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**Re-thinking soft power:
China, Russia and the European Union in Central Asia**

This paper seeks to bring the concept of soft power into the spotlight and to provoke discussion about its application and relevance to China, Russia, and the European Union in the context of their respective approaches to the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The region offers up a viable test-bed to consider the roles of these three external actors. The paper also hopes to initiate discussion about the theoretical and conceptual implications of viewing China and Russia as Soft Powers given that the basic assumptions behind existing research is that soft power is intimately tied to the promotion of democracy, liberalism and ultimately the spreading of Western values. By way of a conclusion, the paper will attempt to bring some clarity to core questions about the relevance of soft power research and to then map out how a future research agenda might be developed, especially in relation to non-Western powers.

Keywords: soft power, Central Asia, China, Russia, European Union

**Nowe podejście do miękkiej siły.
Chiny, Rosja i Unia Europejska w Azji Środkowej**

Artykuł koncentruje się na koncepcji miękkiej siły (*soft power*) i prowokuje do dyskusji na temat tego, jakie ma ona znaczenie dla Chin, Rosji oraz Unii Europejskiej i jak jest stosowana przez te podmioty w odniesieniu do państw Azji Środkowej: Kazachstanu, Kirgistanu i Uzbekistanu.

W artykule podkreśla się teoretyczne implikacje postrzegania Chin i Rosji jako państw dysponujących *soft power*, uwzględniając podstawowe założenia dotychczasowych badań, zgodnie z którymi miękka siła jest ściśle związana z promocją demokracji, liberalizmu, a ostatecznie rozpowszechnianiem zachodnich wartości. W podsumowaniu podjęto próbę odpowiedzi na podstawowe pytania dotyczące znaczenia badań nad *soft power*, a następnie nakreślono, w jaki sposób można opracować przyszły program badań, szczególnie w odniesieniu do mocarstw niezachodnich.

Słowa kluczowe: miękka siła, *soft power*, Azja Środkowa, Chiny, Rosja, Unia Europejska

Introduction and context setting

Central Asia is a region increasingly subject to competition between China, Russia, and the European Union (EU), especially in the spheres of trade, security, and energy. At the same time, however, there is intense, but, so far, less visible rivalry in terms of competing narratives and soft power strategies that all three actors are deploying in an attempt to further their interests in the region by winning the hearts and minds of local elites and populations. Seen in this way, Central Asia appears to be an interesting case for soft power analysis, and crucially, to launch a reconsideration of the tenets and ideas behind the concept. This paper hones in on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, which, although different in terms of levels of democracy and freedom, human development and their embeddedness in international organisations, retain similar structural problems and have weak civil societies. Coupled with this, these states tend to be vulnerable to externally provoked crises, and environmental problems all manifest in a lack of resilience. All three have complex, historically laden relations with Russia and China and are also the subjects of the European Union's recalibrated regional strategy for Central Asia.

Existing literature on Central Asia and the role of external actors tends towards big picture geopolitical analysis, which neglects a raft of issues to do with the competition of ideas, which is something that soft power research emphasises. But perhaps more noticeably is that scant attention is given to comparative analysis of the strategies of external actors towards this region. Accordingly, this paper seeks to bring the concept of soft power¹ into the spotlight and to provoke discussion about its relevance with regards to China, Russia, and the EU's

1 We do not unconditionally associate the concept of soft power with any particular International Relations (IR) theory. Despite Joseph S. Nye (along with Robert Keohane) being a co-founder of neoliberalism, his concept of soft power sits at the nexus of mainstream IR theories. For instance, Nye argues, "there is no contradiction between realism and soft power." J. S. Nye Jr., *The future of power*, Public Affairs, New York 2011, p. 82.

