

A. Paizova , G. Dadabayeva* , JeongWong Park 

KIMEP University, Kazakhstan, Almaty,

*e-mail: dgulnara@kimep.kz

RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA: CONCEPTUALIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

This work is devoted to conceptualization of «soft power» concept in academic science, studying Russia as a particular case of a hard country with an alternative approach to soft power. The COVID outbreak provides another strong argument in favor of changing nature of power in international relations in the 21st century. By another words, the coronavirus revealed the main normative nature of the soft power paradigm, which works well enough in theory but is mostly unproven in the real world. Applying the theory of neoclassical realism to explain the logic of employing Russian soft power, this research is aimed to revealing the effectiveness of the Russian strategy in the Central Asian region, as well as the reasons and factors that determine the advantages of Russian soft power in such weak and at the same time authoritarian countries as Central Asian, where leaders, in their turns, show different external orientation toward integrational process led by Kremlin. Therefore, personal transnational or «Trans imperial» communications serve as the main transmission mechanism of Moscow.

Key words: «soft power», «Russian soft power», neoclassical realism, Central Asia.

А. Паизова, Г.Р. Дадабаева*, Д.В. Парк

КИМЭП университеті, Қазақстан, Алматы қ.

*e-mail: dgulnara@kimep.kz

Орталық Азиядағы Ресейдің жұмсақ күші: концепциялары мен іске асыруы

Бұл мақала Ресейді елдің жеке феномені ретінде зерттейтін, «қатаң күшті» қолданумен сипатталатын академиялық ғылымда «жұмсақ күш» терминін тұжырымдамалауға арналған. Мемлекеттердің бәсекелестігі ынтымақтастық идеясынан басым болатын әлемде «жұмсақ күш» туралы дәстүрлі түсінік ысырылып кетеді де, ал икемділік пен өзгеретін жағдайларға бейімделу осы саясаттың артықшылығы болып табылады. COVID эпидемиясы 21 ғасырдағы халықаралық қатынастар жүйесінің өзгеретін сипаты туралы тезистің пайдасына тағы бір дәлел болды. Басқаша айтқанда, коронавирустың айналасындағы жағдай теорияда жұмыс істейтін, бірақ нақты әлемде тиімсіз «жұмсақ күш» парадигмасының нормативті сипатын айшықтап берді. Ресейлік «жұмсақ күш» ұғымы авторлар «неоклассикалық реализм» теориясының призмасы арқылы көрсетуге тырысқан балама тәсілді білдіреді. «Жұмсақ күшті» қолданудың логикасын зерттей отырып, авторлар Орталық Азия аймағының салыстырмалы әлсіз елдеріндегі артықшылықтарымен қатар ресейлік «жұмсақ күштің» тиімділік көздерін көрсетуге тырысты. Дәл осы жағдайлар көшбасшыларды геосаяси артықшылығы алуан түрлі елдерде оны қолданудың тиімділігін түсіндіреді. Осылайша, жеке трансұлттық немесе «транс империялық» қатынастар осы саясатты жүзеге асырудың негізгі тетігі болып табылады.

Түйін сөздер: «жұмсақ күш», «ресейлік жұмсақ күш», неоклассикалық реализм, Орталық Азия.

А. Паизова, Г.Р. Дадабаева*, Д.В. Парк

Университет КИМЭП, Қазақстан, г. Алматы,

*e-mail: dgulnara@kimep.kz

Мягкая сила России в Центральной Азии: концепции и реализация

Данная статья посвящена концептуализации термина «мягкой силы» в академической науке, которая изучает Россию как отдельный феномен страны, больше характеризующейся применением «жесткой силы». В мире, где конкуренция государств преобладает над идеей сотрудничества, традиционное понимание «мягкой силы» уходит на периферию, и преимуществом этой политики становится гибкость и приспособляемость к изменяющимся условиям. Эпидемия COVID послужила источником другого аргумента в пользу тезиса о меняющемся характере системы международных отношений в 21 веке. Другими словами, ситуация вокруг коронавируса высветила нормативный характер парадигмы «мягкой силы», которая работает в теории, но неэффективна в реальном мире. Российская концепция «мягкой силы» представляет

собой альтернативный подход, который авторы попытались показать через призму теории «неоклассического реализма». Исследуя логику применения «мягкой силы», авторы попытались показать источники эффективности российской «мягкой силы», наряду с ее преимуществами в относительно слабых странах региона Центральной Азии. Именно этими обстоятельствами объясняется эффективность ее применения в странах, где лидеры демонстрируют разнообразие геополитических предпочтений. Таким образом, персональные транснациональные или «транс имперские» взаимосвязи служат основным механизмом для реализации этой политики.

