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## **Russian ‘Manipulative Smart Power’: Zviagintsev’s Oscar Nomination, (Non-)Government Agency, and Contradictions of the Globalised World**

**Vlad Strukov**

### **Introduction: the BRICS and the geopolitical wheel of (mis-)fortune<sup>1</sup>**

Since the annexation of Crimea (2014) and direct military involvement in Syria (since 2015), Russia has been considered a hard state, and its leadership has been described as ‘authoritarian’. In the realm of information and communication technologies, some commentators have described Russian influence simply as ‘propaganda’. For example, the October 2016 cover image of *The Spectator* featured Vladimir Putin, with the exaggerated facial features of a vampire, wrapped up in a red dress, and presiding over the editorial title ‘Putin vs. the world: he is winning in propaganda and on the ground’.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, more than on one occasion, influential media and ranking companies such as *Forbes* have listed Putin as ‘the most powerful person in the world’. Beyond the realm of high politics and the Western obsession with Putin, Russian consumer brands and Russian ‘style’ have proven to be extremely popular (for example, Gosha Rubchinsky’s fashion designs, and Robbie Williams’s October 2016 video ‘Party like a Russian’),<sup>3</sup> a fact, which in itself challenges the propaganda approach and invites a critical consideration of Russian soft power. In this article I aim to demonstrate how Russian influence works beyond ‘propaganda’, thus I use the term ‘manipulation’ to account for sophisticated forms of impact, whilst reserving the term ‘propaganda’ for strategies which had been in use in the twentieth century and relied on a specific system of media, ideology and resistance.

To date, the discourse about Russian soft power has focussed on the role of the government (Sherr 2013; Simons 2015), overlooking the impact of non-government agencies. Therefore I aim to analyse the configurations of both government-led and non-governmental soft power by examining the case of Andrei Zviagintsev’s Oscar nomination in 2014-15 for *Leviathan* (2014).<sup>4</sup> I focus on the historical context in which his film was released, arguing that its premier in the West and in the Russian Federation had significant impact on the international and domestic perception of the Federation’s soft power, leading to an intense discussion about the role of cultural producers who benefit from government money and construct an image of the country for internal and external consumption. I reveal, and theorise, the impact of well-known agents, such as Zviagintsev himself, as well as those who remain offstage whilst exercising great power, such as internet pirates. The latter made *Leviathan* available online ahead of its theatrical release and had a fundamental impact on its reception and the ways in which it entered the debate on Russia’s self-perception. Internet pirates —whom I would call subaltern digital agency—exemplify the work of cultural prosumers in the post-broadcast era as they create bottom-up, horizontal networks of soft power which can work in contradiction to the top-down government approach, by re-ordering information flows and challenging existing institutions. In this regard, I showcase that the power of internet pirates extends beyond media rights-holders, brand owners and manufacturers, and consumers.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Stephen Norris and Robert A. Saunders for their helpful comments on this article.

<sup>2</sup> See also Van Herpen 2015 for a discussion of Russian soft power as propaganda.

<sup>3</sup> It was the first single from his *The Heavy Entertainment Show*. The video makes direct references to Russian elite, cultural heritage and Russian ‘looks’, which the singer identifies and re-enacts as an appealing style. On 8 November 2016 the video had 10,018,748 views on YouTube.

<sup>4</sup> For my analysis of the director’s recent cinematic work see Strukov 2016a.

Russian soft power has been described, using militaristic jargon (e.g., ‘information warfare’), as something that contradicts, disrupts and circumvents Western hegemony. However, it cannot be fully accounted for by using this binary, top-down and one-directional approach. I aim to demonstrate that, in addition to and often instead of destruction and disruption, the Russian government uses available concepts and infrastructure to promote its agenda in the West and globally. To theorise this new, under-researched type of agency, I introduce the term ‘manipulative smart power’ which includes multi-directional, ambiguous and often contradictory, polyvalent and parasitic systems of influence which problematizes existing concepts of soft power. An example of such parasitic appropriation would be the concept of BRICS. As a Western construct, BRICS provides Russia with a framework from which to exercise power and from which to build and lead its own political and economic project.<sup>5</sup> Russia’s role in BRICS—and, via BRICS, globally—has been explored in relation to economy, foreign policy (e.g. Mechetov & Craft 2012), the knowledge economy (e.g. May 2013), media (Nordenstreng & Thussu 2015), new media (Morris et al. 2014; Rutten et al.),<sup>6</sup> and popular music (Platt 2013), but not film. Thus, this is the first study to address the issue of Russian soft power and its manifestations on the big screen and in mediated public discourse. (Other essays in this special issue explore soft power in other BRICS countries so I limit my discussion to the Russian case.)

Through an analysis of government documents regulating the film industry, I aim to examine the structure and reach of Russian soft power in relation to BRICS and the West. (I must introduce an important caveat here: by ‘the West’ I mean a liberal, human-rights-oriented section of Western public, acknowledging that there are different kinds of ‘West’ such as post-Brexit Britain and Donald Trump’s USA.) By placing my discussion in the context of current political transition—from the (seemingly) liberal period of Dmitrii Medvedev’s presidency (2008-12) to the conservative period of Vladimir Putin’s second presidency (2012-present)—I wish to capture the dynamics of Russia’s re-orientation politically and also cinematically: How and where do soft power and screen power intersect? What is the transnational realm of Russian film? What is the logic of ‘manipulative smart power’? How can cinematic controversies be employed to advance the political interests of a country? How can the crisis of Russia’s self-imaging abroad be used for political mobilization at home?

From a theoretical perspective, I am interested in a number of interrelated questions: Who are the agents of soft power in the era of social media? What is the role of pirates and other subaltern digital agents who re-configure official discourses? How does soft power work in the context of the ‘attention economy’ where ‘attention currency’ is valued more than the product to which it is attached?<sup>7</sup> How do controversy and notoriety inform cultural institutions in countries with electoral authoritarianism such as the Russian Federation?<sup>8</sup>

In order to answer these questions, I focus on a particular event—the release of Zviagintsev’s *Leviathan*, its nomination for the 2015 Oscars, and the associated controversy that engulfed Russia and the Russian speaking world in 2014-15 and that bled into international media, especially

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in July 2015 Russia hosted the second BRICS summit, which coincided with a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The latter brings together Russia, China and five Central Asian republics; in 2015 India and Pakistan joined the organization, thus establishing a single Eurasian political, economic and military organisation. In the climate of Western economic sanctions against Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, these two events have demonstrated Russia’s reorientation away from the Western countries and its increasing role as a major political leader in Eurasia and the world.

