

## ARTICLE

# Did Russia's Soft Power Really Work? An Initial Survey of Russia's Soft Power Attraction in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

Russia has been trying to change its image in global politics since the demise of the Soviet Union. One of the most popular tools the Russian government used to do this is soft power resources. The exploration of Russia's soft power can be seen from the *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* in 2016, which places more emphasis on the use of *soft power* instruments in the implementation of foreign policy. This article attempts to explore and understand the type and use of soft power resources of Russia in Indonesia. By using a constructive perspective and descriptive statistical methods, this article will capture how the Indonesian young generation perceives the type and the use of Russia's soft power resources in Indonesia. However, this study's data, collected in 2018, precedes the significant geopolitical shifts following Russia's 2022 military actions in Ukraine, which may have altered global perceptions. Our results showed that Russian soft power resources emanated from Russian culture and Cold War historical remnants have been successfully converted into soft power attractions for foreign audiences in Indonesia. It indicates a shared understanding of the respondents about global multipolarity in which Russia was perceived as a balancing great power of US domination.

**Keywords:** Russia Soft Power; Russia Influence; Strategic Narratives; Indonesia

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# 1. Introduction

Soft power is always about attraction. Joseph Nye when formulating soft power as an analytical concept to understand the phenomenon of changes in the nature of power globally since the 1970s and the tendency of the US role to decline globally in international politics, based his argument on alternative ideological interests besides the dominance of traditional resources elements (military and economic) of a country on wielding power within the international system<sup>[1]</sup>. The ideological interest referred to by Nye, as detailed by Alexander Wendt in the constructivist tradition in the International Relations discipline, stems from “the role of ideas, culture, domestic politics, statesmanship, and the possibility of change”<sup>[2]</sup>. Based on ideological interest, Nye considers that there is a need for an analytical concept based on power resources that is not only focused on hard power (coercion and inducement) but also on intangible power resources, which he later calls soft power. Nye clarified and reemphasized that his soft power formulation was based on power behavior, not only power resources<sup>[3]</sup>. This critical distinction highlights that countries must develop skills in converting resources into strategies that produce preferred outcomes. The effectiveness of these strategies depends upon the context—where, when, and to whom the resources would be used<sup>[3]</sup>. This behavioral emphasis represents an important evolution in soft power theory that moves beyond simply cataloging resources to understanding the strategic conversion process that transforms potential influence into actual attraction.

Since soft power is an analytical concept that focuses on outcomes rather than resources, Nye suggested researchers pay close attention to context and power conversion strategies<sup>[3]</sup>. To effectively convert resources into optimal attraction outcomes, a government must strategically grasp the contemporary global political context and precisely comprehend the target audience’s preferences. Nye illustrated this with two contrasting examples<sup>[3]</sup>: First, the popular admiration for communist resistance to Hitler’s fascism that divided Europe after World War II was suddenly eroded when the Soviet Union used hard power to suppress revolts in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). Second, a Hollywood film might simultaneously produce attraction in Brazil while generating repulsion in

Saudi Arabia. These examples, sourced from opposing value systems, demonstrate that soft power analysis extends beyond neo-liberalist frameworks to include neo-realist perspectives that begin with the overall power structure of the international system. They also reveal a crucial insight: not all resources are suited to a single conversion strategy, and the effectiveness of soft power depends on strategic alignment with audience values and contextual factors.

This paper is a preliminary attempt to examine the attraction of Russia’s soft power resources to foreign country audiences by using Indonesian students’ perceptions of Russian culture, political values, and foreign policies. This study was conducted using a survey experiment design that aims to fill the scarce subject in Russia’s soft power literature: The identification of the soft power resources used by the Russian government in Indonesia and Indonesian students’ perception on Russia’s soft power resources in Indonesia. By examining the case of Russia’s soft power in Indonesia, this study explores the power resources, instruments, and how the respondents perceive the resources used by the Russian government. The research contributes to a better understanding of the dimension of soft power reception in foreign target audiences. In this regard, Joseph Nye noted that “soft power is a relationship of attraction that depends on the eyes of the beholders”<sup>[3]</sup>. Therefore, the examination of the perception of foreign audiences (the case of Indonesian students) about Russia’s soft power is a study of soft power outcomes: how the power resources were converted into a meaningful impact that could shape the target’s perception of the image of the power resources bearer.

Few studies have been published on how Russia’s soft power really worked in Indonesia. A simple search using Google Scholar with the keyword “Russian soft power in Indonesia” did not produce specific findings, as most of the literature discusses cultural diplomacy and Russian public diplomacy in Indonesia. One specific example that discusses Russian public diplomacy in Indonesia is done by de Archellie in which he identified the top-down approach of Russian public diplomacy in Indonesia to control information dissemination structurally and strategically by using social media instruments<sup>[4]</sup>. This finding also confirms a contrasting result that is commonly discussed within the new public diplomacy subject which informs the

new public diplomacy should be characterized by multi-actor approach within the diplomatic activities and dialogical (two-way communication) and networking relational activities between the actors involved<sup>[5-9]</sup>. Another study of Russia's soft power by Alfaraui argues that Russia has deconstructed the soft power concept by using a postmodern perspective to analyze a series of Putin's speeches on many formal occasions<sup>[10]</sup>. Meanwhile, Purnama et al. report the Russian public diplomacy effort to improve its image in Indonesia using Russia Beyond the Headlines (RBTH) as a public diplomacy instrument<sup>[11]</sup>. Unfortunately, none of these studies have precisely informed us about the impact of the Russian mission on Indonesia's soft power resources or public diplomacy strategies upon Indonesia's audiences.