Ключевые слова: «мягкая сила», «российская мягкая сила», неоклассический реализм, Центральная Азия.

Introduction

Conventionally, soft power is the ability to achieve the desired results in international arena by using attraction and influence rather than coercion and force (Nye, 2013). However, in contemporary world, political power is not static, it changes, evolves, grows, expands or decreases.

Today the irrelevance of «soft power» stems not from its theoretical dimension, but from the changing global landscape. The 21st century, as a whole, is characterized by growing competition between such giants as China, India and the United States, the EU. In order to fight against the Great Powers, nations create short-term strategic alliances that collectively negotiate against the giants or force them to counteract the growing influence of the latter. These alliances are based on shared interests, not shared values. In a world where competition rather than cooperation is rampant, we see that the traditional practice of «soft power» receding into the background, and the advantage of strategic alliances is becoming consisted in their flexibility. Unlike the Cold War era, countries are now no longer limited to one giant. On the contrary, countries cooperate with different giants for different purposes. National power stems from a country's status as an ideal member of a strategic alliance. This is not the era of unipolar or bipolar World order, but the age of giants has arrived. In this era, the authorities of different states take different actions.

The COVID outbreak provides another strong argument in favor of changing nature of power in international relations in the 21st century. During the outbreak, the practice has clearly showed that any country that would develop a well-tested and reliable vaccine will be more than welcomed as heroes, no matter it is North Korea, Iran, or Pakistan. In fact, Western countries including Sweden, United Kingdom, France, and Germany, they would have favored this vaccine, ignoring Pakistan's treatment of dissidents, its civil rights abuses, and its acts of sheltering terrorists. This is also reflected in the case of China, because Chinese doctors were very

welcomed by Italy when they landed to help fight against COVID. At the time, no one dared to mention China's large-scale surveillance program, the imprisonment of dissidents, or about reported Muslim concentration camps.

By another words, the coronavirus revealed the main normative nature of the soft power paradigm, which works well enough in theory but is mostly unproven in the real world. The coronavirus also shows that countries will ultimately be motivated by their own interests and will cooperate with other countries based on utility and ability to help them solve problems.

In this article, we argue that the world is in the midst of deep structural change, and that this change requires a re-examination of the concept of soft power. We also argue that third countries will form coalitions with major powers and will be oriented towards them in their external orientation based on certain interests, not because of attractive political image of state.

Materials and methods

The concept of «soft power» formulated by political scientist J. Nye, opened a new page in theoretical and practical studies of the phenomenon «power» in international relations. By the figurative expression of J. Mattern (2005), the concept of «soft power» has mastered the imagination of both scientists and politicians all over the world.

Russia's soft power concept is a relatively new theme in the academic literature and remains noticeably under-researched. The studies in this field can be contingently divided by several groups.

The first group is devoted to the study of Russian soft power through the prism of historical factors that formed the basis for the formation of modern Russian propaganda (Tsygankov, 2013a and 2013b).

Second, there are publications-focusing more on policy than academic direction. They mainly pointed out the rise of Russia's soft power strategy and tried to describe its main strategy Features that do not include deeper analysis '(Ćwiek-Karpowicz, 2012; Sergunin, 2014).

And the last one, there are scholars who wanted to analyze the theoretical framework of soft power, namely, to what extent does the Russian understanding correspond or deviate with the concept offered by Joseph Nye (Lukyanov, 2009; Nye, 2013; Troitski, 2011). This group may also be supplemented with such equally well-known names as Kisileva (2015), Morozov (2015), Zahran G. and Ramos L (2010). In particular, this category of the researchers having different approaches and using various methods made a great contribution on the addressing problems around the concept. Lebedeva (2017) reiterates this point stating that, «fundamental difference of Nye's «soft power» concept is in attractiveness instead of pressure and manipulation, in voluntary and informed choice as opposed to coercion. However, this is a certain convention and an attempt to «semantic hide and seek» – undoubtedly, in «soft power» propaganda can also take place». In response to the critiques of Ramos and Zahran, Nye (2010: 217), provides some contradictory points by stating that «Even if Zahran and Ramos are correct that under hegemony, coercion and consent are complementary, that is not the same as saying that soft power is always rooted in hard power. Sometimes it is and sometimes it is not.» Continuing this debate, we want to emphasize Van Herpen's (2015) work, in particular, his comprehensive explanatory book «Putin's Propaganda machine», where he makes one important point that this work also intend to proof: «the Kremlin gradually transformed its «soft power» into a «velvety hard power Gloves» to launch a truly radical information war against the West, where Central Asia also plays a significant role».