<sup>6</sup> Also see various publications in *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* ([www.digitalicons.org](http://www.digitalicons.org)).

<sup>7</sup> Attention economics is a theoretical concept which treats human attention as a scarce commodity and applies economic theory to solve various information management problems. See, for example, Beller 2012; Davenport & Beck 2013; Lanham 2006. On mega events and mega media events see, for example, Couldry et al. 2009; Burbank et al. 2001; Hayes & Karamichas 2012.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the global spread of authoritarianism, see, for example, Diamond et al 2016.

Anglophone media, thus re-focusing global attention on Russia. The temporal framework for my study is nine months, starting in summer 2014 and finishing in spring 2015. I use hybrid methodology, including media monitoring,<sup>9</sup> analysis of government documents related to the Russian film industry,<sup>10</sup> film analysis, transnational cross-media analysis, and interviews with film directors and media producers in Russia and the EU.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, my study is a combination of film theory, sociology of cinema, political analysis, discourse analysis, visual culture and popular geopolitics.<sup>12</sup> In this context, film emerges not only as a text but also a general discursive strategy, thus re-defining the field of my investigation. I start by outlining the theoretical, political and cultural context of my investigation, mapping Russian areas of interest and considering the structure and reach of the Russian film industry. I proceed to analyse the government and media discourse surrounding the release of *Leviathan*, and I conclude by reflecting on Russian soft power and the country's role in the process of globalisation. In my discussion below, I use the official name of the country—the Russian Federation (RF), not Russia—because it indicates the multi-ethnic, multi-confessional structure of this state which lacks a sense of nationhood and operates as a (post-)imperial entity.<sup>13</sup> Similarly I use the term 'Russians' to relate to the residents of RF, irrespective of their linguistic and cultural identity, and the term 'Russian-speaking non-residents' (hereafter RSNRs) to indicate the global outreach of Russian culture.

### **(Re-)claiming soft power: new directions of influence as a critique of Nye's original concept**

The Russian government has enthusiastically embraced the Western concept of BRICS in spite of the available critique of the very notion (e.g. Armijo 2007; Coning et al. 2015), and in spite of Russia's status as an 'emerging economy'—like that of India—having been challenged on many occasions (e.g. Macfarlane 2006).<sup>14</sup> The association provides RF with global visibility which is in addition to RF's staging mega-media events such as the Pussy Riot incident (winter-spring 2012), the Sochi Winter Olympic Games (February 2014), the annexation of Crimea (February 2014), the BRICS summit (July 2015), and so forth. In the process, RF has demonstrated that soft power as the 'power of attraction' (Nye 2004), or the principle of 'highlighting the attractiveness of a country's culture in order to suggest the attractiveness of its wider value system' (see Cooke's Introduction to this special issue), can, in fact, be coded in negative terms as 'negative soft power'. The term implies that, while not necessarily directly increasing the appeal of a country through its positive representation—an essential ingredient of soft power for Nye—a country's government may use all available tools to assert its dominance through global visibility, even if its actions and the country's representations may be perceived as 'negative' in some parts of the world, such as the West.

Here, I converge with William A. Callahan who, in his analysis of Chinese soft power, challenges Nye's original understanding of the term and suggests that instead 'we should concentrate on the positive/negative and foreign/domestic relations that are less discussed in Nye's work' (2015: 218). As in China, the Russian government uses 'positive soft power' to increase the

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<sup>9</sup> These include the BBC, the Guardian, Al Jazeera, RT, CNN International, Euronews, Kommersant, Colta.ru.

<sup>10</sup> These are available from the site of the Ministry of Culture <http://mkrf.ru/ministerstvo/management/minister/>

<sup>11</sup> My methodological approach combines elements of 'big data analysis'—key word searches—with critical discourse analysis in its post-print, multi-media phase, which I understand as a system of dynamic socio-cognitive and culturally-grounded interactive moves and strategies, with emphasis on contextualisation and re-contextualisation as well as working with textual, audio and visual elements. This is a three-step procedure whereby particular events are selected on the basis of their statistical relevance, analysed in relation to the media environment, including the visual apparatus, and cross-checked with the cultural context.

<sup>12</sup> The sociology of Russian cinema is an underdeveloped field of enquiry; I used industry reports and analytical essays to obtain the necessary data. This is an indicative list of relevant studies in the field of popular geopolitics: Debrix 2008; Dittmer 2010; Edensor 2002; Kaneva 2012; Saunders 2014 & 2016.

<sup>13</sup> On the problem of nationhood in RF see, for example, Condee 2009; Franklin & Widdis 2004; Gerber 2014; Hughes et al. 2002; Matthews 2014; Oushakine 2009; Popova & Strukov 2001 & 2003; Sakwa 2014; Szporluk 1994; Tolz 2001; Tsygankov 2013; Young 2015.

<sup>14</sup> For all terms and names written in Cyrillic I used the Library of Congress system of transliteration.

attractiveness of the country abroad (e.g. the Sochi Olympic Games) and at the same time uses ‘negative soft power’ ‘as a tactic for the domestic problem of building regime legitimacy’ (Callahan 2015: 220). For example, Western negative perceptions of the Russian government’s actions (e.g. the Western reaction to the annexation of Crimea) are used to boost patriotic sentiments at home and to legitimise the government (see Strukov 2016b). Through ‘negative soft power’, that is, a transposition of Western negative perception of Russia as a Russian-own positive self-perception, the Russian government has managed to resolve tensions at home, such as a worsening economic situation, increasing social inequality, distrust in public institutions and the emergence of new economic classes with their own political agenda, by re-directing public attention to events and threats which are located—at least in the popular imaginary—outside the country’s borders.