Table 1. Central Asia and relations with the EU, China and Russia

×	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan
Basic Parameters of Relations with China	Kazakhstan joined the Belt and Road Initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. China has established 5 Confucius Centres in Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan joined the Belt and Road Initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. China established 4 Confucius Centres in Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan joined the Belt and Road Initiative and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. China established 2 Confucius Centres in Uzbekistan
Basic Parameters of Relations with Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – former Soviet Socialist Republic, – CIS member, – member of the Eurasian Economic Union, – branches of Russian universities in Uzbekistan, – Russian World institutions (foreign affairs, science and education initiatives) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – former Soviet Socialist Republic, – CIS member, – member of the Eurasian Economic Union, – Russian-Kyrgyz combined military base, – remittances sent home by workers working in Russia equals almost 31% of Kyrgyzstan’s GDP, – Russian World institutions (foreign affairs, science and education initiatives) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – former Soviet Socialist Republic, – CIS member, – branches of Russian universities in Uzbekistan, – Russian World institutions (foreign affairs, science and education initiatives)
Basic Parameters of Relations with the EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Partnership and Co-operation Agreement since 1999, – Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 2015, – updated EU Central Asia Strategy, – EUNIC Almaty (EU National Institutes for Culture), – participation in Erasmus+ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – PCA since 1999, – the EU granted Kyrgyz Republic the GSP+ (Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus) status (full removal of tariffs on over 66% of tariff lines) in 2016, – updated EU Central Asia Strategy, – participation in Erasmus+ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – PCA since 1999, – Uzbekistan benefits from the GSP (non-reciprocal preferential access to the EU market), – updated EU Central Asia Strategy, – EUNIC Uzbekistan, – participation in Erasmus+

Source: author’s own compilation

respective approaches to the Central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.² The core concerns of this paper are important and interesting for many reasons, not least because all three actors have self-identified as soft powers and have deployed policies in the spheres of education, language learning and cultural diplomacy, which are synonymous with soft power's main tenets, namely generating the power of attraction. But perhaps even more fascinating are the theoretical and conceptual implications of viewing China and Russia as soft powers given that the basic assumption behind existing research is that soft power is intimately tied to the promotion of democracy, liberalism, and ultimately the spreading of Western values. Accordingly, one of the key questions that this paper seeks to raise is how far existing conceptualisations of soft power can be applied to the study of the foreign policies of non-Western states? This is part of far bigger questions to do with whether the concept is culturally bound and inherently Western. The paper wants to provide food for thought, to prompt discussion, and to pave the way towards rethinking of the notion of soft power and possibly an updating of some of its key assumptions as part of a future research agenda.

The paper will proceed by sketching out the parameters and substance of soft power research and cognate issues before drawing out what we identify as core assumptions, claims and characteristics of the EU, China, and Russia's soft power identities and strategies, also in the context of Central Asia. By way of a conclusion, the paper will attempt to bring some clarity to the paper's core questions about the relevance of soft power research and also to map how a future research agenda might be developed.

Soft power: assumptions and conceptual elaboration

Since its original inception by scholar-practitioner Joseph S. Nye in 1990, the idea of soft power has been conceptually elaborated. Literature has proliferated and a wide variety of states, including non-Western countries, have defined themselves as soft powers and consequently, sought to expand their foreign policy portfolios to include instruments which emphasise the power of attraction as opposed to just coercion. It is important to recall that the notion of soft power emerged in the context of a reconceptualised US foreign policy role after 1989. In that early post-Cold War era, Nye posited that

2 The other two countries of the region, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, were not included in our analysis due to the lesser impact of our three soft powers.

by virtue of the harmony between American ideology and international institutions the US would have more co-optive power than other countries.³ In other words, the US had the potential to be a *primus inter pares* soft power because American democracy, values and foreign policy interests were largely undisputed in the context of the collapse of bipolarity and were on the ascent. Thus, the belief that soft power was inextricably linked to upholding the liberal world order, maintaining existing international institutions and the promotion of democracy and Western values and norms was born.

In a nutshell, soft power suggests a contrast with traditional hard power, which evokes the primacy of coercion through, first and foremost, the use or the threat of the use of force. Soft power implies persuasion, co-option and the wielding of the power of attraction via such tools as cultural and public diplomacy.⁴ Soft power also strongly implies multilateralism and common institution building, as opposed to unilateralism. The idea behind soft power is to shape the preferences of others and to get other states to want what you want, without direct reference to coercion. As Nye argues: “If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes.” Moreover: “If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow.”⁵ Nye’s subsequent contributions to the development of soft power broadened the research terrain; later on, he pointed to how the soft power attributes of a given state are not only in the hands of central governments, but are also the assets and tools developed by and used by other actors within popular culture, civil society and private businesses, and can therefore potentially be at odds with official government lines.⁶ Whilst the current paper generally concurs with this idea, it also seeks to argue that only in the contexts of democratic states is there likely to be such a plethora, accordingly, it can be expected that China and Russia will have more centrally defined and implemented soft power strategies. Meanwhile, in other subsequent studies Nye referred to the Islands of Peace as regions where the use of force is no longer an option amongst neighbours, which are “evidence of the increasing importance of soft power where there are shared values about what

3 J.S. Nye Jr., *Soft power*, “Foreign Policy” 1990, No. 80, p. 168.

4 There remain substantial discussions about the difference between cultural and public diplomacy, but this paper holds that there is an interplay between the two and that both are part of a state’s soft power strategies.

