable reputation and others that may damage or interfere with it through firewalling. Another means of distilling a reputation is buffering, which occurs when the effects of old, negative reputation are filtered as they flow through the organisation or externally. Alternatively, compensating evidence is produced that weakens the effects of the negative reputation, allowing a new positive reputation to dominate.

Create — generating positive reputations through growth from basic elements or created whole cloth from the modification or acquisition of key core elements. Reputations may be created inside or outside the core actor, or with respect to entities outside the core actor, i.e., as in the creation of external agents. Tactics used include fertilisation and manufacturing/sculpting (Mahon & Mitnik, 2010, p. 291-95).

For the tactics to be effective in achieving their intended objectives, the new reputation and image needs to be supported by substantive and real changes that not only occur in the realm of actual events, but they also need to be perceived by the target audience. An interest in actively engaging in transforming Russia’s international reputation and image was publicly uttered by the Media Minister of the time, Mikhail Lesin in 2001 when he stated that the country needed to cultivate a new image otherwise Russians would “always look like bears.” (Bibb, 2006)

A Russian expert in Public Diplomacy, Igor Panarin of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Diplomatic Academy proposed a five-step programme for improving Russia’s international image (Igor Panarin’s website (in Russian) can be found at http://panarin.com/. He also has a blog (in English) on Twitter - http://twitter.com/i_panarin). This strategy is posted on his website, the steps include: 1) creating a new presidential advisory position that would coordinate all public information coming from the presidential administration, the government, Foreign Ministry and Security Council; 2) to create a new presidential administrative office of information analysis, and an agency for foreign political news sponsored by the state and business; 3) establish a state commission for public diplomacy, which would be composed of senior state officials from the presidential administration, government, State Duma, national media outlets and leading politicians; 4) restore to Foreign Ministry supervision Voice of Russia (radio) and RIA Novosti (news agency) from the Culture Ministry; 5) the establishment of a number of Russian NGOs, with the aim of pursuing Russia’s foreign policy objectives. (Yasmann, 2006) These innovations to the Russian system would theoretically allow for a greater control of the flow of information and messages to and from the state structures. This in turn may allow for a more consistent message and image coming from the government. Panarin’s comments seem to contradict President Medvedev’s remarks about the state divesting itself of media assets. How these
suggestions could be used to further Russian foreign and economic policy could prove to be somewhat problematic (owing in no small part to very diverse publics and issues).

There have been a number of recent articles on the topic of nation branding campaigns in contemporary Russia, including in the *Russian Journal of Communication*. In 2008 Igor Klyukanov led a forum in the *Russian Journal of Communication* on the theme of *Nation Branding and Russia: Prospects and Pitfalls*. One of the participants, Simon Anholt, stated that nation branding Russia is about proving that Russia deserves a different reputation. In realising this point, information about Russia needs to be communicated to the international community. The next task is setting about generating a desire among the targeted publics to access that information in order to affect some kind of influence on opinion and behaviour. A setback in Anholt’s opinion is the fact that there is a lack of clarity concerning basic concepts, and a lack of consensus of a shared vision among the various stakeholders (not to mention a lack of coordination among them) (Klyukanov, 2006, p. 194-95).

A number of the members of the forum addressed the issues of a lack of clear identity, and a lack of consensus among the key stakeholders on what values and images to communicate. The problem of split and contradictory messages was also raised, caused in part by contradictions in rhetoric and practice (events of international interest, such as the Gas Wars). Many of the contributors also saw the issue of nation branding as something related to international politics, rapprochement with the international community, rather than something that is primarily commercial in nature.

In 2006, when Russia was holding the G8 presidency and the summit in St Petersburg in June of that year, an effort was made to revamp the national image. The firm *Ketchum* (http://www.ketchum.com/) was paid some US$2 million to support the Russian government in their objectives and goals. They were hired again in 2007 for advice, lobbying and media relations in support of promoting foreign investment and Russia’s wish to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Other contracts have been entered with Ketchum that have included promoting a greater visibility and understanding of the Russian government’s goals (see the Foreign Agents Registration Act page for details on foreign government PR and lobbying attempts in the United States - http://www.fara.gov/. The 1938 law makes it mandatory to have all foreign government attempts to influence US publics transparent through registration). (Orttung, 2010, p. 8) The G8 presidency provided an opportune moment for Russia to use a political event, and if correctly supported by an information campaign, could be used to project a more positive international image. However, the communicator needs to not only know the target audience, but the appropriate use of symbols and rhetoric, otherwise the moment could be lost. The cofounder of *GPlus Europe* (Ketchum’s sister company in Brussels), Peter Guilford, explained the reason for hiring a foreign, rather than Russian PR company.
I think they realised that in the normal course of events they can do it themselves, but
the G8 presidency is an exceptional opportunity and an exceptional year where they need
an exceptional response. So they have decided to outsource a lot of the communications
work as much as anything to make the life of the Western press easier in the run-up to
the St Petersburg summit in July, and beyond. (Bigg, 2006)