However, Russian actions cannot be fully accounted for by Callahan’s binary structure of positive/negative and external/internal soft power. Firstly, the structure of RF is not national but (post-)imperial, insofar as it views its own constituent parts as semi-external, e.g. Chechnya, which, whilst being a member of the Federation, is construed as an external, trans-Caucasian entity.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, with the borders of the country constantly shifting, the boundaries between what constitutes internal and external realms are increasingly blurred. (RF has, for example, control over neighbouring semi-independent territories of Georgia—South Ossetia and Abkhazia—which further problematizes the concept of a singular nation-state). Secondly, RF has its own traditional ‘spheres of influence’, whereby, following the Monroe Doctrine which outlined the US influence in Latin America, RF declared the former Soviet Republics as its own sphere of influence.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Russia actively engages and disengages with various regimes in the world—most recently Turkey, a member of NATO—by providing and withdrawing its support, depending on the demands of the current moment, or by initiating new economic and political relationships.

The polycentric and multi-directional organisation of Russian soft power compels me to seek a new term that would define Russian actions and the country’s agents of soft power, including the government, corporations (e.g., Gazprom), and public and private agents (e.g., Zviagintsev). Nye talks about ‘smart power’—a strategy that he describes the successful ‘combination of the hard power of coercion and payment with the soft power of persuasion and attraction’ (2011: 13). As regards RF, I wish to extend Nye’s notion of ‘smart power’ by proposing the concept of ‘manipulative smart power’ (MSP)—one which supplies a combination of hard and soft power tools, on one level, and on another, traverses the binary dynamic of power—positive/negative, external/internal, and vertical/horizontal—and instead operates as a multi-directional, ambiguous and often contradictory, polyvalent and parasitic system of influence. Manipulative smart power also indicates the relationship between government-led and non-government agents of influence, thus providing a more nuanced, multi-agent consideration of soft power which is a significant diversion from Nye’s top-down approach. In the next section I examine the role two kinds of agents—personified (Zviagintsev) and anonymous (internet pirates)—to demonstrate how RF authorities had to respond to this type of agency and to cannibalise it for its own purposes.

### **(Non-)government agents of power: Film festivals, internet pirates and the imperatives of the Russian cultural industry**

Andrei Zviagintsev (b. 1964) has thus far released four feature films—*The Return* (2003), *Banishment* (2007), *Elena* (2010) and *Leviathan* (2014). All of them were made in collaboration with the autodidact cinematographer Mikhail Krichman (b. 1967). The first two were produced by Dmitrii Lesnevskii, who is known for his support of arthouse cinema, whereas the last two were

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<sup>15</sup> The infamous concept of the ‘litso kavkazskoi natsional’nosti’ (a person of the Caucasian nationality, whereby Caucasian does not refer to race but rather a locality) is one such construct of the internal other, or external self.

<sup>16</sup> In Ukraine, RF’s use of hard power resulted in the loss of the soft power leverage: in March 2016 the Ukrainian government banned all Russian films and television series produced since January 2014, which includes *Leviathan*; however, in Kazakhstan, Armenia and other neighbouring countries Russian soft power is preminent.

produced by Aleksandr Rodnianskii, who is behind international blockbusters such as Fedor Bondarchuk's 2013 *Stalingrad*.<sup>17</sup> Zviagintsev's first two films tell stories of broken families, using the language of abstraction, myth and parable, and placing them in unidentifiable historical and cultural contexts. His later films—while keeping some of the features of the earlier productions such as his heavy reliance on symbolism—explicitly focus on societal problems in contemporary RF.<sup>18</sup> If *Elena* explores the class struggles under Putin, *Leviathan* is concerned with the political, financial, religious and moral corruption of the state and its individual representatives such as the local mayor, judges and Orthodox priest. Zviagintsev's re-orientation towards issues specific to RF is also manifest in the funding and production history of his work. The first three films were funded by private individuals, companies and foundations, whereas the last was filmed with money from the RF Ministry of Culture; however, it was produced and marketed by 'Non-Stop Production', a company which belongs to producers Rodnianskii and Sergei Mel'kumov and is affiliated with Twentieth Century Fox (Noonan 2014), which implies that from the very beginning Zviagintsev had access to global distribution networks bolstered by Hollywood and US-led English language media. Thus, the system of MSP utilises Russian and Western resources which propels a more complex system of iterations in the economy of attention surpassing Nye's binary consideration of influence. Finally, the outreach of MSP is based on a global narrative—see my analysis of the film story-line below—wherein Zviagintsev uses an actual event from US history and re-tells it from a Russian perspective in order to appeal to a global audience.

Zviagintsev is held in high esteem by the global cinema community due to the success of all his feature films to date at film festivals.<sup>19</sup> My analysis of the ways in which Zviagintsev's films are funded and the types of festivals at which they appear and win awards yields important insights into the contemporary RF film industry and its soft-power capabilities. (A) The RF film industry is one of the world leaders in the sector of art house and auteur cinema, with Zviagintsev being one of its most recognizable contemporary figures.<sup>20</sup> (B) Russian auteur directors such as Zviagintsev are oriented towards European and North American audiences; however, they are also known in other parts of the world, including other members of the BRICS association. (C) For Russian directors, film festivals are one of the most effective means to reach a global audience and exercise influence.<sup>21</sup> However, Russian-language films play an important part in Russian soft power in the former Soviet Republics, a subject matter which is outside the scope of the present inquiry. (D) RF participates in the world-wide trend of aesthetic opposition to Hollywood by providing support to independent and art-house cinema. Hence, RF government's critique of the US feeds into the opposition to the US dominance in other countries, including BRICS. At the same time, the RF film industry is linked—indirectly—to Hollywood through a network of production companies and their financial interests. It is also linked—directly—to Hollywood through the system of film distribution

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<sup>17</sup> Aleksandr Rodnianskii (b. 1961) is a Ukrainian film director, film producer, television executive and businessman. In addition to founding and managing television channels in Russia and Ukraine, Rodnianskii is responsible for the AR Films company which controls a film production company Non-Stop Production, the leader of the distribution of independent films 'Cinema without Frontiers' [Kino bez granits] and the most important film festival in RF, Kinotavr. His involvement in films such as *Stalingrad* indicates his awareness of the patriotic discourses at the highest level.