5 J.S. Nye Jr., *Soft power*, “Foreign Policy” ..., p. 166–167.

6 *Idem*, *The paradox of American power. Why the world’s only superpower can’t go it alone*, Oxford University Press, Oxford–New York 2002, p. 11.

constitutes acceptable behavior among similar democratic states. In their relations with each other [...].⁷⁷ This is interesting from our perspective, since it would seem to correspond to the EU's situation, which at its very essence is about a collective disavowal of armed force and an apparent desire to spread this reality to states and regions beyond its borders.

This brief elucidation of soft power research feeds this paper's objective to push for a reconsideration of soft power in connection with the cases of China, Russia and the EU. Existing scholarship provides useful foundations for our consideration. Nye sees that an entity's attraction is produced by three main sources: (1) its culture: in places where it is attractive to others; (2) its political values: when it lives up to them at home and abroad and (3) its foreign policies: when they are seen as legitimate and have moral authority. Table 2 presents an adaptation of Nye's work from 2008, setting out a framework of soft power sources, referees and receivers. This gives a very solid point of departure, but needs elaboration and empirical nuance, thus, this paper seeks to nudge soft power research forwards through a lens of Chinese, Russian and EU soft power *vis à vis* Central Asia.

Table 2. Soft power sources, referees and receivers

Nye's sources of soft power	Intermediate referees for gaining credibility or legitimacy	Intended receivers of soft power
Foreign policies	governments, media, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), inter-governmental organisations (IGOs)	foreign governments and publics
Domestic values and policies	media, NGOs, IGOs	foreign governments and publics
Culture (popular and high)	media, markets, governments, NGOs, IGOs	foreign governments (high culture) and publics (pop and high culture)

Source: J.S. Nye Jr., *Public diplomacy and soft power*, "The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science" 2008, No. 616, issue 1, p. 107

The three soft powers: assumptions and key approaches

China, Russia and the EU make for interesting and relevant foci as each actor has different characteristics that arguably shape their claims to be soft powers:

– China is an authoritarian state, yet with foreign economic policies, a growth rate and a market size that bring the country firmly into the mainstream

77 Idem, *Soft power the means to success in world politics*, Public Affairs, New York 2004, p. 20.

of the global economy. Chinese policy does not necessarily adhere to the international norms promoted by Western institutions, though at the same time, evidence points to the potential for China to be a policy and normative agenda setter on some global issues.

– Russia is an authoritarian and centralised state with an imperial past. Its economic growth has been unsteady, polarised, and characterised by oligarchic capitalism. Russia has been dubbed a revisionist state, since its policies are aligned to oppose the norms associated with existing Western institutions, including those of the EU.

– The EU is not a nation state and operates via the pooling of the sovereignty of its 27 member states in a complex blend of rules-based supranational and intergovernmental cooperation. EU external policies are premised on principles to do with democracy, liberalism, and human rights, which are strategised through its neighbourhood and region-building approach grounded in dense institutionalism.

China and soft power

The first Chinese academic paper on soft power *Culture as national power: Soft power* was published by Huning Wang in 1993. The term became more policy-relevant after the concept of peaceful rise was reintroduced by Zheng Bijian in 2002. Bijian, one of the top foreign policy thinkers and an advisor to the Chinese leadership, coined the term *peaceful rise* to denote Beijing's commitment to harmonious coexistence and non-interference in a third state's domestic affairs.⁸ Peaceful rise or peaceful development (China's policymakers prefer the latter as they claim that *rise* assumes aggression) became official policy in China under the leadership of Hu Jintao. The State Council defines China's peaceful rise as:

China should develop itself through upholding world peace and contribute to world peace through its own development [...] by carrying out reform and innovation; at the same time, it should open itself to the outside and learn from other countries [...]. This is a path of scientific, independent, open, peaceful, cooperative and common development.⁹

8 *China's peaceful rise. Speeches of Zheng Bijian 1997–2004*, Brookings Institution, 2014, p. 1–6, available at: <<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/20050616bijianlunch.pdf>> [accessed: 1 IX 2019].