There were three key issues in particular that were being promoted for the Russian
government — health, education and energy security. Ketchum introduced a number of
innovations in trying to get the message across to a global audience. One of these
innovations occurred with the use of social media and a blog on the popular site Twitter -
http://twitter.com/modernrussia. This page has attracted 1327 followers as of 9 February
2011. The page contains a number of different visual symbols for the reader, including the
Russian state emblem (double headed eagle) and an outline of the Russian Federation.
Modern Russia states its business and objectives as being to bring “News, analysis,
commentary on economic, political and social modernization of Russia from Ketchum.”
(From the ModernRussia page on Twitter, http://twitter.com/modernrussia, accessed 8
February 2011) The news feeds relate almost exclusively to economic and commercial
matters. Issues that relate to national and international politics do not appear to be
introduced.

State/owned companies and the Russian government have been hiring foreign PR
companies in order to target specific audiences. One of those audiences is the business
community, which is being targeted with the message that Russia is a safe and profitable
country to invest. An additional message is the “reliable energy supplier” message, which
intersects with the business community. (Kupchinsky, 2009) The nature and means of
Ketchum’s message seems to imply that the business community is the intended target
audience.

Not all efforts for improving Russia’s international reputation and image have been
carried out by foreign PR companies. There have been a number of Russian projects that
include such events as the Valdai Club, where foreign guests are invited to mingle with
influential Russian policy makers and discuss a variety of subjects. The Valdai Club website
(http://www.valdaiclub.com/) describes itself as being “a global forum for the world’s
leading and best-informed experts on Russia to engage in a sustained dialogue about the
country’s political, economic, social and cultural development.”(Front page of the Valdai
reads “fostering a dialogue about Russia.” This particular project has been running since
2004. It seems to be intended to function, in terms of influencing publics, by firstly affecting
the perception and opinion of key influencers who in turn (theoretically) influence a wider
audience by virtue of their social/public position in their home society.
The *Russia Now* campaign was another attempt to influence foreign publics through the mass media. Articles were placed in mass media outlets, such as the Outpost of Change article appearing in the Washington Post. (Levchenko, 2010) This article gave the impression to the reader of openly expressed public discontent as being a “model for constructive dissent” in Kaliningrad. This is opposed to the more often seen and read stories featuring conflict between police and protestors during the *Marches of Dissent* (organised in part by the National Bolshevik Party) and the underlying theme of lack of opportunity in the freedom of expression.

As with Ketchum’s *Modern Russia* campaign that appeared on Twitter, *Russia Now* also uses social media as part of its means of influence and getting the message across. The *Russia Beyond* blog on Twitter - http://twitter.com/russiabeyond - unlike *Modern Russia* does actually bring up political topics and issues. As of 9 February 2011 there were a total of 620 followers of the blog. There is a much broader range of topics, everything from foreign news, culture, politics, sport, history to technology and much more. No Russian state symbols appear on the margins of the blog page, and it appears visually to be quite plain.

*Russia Beyond the Headlines* (part of this PR campaign) also appears on Facebook - http://www.facebook.com/russianow?v=wall. It has a following of some 3276 people (as of 9 February 2011). This is an expanded upon version (in terms of amount of content) of what appears on the Twitter blog, with some articles being generated in the mainstream mass media and being reposted. Many of the articles are drawn from the *Russia Beyond the Headlines* website (http://rbth.ru/).

Mass media that are owned or controlled by the Russian government form an important part of the effort too. The Doctrine of Information Security (For an English translation of this policy document please see Nordenstreng, K., Vartanova, E. & Zassoursky, Y. (editors), *Russian Media Challenge*, Helsinki, Kikimora Publications, 2001, pp. 251-292), which was approved in September 2000, recognised that the Russian government needed a consistent approach, message and access to media outlets in order to influence domestic and international publics. Existing media outlets have been remodelled and new ones established in this regard.