<sup>18</sup> This is an indicative list of research publications on Zviagintsev's films: Anokhina & Gasparov 2014; Cavendish 2013; Graffy 2015; Marko 2007; Strukov 2007 & 2016a.

<sup>19</sup> the Venice Film Festival (*The Return*, 'Golden Lion'); the Cannes Film Festival (*Banishment*, 'best actor', and *Leviathan*, 'best script'); the London Film Festival (*Leviathan*, 'best film'); the Abu Dhabi Film Festival (*Leviathan*, 'Black Pearl Award for Best Narrative Feature'); the Asia Pacific Screen Awards (*Elena*, Achievement in Directing); the Durban International Film Festival, South Africa (*Elena*, best direction); the Fajr International Film Festival, Iran (*The Return*, 'Crystal Simorgh for best film'); Mexico City International Contemporary Film Festival (*The Return*, best film); the São Paulo International Film Festival (*Leviathan*, critics award); and many more.

<sup>20</sup> Others include Aleksandr Sokurov, Aleksei Popogrebskii, Valeriia Gai-Germanika, and Nikolai Khomeriki.

<sup>21</sup> In RF per se there are important film festivals; however, only one—the Moscow film festival—draws significant international attention. Condee (2015) reports that in 2015 its budget was cut by ten percent and total Moscow IFF offerings outside the three competitions dropped from 250 films in 2014 to 150 in 2015.

whereby Russian viewers are exposed to US-soft power (see the discussion of the Voronezh case below). (E) The RF government is a key player on the international film market, with those producers and film distributors who are connected to the government. They have significant impact on all aspects of film production and distribution (see the discussion of the Nikita Mikhalkov case below). This means that the Russian government has to negotiate its political and economic interests with the agents of soft power in the corporate and private sector.

I find a similar juxtaposition in Nye's overview of American soft power when he writes that 'in the Vietnam war era, for example, American popular culture often worked at cross-purposes to official government policy' (2004: 15). However, Nye fails to see the complete circuit of soft power in that he closely aligns, as in this example, soft power with government policy. Instead, I argue that in the long-run, US films criticising the US invasion of Vietnam boosted the attractiveness of the US thanks to the indication of the possibility of counter-hegemonic narratives, a move which, as I show below, has been utilised by the Russian government in the case of the Leviathan controversy. Thus, RF participates in Western-led globalisation by constantly challenging its agenda and offering alternative means of global cooperation (which, however, often remain no more than statements of intention). Consequently, RF exercises soft power by voicing a strong dissenting argument in the global arena, while simultaneously being fully exposed to Western soft power at home, which is evident not least in the structure of the Russian film market. In this context, the Russian government has to manoeuvre carefully among local, regional and global challenges by employing MSP. It also needs to address the influence of the non-government agents, such as internet pirates, by developing a more ductile, self-referential form of MSP.

RF soft power is closely linked to the government's financial concerns. Before the 2015 rouble devaluation, RF was the fifth-largest theatrical market in the world (Roxborough 2012).<sup>22</sup> In fact, Condee (2015) notes that the RF cinema market was growing faster than the construction of cinema chains, which means that the increase in market share was due to a spike in the ticket-price and not in an increase in distribution capacity. At the time when other markets were shrinking, it is not surprising that the attention of the government was diverted to the film market. Although RF has no legislation that sets a quota on the number of domestic films shown on screen,<sup>23</sup> Condee claims 'the percentage of Russian films in distribution has risen significantly from 16% (2013) or 77 films to 21% (2014) or 110 films, sustaining an admission share for Russian films in the domestic market at a steady 18.7%' (2015). This is perhaps due to a greater consumption of Russian films in rural areas, where cinemas are still not equipped to show contemporary Hollywood blockbusters, a fact that may undermine Condee's claim. Moreover, my audit of three major multiplexes in Voronezh,<sup>24</sup> a city of one million inhabitants, in 2014 and 2015 shows that in each of them as few as one Russian film was scheduled for exhibition over a period of three months. This means that RF audiences have full access to Hollywood productions and thus are fully exposed to US soft / screen power, whilst the small share of RF films in cinemas suggests a limited impact of Russian soft / screen power domestically and the need for the government to find alternative, manipulative ways to exercise influence at home, such as media controversies.

The Voronezh case illustrates the reach of Russian soft power and the imperative for it to employ non-state actors.<sup>25</sup> At the end of 2013, the government, mindful of tax revenue losses due to piracy, and finding itself under considerable pressure from Hollywood corporate forces, addressed the issue of piracy by introducing new legislation (Golitsyna 2013; 'Antipiratskii zakon...' 2014).

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<sup>22</sup> In 2011 the box office hit a record \$1.16 billion in revenue, nearly twelve percent above its 2010 performance.

<sup>23</sup> In February 2015 the government rejected the proposal to introduce such quotas; the decision was taken to 'protect the film distribution system' (Fohkt 2015), which is another indication of government dependence on the private sector.

<sup>24</sup> This is a city of one million people in the south of RF; it is representative of large provincial urban centres.

<sup>25</sup> For further discussion see Saunders 2016. On the economic and aesthetic impact of piracy on the film industry, see, for example, Condee 2009; Strukov 2011 & 2016a.

This came into power in 2014 at the same time as the Leviathan scandal was unfolding and immediately divided public opinion. Some commentators interpreted the new legislation as a means to control information on the internet (e.g., Papikian 2013), while others, including authoritative voices such as Anton Nosik, a citizen of Israel and one of the ‘fathers’ of the Russian Internet (Runet), claimed that the law supported the interests of the Western entertainment industry by infringing the rights of Runet users (Nosik 2013). Nikita Mikhalkov,<sup>26</sup> one of the most influential filmmakers, producers and public figures in RF, known for his support of the government, put forward an alternative legislative initiative, according to which the government would cooperate with illegal websites through a series of tax initiatives. The collected revenue would be re-invested into the film industry by a government select committee. The initiative was discussed by filmmakers and government representatives at the Russian Pavilion at the 2015 Cannes IFF, sponsored by the Russian government. In her review of the event, Condee notes that the discussion polarized the public, turning the Pavilion into a hotbed of debate: while producers from RF and ‘Western film representatives joined in sharp criticism of Mikhalkov’s ethics, many in the audience were by no means so inclined against the conservative director, answering back to the panel that Mikhalkov must have been motivated by the best of intentions, unknown to us but worthy of support’ (2015). This case demonstrates how the government utilises MSP to divide public opinion whilst maintaining its own global visibility by tapping into both nationalist and anti-nationalist sentiments, and by cannibalising non-government agents of soft power.