Given the fact that Indonesia is the most important bilateral partner for Russia in the Southeast Asia region and the positive trends of bilateral relationship between Indonesia-Russia after the Soviet demise, it is valuable and relevant endeavor for scholars to examine how Russia's soft power really works and to what extent do Russia's soft power resources attract Indonesian audiences. Indonesia has been one of Russia's strategic partners in the Southeast Asian region since 2003. This partnership was rebuilt after both countries experienced less intense relations during the New Order regime (1966–1998). Indonesia and Russia are gradually building cooperation in the fields of trade, education, economy, and technology. Tourism and culture. Russia is also actively carrying out public diplomacy activities in Indonesia through cultural programs, educational exchanges, and exhibitions (<http://www.kemlu.go.id>). With the increasing flow of cooperation, communication, and interaction between the two countries, it is clear that Russia has an interest in building a positive image as Indonesia's strategic partner.

This study will limit its scope to pre-war Russia's soft power, which most likely will undergo a course of change after Russia's special military operation began in February 2022. By focusing on pre-war Russia's soft power identification and examination, this study will exclude the pro- and anti-Russian narratives that massively circulated in the public domain, mostly distributed and consumed on the internet after the Russian invasion in February 2022. This limitation will provide a piece of valuable information for the researcher in the next study about the pre-war char-

acteristics of Russia's soft power and to what extent it attracts foreign audiences. Therefore, this article will answer the questions: What are the soft power resources used by the Russian government in Indonesia? How do Indonesian students perceive Russia's soft power resources in Indonesia?

## 2. The Concept of *Soft Power*: from Joseph Nye to Vladimir Putin

This article starts from the conceptual debate on the concept of *soft power* as summarised in some works of literature. Using the constructivist perspective, this article begins by explaining the definition of "*soft power*" in the context of International Relations Studies. Joseph Nye formulates soft power as<sup>[12]</sup>:

. . . the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced.

Nye Jr. stated that there is a change in the nature of *power* owned by a state. This influence can no longer be taken from arms and economic sanctions, but combined with other soft methods called *soft power*<sup>[12]</sup>. *Soft power* is the ability to form preferences of other parties or even the enemy. This ability is associated with unseen state ownership, such as interesting personality, culture, political values, and policy that is considered to have legitimation and moral authority. However, it does not mean *soft power* is similar to influence because it will reduce the meaning, like the application of *hard power* that uses threat or economic sanction to give influence.

The discourse of international politics is identical to the seizure of influence and power among the countries. The process that is used can be through *inducement* or *threat*. These two ways are associated with *hard power* used to change the attitude of other countries so that they will go according to the will of the power bearer. Meanwhile, there is another method used to change the attitude of other countries without using the threat of weapons, economic sanctions, or direct inducement. This method, called *soft power*, aims to change the attitude of other countries according to the will of the power bearer without using any threat or inducement. Other countries will change their

attitude when they feel close emotionally, idolize a political system or government, or even want to implement the same values as those in other countries.

The concept of soft power proposed by Nye is widely used and gives birth to heated debates among scholars. Although there are many concerns and it has been discussed by many scholars, this concept is still weak theoretically. Moreover, based on history, it has not been widely applied because it is limited to the sample of soft power in the USA<sup>[13]</sup>. Mattern stated that soft power remains rather poorly understood as a concept<sup>[14]</sup> or does not completely discuss attraction as the main element. Another opinion states that, as a concept, soft power is based on the truth intuitively, so the theoretical clarity of this concept becomes ambiguous<sup>[15]</sup>. Another statement that emerges is related to the use of this concept<sup>[16]</sup>: is it possible to use this concept to understand the signs and phenomena of international politics<sup>[17]</sup>? The basic question, such as “What is soft power and how to analyze it empirically,” becomes urgent to be answered<sup>[18]</sup>.

The adoption of the concept of soft power into the Russian foreign policy realm can be considered late. The Russian government only officially used the term ‘soft power’ in its policy in 2013, as stipulated in The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации). At the same time, Russian soft power has been studied by scholars, ranging from its resources<sup>[19–21]</sup>, strategies to generate soft power<sup>[22–24]</sup>, media, public diplomacy and soft power<sup>[20,25]</sup>, the specific features of Russia’s soft power<sup>[18,22,26–28]</sup>, Putin’s image and Russia’s soft power<sup>[29]</sup>, and the limits of Russia’s soft power<sup>[30]</sup>. These topics demonstrate the distinctiveness of Russian soft power studies prior to the onset of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022. The study of Russian soft power during this period is notably defined by the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Intrinsically, the perspectives of scholars examining Russian soft power between 2014 (the annexation of Crimea) and the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian conflict were shaped by structural constraints imposed by the context of war, most notably in the areas of power projection<sup>[18,21,26–29]</sup>.

The power projection intention within the Russian soft power strategy, initiated by the Crimean annexation, resonated incessantly in the growing body of soft power literature after the 2022 Russo-Ukraine war<sup>[31–36]</sup>. The

theme of power projection in Russian soft power strategy and discourse, as analyzed, problematized, and measured by scholars, was a subtle effect of Vladimir Putin’s conservative-strongman style of rule. Keating and Kaczmarek offer a particularly valuable framework for understanding Russia’s approach through their concept of “illiberal soft power”<sup>[28]</sup>. They argue that traditional soft power scholarship has been biased toward liberal democratic values, overlooking how conservative or illiberal values can generate significant attraction in certain contexts. Putin’s approach exemplifies this alternative model, where strength, stability, and traditional values become attractive soft power resources that resonate with audiences disillusioned with liberal democratic systems. This “conservative-strongman” model represents a deliberate strategic conversion of Russia’s cultural and political resources into a coherent narrative that challenges Western liberal hegemony.