One more important aspect of controversial issue, which has to be mentioned is how soft power is implemented: passively or actively? To a large extent, Nye (2003) regards hard power as active and soft power as passive source of how for instance, state «B» can act in a favor for state «A. However, this is not always so in practice. Therefore, all this above mentioned can be pointed that soft power has a great ability to affect the external orientation of small states that might, for instance, find political arrangements or economic capacities of certain state quite successful and attractive to follow with its models as well as the rules of policy, where internal mechanisms, such as elites' decision and actions also matter.

In terms of application of Russian Soft power on Central Asian states, there are negligible number of works, which scarcely provide with explanation and justification regarding the effectiveness of such policy. Most of the works, like Gusarova's (2017),

Omelicheva (2018), Ospanova (2018), Oztertem (2009), Muratalieva (2014), Saginday (2017), Bogdanova (2016) focused on the evaluation of the Russian institutes and instruments called upon create the attractive image of the state. The core reason of their critique lies on absence of direct work with the youth and presence of Soviet model of soft power, which still defines the Russian compatriots as a main source of attaining desired results in the targeting country (the sort of Russian 5th column). Their works have basically concentrated on critical judgement of the Russian soft power strategy in the region and emphasized some of the key issue that have to be fixed for effectiveness of measures. Unfortunately, domestic researchers could not dare to elaborate comprehensive theoretical work on the issues of Russian soft power in Central Asia in terms of geopolitical motives. Interestingly, there are numerous of domestic works on China-Russian rivalries over the region including cultural influence, but almost no works dedicated to Russia-West ideological confrontation. But amidst this scarcity of literature in this field, nevertheless, one thesis work is worth to be noted- «*Is Soft Balancing the Driving Force Behind Sino-Russian Cooperation in Central Asia?*» by Magnus Jerneck, where researcher using neoclassical realism approach for explaining Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia tries to test if soft balancing applicable to the case of China and Russia to resist USA's influence in the region.

Problem statement

It has to be noted, that in comparison to other major players such as the European Union or the United States, Russia came late to the soft power games in the post-Soviet region, but this did not stop Russia from attempt to expand its soft power and use it successfully in order to bring countries closer. Russia defines the Central Asian region as falling within its traditional area of influence, however, despite of efforts at stating and defining a strategic agenda toward the area through soft means – as for these states, they, perhaps, have their own particular approaches toward Russia: more engagement, in the case of Kazakhstan; dependency, such as Tajikistan; balancing, for Uzbekistan; bandwagoning in the case of Kyrgyzstan; and selective engagement in the case of Turkmenistan (Frier, 2009).

Thus, using the theory of neoclassical realism in explaining the Russian perception and application of soft power (Ripsman et al, 2009), this work is aimed to uncover what a significant factor influences to the success and limits of Russian soft power on external

alignment strategy of states in the Central Asian region. Thus, the main research question of this paper: What the major factor influences on Russian success and limits of soft power in Central Asia in terms of affecting on their external orientations?

This question then falls into two sub-questions:

How is the concept of soft power re-conceptualized through neoclassical realism theory?

How and why does Russia utilize soft power over the contested region?

By doing reconceptualization of Russian soft power using neoclassical realism approach, this research work aims to provide more proper understanding of how soft power concept was transformed to customize the Russian setting and to contribute to a general discussion on how hard states adopt and adjust soft power. Thus, the significance of our research can be explained by, that studying Russia as a particular case of a country with an alternative approach to soft power will contribute to an overall understanding of what 'soft' means in various contexts and extend academic knowledge on the soft power concept. Moreover, the significance also increases when it comes to practical application of the mentioned theoretical approach.

It is important to note that this work departs from traditional understanding of soft power, alignment theories as well as omnibalancing theories in four distinct ways.

First, it demonstrates that the boundaries between soft power and hard power is imperceptibly blurred and that soft power is often projected in active ways. There is no universal means of projecting soft power, and that is why states are free to utilize appropriate tools in order to get the desired results from another states.