The contradictions at home feed into RF imagery abroad. The story of Leviathan’s release in RF exemplifies these tensions between different perceptions of Russia’s status, the role of the government and particularly the use of MSP. The release of the film was postponed a number of times due to its participation in film festivals and competitions—Cannes, London, Toronto, and eventually the Oscars—and the delay was presented to an agitated public as a need to protect the film from internet pirates. However, in the climate of increasing tensions between RF and the West, the media interpreted this fact as the government’s attempt to control and censor cultural production in the country due to the film’s allegedly ‘anti-Russian stance’.<sup>27</sup> This demonstrates the flaws in the existing theoretical framework of soft power, which accommodates only ‘positive’ narratives as part of its strategic arsenal and excludes all other types of persuasion and attraction.

As a matter of fact, Leviathan was subjected to censorship but of a different sort. In July 2014 a law banning the use of profanities during film screenings, concerts and theatrical performances came into power (Belinskii 2014). The law did not prohibit swearing as such, but rather the use of particular vocabulary, a stratum of the Russian language which has no equivalent in English. As a result, some Russian films, including Leviathan, had to be redubbed in order to be shown in cinemas.<sup>28</sup> Eventually Leviathan was shown—nine months after its premier in Cannes, after 49 screenings in other countries, and two weeks ahead of the Oscar ceremony—at the time when the international controversy around the film reached a crescendo. In other words, the debate about Leviathan was staged around the issue of the representation of Russia on screen for a public and by a public that had not seen the film and had to rely on film reviews available in Western media—an example of Western soft power, on the one hand, and a pre-emptive gesture of MSP, on the other. It is worthwhile to emphasise here that the RF government finds itself in a responsive

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<sup>26</sup> Mikhalkov is not only an acclaimed Russian filmmaker and actor but also head of the Russian Cinematographers’ Union. A strong supporter of Putin—he initiated a petition asking Putin not to step down after the expiry of his term in office—he has attempted to utilise his patriotic stance as a means to build a profitable business (he wanted to set up a Russian alternative to McDonald’s), however he has failed (the government rejected his application to fund the fast food chain). When serving on the Russian Oscar committee, he was against Zviagintsev’s nomination but was outvoted.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, representative publications in the *Guardian* (Romney 2015), Al Jazeera (Mirovalev 2015), and Carta Capital, Brazil (Ostaptschuk 2015).

<sup>28</sup> Anna Melikian’s *Star* [Zvezda, 2014] had to be redubbed whilst Valeriia Gai-Germanika refused to redub her *I and I* [Ia i ia, 2014].



mode in relation to the non-government agents such as Zviagintsev and internet pirates; however, arguably, by using networks and resources provided by the state, such agents function within the available discourse.

The redubbed version of *Leviathan* was shown in cinemas. However, a few weeks prior to its cinematic release, the original, un-dubbed copy of the film was leaked on Runet, giving the ninety million RF internet users as well as RSNRs an opportunity to watch the film for free, if they wished to do so. In the end, two versions of *Leviathan* (with profanities online and without in cinemas) and two versions of soft power were circulating among Russian and RSNR publics thus illustrating a multi-tiered structure of Russian MSP. Although the source of the leak remains unknown,<sup>29</sup> it is not impossible to suggest that the ‘pirates’, or unknown agents, increased the effectiveness of government activities by appearing to counteract them—a clear case of the use of MSP. How did the government respond to these events? How did it capitalise on the *Leviathan* controversy domestically and globally?

### **Manipulative smart power and globalization: the *Leviathan* controversy and the map of Russian screen power**

After its premiere at the Cannes festival in May 2014, *Leviathan* initiated considerable media coverage in RF. However, at that time the attention of the public was focussed on events in Ukraine (the introduction of the rouble in Crimea, preparation for local elections on the peninsula, warfare in East Ukraine, the MH17 Malaysian Airlines plane crash in the conflict zone, the introduction of Western sanctions against RF, and so forth). It was only at the end of September 2014, when the Russian Oscars committee put forward *Leviathan* to represent RF, that the attention of the Russian public shifted to the film and the controversy it had caused in the international media. This suggests that the government was acting in the responsive mode, following and manipulating Western soft power. The coverage in RF included, among other things, the public duel between Zviagintsev and RF Culture Minister Vladimir Medinskii. It emerged that the latter had viewed the film at the Cannes festival and criticized it for the use of profanities and its depiction of excessive alcohol consumption. This can be interpreted, on the one hand, as a call to avoid cultural stereotypes, and on the other, as an imposition of a conservative agenda.<sup>30</sup> The director retaliated by accusing the Minister of promoting his own personal views and disregarding the interests of artists and filmmakers. Thus Zviagintsev adopted the position of those who, like Anton Nosik, benefit from the existing system of distribution of resources, yet aspire to have an independent position. The debate continued when in December 2015, during the St. Petersburg International Cultural Forum, Medinskii alluded to Zviagintsev’s film as one that puts forward a ‘simplistic and highly negative picture of contemporary Russia’,<sup>31</sup> and suggested that the Ministry of Culture should provide financial support only to those films that represent Russia in a positive light. Thus, in his statement, the Culture Minister evoked Nye’s original, propagandistic definition of soft power while at the same time acknowledging the effects of new, post-propaganda soft power. On one level, the Zviagintsev-Medinskii debate has revealed that different kinds of soft power are being employed by the RF government. On another, it has indicated that the state has yielded space for other agents of Russian soft power, thus enabling a multi-agent, multi-directional and more dynamic system of soft power.

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<sup>29</sup> In my interview with the director, Zviagintsev rejected the claims that the film had been leaked on the internet by the producers (this conspiracy amounts for the producers’ financial gains) and suggested that the leak was due to the weak systems of control at the film festivals where *Leviathan* had been shown and was performed by someone who had access to the festival copy of the film. This remains an untested hypothesis.

