Cultural Imperialism and the Decline of the Liberal Order: Russian and Western Soft Power in Eastern Europe. by G. Doug Davis and Michael O. Slobodchikoff. Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2018, 150 pages, $90 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1498585866, $39.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1498585880.

Soft power is defined by Joseph Nye as a country's ability to attract other peoples or states to its cultural ethos, and hence to influence behavior without the use of force (hard power).[1] G. Doug Davis' and Michael O. Slobodchikoff's slim volume on this subject aims to demonstrate the impact that foreign—mainly Western and secondarily Russian—cultural pressure has had and will have on Eastern European nations. The authors' core argument is that Western culture—used as a byword for capitalism, consumerism, individualism, and secularism—poses a major threat to "traditional" and religious Eastern European societies. Russia's soft power, it is conversely claimed, has emerged largely in response to this threat as Moscow senses opportunity in Eastern Europe's resistance to Westernization. The book is divided into six chapters. The introduction reviews contrasting conceptions of power in international relations theory, emphasizing that soft power competition is usually examined "from the perspective of a strong state" (7) without proper appraisal of the cultural costs incurred by weaker states on the receiving end of a soft power campaign. The second and third chapters offer an overview of the philosophical value systems that underpin Western and Russian culture, as well as their respective exports in the form of soft power. Following are two empirical chapters that examine soft power competition in Poland and Serbia. The former largely focuses on the negative impact that norm-shaping requirements such as the European Union's Copenhagen Criteria have had on Polish Catholicism, family structure, and economic wellbeing. The latter covers the history of Russian-Serbian relations and queries whether these religious and political connections of the past can be translated successfully into present-day influence. A concluding chapter considers five scenarios for the future of Eastern European politics: Russian assimilation into the West; the gradual weakening of the EU and NATO with concomitant Russian expansion; a rapid decline of European institutions triggered by Washington's withdrawal of security guarantees; the disintegration of NATO and the EU precipitated by the collapse of Western economies; and an outbreak of war between Russia and NATO.

Among the book's strengths is its emphasis on the receivers, rather than the producers, of soft power competition. The authors argue that analyses of Westernization in the global periphery are themselves colored by a Westernizing agenda that downplays or ignores the damage inflicted on local cultures (14–15). If, for instance, an Eastern European country has embraced consumerism and integration into the global economic system, this outcome is usually characterized as a success for the United States and NATO rather than a loss for forgotten domestic actors who opposed these social and political transformations. In this regard the authors have undertaken a useful task: attempting to remove hegemonic or imperial biases from analysis of soft power's "effectiveness." Scholarship should indeed avoid mixing the measurement of value-neutral facts (the degree of influence that Western ideas have in Eastern Europe at a point in time) with the implicit or explicit promotion of normative outcomes (Eastern Europe ought to Westernize).

This promising research direction would have benefited from a clearer line of separation between the authors' personal viewpoints and the analysis of shifts in Eastern European culture. The perspective of the book is clearly nativist and traditionalist, particularly as it relates to the discussion of Poland, and many passages are polemical in tone. Statements such as "cultural emptiness is a characteristic of Western societies that has entered Eastern Europe" (25) and "[t]he West is now passing onto the world the forces that destroyed its own culture" (26) are common. The treatment of certain historical topics also reads as rather polemical or unbalanced. The chapter on Poland appears to adopt at face value the Western betrayal narrative without acknowledging alternative views (72), and elsewhere, the introduction of capitalism to the former Eastern Bloc is compared to the United States' historical impressment of Native American children into boarding schools (21).

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The personal investment of the authors in the preservation of Eastern European cultural uniqueness results in some questionable analytical choices. Among these is a tendency to present identities in undifferentiated or essentialist terms. The book frequently speaks of "the West" as a monolithic, cohesive actor projecting a "secular, post-Christian ethos" (66) that erodes cultural diversity across the globe. The reader is told that "globalization forces originating in Western culture … seek to destroy and integrate all nations into their secular world" (67), but is not given an explanation of whether this is a conscious plot by Western leaders, a natural process of cultural diffusion, or a mixture of the two. Eastern European countries are also held to be straightforwardly traditionalist and religious societies that are experiencing a form of secular temptation promising "to satisfy the lowest human desires" (36). These characterizations suggest a zero-sum binary between Eastern European "acquiescence to the global ethos" (36), resulting in the sacrifice of cultural particularism, and resistance to this ethos at the cost of political and economic isolation and vulnerability to Russian aggression. Such claims create the impression of a Manichean or even conspiratorial worldview that elides the political, moral, and cultural chasms within all of the societies involved.

The analysis could profit from more precision about the mechanisms by which soft power is wielded and absorbed. How do Western and Russian soft power institutions operate in contemporary times, and to what degree are these strategies inherited from the past? Recent studies have, for instance, shown how current Russian information warfare both draws upon Soviet "active measures" methods and tries to refine them.[2] On the other hand, it is perhaps harder to establish continuity between the United States' Cold War soft power campaigns—which involved painstakingly-honed editorial strategies designed to gain the trust of Eastern Bloc audiences—and its influence campaigns of the present, which are no longer coordinated by an explicit anticommunist imperative.[3] While the book makes some mention of broadcasters such as Voice of America, Voice of Russia, Sputnik, and RT (51, 59), its core preoccupation is with the philosophical corruption of "Western cultural imperialism" and Russia's response to it. What sets out to be a discussion of soft power often morphs into a normative warning about the dangers of secularism, materialism, and relativism, not only to Eastern European peoples but to cultural specificity around the world. Civilizational philosophies are an important aspect of soft power studies, but so too are the practical means by which these philosophies are packaged, transmitted, and sold to target audiences. Moreover, beyond general categories such as elites vs. non-elites or young vs. old, which individuals or groups in Poland and Serbia are most susceptible to either Western or Russian cultural pressure? How do reactions to these external forces vary within and across groups? Apart from some polls (61, 84), Serbian readership data for various Russian websites (102), and the opinions of Polish academics personally acquainted with one of the authors (17), the book does not address in great depth how foreign culture is consumed, internalized, and reacted to by flesh-and-blood Eastern Europeans.

Overall, *Cultural Imperialism and the Decline of the Liberal Order* is an interesting and unapologetically opinionated foray into an understudied aspect of soft power in the post-Cold War era. It raises provocative questions for further research about the reception and consequences of soft power competition in target populations, and about the direction of Eastern European culture generally.

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Notes

1 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), x.

2 Stefano Braghiroli and Andrey Makarychev, "Russia and its supporters in Europe: trans-ideology á la carte?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 2 (2016): 213–33; Steve Abrams,

"Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin's Russia," *Connections* 15, no. 1 (2016): 5–31; Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018); Media Ajir and Bethany Vailliant, "Russian Information Warfare: Implications for Deterrence Theory," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (2018): 70–89.

3 Gene Sosin, "Goals of Radio Liberty," in *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, ed. A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), 17–24; Nicholas J. Schlosser, "Creating an 'Atmosphere of Objectivity': Radio in the American Sector, Objectivity and the United States' Propaganda Campaign against the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1961," *German History* 29, no. 4 (November 2011): 610–627; R. Eugene Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener: An Empirical Assessment of Radio Liberty and Western Broadcasting to the USSR during the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2013).

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