*RIA Novosti* (http://en.rian.ru/) a government owned news agency operates in some 45 countries in some 14 different languages. (RIA Novosti, 2011) In 2009 *RIA Novosti* partnered with the Washington DC, London and Zurich based consultancy called *RJI Companies*. The primary contract involved organising a high-level conference on the Arctic in Moscow in November 2009. Intended messages from the event were Russia as a good international actor in terms of their environmental and energy policy. Similar conferences were planned to take place in the Middle East and the Far East. (Rettman (B), 2009) This appears to use the *redefine* strategy combined with *transformation* tactics. Russian
government policy is trying to be shown as being progressive and open in two high profile issue areas.

RIJ Companies also stated that there was a second contract in the making with RIA Novosti, which was to “generally improve the image of Russia abroad.” This included helping to “portray Russia as a benign great power entitled to negotiate with the likes of the US, China and the EU on global security and energy issues.” As part of this effort, it was intended to create the perception of historical precedent and a sense of legitimacy in Russia influencing neighbouring countries for the “good of the world.” This included creating a positive impression of the Soviet Union before and after World War Two. (Rettman (B), 2009) For this to have any chance of succeeding the messenger needs to have credibility, a believable message, a wide interest/appeal and reach (to the audience).

The creation of the English language (and later Arabic and Spanish) Russia Today (http://rt.com/) was intended to fill one of the gaps identified in the Doctrine of Information Security, the state’s capability to directly broadcast to an international audience. Russia Today also has a presence on social media – Twitter, Facebook and You Tube. The TV channel was launched in 2005, and now boasts having coverage on some five continents and over 100 countries. Their promotion/differentiation is the ability to “show you how any story can be another story altogether.” On their website is the claim to have an audience of about 200 million paying viewers among pay-tv subscribers. (Russia Today, 2011) The format of the programming appearing on Russia Today is tailored for an international (Western) audience. Figures for the potential viewership are impressive, with a very large pool of a global audience to influence. The sense of familiarity of format is intended to be the means of getting the message received with less resistance. This is tempered by an expressed suspicion that Russia Today is a propaganda tool under the control of the Russian state.

**CHALLENGES TO PROJECTING RUSSIA’S DESIRED IMAGE**

The physical attributes that constitute a nation cannot be altered or changed by branding, it is the audience’s perception of that nation that can be influenced. There are a number of factors that need to be taken into account, among the audience, which can exert an impact upon their perception: personal experience (visiting a country, meeting and interacting with its citizens); acquired education and knowledge; existing stereotypes and prejudices; framing and narratives of a country through mass media.

A number of mechanisms exist through which a nation’s image influences perceptions. Events, culture, people, products, nature, climate and ideologies (to name a few) can all be associated with a country. As such, both the country and the other aspects exert a mutual effect and impact upon each other’s image and how it is received and
perceived by an audience. For example an association can exist between tulips and the Netherlands, poor/boring food and the United Kingdom, blonde women and Sweden. O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy (2000) list a number of different underlying factors and reasons why associations can exist.

Conditioning: there is a suggestion of substance over image, where people, products, events and so forth come to be associated with positive or negative reinforcement.

Link to Social Norms of Target Audience or its Values or Valued Images: symbols in this instance are used to persuade “the rhetoric of presentation, in which the display of symbols outweighs discursive argument.” The use of given symbols is intended to be the means of persuasion.

Link to a Feeling of Solidarity With Others: this method of appeal can be more usefully understood as an offer of affiliation. The “persuasion presupposes that the persuader and the target audience share a common interest — not all interests in common but the interest relevant to the appeal.” An interest that is used for the appeal may not initially form the basis of a common interest, but may become so through effective rhetoric.

Link to Position and Prestige: is an appeal that uses the hierarchy of influence. The general thesis of this appeal is that those who are higher in the social hierarchy, knowledge hierarchy or celebrity hierarchy possess an advantage in their ability to persuade. There is a reliance on the target audience’s desire to associate with a prestige position. (O’Shaughnessy & O’Shaughnessy, 2000, p. 61-62)

A government is likely to choose what they believe to be core values of a nation, in other words those ideals and values that express what a country and its people stand for. In this respect, it can simultaneously act as a unifying theme. The understanding and exercise of reputational capital is essential in successfully managing to influence and persuade a target audience, and an extremely difficult task without it.

A certain level of conditioning exists beyond the borders that affect the outcome of the campaigns that are being run to improve the international image. Those images are in many cases involving negative associations, which can be picked up through reporting in the mass media. For instance, a Washington Post article described Russia Today in the following light; “at first glance it looks a lot like CNN, but it can be a breathless cheerleader for the Kremlin.” A quote from the same article mentioned Jack Shaffer’s (media critic for Slate) describing Rossiskaya Gazeta’s supplements in the Washington Post as “beneath the shattered syntax of these laughable pieces beats the bloody red heart of the tone-deaf Soviet propagandist.” (Finn, 2008) These quotes from one article illustrate a number of established
and still existing stereotypes and prejudices. There are the associations of Russia with the Soviet Union; crude, yet sinister propaganda; media as being a tool of state propaganda.