Putin’s long tenure and his capability to consolidate domestic politics to gain support have forged Russia’s culture, political values, and foreign policy into powerful resources of soft power projection tools. The prolonged Russo-Ukraine war has become a litmus test for liberal Western values of soft power since non-Western conservative narratives have gained more attraction<sup>[33]</sup>. Following Nye<sup>[3]</sup>, who suggested researchers pay close attention to context and power conversion strategies, it is reasonable to say that Vladimir Putin has changed the course of soft power conceptualization since he successfully grasped the contemporary global political context that was fed up with the US-led unipolar politics. This strategic conversion of Russia’s resources into attraction aligns precisely with Nye’s updated emphasis on behavior and conversion strategies rather than merely cataloging resources. Cuppuleri and Ashiku’s contribution to the debate over an illiberal dimension of Russian soft power showed that it was the genuine-based motivations<sup>[32]</sup>, such as security and counter-balance (to US-led unipolarity), that drove the Russian soft power as a substitute dimension to the Western model of liberal soft power. Regarding the institutional arrangement of liberalism as a source of attraction of soft power, Snyder identified that the mismatch between free markets and prevailing institutions for mass political participation has led to the rise of the illiberal dimension of soft power<sup>[37]</sup>. Besides that, Repnikova argued that the increasing promi-

nence of anti-Western narratives as a branding or soft power strategy by non-Western powers could drive the study of soft power in de-Westernization<sup>[33]</sup>. The trend of the growing significance of this illiberal dimension of soft power might be an attractive stimulus for the scholarly discussion, as Russia strategically combines smart and sharp power, utilizing hard power tools during the Ukrainian war<sup>[38]</sup>.

Despite the extensive literature on soft power, limited attention has been given to the reception of pre-war Russia's soft power among foreign target audiences, particularly in non-Western contexts. Existing studies often focus on Russia's soft power strategies without delving deeply into how these efforts are perceived and received by specific audiences abroad. This paper aims to address this gap by offering a preliminary examination of the attractiveness of Russia's soft power resources—such as culture, political values, and foreign policies—to foreign audiences, with a specific focus on Indonesian students. Using a survey experiment design, this study identifies the soft power resources employed by the Russian government in Indonesia and evaluates how these resources resonate with Indonesian students. By exploring the perceptions of this audience, the study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the dimensions of soft power reception, thus enriching the broader discourse on Russia's soft power and its impact in foreign contexts.

### Understanding Russia's Soft Power

Understanding Russia's soft power can be done firstly by reading and understanding the official documents of the foreign policies of the Republic of the Russian Federation. Russia has published five concepts of its foreign policy (*Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации*) during the three different presidents' administrations<sup>[39–42]</sup>: Boris Yeltsin (1993), Dmitry Medvedev (2008), and Vladimir Putin (2000, 2013, and 2016). Each policy concept is constructed based on the current development of domestic, regional, and global politics in its era. For practical use, this article compares the four documents marking the model of Russia's foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From this comparison, the framework of Russia's foreign policy will be seen, especially those related to the concept of soft power and how to implement it.

**Table 1** shows the comparison of structures in which the change is not that significant<sup>[39–42]</sup>. The concept of Rus-

sia's foreign policy is always comprised of five big parts. The naming of the title in every part does not undergo many changes, and they are mostly switched to the phrases that form the title of the part. For the structure, it is seen that this concept is built with good sequence and illustrates the construction of identity for a country and the Russian nation that has changed based on the current global political situation. The choice of the phrase 'modern world' can be understood as a Russian philosophical view that has seen the changing global structure after the Cold War and Uni Soviet dissolution. Russia identifies the new world after the Cold War as a new strategic environment that changes the way of viewing and acting. This new world then bores choices of priorities for Russian foreign policy and determines the areas that become priorities for the policy.

**Table 1.** Structural Concept.

2000	2008	2013	2016
General principles	General provisions	General provisions	General provisions
Modern world and foreign policy of the Russian Federation	The modern world and the foreign policy of the Russian Federation	Foreign policy of the Russian Federation and the modern world	Modern world and foreign policy of the Russian Federation
Priorities of the Russian Federation in the resolution of global issues	Priorities of the Russian Federation for addressing global issues	Priorities of the Russian Federation for addressing global issues	Priorities of the Russian Federation in overcoming global challenges
Regional priorities	Regional priorities	Regional priorities	Regional foreign policy priorities of the Russian Federation
Design and start-up of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation	Shaping and implementing the foreign policy of the Russian Federation	Development and implementation of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation	Russia's foreign policy formulation and implementation

Source: Adapted from Researchers<sup>[39–42]</sup>.

The second part, which must be studied and compared, is the objectives that Russia wants to achieve by Russia while implementing its foreign policy. **Table 2** does not have a comparison of objectives that Russia wants to achieve by Russia in its foreign policy<sup>[39–42]</sup>, especially



to promote a Russian positive image to the international public. Three parts that are highlighted in **Table 2** are how Russia protects its sovereignty, creates an accommodative external environment, and builds a new perspective on Russia to global society using soft power instruments while achieving its foreign policy. Constructive dialogues among civilizations are built in cultural harmony with other societies in the world. This choice looks stronger in the policy concept of 2013 and 2016; culture and history were chosen as the main power in promoting the Russian image at the global level.