Second, instead of focusing on traditional soft power studies, which are mainly concentrated on people's perception, their attitude toward state, conversely, this work is aimed to analyze the foreign policy of states themselves: why do CA states act in certain ways, why do they integrate or disintegrate with a Russia, why do one state show more balancing strategy, while another states – bandwagoning policy. Therefore, the scope of the research is wider.

Third, it shows that CA leaders are the main actors and focus on their specific motivations. The traditional alliance theory assumes that the state is a unified actor, and they act in a rational way based on national interests rather than personal interests. It is misleading to think that CA leaders are mainly motivated by the national interest or the most favorable motives for the country, because during the transition period, they tend to prioritize their personal interests

and often seek to ensure their political positions at all costs. To this end, most of the CA countries have established powerful administrative departments to legitimize and institutionalize the power of their leaders. In short, many theoretical assumptions put forward by realists provide particularly poor guidance in the post-Soviet era, which requires a more «leader-centric» analysis.

Fourth, Steven David's omnibalancing theory focuses specifically on leaders and their internal threats to their personal survival. From David's point of view, the most effective unified determinant is the rational calculation of leaders, that is, which external powers are most likely to keep them in power. However, the Central Asian practice shows that the whole picture does not appear in that way only, since there are profound exceptions in the case of Turkmenistan, where leader decided to implement neutrality policy in foreign policy, in spite of the «danger of survival», in the case of Kazakhstan is also seems hard to imagine that leader's primary motivation in alignment strategy with Moscow can be only explained through the threat from losing power of Nazarbayev or Tokayev. Apparently, there has to be more than one reason that entails leaders to act in certain ways in International arena, than the theory of Omnibalancing suggests.

Results and discussion

The core theoretical argument of this paper is based on assumption that if great powers compete for influence over region with other «hard powers», they use soft power as a means of expanding or sustaining their spheres of influence and for these aims, they might utilize various soft power tools. Learning on *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy* (2009), edited by Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman and Jeffrey Taliaferro, no matter whether it is deception or truth, seduction or manipulation, foreign aid or propaganda, all types of policies directed to change attitude of states and opinion of foreign societies can be considered as soft power building. As, for instance, militarily strong states can use various types of military power (navy, air force, nuclear weapons, etc.) to force the targeted object to do what they wanted of them, the states may also enjoy wide variety of soft power instruments to achieve desired results.

However, this paper underscores the main point that the success of soft power making by the great powers depends primarily on the internal dynamics of the target states. It is quite clear that the most influential internal factor in authoritarian states al-

ways stays leading elites, which can control, for instance, the flow of propaganda, limit the activities and presence of foreign NGOs and etc. and, thereby it can be stated that all political power in any decisions regarding foreign affairs are owned by Presidents and their close circles. Therefore, if the weak state with authoritarian regime has close inter-elite ties or intensive bilateral relations with great power in a certain level (primarily in order to gain certain benefits or in order to stay in power), then the exerted soft power will be effective enough and the state will bandwagon to Great power. Conversely, if such relation does not exist, then in such states great power may not find a favorable environment in which to trigger soft power and influence the external orientation there. However, transgovernmental and transnational ties are not the sole factors that play important role in shaping the foreign policy of Central Asian states, but rather they serve as the core backbone of the relationship between Russia and the former states.

Case Selection

This article studies the reason behind the formation of dissimilar external orientation of Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) with the focus on Kazakhstan despite their location in the similar geo-strategic environment. In overall, states are holding multivectoral foreign policy, which makes the undivided foreign policy of specific great power almost impossible. This research work states that the existing theories of political realism do not provide enough convincing approach to explain the divergences in the foreign policy strategies of the regional states. Moreover, they are not able to explicate the policies of conflicting great powers to affect the foreign policy choices of these states. Therefore, the major part of this paper will be devoted to exploration of the presented cases in the framework of the theoretical assumption, which have already been explained. These five states- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan are going to be analysed in order to test the hypothesis regarding the foreign policies of weak states which are found in between the great power rivalries. The empirical analysis of the work is particularly focused on the timeframe from 2001 till the present date. This period has been chosen due to the events of September 11, when Central Asia became to the forefront of U.S. attention. Consequently, American presence in the region made Russia to resort counteractive position so that the rivalries

between Russia and the Western powers evolved at some point during this period. Moscow accusation of the US and NATO of «abusing hospitality» in Central Asia and compelling Kyrgyzstan to terminate the lease agreement by the Americans for the base / transit center in Manas in 2009 (see <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20130508/181039938-print/Putin-Criticizes-ISAF-for-Afghan-Drug-Threat-Inaction.html>) serves as an example of geopolitical confrontation of two sides over the region. It has to be noted, that this rivalry remained limited to non-military means of achieving the desired results.