This begs the question, what are the current stereotypes and prejudices that exist that could potentially disrupt efforts to re-brand Russia’s international image? Not all stereotypes and need to be politically negative. For instance, the Russian Union of the Travel Industry in their Just Russia campaign approached the issue of symbols and stereotypes of Russia and Russians.

The stereotypical understanding is that Russia is a faraway, snowy country, where one must wear a fur coat and valenki (felt boots), people do nothing but drink vodka and play balalaikas, while bears are leaving their forest homes to go walking down village streets. However, the reality of our life is very far from this idyllic myth: balalaikas, bears, and felt boots have more or less become symbols of Russia rather than attributes of everyday life. (Just Russia, 2011)

The website takes each symbol and stereotype in turn, describes the history and significance of each character or object. These stereotypes and symbols are more related to cultural images and perceptions of the Russian people and lifestyle. Other popular stereotypes include Russians as being hospitable, risk-taking and warm hearted. Others bring diverse elements as vodka, beautiful girls and communism or that Russians are lazy. (The Cross-Cultural Rhetoric Blog: Stereotypes About Russia, 2008) A number of these images seem to be generated and perpetuated through a lack of direct contact between those who hold these beliefs and Russia/Russians.

If there is not always the opportunity for direct contact to influence views and perceptions, what is a possible source that perpetuates them? Mass media are one of those possible sources of influence by providing an avenue to people and events that would otherwise be remote from their lives. An article appeared in the Guardian newspaper, written by a Russian, expressing a sense of frustration of the mass media entrenching stereotypes by virtue of their narratives and frames.

Stereotypes promoted by the media are now entrenched: Russian companies are corrupt and are puppets of the state, minorities are not allowed to speak their languages and males are chauvinist machos. The economy survives on pumping gas, while the leadership dreams of conquering half of the world. News from Russia is bad news. (Matveeva, 2008)

The reputation and image of Russia to some extent is tied to historical precedent, which is getting reinforced by mass media reporting. Therefore the brand becomes stable, in a negative sense, owing in part to the familiarity of the audience to those stereotypes and traits. President Dmitry Medvedev mentioned the issue of stereotypes in relation to NATO-Russian relations and their harmful effect. He mentioned the existing stereotypes of democracy failing to take root and the Russian leadership being devoted to authoritarian principles. Medvedev then acknowledged that these things “are well entrenched in the minds
of people in Russia, in Europe, and in the US. This may be a grassroots interpretation of the previous approach, but it is there. And we can feel it.” (The Permanent Mission of Russia to NATO, 2010) Once more the element of sticky prior stereotypes in maintaining an image is raised.

There appears to be an effort to try and address the negative images and stereotypes being perpetuated in the mass media. This is being done through the process of identifying and trying to challenge them. One of these efforts can be found in the Real Russia Project (www.russiablog.org — in 2007 the Russia Blog recorded nearly three million individual visitors) that was launched in 2005 by the Discovery Institute (located in Seattle, US), and their production of a leaflet 10 Western Media Stereotypes About Russia: How Truthful are They? It lists 10 stereotypes in turn, which it characterises as being outdated Cold War frames being circulated by US media. The stated aim of this project is “to focus on the emerging new Russia with accurate and fair reporting and analysis — without fear or favour.” Each stereotype is named, examples of that type appearing in the media given, and then an argument to refute the stereotype is detailed. The 10 stereotypes listed are:

- Putin is a former KGB agent who is suppressing opposition and accumulating power;
- Russians live under Putin’s tyranny;
- Russian media isn’t free;
- Khodorkovsky is a political prisoner;
- Brutality and human rights abuses run rampant in Chechnya;
- Kremlin supports Hamas, Iran and radical groups;
- New NGO law assaults Russian civil society;
- New ‘slander’ law demonstrates Kremlin’s authoritarian tendencies;
- Putin’s policies constitute major human rights abuses in Russia;
- Russia is unsafe for US investors. (Discovery Institute, 2006)