The next part of the policy concept shows a specific and explicit view of Russia while using soft power in its

foreign policy activities. The 2013 concept first stated that soft power was a comprehensive tool to achieve foreign policy objectives. Russia defines soft power as an alternative to traditional diplomacy methods and as an inseparable aspect of the relationship among modern nations. Russia also realizes the potential of misusing soft power destructively and is not responsible for pushing the sovereignty of other countries by interfering in domestic problems, destabilization of domestic politics, and manipulating public opinion, including the excuse of giving financial aid for cultural and humanities projects. The 2016 concept reinserted the soft power concept within, repeated the view of the 2013 concept, but no longer stated the concern of misuse.

**Table 2.** Objectives of Russia's Foreign Policy.

2000	2008	2013	2016
to promote a positive perception of the Russian Federation in the world, to popularize the Russian language and culture of the peoples of Russia in foreign states	to promote an objective image of the Russian Federation globally as a democratic state committed to a socially oriented market economy and an independent foreign policy;	promoting the Russian language and strengthening its position in the world, disseminating information on the achievements of the peoples of Russia and consolidating the Russian diaspora abroad;	to strengthen Russia's role in international culture. promote and consolidate the position of the Russian language in the world; raise global awareness of Russia's cultural achievements and national historical legacy, the cultural identity of the peoples of Russia, and Russian education and research; consolidate the Russian-speaking diaspora
	to promote and propagate, in foreign States, the Russian language and Russian peoples' culture, constituting a unique contribution to cultural and civilizational diversity of the contemporary world and the development of an intercivilizational partnership.	facilitating the development of a constructive dialogue and partnership relations between civilizations in the interests of enhancing accord among various cultures and confessions and ensuring their mutual enrichment.	to bolster the standing of Russian mass media and communication tools in the global information space and convey Russia's perspective on international processes to a wider international community

Source: Adapted from Researchers <sup>[39-42]</sup>.

The above comparison shows that Russia has consciously changed its view of the world from time to time. The change of view, especially the use of soft power as an alternative method for traditional diplomacy, seems late because it was explicitly stated in the 2013 concept and reemphasized in the 2016 concept. From the constructivist perspective, the change of view and attitude indicates the willingness of Russia to adopt a universal civilization by using soft power narratives adopted from outside the country as the formal method for its foreign policy. Russia wants to be actively involved in the construction of a global identity built on the shared understanding of univer-

sal values such as promotion and democracy, protection of human rights, and even soft power narratives themselves.

### 3. Methodology

This article is based on a survey experiment research study that aims to identify and understand the soft power resources used by the Russian government or diplomatic mission in Indonesia, investigate how these resources were utilized, and examine how the Indonesian audience perceived them. As a preliminary attempt to investigate the attraction of Russia's soft power resources to foreign coun-

try audiences, we found a scarce supply of literature that studies Russia's soft power in Indonesia. Most importantly, we only find very limited studies that examine the impact of Russia's soft power resources on Indonesian audiences before. As we observed the global wide survey by Pew Research <sup>[43]</sup>, it is difficult to use this result as preliminary data or observational data to conclude how Russia's soft power really works in a foreign country since the study only captures respondents' perceptions of three questions: views on Russia in the last ten years, the role Russia plays in the global stage, and confidence in Putin leadership. The study did not mention the number of respondents in their report. A study by The Soft Power 30 at least provides us with valuable insights because it measures seven indicators of a country's attraction to foreign audiences <sup>[44]</sup>. The polling also stated that it collected data from 500 respondents from Indonesia. To mark different approaches and designs from the previous studies, our research was designed to convey a deep knowledge pertaining to Russia's image in terms of cognitive dimensions of foreign audiences, which, within the soft power analytical framework, indicates the degree of soft power attraction to the target audiences.

This research was conducted in three stages. Firstly, literature study from various official documents of the Russian government, textbooks, scientific articles, and Russian government foreign policies, which have a soft power dimension. Secondly, to know the perception of the respondents on Russia's soft power in Indonesia, data were collected by giving out questionnaires to 650 students of International Relations and Russian Studies from four different universities: Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Lampung, Universitas Islam Al-Azhar, and Universitas Satya Negara Indonesia. The questionnaires were given between May and August 2018. The decision to choose these students as respondents is based on the assumption that they are the target audience of Russia's Soft Power, and they have more time and access to information pertaining to International Relations and Russian issues. Their knowledge and understanding of International Relations and Russia will be more abundant, critical, and deep, so it will be relevant to this research. In addition, the students are the young generation who have higher education and future orientation, which reflects the generation of the leaders and decision-makers in the future.

We acknowledge that this sample selection introduces certain limitations to our study. Specifically, IR and Russian Studies students may have preexisting biases or specialized knowledge that could skew results in several ways. First, these students likely have greater awareness of Russia's geopolitical role than the general population, potentially overestimating Russia's importance in global affairs. Second, their academic exposure to international relations theories might predispose them to interpret Russia's actions through particular theoretical lenses. Third, Russian Studies students especially may have developed an affinity toward Russian culture through their studies, possibly resulting in more positive perceptions than would be found in the broader population. Despite these limitations, we believe this specialized sample provides valuable insights as a starting point for understanding how Russia's soft power resources are received by an educated audience in Indonesia. Thirdly, information from the questionnaire is then interpreted through the literature reviews done in the first stage.