Russian interests in the region

Moscow's interests in Central Asia alongside with economic benefits, has primarily directed to combat Islamic terrorism and radicalism, and to promote stability in the region.. Security related drivers, which explain Russian presence in Central Asia can be seen in coordinated states' efforts in the fight against terrorism. For example, the Russian leadership initiated the CIS Anti-Terrorist Center (ATC), which was established in Moscow in 2000, a structural subdivision of which was opened in Kyrgyzstan. The intensified military and security cooperation of Russia with the former Soviet Union republics was institutionalized in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which permanent military base was established in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, in 2002. The base hosts part of the Collective Rapid Deployment force (CRDF) designed to support «collective security» of the region. Another CRDF division is staged at the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan. This is Russia's largest military facility abroad with the estimated 7,500 military personnel in 2016 (Laruelle, 2008). In the same time, President Putin invested considerable time and effort to reenergize another security grouping, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which has directed to fight against «three evils» of terrorism, Islamism, and separatism and whose members became Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In addition, the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) was established in Tashkent in 2004. Conjoint antiterrorist operations, military exercises, and security drills held under the auspices of the SCO and CSTO have become a regular feature of Russia-Central Asia security cooperation. (Omelicheva, 2011).

On the other hand, According to Omelicheva (2018) and Lo (2015), Russia has ignored the Central Asian states' internal dynamics conducive to political instability, terrorism, and organized crime.

The Kremlin-led regional security projects have had a negligible impact on the root causes of security problems that continue taking place in these states. This picture even might lead us to the thoughts that she does not want to stabilize the situation in the region, but wants to maintain a «controllable instability» in the region. One proof of this argument is that Russia avoided intervention Kyrgyzstan-Uzbek clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan during clashes June 2010 (although the interim Kyrgyz government at the time had requested such intervention) (Górecki, 2014). Furthermore, a number of ad hoc events in the region showed little results to creating a more favorable regional environment. Even CSTO does not become the security provider in the region. Consequently, Moscow's initial security related drives comes to inconsistency with the fact that, it turned out that Russian has transformed from a transit territory into a main point of supply for Afghan heroin (see <http://en.itar-tass.com/russia/755981>). Today, according to moderate estimates, the number of drug users in Russia is 1.7 million, and there has been a dramatically increase in drug-related diseases such as AIDS / HIV (Nechepurenko, 2013). Moreover, another argument in favor of this claim is the fact that the Kremlin was the main initiator of the communique adopted in the 2005 SCO Summit in Astana, calling for the closure of US bases in Central Asia. This reversal showed that the balance between security and geopolitics is due not only to regional circumstances, but also to the state of relations between Russia and the United States in a broader international context. For instance, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticized the «artificial deadlines» (premature) for the withdrawal of NATO forces. (see <http://en.afghanistan.ru/doc/353.html>) At the same time, Moscow accused the US and NATO of «abusing hospitality» in Central Asia and forced Kyrgyzstan to terminate the lease agreement by the Americans for the base / transit center in Manas. (see <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20130508/181039938-print/Putin-Criticizes-ISAF-for-Afghan-Drug-Threat-Action.html>). In addition, he accused Washington of sharply increasing production of Afghan opium and heroin and increasing the flow of drugs to Russia, but blocked US proposals for developing a network of drug control centers in the Central Asian republics. Therefore, despite the loud statements against the threat of «triple evil» (terrorism, separatism and extremism), the penetration of Western liberal ideas in reality causes Moscow more concern, as evidenced by Russia's attempts at the meeting of the SCO leaders to stimulate «international information security» (SCO Summit Declaration).

Accordingly, it can be stated that Russia's engagement in Central Asia has been driven by geopolitical motives superseding its immediate concerns with the regional security threats. Russia has sought regional domination under the banner of counterterrorist policy for countering the US hegemony and NATO's expansionism. In the 1990s, Russia's own economic, political, and military problems stymied the realization of Moscow's ambitions. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the global economic situation was favorable to the realization of Russia's geopolitical objectives. Russia's economic upturn coincided with Vladimir Putin's rise to power. The restoration of Russia's influence in international affairs was declared the chief priority for the Putin administration. Therefore, Central Asian region as a major Russian sphere of influence cannot be understood outside of the context of Russia-US relations.

