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The role of Public Diplomacy in Maintaining and Developing Relations of Vietnam with Soviet Union / Russian Federation over the past 75 years: historical perspective

Abstract. This article examines the evolution and significance of public diplomacy—more specifically, people-to-people diplomacy—in the development of Vietnam's relations with the Soviet Union and, subsequently, the Russian Federation over the past 75 years. Rather than analyzing institutional mechanisms or policy strategies, the study focuses on the human dimension of diplomacy, as expressed through personal and collective memory. Drawing upon memoirs, commemorative publications, and oral histories, the article explores how shared historical experiences, cultural exchanges, and interpersonal connections have served as enduring foundations for bilateral relations.

Keywords: Vietnam—Russia relations, people's diplomacy, public diplomacy, collective memory, historical narrative.

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Роль общественной дипломатии в поддержании и развитии отношений между Вьетнамом и Советским Союзом/Российской Федерацией за последние 75 лет: исторический взгляд

Аннотация. В данной статье рассматривается эволюция и значение публичной дипломатии, в частности — народной дипломатии, в развитии отношений Вьетнама с Советским Союзом, а затем и с Российской Федерацией за последние 75 лет. Вместо анализа институциональных механизмов или политических стратегий исследование фокусируется на человеческом измерении дипломатии, выраженном через личную и коллективную память. Опираясь на мемуары, памятные издания и устные истории, автор рассматривает как общий исторический опыт, культурные обмены и межличностные связи служили прочной основой двусторонних отношений.

Ключевые слова: вьетнамско-российские отношения, народная дипломатия, публичная дипломатия, коллективная память, исторический нарратив.

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1. Introduction

Public diplomacy — also referred to as people's diplomacy — has emerged in recent decades as a prominent analytical framework in the field of international relations, attracting growing scholarly attention and a diversity of interpretations.

Public diplomacy between Vietnam and the Russian Federation is rooted in the earlier Vietnam—Soviet Union relationship, a subject that has been addressed in several studies.

Some Vietnamese-language journal articles have provided general historical overviews of the Vietnam—Soviet and, more recently, Vietnam—Russia relationship. Võ Kim Cương (2004) outlines the evolution of bilateral relations, emphasizing both continuity and change from the Soviet period to the current Vietnam—Russia partnership. Nguyễn Thị Mai Hoa (2014) focuses specifically on the early stages of Vietnam—Soviet cooperation during the First Indochina War, highlighting the significance of Soviet support in Vietnam's anti-colonial struggle. Similarly, Trần Thị Minh Tuyết (2015) presents a broader narrative of Vietnam—Soviet relations between 1945 and 1991, underscoring ideological alignment, diplomatic cooperation, and strategic assistance throughout the Cold War. From a Russian perspective, E.V. Kobelev (2017) foregrounds the role of Ho Chi Minh as the architect of Vietnam—Soviet/Russian relations, portraying his diplomatic engagement as foundational to the long-standing ties between the two nations. Most recently, Ngô Đức Mạnh (2022) published a comprehensive work of over 600 pages, richly illustrated with photographs, presenting the most significant historical events in Vietnam—Soviet Union relations and their continuation in Vietnam—Russian Federation relations from 1950 to 2022. While these studies contribute to the historical understanding of bilateral relations, few works to date have explored the specific role of public diplomacy or people-to-people ties within this context.

Based on Western analytical frameworks, Velikaya (2020) and Lebedeva (2021) explore the Soviet-era institutional legacies of people's diplomacy in a changing international context, the evolution of media and propaganda tools, state-led efforts to shape Russia's global image, and the limited success of major public diplomacy initiatives. Whereas Tsvetkova and Ruschchin (2021) believe that digital platforms offer promising avenues for projecting Russian soft power through cultural, educational, and technological programs

Concerning the Vietnam's approach, more deeply rooted in people's diplomacy (PD), Mehta (2019) demonstrated its use of effective tools in mobilizing international

public opinions to support Vietnam during the war against the United States. Vu Lam (2023) investigates institutionalized external communication strategies that Vietnam has employed since the Đổi Mới to implement people's diplomacy at the national level and highlights that they are often equated with state propaganda.