These stereotypes are perpetuated in the global mass media through news reporting, which tends to support these as facts. Although these contentious stereotypes are tackled head-on, which is an unusual step and probably more fruitful than trying to avoid such questions, such contradictions (plus the ability to reach the audience that is exposed to the ‘negative’ news) make the task of influencing and persuading the audience very difficult. Additionally, the news footage of such events as the court trials of such events as the Khodorkovsky court trials or the breaking up of unsanctioned public protest marches (such as gay rights or political opposition) tend to support the dictum that actions speak louder than words. Having said this though, the more ‘novel’ approach of publicly and openly discussing such problems in order to challenge the stereotypes is likely to be the best approach, which needs to be seen to be supported by the actions of the authorities in Russia.
This particular campaign tackles the various high profile and some controversial stereotypes in an apparently open and systematic manner. On the blog it states that it is managed by “Yuri Mamchur, Director of Discovery Institute’s Real Russia Project, a member of MBA class 2011 at Vanderbilt University’s Owen Graduate School of Management.” (Russia Blog, 2011) As stated earlier, the Real Russia Project is run through the Discovery Institute (http://www.discovery.org). Discovery Institute describes themselves as being a non-profit educational organisation. The mission statement of the Discovery Institute is quite broad:

Discovery Institute’s mission is to make a positive vision of the future practical. The Institute discovers and promotes ideas in the common sense tradition of representative government, the free market and individual liberty. Our mission is promoted through books, reports, legislative testimony, articles, public conferences and debates, plus media coverage and the Institute’s own publications and Internet website.

Current projects explore the fields of technology, science and culture, reform of the law, national defence, the environment and the economy, the future of democratic institutions, transportation, religion and public life, government entitlement spending, foreign affairs and cooperation within the bi-national region of “Cascadia.” The efforts of Discovery fellows and staff, headquartered in Seattle, are crucially abetted by the Institute’s members, board and sponsors. (Discovery Institute, 2011)

This project seems to have met with some success, insofar as they are quoted in some US and Russian media sources. Tough and controversial aspects are broached in the Real Russia Project, instead of trying to bypass or focus attention on other issues. Given the volume of visitors on the Russia Blog, this initiative seems to have gained public attention. However, has this translated into a change of stereotypes and images? Two issues/events shall now be briefly discussed in order to try and find an answer to this question — the 2008 Georgian-Russian War and the Gas Wars with Ukraine. These two cases represent the issue of actions (or perceived actions) speaking louder than mere words, thereby ensuring efforts to shift reputation in order to better accumulate and wield soft power, more difficult.

The outcome of modern wars are being determined more and more by political considerations, which are guided by perception and opinion, rather than by pure military might. Georgia and Russia have a relationship based upon tension and conflict in the post-Soviet era. As with the weighting of the two countries tangible qualities (land mass, population, economic and military strength), the intangible assets (reputation and image) also displayed a large gulf and were asymmetric. It is not the intention of this article to go extensively into the rights and wrongs of the Georgian-Russian War of August 2008. This
event does however demonstrate a number of important points, which relate to the issues of prejudices, stereotypes and the influence of external events upon a PR campaign.

In a reflection upon the failings of the Western media and their reporting on the war, Peter Wilby of the Guardian summed up a number of reasons why they fell short. “They need to be told who are the goodies and baddies. News, remember, is part of the entertainment industry.” (Wilby, 2008) An assumption from Wilby’s statement and the nature of the mainstream international media framing of this conflict implies that Russia is carrying the label as one of the ‘baddies’. This resulted in diametrically opposed frames and narratives describing Georgia and Russia. Georgia was being framed as a democratic country, seeking independence from an aggressive and authoritarian Russia.

There were PR agencies attempting to render some help to the Russian cause, such as GPlus Europe had been active in trying to influence EU policy makers, it specialises in hiring former EU officials and prominent journalists. During the 2008 war they pushed for press visits to South Ossetia “so that TV in Europe had more to show than rampaging Russian tanks.” (Rettman (A), 2009) The nature of the international media coverage of the conflict generated significant debate and many accusations of lack of professionalism and ethics. Early coverage painted Russia in a very bad light, which was exacerbated by an overwhelming coverage of the official Georgian perspective of the conflict. Such coverage was very harmful to Russia’s international credibility and image. The harm can be found in the fact that the perceived actions of Russia in the Georgian-Russian War of 2008, tended to support a number of the ten stereotypes that are listed above. This is acutely shown through news reporting that tended to blame Putin (rather than the incumbent President Medvedev) for the perceived wrongs and injustices of the moment.

