Evaluating Soft Power in Central Asia

*Assessing Soft Power in Central Asia is a result of a brainstorming and simulation that took place at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) during the 2018 Central Asia Working Group, Strategic Studies Network meeting.*

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The issue of Soft Power in Central is analyzed in this paper in two dimensions:

- possibilities, ways and limits of the third parties soft power projection in Central Asia, and
- potential of the Central Asian states to project their soft power outside the region and at each other.

**EXTERNAL SOFT POWER**

First, it is important to define *whose soft power* is present in Central Asia. We have concentrated our analysis at the active actors, whose undertakings and policies have both direct and indirect influence beyond the military. The United States, China, Russia, Turkey, and the EU.

Considering a special character of the soft power, the analysis cannot be objective, as one of the first questions in estimation efficiency of the third parties’ activities should be - do these parties are in general interested in having the soft power towards the Central Asian states? What is the percentage of the real soft power projection and of indirect influence and image created through, for example, mass culture?

Currently it is a clear understanding that “super powers” do not have any strategy for their soft power in the region. Soft power in Central Asia is currently a scene where action is teeming. To begin with, the region itself is far from uniform, where countries are differently exposed to external information flows. This tendency is both for positive and negative information spread. Anti-Western/anti-American and anti-Russian/anti-Putin moods vary significantly among the five countries.

At the same time, different actors choose different instruments. For China, economy goes first, while cultural issues or values do not play serious role. For Russia – history, traditional values and language, all that back the past contacts between the states. For the EU – democratic values and support of the civil society are among top priorities. Turkey concentrated attention on religion and joint Turkic identity. The United States are the most complicated case, as with a continuing indirect soft power manifestation, it is a decrease in real soft power projection in the region, where pragmatic power policy is coming to the front stage.

**China**

The Chinese tendency to position itself against the Western model is no exception when it comes to soft power. Pragmatic realism in Chinese foreign policy meant that each decision is based upon practical-rationality, driven by a high attention to consequences. Soft power for the Chinese therefore must be quantitatively presentable to meet precisely the needs of the Communist Party, in oppose to a value-based, ideological Western soft power.

While economic dominance is amongst the first Beijing tactics of political influence, Chinese Western expansion is increasingly taking up a cultural dimension. Measured by the numbers of Confucius institutes in Central Asia combined with the number of Central Asian students in China, Chinese soft power pursuit remains quantitative in nature.

However, this influence is generational based, when youth of the Central Asian states are being more exposed to Chinese influence, while older generation are opting to Russia.

With the Belt and Road Initiative progressing, more and more Chinese presence and influence in the economic and transport sphere is expected. Thus, it is still unclear whether one can consider Chinese economic projects within the Belt and Road Initiative as a soft power element or as a venture that will need such support by itself.
As Chinese businesses expand in Central Asia, the effort to pursue soft power also serve as a necessary means to manage Sinophobic sentiment, to prevent another suicide bomber at the Chinese embassy in Bishkek or to trigger another protest over foreigners buying land in Kazakhstan. China's share in Central Asian states' foreign debt has grown alarmingly in the past 10 years, with many concerns over land deals as the de facto form of repayment.

However, the question remains - does Chinese economic power mean political power in Central Asia?

Chinese soft power in the region is channeling through education, Confucius institutions, mass media, and Chinese public funds. Yet, Soviet legacy and post-Cold War Western soft power dominance in Central Asia mean that locals have a seriously low-level knowledge about China, despite being geographically close. In terms of language, Chinese will take a long time to catch up with Russian and English as the preferred foreign language. But still a growing interest in studying Chinese language is already witnessed, together with developing of Confucius Institutions network, availability of public funds and introduction of mass media. Though, regardless of high Chinese interest to establish soft power, its capacity in Central Asia remains low with high presences of other competitors.

**Russia**

Talking about Russia, it is a serious distinction in expectations, which do not divide between countries but inside of each Central Asia state: while one group would like to see greater involvement of Russia in the region, the others are happy it has not involved comprehensively.

Russia in general does not have a Central Asian strategy as a regional approach and a vision of its policy. Most of its soft power is based on the history of relations, created myths of the big brother, personal relations among elites and mass media presence. Therefore, for the Russian Federation, soft power is just a supportive element of its general policy towards the region, more of using opportunities rather than elaborating strategies.

Russian soft power is also built around a concept of great Eurasia as a counterpart to Europe or "Western World", where Russia should play a dominant role. As “Russkiy mir” [Russian World] concept is not working well in Central Asia, due to the ethnic and linguistic differences, and percentage of the Russian population is not so high, so "Eurasianism" concept is prevailing. It also allows Moscow to pull five Central Asian states away from the idea of Turkic world and impose itself in the middle of the Central Asian affairs as insider rather than outsider.