## Survey

This survey aims to explore how the young generation having higher education perceives the presence of Russia in international politics and the importance of this perception as the representation of the generation of leaders and decision-makers in the future. The data were gathered by giving out questionnaires to students from four different universities in Indonesia. The surveys were given in the Indonesian language in the form of 34 multiple-choice questions based on the operationalization of the soft power concept according to Joseph Nye Jr., namely culture, political values, and policy. These three categories are called soft power instruments by Nye because they are not only concepts but also resources of power configuration owned by a state aside from hard power (military and economy). Each instrument can be derived into elements and products using certain sizes. In a deductive method, Nye believes that the three instruments can have an impact on other countries.

Our survey design deliberately ties specific questions to each of Nye's three soft power instruments. For example, questions about Cold War perceptions (**Tables 3–5**) were designed to measure how Russia's foreign policies

are perceived, while questions about Russian ideology (**Tables 6–11**) assess the attraction of Russia’s political values. Questions about cultural elements (**Tables 12–17**) directly correspond to Nye’s cultural dimension of soft power. This structured approach allows us to systematically evaluate which aspects of Russia’s soft power resources generate the most attraction among our respondents. The result of the survey was presented in the form of respondents’ percentages. However, as respondents can give more than one answer to some questions, the total result can be more than 100 percent.

**Table 3.** Are Russia and the USA Still Involved in the Cold War (Percentage)?

<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No Answer</i>
79	20	1

**Table 4.** Who is the Most Responsible for the Current Cold War Between Russia and the USA (Percentage)?

<i>USA</i>	<i>Russia</i>	<i>No Answer</i>
75	10	15

**Table 5.** Current World Political System (Percentage).

<i>Multipolar</i>	<i>Bipolar</i>	<i>Unipolar</i>
52	28	20

**Table 6.** Is Russia Still Within the Soviet Union? (Percentage).

<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
85	15

**Table 7.** Ideology of Russia (Percentage).

<i>Communism</i>	<i>Democracy</i>	<i>Socialism</i>	<i>Totalitarianism</i>	<i>No Answer</i>
47	26	14	2	11

**Table 8.** Is Russia Spreading Its Ideology? (Percentage).

<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No Answer</i>
42	15	43

**Table 9.** The Agents that Spread Russian Ideology (Percentage).

<i>Mass Media</i>	<i>Russian Cultural Centre in Indonesia</i>	<i>Russian Citizens</i>	<i>Indonesian Citizens Who Lived or Studied in Russia Before</i>
69	15	14	2

**Table 10.** Is Russian Ideology Liked Globally (Percentage).

<i>Not Sure</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>
63	27	10

**Table 11.** Why is Russian Ideology Liked (Percentage)?

<i>Russia has a strong leadership</i>	<i>Russia is a big and influential country</i>	<i>Compete with other ideologies</i>	<i>Russia generates global prosperity</i>	<i>Russia brings peace</i>
39	26	17	15	3

**Table 12.** Things That You Remember Most About Russia (Percentage).

<i>Russia is led by Vladimir Putin</i>	<i>Russia is a communist country</i>	<i>Russia is an enemy of the USA</i>	<i>Russia is a country of tourist destinations</i>	<i>Russia is a democratic</i>
40	34	18	7	1

**Table 13.** Source of Information About Russia (Percentage).

<i>Online-based news</i>	<i>Social media</i>	<i>TV and Radio</i>	<i>Paper-based news (newspaper and magazine)</i>	<i>Seminar or visiting the Russian Cultural Centre</i>
60	22	15	2	1

**Table 14.** Things That Attract You Most After Consuming Information About Russia (Percentage).

<i>Military</i>	<i>Language and culture</i>	<i>Politics</i>	<i>Prominent figures</i>	<i>Tourism</i>
29	21	21	20	9

**Table 15.** The Most Familiar Russian Cultural Elements You Recognized (Percentage).

<i>Language</i>	<i>Film</i>	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Music and dance</i>	<i>Cuisine</i>
50	25	13	8	4

**Table 16.** Russian Cultural Products or Expressions You Know the Most (Percentage).

<i>Masha and the Bear cartoon</i>	<i>Vodka</i>	<i>Matryoshka</i>	<i>Maxim Gorki’s “Mother”</i>	<i>Ballet</i>
60	21	12	4	3

**Table 17.** Agents that Have Roles in Spreading Russian Culture (Percentage).

<i>Mass Media</i>	<i>Russian citizens</i>	<i>Russian Cultural Centre</i>	<i>Indonesian citizens who lived or studied in Russia</i>
73	16	8	3

The data gathering using a paper-based questionnaire was administered with the lecturer/facilitator from the university present in the room during the process of filling out the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to 650 students from four different universities: 150 respondents



from Universitas Lampung, 229 respondents from Universitas Indonesia, 150 respondents from Universitas Islam Al-Azhar Jakarta, and 121 respondents from Universitas Satya Negara Indonesia. The survey was conducted between May and June 2018: Universitas Lampung from 5 to 11 May; Universitas Indonesia from 4 to 8 June; Universitas Islam Al-Azhar Jakarta from 16 to 27 June; and Universitas Satya Negara Indonesia from 18 May to 27 June. All respondents were students in semesters 2, 4, 6, and 8 of the International Relations undergraduate program, except for the University of Indonesia, who were students of the Russian Studies Program. Respondents consisted of 234 men and 416 women and were between 18 and 27 years old. Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants before filling out the survey form. The confidentiality of data was well preserved throughout the study by keeping it anonymous and asking the participants to select honest answers and options.