The post-War tit-for-tat is still happening at the political and diplomatic level between the Georgian and Russian governments. Mass media reports, especially in the early stages of the war were laying the blame on Russia, together with a loaded framing and narrative (which included references to the Soviet period — Prague Spring of 1968 and Hungarian Uprising of 1956 for example). Comments made by Peter Wilby underline that journalists were making value judgements based upon existing knowledge and what they perceived to be happening. Therefore concluded that historically, and what they perceived to be happening at the time, framed Russia as the aggressor and Georgia as the victim. Given the values and messages being expressed and transmitted, international audiences were more likely to empathise and sympathise with the Georgian cause. This in turn had the effect of restricting the military options available to Russia.

Conflict over energy supplies is another contentious issue, which touches the political and business sphere. How has this issue affected Russia’s international brand? Russia’s G8 leadership became marred by a number of different events, one of which was the 2006 Gas War with Ukraine. A conflict over the price of gas supplied by Russia to Ukraine resulted
in the shutting off of gas supplies to Ukraine on 1 January 2006. One side portrayed this event as being a sign that Russia was an unreliable supplier of gas and was using energy as a foreign policy weapon. On the other side, there were those policy watchers that commented that Russia was entitled to raise the gas price. Vladimir Putin’s Deputy Press Secretary at the time, Dmitry Peskov, noted the problem of perception and rationalized it as being rooted in Russia being ‘misunderstood.’

The situation surrounding the conflict between Gazprom and Ukraine probably demonstrated most clearly that we are not always understood correctly. […] Gazprom did not sever supplies to Western consumers, and the argument was with Ukraine only. But many analysts literally refused to understand this, and accused Russia of using its gas and its natural resources as a means to put political pressure on some countries, whereas this is purely a business question. (Bigg, 2006)

Various Gas Wars between Russia and Ukraine (Belarus also) have been another source of negative image for Russia. It is difficult for the Russian government and Gazprom to get their message across (and accepted) in the international press. Established narratives and stereotypes quickly emerge in the framing of these energy conflicts. However, there have been some changes in attempts to manage the information from previous conflicts. In December 2008 Gazprom realised there was likely to be another Gas War with Ukraine, and unlike the previous one in 2006, they began to communicate proactively through establishing a website - http://www.gazpromukrainefacts.com/. This forum carried daily news reports of meetings, press conferences and the company’s version of events as they were unfolding. (Orttung, 2010, p. 9)

The Gazprom website (www.gazprom.com) is available in Russian and English, with a well laid out and easy to access and navigate website. Different political and business news is published on the website. The German magazine Der Spiegel had an interview with Alexei Miller from Gazprom, eventually the issue of Russian government influence on Gazprom was raised. The interviewer posed a question after the issue of the progress of the various gas pipelines was discussed (Nordstream, South Stream and Nabucco).

Interviewer: Where are such decisions taken — at Gazprom’s headquarters or 6 kilometers away from there, in the Kremlin?

Alexei Miller: It’s nice — a good stereotype for western readers. That’s right, Gazprom is a state-owned company and the Government holds over 50 per cent of its shares. Being the majority shareholder, the Government defines our strategic goals, we have only three of those: diversification of our markets, transportation routes and final products. No other tasks are given by it. At our
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level we make managerial decisions and we do it in a timely manner! We consider it a great competitive advantage. (Mahler & Schepp, 2011)

A number of questions relating to Ukraine followed, which seems to demonstrate that certain prejudices and stereotypes are imbedded in journalists, and get expressed in the mass media, which then perpetuates them. As the mass media provide an outlet to those who do not necessarily experience events they cover directly, opinions may be formed on the information that is available and/or consumed. Gazprom seems to be trying to circumvent at least some of this problem by communicating to target publics (given the nature of the news available in English, likely to be Western businessmen). There is a clear understanding here about the potential loss of reputation with the resulting deficit in terms of soft power and its consequences (political conflicts with other governments and lack of business interest in investing in or doing business with Russia for example).

Hills and Knowlton has also been assisting the Russian government with the energy security issue. Elaine Cruikshanks, the Brussels office chief, promoted the Nord Stream pipeline as a “purely commercial” venture and a “strategic prospect” for EU energy diversity. Previous campaigns by Hills and Knowlton have included flying Members of the European Parliament (MEP) to Siberia on a private jet for Rosneft, a Russian energy giant. (Rettman (A), 2009) Different tactics and appeals are used in order to try and influence the target audience, as seen here, the use emotional appeal to self-interest (EU to secure energy supplies). An additional tactic of employing privilege with familiarity is also used, in bringing MEPs to Siberia so that the idea seems to be more tangible and real in addition to being very warmly hosted. These efforts revolving around economic/energy issues show efforts that go beyond merely using mass media as a means to influence key influencers. Although this is not an example of G2P communications it does tend to demonstrate the understanding of the limits of mass media based communication. Mass media information tends to reinforce existing opinions and attitudes, rather than changing them. First hand exposure to the concept or idea that is being promoted is more effective. This can be a more problematic issue for ordinary people gaining entry to Russia, owing to the visa regime.