Despite 75 years of diplomatic relations, Vietnam—Russia people's diplomacy remains underexplored, with existing literature largely limited to descriptive accounts of individual actors.

As Lebedeva notes, the term “public diplomacy” was first introduced in the United States in the mid-twentieth century by Edmund Gullion at Tufts University. It is broadly understood as “the way in which governments seek to influence public opinion abroad in order to affect the formulation and implementation of foreign policy” [Lebedeva 2021: 3]. Unlike traditional diplomacy, PD expands the scope of statecraft by engaging foreign publics through various means such as cultural exchanges, educational initiatives, and information dissemination, thereby fostering mutual understanding between nations.

Although the terminology itself is relatively recent, the practice of influencing foreign societies through non-coercive means has a long historical precedent. PD operates through both state actors — such as heads of state and official spokespersons — and non-state actors, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic institutions, cultural organizations, and private individuals [Lebedeva 2021: 4].

In contemporary terms, PD is increasingly associated with the notion of “soft power,” wherein states employ cultural, educational, scientific, and commercial tools to project influence and enhance their national brand. This stands in contrast to the use of military or economic coercion—so-called “hard power”—and instead seeks to persuade and attract, win “hearts and minds” of the publics through shared values, mutual interests, and cooperative engagement.

This article revisits the history of public diplomacy (PD) — or, more precisely, people-to-people diplomacy — between Vietnam and Russia. Rather than focusing on institutional structures or specific diplomatic mechanisms, the article highlights one particular dimension: the exploration of bilateral relations through the lens of personal and collective memory. These memories, often fragmented and episodic, are typically documented and published in connection with major commemorative milestones — such as the anniversaries of the October Revolution in 1987, 1997, and 2007, and the 70th anniversary of the establishment of Vietnam—Soviet diplomatic relations in 2020.

2. Scholarship on Russia's and Vietnam's Public Diplomacy

The term PD was not used in the Soviet Union; instead, the concept of people's diplomacy was more commonly employed. This referred to the activities of scientists, artists, cosmonauts, and other prominent individuals who contributed to shaping a positive image of the Soviet Union abroad. In this sense, PD was effectively limited to non-state or semi-official actors. Nevertheless, the Soviet government established several institutions to facilitate these efforts. Notably, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), and later the Union of Soviet Societies for

Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (SSOD), played a significant role. These organizations were tasked with promoting cultural and scientific exchanges between Soviet public institutions and their counterparts abroad, as well as with individual representatives of the global intellectual and artistic community [Lebedeva 2021: 15].

In the past decade, scholarship on Russia's PD has grown considerably, particularly in the context of deteriorating international relations — an environment some scholars have described as a “New Cold War”. Within this context, Russia's increasing geopolitical isolation has prompted efforts to counteract external misperceptions and negative portrayals. As Velikaya and Simmons observe, this situation has given rise to a widespread temptation to “demonize” or mischaracterize Russia, often driven by fear or misunderstanding [Velikaya & Simmons 2020: 2].

This renewed emphasis on people's diplomacy is reminiscent of its origins during the early years of the Soviet Union, when the USSR — facing diplomatic isolation after the 1917 Revolution — relied on both official and unofficial channels to promote its international image [Lebedeva 2021: 15]. The creation of VOKS in the 1920s, and its later transformation into SSOD, reflected a dual objective: to introduce Soviet cultural achievements to the world and to bring foreign cultural values to the Soviet public. These efforts reflected a sophisticated understanding of mutual exchange as a foundation for long-term influence and international legitimacy.