Russian soft power builds upon two important "natural" advantages – the spread of Russian language among all Central Asian states (said to be shrinking but still by far the most widespread than any other non-state language) and the legacy of about seventy years of common Soviet statehood. Both the role/status of Russian language and especially the meaning of the Soviet legacy are often politically equivocal in Central Asia, however at the end of the day both these factors help, rather than hinder, the positive acceptance of Russia and Russian influence in all of the Central Asian states.

Among key components of the Russian soft power in Central Asia are

- leadership links,
- media,
- diasporas.

**Leadership links.** The Russian involvement in Central Asia is mostly based on old contacts and post-Soviet perceptions. Close relations with local elites, using weaknesses of the authoritarian regimes, support
without commitments in such sensitive topics as human rights and democracy - all this make Central Asian elites more attractable to the Russian influence. However, for example, there is close relationship between President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev and President of Russia Putin, but the question is whether this relationship affects the Russian soft power in Kazakhstan in a positive way.

**Diasporas.** Working migrants from Central Asian states has more effect to the public opinion and Russia’s perception in the region, than influence Russia’s views towards the region. At the same time, it is difficult to name migrants as a soft power instrument but more as a channel of influence and information spread, both direct and indirect. On the one hand, any negative dynamic therein – usually due to some action of the Russian government against migrants – is capable of leading to critical attitudes toward Russia. On another – these people spend time in the Russian information bubble, so are under substantial information influence that they spillover to their relatives in Central Asia, in addition to the preference of continuing positive relations between their mother states and the Russian Federation due to a fear to lose job opportunities. Quite the same situation is also with students from the Central Asian states studying in Russia.

**Media and Public diplomacy.** The Russian information products are actively present in media domain in five Central Asian states. The biggest influence is in Kazakhstan. Russian public diplomacy is experiencing certain difficulties due to poor understanding of the concept and heavy-handed implementation. Nevertheless, special events and programs in cultural and people-to-people domains are taking place, including academic cooperation.

**The United States**

American soft power, seeming to be in decline, is nonetheless observable. In the 1990-s, the United States were seen in positive awe as a leader of the free world, a strong economy, a resolute champion of democracy and good governance, and a land of dream. The later propaganda both inside of the Central Asia states and from the side of the Russian media replaced that picture with an image of the U.S. waging wars around the world, forcing reforms that drove masses into poverty, preaching democracy and human rights while befriending partners who offend these rights for reasons of political convenience.

While anti-American political discourse had some of its heyday around 2010’s, the spell of Russia’s anti-American rhetoric is having less effect after the starts of the crisis in and around Ukraine in 2014. Whereas the earlier enchantment for America may never come back, the more recent disenchantment is probably turning into more realistic perceptions.

The U.S. soft power has a lot of indirect effect in the region. With absence of coherent strategy and action plans, the image of the U.S. is nevertheless being created through images of celebrities, business representatives (e.g. Elon Musk and Steve Jobs), and Hollywood. Same effect is coming from the business representation such as KFC and MacDonald’s - every new café in Central Asian cities is an event marking achievement.

Education and Professional training possess an important role in the U.S. soft power projection. There are a range of exchange programs in higher education, university level and professional training. Among others, the U.S. government is investing in professional education of other governments and military in Central Asia. Together with the Peace Corps activities in the region, the education component of the soft power has and will have significant impact. It both promote good knowledge, sharing experience and practices, but also have a positive effect on the development of the local civil society.

Recently, one can witness change in the U.S. priorities and instruments towards the region, including soft
power. While focusing on security matters in C5+1, human rights protection is no longer on the U.S. agenda at the same level as it used to be.

The more recent efforts by the U.S. to reestablish its soft power standing in Central Asia have been limited mostly to RFE/RL’s channels and products aired by radio, TV, internet, and low-intensity public relations programming.

Another issue under the question is so called Gunship diplomacy or soft power side effect of security issues. Since 2001, Central Asian states have supported U.S.-led operations in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan both hosted US airbases. This gave a basis for projecting positive image of the U.S. as a security guarantor, a partner and for building up political dialogue upon this.

The European Union

Three dimensions have been among the top priorities where the EU activities concentrated - building democracy, education, energy and transport. First two are closely connected with the soft power projection. Working through the civil society, supporting projects on human rights and good governance have been main concern of Brussels.

Image of the EU at the same time is influenced by the Russian media, who creates alternatives to the reality, presenting “horrors of life”, absence of the so-called “traditional values”, inabilitys of the governments and democracies in the EU member-states. This influence perception of the EU and its values that are promoted in Central Asia through the negative lenses. As a result, the EU needs not only to overcome ignorance about the EU among the citizens of the Central Asian States, but also this additional barrier.