Both of the cases, of the Georgian-Russian War and the Gas Wars in Ukraine, represent examples of the potential of individual issues threatening the strategic management of the image that is desired by the Russian government and the images being conveyed through the various elements of public diplomacy. The situation no longer exists, where a government can hope to effectively suppress various events and images over a protracted period, such as happened during the Soviet period (for example news of the Ukrainian Famine and repressions during the Stalin-era). New Information Communication Technologies and the presence of international news media, not to mention social media, make this task seemingly impossible. The case of the Domodedovo Airport bombing in
January 2011 illustrates this point, when social media broadcast images and news of the event when the mainstream domestic media did not initially report on the terror act.

The Georgian-Russian War and the Ukrainian Gas War are two cases, one that was a success and the other a failure, in terms of a positive image of Russia. Both events were a potential threat to the Russian government’s attempt to instil a more positive international image of the country. As stated earlier, the Georgian-Russian War proved to be harmful to that image, owing to the event tending to reinforce the existing negative images of Russia (mainly political, but also economic in nature). Georgia was much more adept at the information war in the early stages. By the time Russia began to communicate more effectively, journalists had moved on to the next story. The short attention span of international media to ‘hot’ stories worked in Georgia’s favour, as the negative stories concerning Russia’s involvement in the war are the ones that continue to hold resonance.

Experience that was gained from the First Gas War in Ukraine was used to wage a much more effective information campaign in order to mitigate negative effects. The information campaign can be considered as being well organised and reasonably effective, insofar as getting the official position of Gazprom (and the Russian government) in global media, and therefore successful. Thus the disastrous performance of informing, influencing and persuading an international public of the earlier Gas War was turned around. One of Russia’s potential means of accumulating soft-power is through its ability to attract foreign investment in its industry. International big business has shown a great deal of interest in possible projects in Russia, however, they are cautious owing to political uncertainties (such as those experienced by the energy company BP). Big business is also a means with which to indirectly influence foreign governments, owing to the connections between politics and corporations.

In sum, there are a number sub-issues that affect the strategic image of Russia. The source of images and information is not solely derived, owned or controlled by the state. State and non-state actors through their words and deeds can either consolidate or break efforts at attempting to re-brand a nation. The recent example of events in Belarus in the wake of the December 2010 elections completely overwhelmed and undid the successful work of Timothy Bell in rehabilitating the Belarusian image.

RESULTS REFLECTED IN PUBLIC OPINION AND POLLS

How have all of these diverse and various attempts served the cause of improving Russia’s international image? Has it worked at all, or has the exercise been a waste of time and money? A number of polls and their results have appeared in the news lately, with a somewhat mixed result. In the BBC World Service Poll (held annually), which is conducted by GlobeScan, found that Russia rose from 29th place in the previous poll to 13th place. This
ranking is made in terms of thoughts and feelings of respondents on different countries’ influence upon the global stage. (Washington, 2011)

The poll asked some 28,619 people to rate the influence of 16 major nations and the European Union. Those who viewed Russia as having a positive effect grew from 29 per cent in 2010 to 34 per cent in 2011. A majority of 38 per cent (stable from last year) still view Russia negatively though. Of the 27 countries where the poll was conducted, nine had a positive opinion of Russia’s global influence, 11 held a negative opinion and seven were divided (The full report is downloadable from http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/views_on_countriesregions_bt/680.php?nid=&id=&pnt=680&lb=). (World Public Opinion, 2011) Russia Beyond the Headlines met the news with a positive tone. “Although there have been numerous hiccups along the way — refusing entry to a Guardian journalist earlier this year for example — the result of a more ‘pragmatic’ foreign policy and efforts to improve ties with the West now appear to be reaping dividends.” (Russia Beyond the Headlines, 2011)

However, another ranking, given by the conservative US think tank the Heritage Foundation, rated Russia as being in 143rd in the world position and 41st among European countries (out of a total of 43 countries) in terms of economic freedom for investors. This was still a 0.2 improvement on the last evaluation, which was due to what were termed as being minor improvements. Chairman of GlobeScan, Doug Miller stated that Russia was hurting its international image by virtue of some of its actions. “[…] the more it acts like the old Soviet Union, the less people outside its borders seem to like it” (for the Heritage Foundation Report on the Index for Economic Freedom in 2011 please see http://www.heritage.org/index/). (Washington, 2011) It can be assumed from the results and the remarks, a country’s international image is adversely affected when its leadership is perceived to be violating common norms and acceptable behaviour.