Recent studies suggest that, in the current global environment, Russia has employed a broad range of PD tools that embody elements of soft power. These include the promotion of cultural heritage, educational exchanges, strategic assets such as energy, and the activities of business networks and non-governmental organizations. Nevertheless, public opinion in many Western countries remains deeply skeptical or negative. As Velikaya notes, Russia has become the target of an “information war”, the aim of which is to distort historical narratives and fuel Russophobia by portraying Russia and its people as aggressors on the global stage [Velikaya & Simmons 2020: 47].

In the case of Vietnam, PD only began to assume a clearly defined role in foreign policy following the launch of the Đổi Mới (Renovation) reforms in 1986. These reforms marked a fundamental shift in Vietnam's international orientation — prioritizing peace, independence, and development — thereby creating a favorable environment for PD to emerge as a vital component of the country's foreign affairs. Since then, various forms of PD — such as people-to-people engagement, cultural exchange, and external communication — have become increasingly visible and significant.

However, PD remains an emerging concept in Vietnam's institutional and legal framework. Although it is widely discussed in political discourse and practiced at various levels, it has yet to receive official recognition as a formal policy domain. As Vu notes, the term has gained popularity, but there is not yet a shared understanding or consensus on its definition or scope [Vu 2023: 1–2]. Moreover, one of Vietnam's key PD instruments — so-called “external information” (thông tin đối ngoại) — was previously labeled “external propaganda” (tuyên truyền đối ngoại). In the Vietnamese political context, the term propaganda does not carry the negative connotations it does in Western discourse; hence, no conceptual conflict is perceived between propaganda and PD [Vu 2023:72].

Meanwhile, Harish Mehta identifies people's diplomacy as a strategic pillar of the Vietnamese diplomatic front during the war against the U.S. Following the guidance of Hồ Chí Minh, North Vietnamese diplomats closely mirrored American diplomatic practices in order to counter U.S. propaganda and discredit the Saigon regime. These efforts included the denunciation of America's so-called "civilizing mission" as a form of covert imperialism, as well as portrayals of the southern government as illegitimate. Cultural products such as political cartoons, films, posters, and newsletters produced in Hanoi served as vehicles for these messages [Mehta 2019: 4].

Mehta further argues that people's diplomacy was not merely supplementary to official diplomacy, but often served as an unofficial yet powerful tool of statecraft, particularly in Vietnam's dealings with key allies such as China and the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, Vietnam used people's diplomacy to maintain neutrality amid the Sino-Soviet split, engaging in cultural exchanges and public delegations with both powers in order to project an image of unity and balance [Mehta 2019: 122–124].

3. Vietnam—Russia Public Diplomacy in Bilateral Relations: From People-to-People Contacts to Official Diplomacy

When viewed through the lens of interpersonal interaction, people-to-people diplomacy between Vietnam and Russia predates the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The earliest recorded Russian encounters with Vietnam date back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These early observations — subsequently translated into Vietnamese and compiled in a 1997 publication by a group of Vietnamese scholars with deep interest in Russia — offer unique insights into Vietnam under French colonial rule.

The first Russians to arrive in Vietnam primarily visited Cochinchina, then under French administration. Several accounts show a sympathetic view toward Vietnamese resistance to colonial oppression (Những tiếp xúc đầu tiên 1997). These early Russian visitors were largely intellectual aristocrats. Like many Europeans at the time, they embarked on exploratory journeys toward the Far East, driven less by colonial ambitions and more by a desire for discovery. During this period, Russia maintained amicable relations with France and showed little interest in competing for colonial influence in Indochina.

In the modern era, Nguyễn Ái Quốc — later known as Hồ Chí Minh — recognized Leninist ideology and the model of the Soviet socialist state as a guiding path for Vietnam's national liberation. As early as 1923, he traveled to the Soviet Union and in 1925 published an article titled "Lenin and the Colonial Peoples" in *Krasnaya Gazeta* (The Red Newspaper), written in Russian. In the article, he wrote:

"In the eyes of the colonized peoples, in their history of endured pain and dispossession, Lenin is the one who created a new life, a beacon that illuminates the path toward liberation for all the oppressed of humanity" [Nguyễn (1925) 2011: 148].