<sup>30</sup> RF propagandists such as Dmitrii Kisilev have attributed drinking and swearing to the corrupt influence of the West.

<sup>31</sup> The actual term he used is ‘films in the style of “shitty-Russia”’; the original Russian [Rashka-govniashka] reveals the crisis of self-perception and concerns about the perception of RF in the West.

Medinskii's statement caused an outcry in RF with various cultural figures joining the debate about the role of the government, the future of Russian cinema and art, freedom of expression, and soft power. Eventually Medinskii retreated and issued an official apology; however, the frenzy in the media and social media around *Leviathan* kept escalating. Arguably, between December 2014 and January 2015, *Leviathan* and the political controversy around it became the most discussed culture-related topic in RF since Russia's independence in 1991. This was evident even among those Russians who had not seen the film but felt compelled to express their opinion concerning the challenges of global media, Russia's self-perception domestically and self-representation abroad and the role of the government (Solntseva 2015). As one journalist wistfully noted, in RF 'only President Putin and Patriarch Kirill had remained silent on the issue of *Leviathan*' (Piatetskaia 2015). Taking a broader historical perspective—I should remind the reader that the debate took place in the aftermath of Crimea's annexation, the enlarged RF and economic sanctions imposed by the West—the debate about *Leviathan* was a debate about the future of Russia. However, unlike during the previous historical periods, that debate did not result in violence, the imprisonment or expulsion of the filmmaker.<sup>32</sup> This is because, I argue, the political objective of the government was not to silence the director but to use the controversy to distract public attention from the pressing economic, social and political problems outlined above, and to bring non-government agents of soft power into the official discourse.

At the same time in Western media, *Leviathan* was branded as an 'anti-Russian Russian film' (e.g. in *The Guardian* (Walker 2015)), or even 'Russophobic' (e.g. by Euronews (Karaeva 2015)) due to its narrative. Indeed, the film offers a critique of state power, telling the story of Nikolai (Aleksei Serebriakov) who lives in a small town near the Barents Sea in North Russia. He has his own auto-repair shop where he services the cars of his friends and local nomenclature. The shop stands next to the house where he lives with his young wife Lilia (Elena Liadova) and his son from a previous marriage (Sergei Pokhodaev). Vadim Sheleviat, the Mayor of the town (Roman Madianov), wants to take away Nikolai's land, and the viewer is led to believe this is for the Mayor's own dreams of luxury and gratification. First Vadim tries buying Nikolai off, but Nikolai cannot contemplate losing everything he has, not only the land which has been in his family for generations but also the natural beauty that has surrounded him since his birth. Vadim takes Nikolai to court. As Nikolai has no documents to prove that he owns the land,<sup>33</sup> he loses the case, the house is demolished and—to the viewers' tremendous shock—in its place Vadim builds a new Orthodox church. Local clergy, lawyers and government representatives support Vadim because they are part of the same corrupt social network. In the end Nikolai loses his land and house, his wife, son and best friend, and his personal crisis turns into a human catastrophe of Biblical proportions. The title of the film alludes to the Old Testament story, but more importantly in this context, to Thomas Hobbes's study of the modern state.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the film attacks state institutions and depicts contemporary Russian society as being corrupt at all levels. In the process, it utilises Western, more specifically Anglophone, theory of the state in its critique—it speaks to the West, using Western discourse of which RF is an intrinsic part. Nikolai lives in a country—and a world—where no one, including the state, church or family can protect or understand him. Zviagintsev based his film on a story about Marvin John Heemeyer from Colorado,<sup>35</sup> which had received global media exposure,

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<sup>32</sup> Arguably, Zviagintsev and other filmmakers 'learned their lesson' and will avoid confrontation with the government in the future. Having said that, Vasili Sigarev's new film *The Land of Oz* which provides another damning critic of the regime, was released in January 2016 and became a box office success.

<sup>33</sup> The land came into his use from his grandparents—an old photograph shows his family house standing on the same spot a hundred years ago; however Nikolai failed to privatize the land after the dissolution of the USSR and introduction of private property.

<sup>34</sup> He wrote it during the English Civil War (1642–1651) which provided yet another layer of consideration for RF which perceives the conflict in East Ukraine as a civil war.

<sup>35</sup> He was a welder who owned a garage. He went on a rampage with a tractor in 2004 after the local authorities gave permission to construct a factory that blocked the entrance to his shop. He bulldozed the town hall, the factory and other buildings, then killed himself.

thus asserting that Nikolai's predicament is a global condition. In this regard, the character of Nikolai was emblematic not only of the disenfranchised public in RF and everywhere else in the world, but also of the non-government agency of influence whereby staging a revolt against the authorities was similar to how internet pirates break the transnational neo-liberal system governing corporate interests.

My analysis of Western media responses to *Leviathan* and the perception of the Russian reception of the film reveals the ideological agenda of Western media and the parameters and impact of Russian soft power. By labelling *Leviathan* an 'anti-Russian Russian' film, Western media recognized the complex, controversial and impactful nature of Russian soft power, that is, its ability to reach out to global audiences. *Leviathan* was often a pretext to write about the impact of the Russian government-sponsored international broadcaster RT, which had challenged the dominance of Western media. The media attempted to counteract the effect of RF soft power by entirely ignoring, or significantly downplaying, the fact that the film had been made with money provided by the Russian Ministry of Culture, thus framing—in the style of the Cold War era, which still remains the dominant anti-Russian 'grand' narrative in the West—*Leviathan* exclusively as a piece of dissident art and comparing Zviagintsev to Andrei Tarkovskii.<sup>36</sup>