The tasks of Russian politics in Central Asia are primarily related to the factors of importance of the region. They also reflect the challenges and requirements that Moscow faces in realizing its agenda. In practice, this means that Moscow has no serious intention to revive the Soviet Union. Despite the public expression of regret over the collapse of the USSR, V. Putin is pragmatic enough to realize the impracticability of the project for its restoration. Instead, Moscow is striving for leading influence, for the type of relationship similar between the Chinese empire and dependent states on its periphery. Russia seeks to ensure that the adoption of political decisions by Central Asian states were carried out within certain parameters and in accordance with certain «Rules», which follow interests of Russia, especially in the field of foreign and security policy. Accordingly, this means that the Central Asian Republic cannot be equal to foreign powers or alliances—mainly the United States and NATO, nor can it be equal to the China, European Union, Turkey, and Iran. Ideally, Moscow wants them to join various Russian-led projects, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In this manner, Moscow seeks to prevent the participation of external forces in regional affairs or, at least, control them. Understanding the impossibility of eliminating completely such interactions, the Kremlin believes that it has at least the ability and the right to influence them. In practice, this is expressed in two forms: firstly, stimulating foreign partners to cooperate more in the economy than in the security sphere, and secondly, the preference of China and other non-Western countries to European and American. Russia's favor with China is explained by the fact that the Chinese

avoid strategic ambitions, limit their participation in security projects in Central Asia and support Russia's role as a regional leader (Lo, 2015).

The implementation of Russian anti-western soft power in Central Asia: new approach and new tools

Similar to the United States, Russia has been developing its own normative vision and trying to promote it abroad. She reliably advances her dreams in discussions like United Nations and in regional organisations as the Shanghai cooperation organisation. She has taken an even a more assertive strategy since the U.S. presence in the Central Asia after the 9-11 attacks and the subsequent impact of Western NGOs. In light of expanded Western openness around there, Russia has prepared its own youth organizations, limited the exercises of western NGOs in state and cautioned the United States against interference with Russia's domestic affairs. Russia's soft power strategy was enunciated in a Foreign Ministry report called «A Review of the Russian Federation's Foreign Policy.» Report, that has commissioned by the Kremlin and delivered 27 March, 2007, pushed for a «more impartial dissemination of assets for impact and economic growth» and guarded the thought of aggregate administration and multilateral diplomacy as an option in contrast to unilateralism and hegemony in worldwide relations. Russia, in fact has played a more prominent part in fostering its own form of democracy as well. The Kremlin's previous driving ideologist, Vladislav Surkov, characterized sovereign democracy as follow «the need to defend an intellectually determined path to political development and to protect economic prosperity, individual freedom, and social justice from potential threats ... [such as] 'international terrorism, military conflict, lack of economic competitiveness, and soft takeovers by «orange technologies» in a time of decreased national immunity to foreign influence.» (Tsygankov, 2005) Russian growing soft power is considered an indispensable national security interest and one that is important to counterbalance the United States' domineering aspirations. «We see the presence of an amazing military alliance on our boundaries ... as an immediate danger to the security of our country,» Putin said of the Western advancement of «Color Revolutions» after a 2008 NATO summit (Kuzmin, 2008).

The illiberal paradigm of democracy is pulling and attracting smaller states to the Moscow's side. For example, «the Central Asian states, finding the American liberal democracy a price too high, fol-

lowed the Russian model ... in which states, through the vote of their people, can choose the social system they feel best for them. Unlike liberal democracies, with institutions committed to upholding liberties through a system of checks and balances, the Russian model is conceived of a strong elected executive who coordinates institutions of national power.» (Hiro, 2010) This attractive allure isn't restricted to the Central Asian states from the SCO, yet in addition is acquiring footing in different states of the world, where democracy is tertiary concern to social equity, economic security and stability. Thusly, Russia mirrors the language of democracy utilized in the West while refracting its utilization for her own interests. Such a system changes the narrative on her favor, despite the fact that she receives the language of the standard, she encodes it with different meaning.