9 *Full text: Action plan on the Belt and Road Initiative*, “The State Council of the People's Republic of China” [online], 30 III 2015 [accessed: 1 IX 2019], available at: <http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm, 2015>.

To follow this path, Beijing has, according to the literature, gradually adopted a soft power strategy.¹⁰ In 2014, during the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, it was declared that there should be an increase in China's soft power, to "give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world."¹¹

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides an interesting case study for soft power research. According to the literature, BRI enhances strengthening cooperation in areas such as policy coordination, connectivity, trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds along those countries of the belt.¹² Since its introduction in 2013, China has poured nearly \$700 billion into more than 60 countries, much of it in the form of large-scale infrastructure projects and loans to governments. According to Balding, the idea was to "draw these countries closer to Beijing while boosting Chinese soft power abroad."¹³ The development of BRI has been accompanied by a mushrooming of institutions and think tanks designed to promote investment in China and the countries involved. Similarly, Dave argues that "BRI has spurred a flurry of public diplomacy to engage the various stakeholders within society and reinforce high diplomacy – the handshakes between the leaders of China and Central Asian states that serve as affirmations of friendship, a common vision, and the convergence of goals and priorities."¹⁴ Such affirmation can also be seen in the political discourse surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a part of BRI that stretches across Pakistan (China's all-weather friend) arguably to become a regional game-changer.¹⁵

The developments mentioned above have prompted academics to investigate China's claims about soft power. Men expanded Nye's three sources

10 X. Li, V. Worm, *Building China's soft power for a peaceful rise*, "Journal of Chinese Political Science" 2011, vol. 16, issue 1, p. 69.

11 *China's soft power campaign mapping China's cultural genome*, "Wilson Center" [online, accessed: 1 IX 2019], available at: <www.wilsoncenter.org/chinas-soft-power-campaign>.

12 *Full text: Action plan...*

13 Ch. Balding, *Why democracies are turning against Belt and Road corruption, debt, and backlash*, "Foreign Affairs" [online], 24 X 2018 [accessed: 1 IX 2019], available at: <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-10-24/why-democracies-are-turning-against-belt-and-road>>.

14 B. Dave, *Silk Road Economic Belt. Effects of China's soft power diplomacy in Kazakhstan*, [in:] *China's Belt and Road Initiative and its impact in Central Asia*, ed. M. Laruelle, George Washington University, Washington D.C. 2018, p. 97.

15 A. Kuszewska, A. Nitza-Makowska, *Selected aspects of Pakistan's post-2013 foreign policy*, "IAAPS Perspectives" 2017, No. 2, p. 33–46.

by adding two more: economic development model and international image.¹⁶ Accordingly, the five main sources of China's soft power are described as: (1) Culture. Beijing actively promotes its culture overseas via the Confucian Institutes (CIs). Since the first two were opened in Seoul and Tashkent in 2004, their number has grown to 548 in 154 countries. (2) Political values. According to Western-centric perspectives, the political values of China cannot be a source of its soft power. Challenging such perceptions, Li and Worm distinguish "two aspects of a country's political values: one domestic, i.e., how the government rules its own people, and one international, i.e., the principles and policies when dealing with other nations and international affairs."¹⁷ In the first aspect, some academics emphasise China's unique regime path will eventually aim for democracy. In the second aspect, China promotes democracy in international relations, understood as equality between countries, regardless of their power and resources.¹⁸ (3) Foreign policies. In launching the two foreign policy grand strategies, China's peaceful rise and BRI, Beijing is trying to spread a friendly image of both the country itself and the world order it attempts to create.

China advocates that all nations regardless of size and wealth should be treated as equal and their ways of life should be respected. China maintains that peace and development should be the two major themes of the contemporary world [...]. China claims that all countries should shoulder common but differentiated obligations to solving global issues such as climate change and developed nations should attend to the needs of developing countries when it comes to international obligations like reducing CO₂.¹⁹

(4) Development model. China's economic performance makes its development model attractive to the global south and elsewhere: "[...] countries, authoritarian or liberal, like Vietnam, Russia, Kazakhstan, India, Iran, and Brazil, have shown their interest in the so-called Beijing Consensus."²⁰ Contrary to Western schemes of providing international aid, China's does not attach political strings, or invoke conditionality like the EU does towards third

16 门洪华 [Men H.], *中国软实力评估报告-(上)* ['Assessment report on China's soft power: part one'], "国际观察" ['International Watch'] 2007, No. 2, p. 15–26.