By singling out Zviagintsev and personifying Russian opposition, the Western media tried to corroborate further their dissident, binary narrative. To achieve their objective, they disregarded the fact that *Leviathan* continues the cinematic tradition of political critique evident in recent films such as Aleksei Balabanov's *Cargo 200* (*Gruz 200*, 2007), Valeriia Gay Germanika's *All but I will Die* (*Vse umrut, a ia ostanus'*, 2008), Vasilii Sigarev's *Living* (*Zhit'*, 2012) and Boris Khlebnikov's *A Long and Happy Life* (*Dolgaia schastlivaia zhizn'*, 2012), and Iurii Bykov's *The Fool* (*Durak*, 2014).<sup>37</sup> If Western media had had to acknowledge that the Russian Ministry of Culture had financially supported *Leviathan*, they would have had to revise their concept of 'Putin's propaganda', which, allegedly, supplies only 'positive' representations of the country. This would be another geopolitical gain for the Russian government as it would reveal bias in Western media coverage of RF.<sup>38</sup> The Western media resolved these contradictions by focusing on the perception of the film in RF, highlighting negative remarks made by some Russian officials, ignoring any critical remarks coming from other parts of the Russian public, and thus presenting a one-sided view of Russian society. This type of Western manipulative coverage, however, was immediately used by the RF government to point out bias in Western attitudes to Russia, which re-enforced the government's narrative of a 'Western attack' on Russia. This created waves of information manipulation in the West and RF. For the Russian government which, at that time, was struggling to come up with an explanation as to why economic sanctions had been imposed on RF, sanctions that had led to a deterioration of the standard of living of ordinary Russians, this type of narrative was a golden opportunity to promote the government's ideological position, thus completing the circle of MSP.

The *Leviathan* controversy has had an intriguing afterlife: in March 2016, Putin made a public speech condemning the violation of human rights in RF ('Putin podschital...' 2016). The examples he gave correlate with the abuses represented in *Leviathan*. In so doing, on the one hand, Putin might have appeared as a politician who had 'listened' to his electorate; however, all the abuses that he referred to, in fact, had been uncovered by the Russian law enforcement agencies. In other words, these violations can be considered to be part of the official discourse, as opposed to being part of an oppositional discourse, as they are ostensible presented to be by Western commentators on the film. This change in the government dynamic indicates how MSP has been

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<sup>36</sup> This in itself is an orientalisising manoeuvre insofar as it considers freedom of expression as exclusively a western prerogative.

<sup>37</sup> Julian Graffy (2015) identifies a number of parallels between *Leviathan* and Boris Khlebnikov's *A Long and Happy Life* which leads him to believe that the originality of Zviagintsev's film is in the explicitness and scale of the critique.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Piers Robinson's discussion in *The Guardian* (2016) of Western media bias towards Russia.

utilised to co-opt and disable grassroots debates, such as that generated around *Leviathan*, about injustice and corruption in the country. By making this speech, Putin has also disarmed those critics in the West who claim the Russian government is not concerned about human-rights violations, making future calls for regime change more difficult.

The outcome of the *Leviathan* controversy was that, first and foremost, RF was in the centre of public attention in the West, and through Western media and other cultural institutions and communication channels—globally. To put it differently, the RF government utilised Western channels of information and influence such as the media and international film festivals for its own means. This was a clear display of what I labelled above as the parasitic aspect of MSP. Indeed, Western responses to *Leviathan* in 2014-15 were reminiscent of the negative coverage of the Sochi Winter Olympics from 2013-14.<sup>39</sup> But the careful timing of the debate—covering almost exactly the same period in the annual news calendar—suggests that, in the context of the attention economy and global competition for visibility, and in comparison with previous mega-media events such as the Sochi Winter Olympics, the discourse around *Leviathan* had a considerable effect. The global visibility achieved thanks to *Leviathan* was perhaps as great as that of the Sochi Olympics, despite the obvious difference in purpose and financial cost. This fact reveals a mixture of ‘positive and negative soft power’ whereby the RF government finds itself primarily in the responsive mode.

Secondly, the attention of the Russian public was distracted from events in Ukraine by re-focusing it on the *Leviathan* controversy: the debates about the film were particularly intensive at the time when the West, Russia, Ukraine and representatives of the two unrecognized quasi-states, Donbass and Luhansk, discussed a possible resolution for the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>40</sup> This manipulation of public attention at home and abroad has revealed how the RF government combines soft and hard power and how Russian soft power is simultaneously external and internal.

Thirdly, by using Western media as a springboard to channel its official views, the Russian government re-affirmed its position as a global leader of conservatism. By showing its disapproval of the film, it demonstrated its commitment to supporting traditional societal institutions such as religion, family and the rule of law, the latter based on the opposite premise to Western law and its presumption of innocence (having failed to prove their innocence—as is the case with Nikolai—the suspect is found guilty).<sup>41</sup> What was seen as negative in the West was perceived as positive elsewhere in the world. By exploiting the Western infrastructure to critique the West and to appeal to the non-West, the Russian government utilised a mixture of direct and parasitic soft power.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, the government representatives emphasized the fact that *Leviathan* had been based on a US story, thus placing the responsibility for the injustices of the globalized world on the USA. This type of discourse and associated soft power collapses the distinctions between the centre and peripheries of globalisation, as well as its top-down structure. Finally, the manipulation of public opinion in RF and its coverage in the Western media compelled the RF audience to consider the Academy decision as a political one. Should the Academy give the award to another film, they would be lambasted for their anti-Russian position; should they vote for *Leviathan*, they would be found appeasing RF. This was a clear ‘win-win’ situation for RF authorities such as the Ministry of Culture, so much so that they refrained from commenting on the outcome of the Academy’s vote when it was announced.

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<sup>39</sup> On this matter see Hutchings et al. 2015 and Saunders 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Their efforts would eventually result in signing the so-called Minsk agreement (late-August 2014—January 2015).

<sup>41</sup> This assertion is based on a ‘conservative’ interpretation of the film, according to which, for example, Lilia’s death is an act of punishment for her infidelity: whether the wave washes her away into the sea (God’s punishment), or someone invisible pushes her over the cliff (this is an authoritarian judge, or a jury personified in the figure of a religious leader or other Elder who acts as the Trier of Fact), she is there to be castigated rather than empathized with.

<sup>42</sup> In 2013, Putin was labelled ‘world conservatism’s new leader’; see, for example, publications in *The Spectator* as well my discussion of mediated conservatism in Strukov 2016b.