In high governmental level, Russian soft power impact is expressed in copycats of legislatives. For example, Russia's normative agenda has also influenced Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary discussions on their own versions of Russia's anti-gay and anti-NGO laws. Both governments submitted anti-gay bills; Kazakhstan's did not pass, Kyrgyzstan's did. Kazakhstan did pass a foreign agent law and laws restricting NGO activities and unsanctioned protests. Kyrgyzstan's Parliament refused legislation against NGOs as foreign agents or unsanctioned protests, but validated a law defending the religious feelings of believers against any kind of «offense» or «blasphemy». All these legislative efforts are explicitly based on Russian laws. The Kyrgyz homosexual propaganda bill was widely seen as an effort to gain support among the conservative electorate. In Kazakhstan, even if the bill did not pass, it appears that the interparty links between Nur Otan and United Russia inspired the copycat mechanism; a Kazakh MP noted «the geostrategic position of Kazakhstan» among other moral and cultural justifications for the nature of the bill and its timing. (Laruelle, 2017)

To sum up, it can be concluded that this strategy of anti-westernism enjoys with quite popularity in the region and serves a kind of legitimizing justifications for the leaders of authoritarian states, who constantly striving for consolidation of their power.

Concerning the unique instruments of soft power that Kremlin use in region in order to affect the integrational process there, we can mention economic tools, military diplomacy, cultural mechanisms, as well as elites' ties.

Economic tools. Although the Ukrainian crisis has shown that the Kremlin continues to trust primarily military force, it usually proceeds from the principle

that co-optation is more effective than coercion, and that is why resorts to several interconnected strategies: maintaining interconnectedness that has remained from Soviet times (and earlier) in response to globalization promoted by the West and external competition – significant technical assistance; the employment of millions of labor migrants whose remittances are essential for the survival of some regional economies (in particular, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan); strengthening ties between the interests of business elites.

Moscow continues to have big hopes for *military diplomacy*. This is most evident in the presence of a significant Russian military contingent in Tajikistan and the existence of large Russian military bases such as Kant in Kyrgyzstan and Aini in Tajikistan. The objectives of this presence are radically different from those that prompted Russia to use troops and bases in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova to exert pressure on Kiev, Tbilisi and Chisinau, respectively. In Central Asia, the presence of Russian troops is not aimed at undermining, but on the contrary, at supporting existing regimes and demonstrating Russia's need for this process. Military assistance programs have a similar function and serve to strengthen inter-departmental ties.

Cultural diplomacy remains an important means of promoting Russian interests. Emphasizing «civilizational unity» and shared values is in line with the more global goal of Russia-led Eurasia. Through the communication of mass culture (television shows) and news broadcasts to a wide regional audience, the Kremlin expects, in essence, to create The Moscow Consensus is similar in its effect to the famous (albeit fictitious) Beijing Consensus. The main idea of the Kremlin is that Russian culture and values are much better suited to Central Asia than the destructive ideas of the West.

The main tool of influence

While at present Russia remains the de facto leader of the region, in the same time many scholars emphasized that, similarly to the EU, Russia's efforts have not been successful in the whole region. While some countries have been bandwagoning with Russia, others have followed individual paths and rejected closer ties. Even in the most Russophile CA states, the attitude towards Russia is sometimes referred to «forced interdependence» or «let the sleeping dog where it is». In addition, and perhaps more importantly, Moscow's idea and use of soft power portray CA as a fundamental part of the 'Russian world'. And while most of CA states welcome

cooperation with Moscow, as noted by Valenza and Boers (2018), their elites have been able «to play cats and mouse» and to make balancing exercises, as in the case of Kyrgyzstan, which willingly accepts financial help from both Russia and the EU. Thus, Central Asian region, which are considered as the most influenced region in terms of soft power, nevertheless, also have their own particular approaches toward Russia.

As it was indicated in previous paragraphs, Russia's basic and most important goal in the CA region is to maintain its influence (in the best case to expand its influence) and limit the influence of other actors so that Russia has a decisive say on the most important issues in the region, and this privilege is not questioned by any major players. For these purposes, Moscow realizes that the challenges posed by the turbulent regional (and international) environment require Russia to adopt a multi-pronged approach to realize its interests. This means using various forms of «soft» power and more traditional means of political and military influence, turning to multilateral mechanisms to supplement bilateral relations, and striving for geopolitical balance on a regional and global scale. Therefore, this paper states that the main tool used by the Kremlin is the promotion of inter-elite ties, especially between President Putin and the heads of Central Asian states. These ties are mainly characterized by weak institutions and highly personalized decision-making methods.

Ultimately, this tendency leads to the fact that almost all integration and disintegration processes of Russia and the Central Asian nations depend not just on the target political establishments and economic conditions, yet in addition on the subjective factors of the ruling elites, who straightforwardly have state power. The main force of integration is the impression of the decision by elites in the political will and relating activities of the conscious part of society in every nation – its political elites' interests (Ki, 2005).