Following the Leninist revolutionary path, Nguyễn Ái Quốc and the Communist Party led the August Revolution of 1945, which overthrew colonial and monarchical rule and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). At January 1950 the

Soviet Union was among the first nations to recognize the new Vietnamese state, breaking the DRV's isolation.

Soon after diplomatic recognition, on May 23, 1950, the Vietnam–Soviet Friendship Association was established. Although nominally a civil society organization funded by membership contributions, it functioned with clear state guidance. Its first president was Tôn Đức Thắng, Vice President of the DRV, and its leadership included high-ranking officials. The Association operated nationwide, with branches extending from central to provincial levels (Hội Việt–Xô hữu nghị 1950).

In November 1955, following the liberation of North Vietnam and the relocation of central government institutions to Hanoi, the Association convened its first National Congress. The event served as both a formal reorganization and a public expression of gratitude toward the Soviet Union. In his opening remarks, Tôn Đức Thắng emphasized:

“The Soviet Union’s fraternal assistance to the Vietnamese people has been of immense significance. It is manifested not only in the growing support of the Soviet government and people for Vietnam today, but more importantly, in the fact that the Soviet Union showed us the path to ultimate victory” [Hội Việt – Xô hữu nghị 1955: 6].

The Association soon established a publishing house and disseminated books, newspapers, and journals that introduced Soviet society and values to the Vietnamese public. In southern Vietnam — then under the French and American-backed State of Vietnam led by Bảo Đại — the Association published a bilingual periodical titled Vietnam–Soviet Friendship, promoting socialist ideals in an accessible and engaging format. Exhibitions of Soviet books, newspapers, and photographs, along with mobile film screenings, brought images of Soviet life to rural and urban audiences alike.

After establishing official diplomatic relations with the USSR and China, DRV was no longer isolated. Numerous Vietnamese delegations — including state-level officials and individuals — took part in friendship exchanges and cultural programs with the USSR. Upon returning, these delegations organized public talks and presentations to introduce the Soviet Union, Soviet people, and their sentiments toward Vietnam to the Vietnamese populace. The image of the USSR came to be regarded with admiration by the Vietnamese as a land of prosperity, justice, and freedom — particularly meaningful for a nation that had endured nearly a century of colonial domination and was still engaged in a protracted struggle for national independence. Vietnam–Soviet diplomatic relations in general, and people’s diplomacy in particular, were grounded in the principles of Marxism–Leninism and socialist internationalism.

In 1957, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution, President Hồ Chí Minh authored a treatise entitled “Great Soviet Union” under the pseudonym Trần Lực. Published in Vietnam, the work presented the achievements of the USSR to the Vietnamese public. Written in accessible and engaging prose, Hồ Chí Minh invited readers on a spiritual journey:

“Come, my friends, let us visit the Soviet Union together. Don’t worry, this journey won’t cost you anything, for it is a spiritual voyage. You simply sit and listen to my stories, and imagine that you are there — meeting those people, witnessing those events.” [Trần Lực (1957) 2011:23]

Although Vietnam and the Russian Federation have shared a long-standing relationship spanning 75 years (1950–2025), in-depth scholarly research on this topic remains limited. Soviet scholars were among the first to document this relationship with works such as *The History of Soviet–Vietnamese Relations (1917–1985)* by M.P. Isaev and A.Kh. Ternyshev, which, as of now, remains untranslated into Vietnamese [Cách mạng... 1987:23].

In 2022, Ngô Đức Mạnh published a comprehensive volume titled *The Glorious Journey of Vietnam–Russia Relations*, outlining three distinct historical phases in Vietnam–Russia relations: 1950–1990, 1991–2011, and 2012–2022. The book also devotes a chapter to people’s diplomacy between Vietnam and the Russian Federation. According to Ngô, this relationship is deeply rooted in the Vietnamese ethos of “when eating fruit, remember who planted the tree”, reflecting the enduring gratitude of the Vietnamese people toward the Soviet Union and, subsequently, the Russian Federation for their immense, altruistic, and effective assistance during wartime, national reconstruction, and the Đổi Mới (Renovation) and international integration periods [Ngô 2022].