The sample found in this survey is relatively few compared to surveys conducted by other organizations in various countries. The efforts to survey a wider national level with a higher number of respondents in Indonesia were not possible because of time limitations, wide areas, and huge samples. As preliminary research to explore the perception of the young generation having higher education, this study tries to get a representative sample of respondents. As students studying International Relations and Russia, the respondents of this research have a specific characteristic, which is having more access and time to information related to Russia. The knowledge and understanding of Russia will be more abundant, critical, and deeper so which will be relevant to the aims of this research. Thus, this survey is not about public perception in general on international political issues, specifically those involving Russia, but the view of the young generation who will be leaders and decision-makers in the future.

The model of this research has the same topics as were done by Alexander Bukh<sup>[45]</sup>, which is published in the article “Russia’s Image and Soft Power Resources in Southeast Asia: perceptions among Young Elites in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam”. Bukh surveyed to see the perception of young people in Southeast Asia of Russia’s image and soft power. The result of Bukh’s study concludes that Russia is generally perceived as a great power having an

important and positive role in the world. Different from Bukh’s research, this research was conducted by looking at Indonesia’s young generation’s perception of Russia to explore under what conditions respondents are attracted to Russia’s soft power resources. Nonetheless, this research does not aim to show the relation of perception with factual events. The other difference is that this research proposed a list of questions divided into three categories of soft power resources, following Nye’s concept, namely culture, political values, and policy. The result of this research is analyzed using statistical and descriptive models and presented in the percentage.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Russia’s Attractions 1: Foreign Policy and Russia’s Role in World Politics

The respondent’s perception of Russia’s role or position in international politics was initially described by their knowledge of whether post-Soviet Russia was still involved in the Cold War with the United States. More than three-quarters of the respondents consider that the Cold War between Russia and the USA is still ongoing (**Table 3**). The same number of respondents also believe that the USA is the most responsible actor in the Cold War, which is still ongoing (**Table 4**). This assumption has implications for the next question: the model of the international political system applied in the current world. For this question, the answers of the respondents tend to be various; the most chosen ones are unipolar, multipolar, and bipolar. The most chosen choice (more than half), multipolar, indicates that the power distribution in the current world political system is no longer dominated by the USA as vehemently perceived during the post-Cold War period (**Table 5**).

For the next question, the respondents were asked about their opinions regarding the current orientation of Russia’s foreign policy in relation to whether the Cold War between Russia and the USA is still ongoing. Almost three-quarters of the respondents (70%) answered that the current orientation of Russia’s foreign policy is anti-USA (**Table 18**). As a response, the next question is what the ideal orientation for the current Russian foreign policy is. Contrary to expectations, the answer is less consistent with the previous question; most respondents answered that the

ideal foreign policy for Russia should be neutral (73%). Meanwhile, the ideal orientation for anti-US policy is only shown by 24 percent of respondents (**Table 19**).

**Table 18.** Current Orientation of Russia's Foreign Policy (Percentage).

<i>Against the US</i>	<i>US-aligned</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
70	4	26

**Table 19.** Ideal Orientation of Russia's Foreign Policy (Percentage).

<i>Against the US</i>	<i>US-aligned</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
73	24	3

This apparent contradiction between respondents viewing Russia as engaged in an ongoing Cold War with the US while simultaneously favoring a neutral foreign policy for Russia warrants deeper analysis. This tension likely reflects Indonesia's foreign policy tradition of non-alignment and active independence (*bebas-aktif*), which has characterized its approach to international relations since the Bandung Conference of 1955. Indonesian students, socialized in this diplomatic tradition, may project these values onto their assessment of Russia's ideal foreign policy orientation. While they recognize the geopolitical reality of US-Russia tensions, they appear to value diplomatic neutrality as a normative ideal, suggesting that their attraction to Russia as a balancer to US power may be more symbolic than an endorsement of confrontational policies.

Along with the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia has been trying to manage its socio-political governance domestically and improve its global image. The next question is the respondents' opinion on whether Russia plays an important role in current international politics. Most respondents answered that Russia has an important role in international politics (**Table 20**). For this question, only 2 percent of the respondents said that Russia does not have an important role. Respondents are given questions on Russia's ideal role in international politics to get a more concrete understanding of what kind of role Russia should have in international politics. Almost half of the respondents think that Russia is a great power (49%), while 32 percent perceive that Russia is a superpower (**Table 21**). More than half of the respondents think that Russia should play as a great power or a balancer to the USA in international politics. This answer shows the respondents' consistency while viewing the political role

of Russia globally (**Table 22**).