17 X. Li, V. Worm, *Building China's soft power...*, p. 77.

18 *Full text: Action plan...*

19 X. Li, V. Worm, *Building China's soft power...*, p. 78.

20 Yanzhong H., Ding S., *Dragon's underbelly: An analysis of China's soft power*, "East Asia" 2006, No. 23, issue 4, p. 29.

countries in receipt of development support. (5) International image. China's international image lags behind Western states in large part because of the nature of its political regime, but also due to the prevailing Western stereotypes of the country and policymakers' tendencies to neglect the importance of international image in the past, especially under Mao. "Made in China" low-quality products sold all across the world tend to spoil the country's international image. China has been seeking to reverse its soft power losses caused by negative perceptions abroad, for example by solving border disputes with most neighbours, except for India and Bhutan, hosting the Beijing Olympic Games and sending more students abroad.

Russia and soft power

After the implosion of the USSR, Russia emerged as the most significant successor state in terms of regional and global actorness. At the same time, the end of the Cold War implied that Russians were victims of the seismic change in the international order which, from a domestic perspective, ushered in a period of state failure, corruption, regional conflicts and ultimately, a demise in the image and weight of Russian power.²¹ Whilst the idea of soft power posited by Nye was conceived in the context of the perceived supremacy of the West and its role in bringing about the end of Cold War and the setting up a new order, Russia's conception of soft power is, according to existing scholarship, intimately linked to Russia's reactivated role towards its so-called near abroad and foreign policies for the Russian World. Sergunin and Karabeshkin point to a lack of a cogent and convincing Russian national idea in the 1990s.²² Consequently, it can be argued that Russia's development of soft power was a response to an internal dislocation of national identity, a perceived deteriorated global role, and a depletion of Russia's significance across the former Soviet space. By the 2000s, Russian soft power was arguably conceived as a means to counter influences coming from the US and Europe, which from the perspective of Russian elites, were supporting regional nationalisms and injuring Russia's interests in its immediate vicinity. This is interesting from this paper's point of view because it suggests that the promotion of Russian identity is a core strand of Russian public diplomacy and, in turn, part of its soft power strategy.

21 A. Sergunin, L. Karabeshkin, *Understanding Russia's soft power strategy*, "Politics" 2015, vol. 35, issue 3–4, p. 350.

22 *Ibidem*, p. 349.

In February 2013, the new ‘Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation’ underlined the need for international cooperation and increasing the position of Russia by activating public, digital, scientific, and cultural diplomacy. All of this was to contribute to the “objective perception of Russia in the world,” and to gain understanding and support for its policies.²³

Osipova suggests that Russia grabbed from the existing soft power vocabulary to suit its own preferences, “Russia had to reconceptualise and indigenise the concept, inserting ideas such as sovereignty, stability, civilisationalism, and multiculturalism into the language.”²⁴ In terms of culture and attractiveness, Russia wants to utilise the rich heritage of its past, emphasise its multicultural make-up, wield the potential of the Russian language as one of regional and global significance, and represent a moral pole of conservative and religious values.²⁵ This approach finds both resonance and resistance due to the years of coexistence within the Russian Empire and then the USSR which created a historical community and language ties across Central Asia.²⁶ Moreover, local languages are underdeveloped and consequently, Russian remains the highway to high culture, art, and science which helps the Russian Federation’s efforts at spreading and consolidating its culture, traditions, and values beyond its borders.

Education is an important soft power resource for Russia and is actively used in domestic, regional, and foreign policies.²⁷ According to Arefyev, Russian universities form transnational influence networks and may spread the same values as an information channel for Central Asian students.²⁸ According to UNESCO, over 243,752 foreign students studied in Russia, of which 69,895 were from Kazakhstan, 19,893 from Uzbekistan, 16,521 from Turkmenistan, 15,126 from Tajikistan, and 5,700 from Kyrgyzstan.²⁹

23 *Koncepcja polityki zagranicznej Federacji Rosyjskiej. Zatwierdzona przez Prezydenta Federacji Rosyjskiej V. Putina 12 lutego 2013 r.*, “Konsulat Generalny Rosji w Gdańsku” [online, accessed: 23 II 2020], available at: <https://gdansk.mid.ru/web/gdansk_pl/koncepcja-polityki-zagranicznej-federacji-rosyjskiej?fbclid=IwAR20tDlaFSfJ7S7_T0iD1ziAbcFXSN4jBUSuKqPg96Dcoi-xkYEUrLkV02w>.