## Conclusions: Charm offensive and aberration defence, or the logic of screen power

As discussed above, by capitalizing on the Leviathan controversy, the government managed to distract public attention away from pressing concerns at home such as the deteriorating economic situation (including capital flight and the devaluation of the rouble), the escalation of class antagonisms, migration, and so on. In addition, the government managed to consolidate the majority of its supporters by accusing Zviagintsev of providing an unfair representation of RF. This was an extremely important strategic move at a time when the public was challenging the government's reaction to Western economic sanctions and starting to blame the government for the country's financial woes. By utilizing the debate around Leviathan in the manner outlined in this article, the government emerged as the protector of RF and its values (traditionalism) against the 'aggressive liberal West'. Paradoxically, the government appeased the liberal opposition, too, by enabling its representatives to voice their dissent in relation to the film's reception rather than in relation to the government itself. The government also shifted some of the blame onto Medinskii—using the same tactic of personification of public nuisance which I discussed above—with the state functioning as an arbiter of different political and societal discourses, including non-government agents of influence. In this process, in the liberal Russophone discourse, Leviathan evolved from a metaphor for a controversial work of art into a metaphor for a dysfunctional state—Leviofaniia, or 'Putin's country'.

The government utilised the Leviathan controversy to re-enforce its spheres of influence which extend from within RF in concentric circles: (1) RF itself, where soft power is used for social mobilisation and to ensure social cohesion in and among national republics, autonomous republics and other elements of the (post-)imperial structure; (2) the 'so-called near abroad', or most of the former Soviet republics; for example, in January 2015 Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union, which brings together Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus in a Moscow-led project meant to counterbalance the European Union; (3) the Eurasian continent (the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation); and (4) the world through the BRICS. All of these are used to oppose the West in its world hegemony whilst Western cultural institutions and media are used to disseminate contentious information.

In this structure, the Leviathan controversy demonstrates that RF utilizes a mixture of different types of soft power. One can see evidence of 'negative' soft power directed at the West, as well as 'positive' soft power directed at the rest of the world. These two types of soft power often overlap and, as a result, create zones of mediation and dispute, keeping RF in the spotlight of world media and providing RF with a global visibility that it much desires. One such area is, of course, Ukraine, whose re-orientation towards the West signifies political losses<sup>43</sup> for the Russian government as well as economic losses for the RF film industry, Ukraine having been one of the largest markets for Russophone films outside RF.<sup>44</sup> Whilst current research focuses predominantly on RF influence in the former Soviet republics, especially those which are now part of the EU such as Estonia and Lithuania, or on the first circle in the sphere of influence,<sup>45</sup> my analysis of the Leviathan controversy has demonstrated that scholarly attention should be focussed on other areas of Russian impact, including BRICS, which so far have received little critical attention in the literature.

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<sup>43</sup> Arguably this has been recompensed by the annexation of Crimea. This tactic follows the logic of positive versus negative power.

<sup>44</sup> To remind the reader, at the time of the *Leviathan* controversy Ukraine banned 162 Russian films and television series ('Poroshenko zapretit...' 2015), and later it banned all Russian films released since 2014, which ironically includes *Leviathan*.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Anguelov 2015; Cadier & Light 2015; Conley et al. 2011; Ćwiek-Karpowicz 2012; Grigas 2012; Hudson 2014; Sherr 2013; Simons 2015.

Since Putin's second presidency, the creation of the multipolar world and the construction of a RF-led globality, which might provide alternatives to Western globalisation, has become one of the top priorities of RF foreign and domestic policy, with the government utilising resources such as the Leviathan controversy to mobilise the public in RF and elsewhere. In this context, Russian soft power is inseparable from the government's foreign policy, and the medium of film is utilised as a platform to implement a complex and confusing acclamation strategy in order to provide RF with global visibility, a strategy which I call manipulative smart power. The Leviathan controversy displays similarities with other RF recent mega-media events which follow simultaneously the logic of distraction, offence and appeal. Whilst at the moment there is little activity between RF and the other four BRICS countries as regards cultural co-production and exchange, for example, through film co-production agreements, it is anticipated these exchanges will increase in the future, especially after the financial foundations of BRICS were established at the summit in RF. RF utilises manipulative smart power, positioning itself as the protector of traditional values and as the leader of world conservatism, which finds followers in other BRICS countries (Strukov 2016b). Therefore, I assume in the near future the RF government will back film productions that will be aimed at audiences in the West and also in non-Western spaces.

As far as the West is concerned, RF employs soft power, which, on one level, plays to Western stereotypes about RF and, on another, supplies confusing and contradictory information which makes Western institutions challenge their own assumptions. Such are the effects of MSP. In particular, RF targets Western elites—the audiences of films such as Leviathan—who are already inclined to consider Western-led globalization critically. RF exploits Western cultural institutions such as the media system, film festival circuit and even its own narratives to promote its geopolitical agenda while at the same time exposing itself to the impact of Western media coverage at home ('parasitic soft power'). The media system, in which RF participates and which includes the institutions of cinema, is porous insofar as it enables uncomplicated transfer of information among different participating structures. To put it another way, unlike China or Turkey, RF does not impose any firewall controls on media and social media, instead utilising principles of soft power, that is, control via cultural institutions and values, to maintain power.

Whilst piracy has emerged as a form of subaltern power—see my analysis of internet pirates above—RF MSP has used the tactics of piracy in the general sense to circumvent Western structures. It is worth re-iterating that Leviathan is based on a US-inspired script and thus is aimed to resonate in a US context: Zviagintsev simultaneously transposes it onto Russian soil and in so doing universalises the narrative into a story of conflict, employing a philosophical text which is at the basis of the European modern state and ethics. (Conversely Zviagintsev's RF opponents used the film to stage their critique of the West.)

Thus, the concept of screen power brings together government-led and non-government agents of soft power into a singular domain of iterations and influence where exclusion and control now work in an entirely new way. Zviagintsev speaks about the concerns and impact of all sorts of globalisations—Western, Russian, BRICS, etc.—from the perspective of ordinary people, i.e. those who might feel alienated from global screen power. The RF government has capitalised on the available opportunity of Zviagintsev's Oscar nominations by personifying its soft power—using a select number of cultural figures and representatives who advocate, either critically or not, in the interests of RF—in order to achieve global visibility. It is anticipated that RF will continue using the powers of attraction and aberration as part of its multi-directional, ambiguous and often contradictory, polyvalent and parasitic system of influence to speak to different actors on the global stage.

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