In the same year of 2020, the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IFES RAS) convened a roundtable discussion with leading experts from Russia and Vietnam to assess the current state of bilateral cooperation across various sectors. While mutual political trust between the leadership of both countries and strong cultural and spiritual ties between their peoples remain intact, several challenges persist. Scholars highlighted the decline of Russia’s influence in Vietnam in fields such as economics, science, and culture, attributing this trend to both external conditions and internal policy missteps. Experts also pointed to limited cooperation in science, technology, and culture, as well as the scarcity of information about Vietnam in Russian media [Mazyrin & Nikulina 2020: 76–81].

4. Vietnam–Russia public diplomacy through the lens of personal and collective memory

In recent years, a growing scholarly interest in memory studies has opened new avenues for reinterpreting history through the lens of personal and collective recollections. Memory, by its very nature, is dynamic and reflective — shaped by changing social contexts such as war, political transformation, or the emergence of new historical knowledge. This approach allows for a richer and more multidimensional understanding of history than the often-linear narratives found in official historiography.

Hue-Tam Ho Tai argues that memory operates in both directions — backward and forward — giving meaning to past experiences by embedding them within broader personal or collective narratives. These narratives often carry a sense of progression and a vision for the future in which the past serves as prologue [Tai 2001: 2]. At times, however, memory may also reinforce fixed historical interpretations, solidifying dominant narratives over time. Such memory-formed constructs constitute the very foundation upon which the history of Vietnam–Russia people’s diplomacy is built.

Among the most vivid sources of memory in this context are the recollections of Soviet military experts who were deployed to Vietnam to support the development of its defense capabilities. Hundreds of Soviet military and civilian specialists were sent to Vietnam to train local personnel in the use of advanced military technologies.

These Soviet experts did not merely serve as instructors; they often formed deep personal bonds with their Vietnamese counterparts. Many later wrote memoirs that conveyed strong emotional connections to Vietnam, its people, and the sense of solidarity they felt during their service. Likewise, Vietnamese officers and soldiers recorded their own experiences, emphasizing the professional skills and cultural understanding they gained through these interactions.

Consistent with the Vietnamese principle of “when drinking water, remember its source,” many of these memories have been compiled in commemorative publications, especially those produced for the 70th anniversary of Vietnam–Russia diplomatic relations [Ninh 2020]. These narratives enrich our understanding of the human dimension of diplomacy and illustrate how collective memory serves not only as a historical archive, but also as a vehicle for enduring mutual trust and emotional connection.

One notable example is the collaborative reflection published in 1987 on the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution. Between 1981 and 1985 alone, over 200 facilities were built in Vietnam with Soviet assistance. The Soviets contributed not only advanced technology and engineering expertise, but also enduring commitment and solidarity. As one account noted, Soviet engineers at the Sông Đà site were more than foreign specialists — they became “lifelong friends of Vietnam” [Trên các công trình hợp tác Việt-Xô 1987: 30–32].

In 2007, the publication *The Soviet Union — A Word Never Forgotten* compiled memories of prominent Vietnamese and Russian figures, reflecting on a shared past rooted in ideological solidarity, personal friendship, and cultural exchange [Liên Xô... 2007].

Tsvetov, former representative of the Russian cultural center in Vietnam, recalled the Vietnam–Russia relations after the collapse of Soviet public diplomacy institutions. Lacking state support for commemorative events in the mid-1990s, he mobilized Vietnam’s extensive network of Soviet-educated alumni, about eighty thousand as he estimated — many in senior leadership roles — whom he called “Russia’s most loyal friends” [Liên Xô... 2007: 515–516]. This episode underscores the decline of institutional PD in the post-Soviet period and the crucial role of interpersonal ties — rooted in shared educational and cultural experiences — in sustaining bilateral engagement.

