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Tracing the Mechanisms of Russian Soft Power in Ukraine: the Language Issue Case

Many scholars doing research on Russia's foreign policy converge in the opinion that Russia cannot make effective use of soft power, either because Russia's hard power undermines its soft-power efforts, or because Russia is incapable of utilising its soft-power resources, or both. The consensus is particularly strong in the case of Russia's relation to Ukraine, where recent scholarship has found that Russia's hard-power behaviours have severely depleted its soft-power capacity. This paper seeks to put these theoretical expectations to a rigorous empirical test by tracing the mechanisms that explain the causes of effects in a socio-political process in Ukraine. The process leading up to the adoption of the law on minority languages provides a setting where a soft-power explanation is most likely to hold, while its subsequent (non-conclusive) repeal can shed light on the conditions that set counter-effect mechanisms in motion. Failing an 'easy' test would furnish compelling evidence to confirm existing assumptions about Russian soft-power inaptitude, while passing it would indicate that some qualifications in the theoretical expectations merit consideration. The paper uses developments before and after the adoption of the law as leverage in a most-similar case study design to generate findings yielding new theoretical insights into the mechanisms of soft power and updating understandings about the interplay of soft and hard power.