24 Y. Osipova, “Russification” of “soft power”: Transformation of a concept, “Exchange. The Journal of Public Diplomacy” 2014, vol. 5, issue 1, p. 66.

25 Ibidem.

26 J. Sherr, *Hard diplomacy and soft coercion. Russia’s influence abroad*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C. 2013, p. 90.

27 A. Włodkowska, *Polityka Federacji Rosyjskiej na obszarze WNP*, Wydawnictwo „Adam Marszałek”, Toruń 2006, p. 249–250.

28 A. Aref’ev, *Skol’ko ludej govorât i budut govorit’ po-russki*, “Demoskop Weekly” 2006, No. 251–252.

29 *Global flow of tertiary-level students*, “UNESCO” [online, accessed: 1 IX 2019], available at: <<http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>>.

Russian soft power is also furthered by an active media strategy strongly linked to its foreign policy interests. Russian TV and radio stations, press, and internet portals are an important element in disseminating information in environments that mainly focus on Russian culture. Russian TV news programmes have a political dimension, and are completely dependent on the authorities, which allows for consistency in the interpretation of events.³⁰ The low quality of TV and radio shows in local languages across the former Soviet space means that entertainment shows in Russian remain in high demand.

Institution building follows the soft power logic that co-option and co-operation are ultimately more effective than coercion. Accordingly, in response to the disarray after the USSR, Russia tried to preserve its political and economic influence by institution building to (re)integrate the post-Soviet area in the form of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and later the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC).³¹

The question of Russian soft power is interesting and, like China, raises a host of issues to do with if and how it relates to prevailing Western understandings of soft power. As an authoritarian state with very limited democratic credentials, official Russian soft power will always have limited appeal to civil society, thus curtailing Russia's power of attraction. However, at the same time, due to the nature of existing power structures within some former Soviet states (especially in Central Asia), the efficacy and power of Russian language and identity means that hearts and minds are palpably open to Russia's soft power.³²

The European Union and soft power

On first inspection it is tempting to assume that the EU is a soft power *par excellence*: the EU is not a state, it does not have its own armed forces and therefore is not imbued with a capacity to rely on traditional hard power coercion in its external policies. As a deeply integrated body of 27 member states it has amassed a considerable role in international relations, arguably most

30 V. Zakem, P. Saunders, U. Hashimova, P.K. Hammerberg, *Mapping Russian media network. Media's role in Russian foreign policy and decision-making*, CNA, 2018, available at: <https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/DRM-2017-U-015367-3Rev.pdf> [accessed: 1 IX 2019]; R. Łoś, *Soft power Rosji*, "Przegląd Strategiczny" 2017, nr 10, p. 573.

31 B. Kainazarov, *The EU engagement in democracy promotion in post-Soviet Central Asia: The case study of the Kyrgyz Republic – prospects and challenges*, "Przegląd Polityczny" 2018, nr 3, p. 31–32.

32 C. Walker, S. Kalathil, J. Ludwig, *Forget hearts and minds*, "Foreign Policy" [online], 14 IX 2018 [accessed: 1 IX 2019], available at: <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/14/forget-hearts-and-minds-sharp-power/>>.

notably in the field of trade and by spreading its brand of integration via enlargement, neighbourhood policies and various forms of association and partnerships with third countries. Current research suggests that the EU has soft power in abundance, but also points to a more complex reality whereby member states are increasingly aware of the limits of pure soft power; the 2016 EU Global Strategy, for example, stated that soft power is not enough and that hard power is also a requisite.³³ Moreover, the ineffective nature of EU soft power towards Ukraine has prompted a palpable shift towards an approach that seeks resilience building, which privileges a more security and status quo approach from the side of the EU. As Tatiana Romanova and Elena Pavlova have posited, notions of civilian, normative and soft power as being at the core of the EU's foreign policy identity seem to be in flux, if not outrightly challenged by the emergence of a new resilience focused paradigm to EU foreign policy, which might suggest a less rigid adherence and reference to values and norms.³⁴ Following this logic, the ways in which the nature and role of soft power within the EU's foreign policies may shift and if so, will also be manifest in the EU's approach towards Central Asia. Rendering states, institutions and societies more resilient in Central Asia so that they can withstand and bounce back from trauma will perhaps mean that the EU adjusts its soft power objectives and strategies to serve a more pragmatic set of interests.