In recent years, collective memory has found new expression in both print and digital media. Veteran associations, alumni networks, and Russian-language communities in Vietnam have established websites and online platforms to share their experiences, organize commemorations of key anniversaries, and express continued affection for Russian language, culture, and people.

Personal and collective memories not only reflect the official relationship between the two nations but also reveal a profound mutual understanding between Vietnamese

and Russian friends — an invisible bond that continues to connect the two countries [Tkachev 2011; Sokolov 2020].

These memories have withstood the passage of time as well as the most severe historical ruptures. Over the past three decades, profound changes have taken place: Russia has replaced the Soviet Union in its official relations with Vietnam. Yet in collective recollection, the sentiments of the Vietnamese toward the Russians, and of the Russians toward the Vietnamese, both before and after such socio-political transformations, appear to remain remarkably intact. Historical upheavals are recalled as “dark moments” in the bilateral relationship, but the essential meaning of this shared memory has not shifted. What memory preserves is not merely a subjective echo of the past but a lens through which the deeper truth of history can be discerned. In this sense, recollection does not contradict history; rather, it complements and corrects it by safeguarding the enduring substance of the relationship. Thus, the Vietnam—Russia bond continues to be affirmed as one of friendship, comradeship, and fraternity — a symbolic tie that transcends political contingencies and constitutes a resilient element of collective identity.

Conclusion

Public diplomacy between Vietnam and the Russian Federation has evolved as a continuous thread linking the historical trajectory of Vietnam—Soviet Union relations with the post-Soviet bilateral partnership. Rooted in both state-sponsored institutions and grassroots exchanges, public diplomacy — particularly its people-to-people dimension — has functioned as a vital mechanism for fostering mutual understanding, shaping national images, and sustaining emotional and cultural affinity across geopolitical transformations.

This article has examined this enduring relationship through the lens of personal and collective memory, emphasizing how individuals from both nations have experienced and interpreted historical events. The first Russian visitors to Vietnam in the late 19th century arrived not as colonial agents, but as curious observers engaged in cultural and intellectual discovery. In the 20th century, revolutionary ideology and shared anti-colonial struggles brought Vietnam and the Soviet Union into close alignment, with Hồ Chí Minh identifying Leninist thought and the socialist state model as guiding principles for Vietnam’s path to independence.

Following the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1950, both countries institutionalized their people’s diplomacy through organizations such as the Vietnam—Soviet Friendship Association, supported by cultural and scientific exchange mechanisms. These institutions not only promoted mutual knowledge and solidarity but also served as vehicles for ideological alignment and soft power projection within a Cold War context.

Crucially, the interpersonal dimension of diplomacy — the stories, emotions, and lived experiences of individuals — has persisted even during periods of geopolitical rupture. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it was precisely these human connections that filled the void left by the weakening of state-sponsored diplomatic

mechanisms. Former students, veterans, scientists, and cultural figures became the informal custodians of a shared history and continued to nurture bilateral bonds through memoirs, commemorations, and public discourse.

Memory, in this context, emerges not only as a source of historical data but also as a diplomatic resource. It preserves the affective and symbolic elements of the Vietnam—Russia relationship, reinforcing narratives of trust, gratitude, and camaraderie. Officially published recollections analyzed in this study demonstrate a notable alignment between personal memory, collective sentiment, and the dominant narrative of bilateral friendship — a narrative grounded in mutual support, ideological affinity, and cultural exchange.

As the international landscape continues to shift, the legacy of people’s diplomacy offers valuable lessons. It illustrates that diplomacy is not solely the domain of governments but is also enacted through the enduring bonds between people. In the case of Vietnam and Russia, these bonds have withstood political transitions, economic upheavals, and systemic change — testifying to the power of public diplomacy not only as a policy tool but also as a human enterprise rooted in shared memory and reciprocal respect.

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