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Since its conservative shift in 2012, Russia has significantly increased its engagement in the European space, using a mix of hard and soft power strategies to shape global perceptions through a Kremlin-centric lens. Despite the annexation of Crimea in 2014, dialogue with Putin’s regime continued, only to be challenged by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Nevertheless, Russian para-diplomacy, with the “Russian World” imaginary at its core, persists in the global socio-cultural and educational milieu.

*Russian Cultural Diplomacy under Putin*, edited by Nadiia Koval and Denys Tereshchenko, critically assesses the role and influence of the leading promoters of the Russian world abroad: Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russian World Foundation and the Alexander Gorchakov Fund for Public Diplomacy. Each chapter methodically examines the structure, genealogy, and character of key representatives and activities of these entities, illuminating the ideological motivations underlying their ostensibly apolitical socio-cultural engagements, including humanitarian, educational, and language initiatives.

The first chapter discusses the case of Rossotrudnichestvo, which, as an agency representing the Russian state abroad, is supposed to be primarily concerned with assisting Russian citizens and fostering international cooperation. The authors reveal that, contrary to its intended purpose of goodwill and friendship, the agency serves as a conduit for Kremlin propaganda. This is achieved, in part, by recruiting Putin sympathisers or “discriminated” Russian speakers who willingly share their views on cases of Russophobia or engage in subversive activities on foreign soil. The agency uses unique methods to exploit and instrumentalise compatriot sentiment, including organising patriotic motorcycle rallies, holding events mocking Western sanctions (labelled ‘From Russia with warmth’, p. 92) and running anti-discrimination campaigns in European cities. Rossotrudnichestvo also disseminates the Kremlin’s vision of

Ukraine's "liberated regions" both online and offline, using tools such as thematic exhibitions, historical lectures, cultural workshops and the screening of patriotic films in Russian Houses.

Subsequent chapters of the book focus on two major, deceptively independent actors in Russian diplomacy, examining their economic aspects, institutional networks, strategies and target audiences. The authors effectively illuminate the direct links between these non-governmental organisations (foundations) and state funding, figures in Putin's inner circle and Kremlin officials. This analysis provides a comprehensive view of the Kremlin's extensive diplomatic outreach efforts, – in other words, a snapshot of the entire production line of *soft power for export*.

A detailed examination of social media channels, official statements by foundation leaders and their academic publications reveals a coherent yet evolving ideological framework underpinning Kremlin-backed narratives. Vyacheslav Nikonov, the irreplaceable head of the Russian World Foundation, stands out for his discourse on civilisationism, which expands the notion of the Russian world to include not only Russian speakers but also those globally engaged with Russian literature and art. This approach is also central to the Gorchakov Fund's strategy of attracting new adherents through educational exchanges and language learning programmes.

Another important aspect of the book is its exploration of the extensive network that these foundations have built up, including collaborations with renowned cultural figures, publishers, academic institutions and grassroots projects. By engaging with such diverse entities, the agents of Russian diplomacy effectively position themselves as legitimate and respected participants in the international cultural sector.

In essence, the book explains why public affairs and cultural initiatives sponsored by the Russian state should always be treated with great scepticism and caution. It provides a critical analysis of how Russian diplomatic institutions function not only as cultural mediators but also as instruments of state policy, effectively blurring the line between culture and politics. Each chapter methodically unravels the strategic use of cultural para-diplomacy to improve Russia's global image, counter Western influence, and harness the Russian diaspora and individuals involved in educational and socio-cultural programmes. The editors and contributors adeptly dissect these mechanisms, demonstrating how Russia leverages cultural ties to reinforce its geopolitical stance.

While acknowledging the merits of this analysis, my only criticism of this work is its comparative framework. The book largely contrasts Russian cultural diplomacy with Western counterparts, such as the British Council or the Goethe-Institut. A potentially more compelling approach would be to compare Russian diplomatic efforts with those in the Middle East, Asia or the Global South, thus offering a more nuanced understanding of Russia's manoeuvres in a diverse geopolitical context.

In sum, *Russian Cultural Diplomacy under Putin* is a valuable resource for several reasons. First, it provides a detailed analysis of Russia's ecosystem of cultural diplomacy, highlighting the role of various organisations as intermediaries in Russia's militaristic endeavours in neighbouring regions. This insight, coupled with a historical overview tracing the evolution of these entities from the Soviet era to Putin's regime, deepens the understanding of their operational logic. Second, the book's timeliness is particularly relevant given the Kremlin's ideological shift from the Global North to the Global South, making it an essential tool for international relations experts, policymakers, and the public. It also lays the groundwork for further research into Russia's soft power and information warfare strategies.

Finally, the book offers an in-depth look at Russia's diplomatic apparatus, providing important insights into the complex relationship between culture and politics in its foreign policy. It skilfully responds to the challenges of distinguishing cultural efforts from political agendas, especially when culture is used as an instrument of state influence, thereby enriching our understanding of contemporary diplomacy and global politics.