Turkey

There is a marginal influence that Turkey currently enjoys. In the early 1990s, Turkey had the biggest chances to become the main competitor to the Russian soft power in the region, however its attitude towards Central Asia was relatively enthusiastic and emotional, lacking a tangible action plan. Turkey used to think about the Central Asia not as a separate region but as a part of Turkic world. At that time, perception of Turkey was based on an image of a role-model for the countries in the region; Turkey has been an example because of its secular structure with a Muslim population, and open market economy. Religion, education, support of the security sector - all three were actively used towards Central Asia. However, internal changes and islamisation in Turkey, as well as lack of attention towards the five countries and later cases of “Gulen schools” led to a significant decrease in Turkish influence abilities.

CENTRAL ASIAN STATES’ SOFT POWER

The first questions, when it comes to Central Asia, that is necessary to define is what are we talking about: an image-building process or soft power?

All Central Asian states are spending money for advertisements of their touristic potential or sports events at CNN or BBC. However, there are at least two problems. First – that most of these advertisements are not unique one from another, so Western audience will not distinguish between them. Second - what is the capacity of Central Asian states to invest in their soft power except the sport events?

Yet one issue has already created a false image of Central Asia through movies like Borat. The experts’ opinion divided on this point. One group consider a serious negative impact of this case, which will be
difficult to overcome by advertisements only. Another one assumes that the most important goal is reached – the Western audience got interested in the region and will search opportunity to explore it by themselves.

Not less important problem is whether the Central Asian states should be presented as a single region or as separate states in terms of soft power projection. In this case, an answer to the more existential question should come first – is it a common identity and values that the regional countries share and do their share their attitude towards the soft power. Baltic States present themselves as a joint group, a region at many international fora, so can the Central Asia states consider such an option as well?

The second question is - can the Central Asian states influence and project soft power to each other.

For example, is it about likability or a soft power, when we speak about President Nazarbayev positive perception and image in other Central Asian states? Can this positive image be transformed in ability to influence the political situation? When Kazakhstan attempts to play a role of the mediator, does it influence the image of Kazakhstan in the region and ability to project its policy and power in the region in the future?

**Conclusions**

There are several conclusions that can be presented analyzing the current state of the soft power projection in Central Asia:

- The U.S. has been projecting soft power, while Russia and China were present in the region, through historical and economic ties. Very often, they are not even perceived as third powers by the Central Asian states, especially Russia. However, the situation is slowly changing and is in flux due to the change of foreign policy priorities (C5+1), new projects (Belt and Road Initiative) development and necessity to necessity to secure old links (due to the sanctions and political isolation because of the conflict around Ukraine).
- Soft power in Central Asia becomes a highly multi-variate and multi-dimensional puzzle where simple and straightforward propositions such as “Russia wields the most effective soft power in Central Asia” or “American soft power in Central Asia is in decline”, or “Chinese soft power is sharply rising” would be at best oversimplifications and at worst, misleading conclusions.
- One of the main questions remaining - Can new actors appear in this sphere of the soft power projection in Central Asia? The chances are low; however, it is possible to expect certain splashes of Indian, South Korean, some of the Arabic States, Iranian soft power activities, which can cover certain areas or accompany implementation of projects. This can relate to religious, cultural or mass culture, public events and funds available for educational and civil society projects. However, such influence will be more concentrated on positive image presentation rather than desire to influence state policy.
- Turkey still has the highest chances for increasing its soft power in the region if a window of opportunities opens. This “window” can be a decrease of the strategic interest of the U.S. and Russia in the region, or internal changes in some of the states. However, it will be possible to realize only in case of a coherent strategy on behalf of Turkey, not just taking for granted joint Turkic identity.
- Developing a new Central Asia Strategy (expected in 2019), the EU has a chance to include soft power component, as such new topics (comparing to the 2007 version) in the new strategy as
problems of radicalization, foreign fighters, terrorism, Afghanistan, illegal migration – all have a potential for the EU image projection, positive changes based on democratic values and good governance inside of the Central Asia states.

- The concept of the Russian World, used by the Kremlin, is not any longer applicable to Central Asia. The level of proficiency in Russian is seriously decreasing - the status of lingua franca will be challenged in Kazakhstan in near future, while in other Central Asian states, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in particular, it is already poor. Another serious Russian challenge is that the Central Asian states do not support its anti-European rhetoric and territorial claims policy. But at the same time, Central Asian states do not support sanctions and open statements against Russia’s violations of international law and conflict provocations.

- The Central Asian states themselves is still not able to distinguish between Soft power, Nation-branding and Public Diplomacy in their strategies and policies. In the near years, public diplomacy and nation branding (more for the purpose of business development and tourists’ attraction) will prevail.
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Appendix

Partner institutions

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UA: Ukraine Analytica, the first Ukrainian academic/analytical journal in English language on International Relations, Politics and Economics. The journal is aimed for experts, diplomats, academics, students interested in the international relations and foreign policy. Journal is published by the NGO “Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation” (Ukraine), Centre of International Studies (Ukraine), with the financial support of the Representation of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine and International Renaissance Foundation (Ukraine), Black Sea Trust of the German Marshall Fund of the US.