**Table 20.** Russia's Position and Role in International Politics (Percentage).

<i>Important</i>	<i>Unimportant</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
74	2	24

**Table 21.** Russia's Current Role in the World Political System.

<i>Great power</i>	<i>Superpower</i>	<i>Middle power</i>
49	32	19

**Table 22.** What Role Should be Played by Russia in the World (Percentage).

<i>Great power or Balancer to the USA</i>	<i>Superpower or sole power</i>	<i>Middle power</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
63	18	8	11

## 4.2. Russia's Attraction 2: Political Values

The second part of the questionnaire identifies and understands the political values upheld by Russia and their influence on respondents. In the beginning, the question starts from the basic general knowledge of Russia, whether Russia is still currently called the Soviet Union. Generally, the respondents stated that Russia is no longer the Soviet Union (**Table 6**). The next question aims to know the respondents' knowledge of Russian ideology after the Soviet Union collapsed. After the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia, as the heir, adopted democracy as the conduct of its political system. Universal values such as human rights, freedom of the media, freedom of speech, and politics are enforced under the principle of law enforcement, which started to be introduced gradually to Russian society by the government. We were surprised to find that almost half of the respondents still perceived communism as the ideology of the Russian Federation (**Table 7**). The survey only finds that more than a quarter (26%) of the respondents think Russia is a democratic country. By having a view on Russian ideology, the respondents were asked whether Russia is spreading its ideology. Almost half of the respondents believed that Russia is spreading its ideology to the world (42%), while nearly the same number were not sure whether Russia is spreading its ideology globally (43%), and the rest (15%) think that Russia is not spreading its ideology (**Table 8**). During the process, respondents (with various answers) stated that there were some actors who were re-

sponsible for spreading the ideology, including the mass media, the Russian Cultural Centre in Indonesia, Russian citizens living in Indonesia, and Indonesian citizens who were living or studying in Russia (**Table 9**).

Among the respondents surveyed about the global appeal of Russian political values, 43% selected “No Answer” when asked whether Russia is spreading its ideology. This high proportion likely reflects genuine uncertainty or lack of knowledge. The topic may be too complex or abstract for many respondents, especially if they are unfamiliar with Russia’s global political actions. Additionally, the ideological content or intent behind Russia’s activities might not be clearly perceived by the public. This suggests a significant information gap and indicates the need for greater awareness and education regarding international ideological dynamics among Indonesian youth.

To get a more complex understanding, respondents as part of global society are asked questions about whether Russian ideology is liked globally. More than half of the respondents (63%) were not sure whether global society likes the state ideology of Russia, while 27 percent believed that global society does not like Russian ideology, and 10 percent of the respondents were quite sure that global society likes Russian ideology (**Table 10**). The uttered reason for the indecisive perception about this is found in **Table 9**. It is intriguing that the respondents were still affected by the popular fact that Russia has a strong leadership (39%), followed by 26 percent thought Russia is a big and influential country, 17 percent believed Russian ideology was competitive with others, 15 percent believed that Russian ideology generates global prosperity, and the rest 3 percent perceived Russian ideology brings peace to the world order. It is worthwhile to note that strong leadership, as brought by Vladimir Putin’s style of governance, was presumably perceived by the respondents as an alternative ideology to mainstream ideological concepts that are widely known, such as democracy, socialism, or communism.

#### 4.3. Russia’s Attraction 3: Culture and Russia’s Image

The last part of the survey presents the respondents’ perceptions of Russian culture and image as well as how the respondents access and consume information about

Russia. According to the data we have collected, the most common Russian cultural element recognized by the respondents was language, and the image of the country as perceived by the respondents was mixed between Russian cultural products and Vladimir Putin’s figure as a strong leader. **Table 12** shows the things that are commonly associated with Russia in the respondents’ memories. The figure of Vladimir Putin is once again attached to Russia’s image as 40 percent of respondents reported in **Table 12**, followed by the image of Russia as a communist country (34%), Russia as an enemy of the USA (18%), Russia is a country of tourist destination (7%), and only very small minority of participants believed that Russia is a democratic country (1%).

The prominence of Putin’s image in respondents’ perceptions (40% in **Table 12**) raises important questions about whether this attraction translates into actual policy influence or remains merely symbolic. While Putin’s strong leadership clearly resonates with respondents, this attraction appears to function primarily as a symbolic counterpoint to perceived US dominance rather than translating into support for specific Russian policies. This distinction is critical for understanding the effectiveness of Russia’s soft power conversion strategy—while Putin’s image successfully generates attraction, our data suggests this attraction may not fully convert into the policy outcomes Russia desires. The respondents’ preference for neutral Russian foreign policy (**Table 19**), despite their attraction to Putin’s leadership style, indicates that personality-based soft power has limitations in translating to policy influence.

It is probable that Putin’s image was massively projected through internet-based news media, as confirmed by **Table 13**, in which it can be seen that almost two-thirds of respondents (60%) stated that their source of information about Russia was online-based news. The respondents’ sources of information about Russia were followed by social media (22%), TV and radio (15%), paper-based news (2%), and an insignificant percentage of respondents who went to seminars or the Russian Cultural Centre to gather information.

When asked about the most familiar Russian cultural elements that are recognized, half of the respondents (50%) chose language, followed by film, literature, music and dance, and cuisine, as reported in **Table 15**. These findings

are in contradiction with previous results reported in **Table 14**, while the respondents chose “language and culture” as the second “things that attract” their attention after consuming the information about Russia. The military was the most attractive aspect for the respondents when consuming information about Russia. These findings thus need to be interpreted with caution since the respondents stated that their main source of information about Russia was almost dominated by online-based news, as reported in **Table 13** before. The domination of the internet as the main information resource is in line with the development of information technology over the past two decades. Everyone has access to the internet using their personal gadget. The width and better quality of the network lead people to depend on the internet as the center of information. It is once again confirmed by the findings in **Table 16**, as almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) believed that mass media is the agent that has a significant role in spreading Russian culture globally. Whether or not this difference could be attributed to the exaggerated resonance of Putin’s image as a strong leader that was transmitted through online news and social media, one of which attributes inherently embedded in this image was Russian military power.