The EU's distinctive make-up and the fact that it is an International Organisation distinguishes it from China and Russia; not least in the sense that its foreign policies towards Central Asia coexist with the national bilateral policies of its individual member states. The EU is also characterised by multi-layer decision making and multiple agencies and bodies involved in its external policies – rendering policy implementation arguably more unwieldy and protracted, when compared to the Chinese and Russian contexts. Moreover, compared to the veteran nature of both China and Russia, the EU is a relative newcomer in the region and its strategies, therefore, rather nascent.

This point notwithstanding, four interrelated points about EU soft power can be posited. (1) Underlying the EU's supposed power of attraction and

33 *Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, [European Union], 2016, available at: <https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf> [accessed: 1 IX 2019].

34 E. Pavlova, T. Romanova, *Resilience in EU discourse: A new norm in relations with Russia?*, "Russia in Global Affairs" [online], 25 XII 2019 [accessed: 23 II 2020], available at: <<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Resilience-in-EU-Discourse-A-New-Norm-in-Relations-with-Russia-20310>>.

indeed its brand is its history and identity, which is tied to the post-Second World War era. The EU's power of attraction and the reasons why neighbouring states opt for membership or desire association, whilst having much to do with the prospect of economic gain and security, is also perceived as being about joining a successful and exclusive club of states that through integration and pooling of sovereignty have overcome a difficult history in favour of peace and common security. (2) The EU's resources in terms of its power are both material and ideational. Ideational in terms of being seen as an attractive peace project and promoter of milieu (rather than possession goals),³⁵ and material in terms of its resources as a large market and relatively high standards of living. (3) A further characteristic relates to the idea of the EU as a normative power – implying that behind the Union's external relations is an impulse to define what passes for normal in world politics.³⁶ In this vein, authors talk about the EU as a promoter of norms to do with peace, democracy, human rights, liberty, and the rule of law and the fact that the EU and its members tightly align their foreign policies with the goals and norms set by the UN. Equally, normative power Europe and related literature claims that the EU is a major agenda setter in establishing new international norms which are often diffused via soft power tools. (4) The EU's explicit method in its external relations is conditionality. Put simply, this is about setting conditions that it expects third countries to accept and implement if they want to enjoy the material benefits of cooperating with the EU. The EU's transformative power,³⁷ where the rigid give/take, stick/carrot levers of EU-style conditionality have brought about successive rounds of enlargement and a deepening of relations with eastern neighbours based around Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements in exchange for improving the rule of law, being prime examples.

Like Russia and China, the European Union has expanded its dealings in Central Asia in the sphere of education and science. Universities in our three Central Asian target states are part of Erasmus+ schemes and the 2019 revised Central Asia strategy places education and training as a high priority for additional funding and support for regional cooperation, academic regional mobility and curriculum development, which is explicitly tied to the goal

35 V. Birchfield, J. Krige, A.R. Young, *European integration as a peace project*, "The British Journal of Politics and International Relations" 2017, vol. 19, issue 1, p. 3–12.

36 I. Manners, *Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms?*, "Journal of Common Market Studies" 2002, vol. 40, No. 2.

37 H. Grabbe, *The EU's transformative power. Europeanization through conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2005.

of resilience building, economic prosperity in the region and tackling extremism. Also, like Russia and China, the EU uses cultural diplomacy, including the establishment of EU National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) clusters in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Central Asia provides an interesting canvas to consider the soft power strategies of these three external actors which, we posit, will increasingly come into conflict. Almost 30 years after regaining independence, Central Asian states continue to undergo political and economic transitions and, as such, are relatively susceptible to external influences and changing foreign vectors. It is in this context that each of our external powers have self-identified as soft powers, but crucially their strategies are defined and determined by mostly diverging underlying norms, assumptions and conceptions about international relations. Another crucial difference sees that, whilst the EU's soft power has hitherto been only loosely tied to geopolitical interests and has spoken more about nurturing democracy from afar, Chinese and Russian variants are far more closely linked with the pursuit of hardnosed interests and consolidation of their physical presence on the ground. The policies of both Russia and China have the potential to enjoy support, not least because they are arguably less complicated and demanding of governments in the region, since in general, Beijing and Moscow do not seek to bring about change. Moreover, ruling regimes in Central Asia benefit from maintaining the status quo and thus leaders will quite comfortably align with Moscow and/or Beijing. In the case of relations with the EU the matter is less simple, which is a reflection of the nature of the EU itself, its mode of conditionality and values-laden external projection, which means that Brussels has arguably higher expectations to do with the rule of law, political pluralism, human rights, and so on. Thus, for the governments of Central Asia and their state of development, the Russian-Chinese direction of cooperation often seems more accessible and easier to implement.