**Conclusions**

With the Cold War coming to an end there was a realisation of a change in how a country projects its power and will on the international stage. Long gone were the days when hard power, such as economic coercion or the use of military force, bring about the desired and intended effect. With rapidly transforming information technology and methods of communication, an alternative form of power, soft power was realisable. The new situation meant that a state could utilise its culture, reputation and foreign policy in order to achieve its goals. But this requires a country to gain setting the international agenda and influencing the preferences of others. This is done by increasing a country’s perceived attractiveness in terms of its culture and policies that are practiced, to an international public (at the level of citizens and not government).
A key problem that can be detected is how actors view the role and effectiveness of PR technologies in persuading and influencing a target audience. In some regards it is viewed as the silver bullet that has the power to resolve a variety of social, commercial and political issues. However, as the likes of Bernays and Lippmann have already stated, for the desired change in image to occur, real change to address those issues also needs to occur in order to support the message being relayed.

These two problems have the effect of causing definitional stability of reputation, which is further reinforced through environmental factors such as framing and narratives used by international mass media, and a lack of direct experience (in visiting Russia and meeting Russians) of some segments of the audience. The old stereotypes and images are more familiar, which is likely to result in the new communicated messages not having any or the intended effect. Media reporting focuses on, as a rule, negative or bad news from Russia. This in turn creates a link to negative images.

Added to these problems is the issue of how the Self is seen, and therefore can be communicated to the Other. What does it mean to be Russian? What is the Russian identity? These are questions that have existed for centuries and are still hotly debated. This makes the matter of expressing oneself in terms of nation brand much more difficult, when the basis of the image that needs to be relayed is uncertain.

In the current global landscape, a currency of ideas is in existence, and Russia (like everyone else) needs to compete in order to get a message across. This is not something that is easily done, crafting and delivering an effective message takes much time and effort in order to stand some chance of success. For a message to hold the attention of and resonate with the target audience it must use recognised and accepted symbols and images, offer some platform for the basis of establishing a shared interest, linking common or shared values or norms, and to deliver the message via the mass medium that is used by the target audience.

Results from the various PR campaigns aimed at re-branding and improving Russia’s international image have been mixed. Various strategies have been used, such as transferring, redefining and concealing in order for realising a re-branded Russia. Different campaigns run by different organisations have targeted different publics with a variety of issues and appeals.

There have been attempts to influence key influencers, those in society that hold status and position that would enable to influence a wider circle of people that trust them. This has in some cases been skilfully done through such events as the Valdai Club, and organising international conferences and symposiums around key issues that are designed raise the Russian government’s image through linking it to a position or prestige (such as energy security and the environment).
One of the elements that can undo these efforts is an inconsistent image, whether by accident or design. If a tourist or businessman has an unpleasant experience with a customs officer or some other public official, word of mouth through informal channels of communication can spread negative news and images. This was certainly the case when my father and sister visited Russia several years ago. There are also international events, such as the Georgian-Russian War and the Gas Wars that can also prove to be very damaging to Russia’s attempts to re-brand itself, having the effect to confirm a number of the old and negative stereotypes. The influence of the information sphere has its limits, it forms a bridge between the physical world and the cognitive sphere. Information needs to be able to support and agree with events in the physical world, otherwise they are not likely to gain currency. All of the attempts to rebrand Russia’s international image (especially the political reputation) seem to stumble upon Simon Anholt’s observation, which is the difficulty in proving to the international community that Russia deserves a different reputation and image.

Russia has a multitude of brands relating to culture, economics and politics (and are perceived and understood differently), which provide mental short cuts and understandings of the country and its people. In sum, Russia has an attractive culture, which has a long established and rich tradition in literature, music and the arts. This is offset and overshadowed by politics (real and perceived), which revolve around the issues of lack of freedom (political, human rights and economic). The main objectives of the nation branding exercise involve the task of correcting and improving the current national image, which is attempted through trying to discard the negative aspects.

A problematic issue in realising this is there seems to be a lack of consensus on a lack of clarity of the main concepts, identity and values expressed. This is further compounded by differing information agenda and objectives by various actors (state and non-state), with the resulting lack of coordination. Conditioning in the foreign publics also presents a significant obstacle, such as associating Russia and the Soviet Union, which superimposes negative values and attributes of the later upon the former.

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