## 5. Discussions

To comprehend Russia’s foreign policy objectives, orientation, and attitudes by analyzing and criticizing its official documents is a critical endeavor for scholars to construct the context in which soft power resources have a meaningful potential that could be converted into an impactful soft power for foreign audiences. The results of the literature study on the model of Russia’s foreign policy in the 21st century show that Russia has, from time to time, consciously shifted its view of the world. However, this change is considered late, especially in the utilization of soft power as an alternative method for conventional diplomacy. On the other hand, the constructivist perspective sees the change of view and attitude as Russia’s eagerness towards a universal civilization by implementing soft power narratives from outside the country as its foreign policy’s formal method. It is the willingness of Russia to get involved in the construction of a global identity based on a shared understanding of universal values.

Considering these factors, the view of the young

generation as future leaders and decision-makers is essential. The survey conducted for the perception of Russia’s role in international politics resulted in three categories that are foreign policy and Russia’s role in world politics, political values, culture, and Russia’s image. Our results showed that Russian soft power resources emanated from Russian culture and Cold War historical remnants have been successfully converted into soft power attractions for foreign audiences in Indonesia. It indicates a shared understanding of the respondents about global multipolarity in which Russia was perceived as a balancing great power against US domination. This finding sits well with the broader scholarship that claims that soft power resources have their own weight, which is not given by the resources or the owner by shared understanding in social relations <sup>[46,47]</sup>. The consensus around shared meanings of Russia’s role as the balancer of the US domination within global multipolarity should be interpreted in light of the massive dissemination of Russia’s image using strategic narratives projected through internet-based media.

The first category shows the interesting fact that the respondents still believed that post-Soviet Russia was still involved in the Cold War with the United States. The USA is the most responsible actor in the Cold War, which is still ongoing, while the international system is perceived as a multipolar one. Furthermore, contrary to expectations, respondents argued that the ideal foreign policy for Russia within the multipolarity of the international system, while still enduring a cold war with the USA, should be neutral. This is believed to be affected by respondents’ knowledge of Indonesia’s foreign policy guidelines that uphold the non-interference principle in international affairs and their limited knowledge of global foreign policy orientation.

The view about Russia’s political values, as shown by the second category, is surprising to find that respondents still perceive communism as the ideology of the Russian Federation. Russia is also believed to be spreading its ideology worldwide using an official instrument, mostly by mass media. The strong influence of internet-based media has significantly conveyed Vladimir Putin’s image as a strong leader as the most powerful element of Russia’s image. Yet, to confirm the findings about the ideology, much more research is needed. Nonetheless, as Ohnesorge proposed <sup>[1]</sup>, it may be argued that surveys are valuable



instruments to detect the indirect form of soft power since the respondents in this study show an attraction to Russia, especially within the malignancy of international order, instead of the US.

A significant limitation of this study is its focus on the pre-2022 Ukraine invasion. While this temporal boundary was necessary for methodological clarity, it is important to acknowledge that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 likely represents a watershed moment in global perceptions of Russia. The war has potentially reshaped how Russia's soft power resources are received by foreign audiences, particularly as the conflict has generated extensive international coverage and prompted widespread diplomatic responses. Future research should examine how this major geopolitical event has altered the baseline perceptions documented in this study, particularly regarding the attractiveness of Putin's leadership style and Russia's role as a balancer to US power.

## 6. Conclusions

This study illuminates the nuanced reception of Russia's pre-2022 soft power resources among Indonesian students, revealing a complex interplay between symbolic attraction and policy influence. The findings demonstrate that Russia's cultural elements and its image as a counter-balance to U.S. hegemony, particularly through Vladimir Putin's strongman persona, generated significant appeal, yet this attraction did not fully translate into support for confrontational foreign policies. This tension underscores the limitations of Russia's soft power conversion strategies, aligning with broader debates on "illiberal soft power"<sup>[28]</sup>, which challenges Western liberal democratic models by leveraging conservative values and narratives of multipolarity<sup>[32,37]</sup>. The prominence of Putin's leadership and Cold War remnants in shaping perceptions highlights Russia's strategic use of historical and cultural resources to project influence in non-Western contexts. However, the study's pre-2022 focus limits its applicability to current geopolitics, as the Ukraine invasion likely reshaped global views of Russia. Future research should explore post-2022 perceptions, compare ASEAN states, and examine diverse demographics to further elucidate the dynamics of illiberal soft power versus Western frameworks, enriching our understanding of how non-Western powers navigate global

influence.

Future research could build on these findings in several ways. Comparative studies across other ASEAN states would help identify regional patterns in soft power reception. Longitudinal research tracking changes in perceptions before and after the Ukraine invasion would illuminate how major geopolitical events reshape soft power dynamics. Additionally, studies comparing perceptions across different demographic groups beyond university students would provide a more comprehensive understanding of Russia's soft power reach in Southeast Asia. Such research would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how non-Western powers like Russia can effectively convert their resources into meaningful soft power outcomes in diverse global contexts.

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Conceptualization, R.D.A.; methodology, R.D.A. and C.A.; software, C.A.; validation, C.A.; formal analysis, R.D.A. and C.A.; investigation, C.A.; resources, R.D.A. and C.A.; data curation, R.D.A. and C.A.; writing—original draft preparation, R.D.A.; writing—review and editing, R.D.A. and C.A.; visualization, R.D.A.; supervision, R.D.A.; project administration, C.A.; funding acquisition, R.D.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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