In lieu of a conclusion: nudging discussion on soft power along

The main aim of this paper was to shed critical light on the notion of soft power and to promote discussion as to how the concept might, or indeed should, be developed to take account of the changes that have taken place in international relations after 1989, and specifically developments that have seen the EU become more of a consequential foreign policy actor, China's rapid rise and mounting global relevance and the recalibration of Russia's foreign

policies and assertiveness, especially towards its near abroad. Crucially, within this context, strategies labelled “soft power” have been developed and implemented arguably in ways and by actors that do not necessarily tally with standard ways of thinking about what soft power invokes. What does this imply for the soft power research agenda?

First, it is clear that current notions of soft power are culturally bound and are tied to Western-centric views of the world lodged in the early post-Cold War era. Accordingly, if it is to remain useful, soft power research needs to take more detailed account of changes in international relations and to reflect on its prevailing Western notions of power and influence. Whereas in the 1990s US leadership remained largely unchallenged, US foreign policy failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, aimed at bringing about democracy, damaged the US’s international legitimacy and reputation and as a consequence the quality and perceived effectiveness of America’s soft power status and power of attraction became tarnished. Meanwhile, China, Russia, and the EU have become global poles of attraction and have developed their own soft power brands. Crucially, this has inescapable implications for soft power research. The EU has grown in significance from 12 members in 1990 to 28 in 2013 and in so doing has carved a distinct foreign policy role. Meanwhile, Russia attempts to secure its traditional spheres of influence emphasising Russian values, language and culture. Similarly, China’s rise, its self-identification as a soft power and the rolling out of cultural diplomacy projects to accompany the BRI, pose weighty conceptual and empirical questions about existing conceptions of soft power. In this regard, the conceptual refinement of soft power, we argue, needs to take on board the multiplicity of notions of soft power, and question Western centrism and crucially not take for granted that it is, or indeed should be, intimately linked to Western liberal ideals and the promotion of democracy. This is particularly important in Central Asia. Ethnic complexity and traditional hierarchies, as well as strong, often authoritarian, political leaderships, affect the perception of narratives of soft power. That is why the soft power strategies of Russia and China, which do not have the types of political strings attached to democracy, as the EU’s does, enjoy more support in this region.

A second point relates to Nye’s original formulation of the sources of a state’s attraction and soft power, which were seen as to do with its foreign policies, domestic values and policies and its culture. Our brief foray into Central Asia from the perspective the EU, China and Russia suggests that additional aspects could be added, such as the model of development and perceptions of international leadership. Such an expansion could, arguably, enable soft power research

to respond to the challenges brought about by the growth in the number of types of states identifying as soft powers. More specifically, a wider framework such as this could favour comparative studies of soft powers.

A third proposal to update soft power research is that more empirical studies need to be carried out across a wider selection of regions. Fourth, there is a need for a dynamic inside-outside perspective to be developed. We see that the reception and impact of soft power, and ultimately the responses to it, are strongly determined by domestic contexts and the internal power structures within the recipient state, thus research on soft power would benefit if greater attention was given to: (a) looking at the mechanisms of how and by whom soft power is generated and subsequently implemented, which implies looking at key domestic institutions, both public and private and the realm of civil society; (b) identifying the channels and forms through which soft power is transmitted, meaning the policy tools and instruments at official and unofficial levels; and (c) paying attention to how soft power is then received and responded to by domestic stakeholders in official as well as civil society domains, taking account of domestic power structures.

Fifth, soft power research should ask more probing questions about what states are using soft power for? Are they using soft power in offensive or defensive ways or, indeed, a combination of the two? How closely are their soft power strategies tied, either explicitly or implicitly, to their other traditional geopolitical foreign policy interests, such as trade, defence and energy? Furthermore, is the main aim of soft power instruments to prevent the soft power of others succeeding and prevailing?

The aim of this paper was to nudge or prompt discussion on the notion of soft power. We glanced at three Central Asian states alongside identifying the core ideas and some of the tools used by China, Russia and the EU towards the region. Our discussion affirms the importance of soft power, but at the same time clearly shows that the notion needs updating, both empirically and theoretically, if it is to remain relevant.

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Re-thinking soft power: China, Russia and the European Union in Central Asia

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