It can be stated, that Integration is done by the top (elites), for example those circles that in some way or another partake in the making political choices at the state level. The adjustment of the whole system relies upon their capacity within the system to focus, control and utilize the means for power. Russia's strategy towards the CIS states, just as the approach with Central Asian nations is ended up being relied upon the subjective perspectives on the head of state himself and his inward circle. For instance, the Russian researcher V. Razmerov asserted that the foreign policy of the USSR was not done in the Foreign Ministry, but in the Old Square, where

the Central Committee of the CPSU was found. The location of the advancement of Russian foreign policy is something similar, since now-the administration of the President of the Russian Federation is situated there. Some little group of People, who are close to the President is attempting to carry out the capacities acted in different nations by various and assorted state establishments.

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the centrifugal powers inside the CIS were additionally dictated by absolutely subjective factors, which are chiefly identified with the idea of the nature of national elites, the arrangement of political powers, movements and parties. Official Presidential administrations in these nations now and then – the nearest family members (relatives) of high-ranking representatives remaining behind them. They required financial resources to save power, and in such amounts that the state financial budgets couldn't give. In such manner, the analysis of the decision elites of Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan is a significant factor in understanding integration and disintegration of these countries.

The main point here that since from the soviet period, nothing changed significantly. It is becoming more evident that today, private ties between leaders of the CIS countries may still facilitate integration within the CIS. We cannot deny the fact that the close personal contacts between President Boris Yeltsin and President Nazarbayev played an important role in the integration of Russia and Kazakhstan. The connection between Nazarbayev and Kyrgyzstan's President Askar Akayev was equally important for promoting Kyrgyzstan's participation in the «Four Nations Alliance». It should be clearly emphasized that so far, most issues between the member states of the Central Asian region and the Russia itself have been decided at the level of national leaders. For most of the time since independence, the Central Asian countries have been ruled by the presidents of former communist leaders. It should be pointed out, that the current leaders were born and raised between the 1950s and 1970s, were educated in Russian, and had close ties with Russia (economics, culture, interpersonal relations, etc.), which affected their political preferences (Lukyanov, 2009). This is Russia's most important tool.

The case of Kazakhstan

It can be outlined that in the example of Kazakhstan we could clearly see that in particular bilateral relation of the given states as well as the close inter-elite ties play the main decisive role in alignment

strategy of Kazakhstan and determine the foreign policy of Kazakhstan toward Russia.

Regarding the Russian-Kazakh relations, we would roughly divide them into two main stages, the stage of intensive bilateral, inter-elite relations and the second stage of deterioration of close relations, which occurred after 2015, which I would call as «uneasy alliance».

At the beginning of the Putin era, Kazakhstan's relationship with Russia was very strong, although Kazakhstan was also committed to diversifying and modernizing the economy, which would naturally separate it from the Kremlin. However, President Nursultan Nazarbayev highly supports close ties with Russia, and was the first institution to call for the establishment of a regional economic institution, which will eventually pass the Eurasian Economic Community and subsequent EAEU implementation. During Putin's era, Kazakhstan has become the country with the highest degree of integration between Central Asian countries and the world economy (Hess, 2020). It was exactly the President of Kazakhstan N. A. Nazarbayev who was the first to propose the idea of creating a new integration association – the Eurasian economic Union-in his famous speech at Moscow state University in 1994. Subsequently, he repeatedly returned to it both at home and internationally (Zabortseva, 2016).

The number of annual meetings between Nazarbayev and the Russian president has increased from an average of five to at least ten per year. The progress in bilateral diplomacy has made considerable progress at the beginning of the period, which encouraged more areas. The consolidation of diplomatic relations significantly continued to the military/security relations between the two and direct bilateral cooperation. During this period, Russia was clearly still Kazakhstan's main military ally, committed to strengthening cooperation in the technical and military fields. The mutual members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization have consolidated its official goal of regional security and proved its importance to bilateral cooperation (Embassy of the Russian Federation to the Republic of Kazakhstan).

The next stage of Russian-Kazakh relations started with Putin's return to the presidential palace in 2012, and after the Euro-Meydan protests in 2013, when Russia's foreign policy has become increasingly unpredictable and more aggressive.

Kazakhstan once benefited from Russia's attention and cooperation, and now it has experienced Russia's efforts to undermine Kazakhstan's interests to ensure loyalty.

It can be stated that the deterioration of relations started after 2014, when the Russian closest ally in the fact of Kazakhstan refused to take her side. As Kazakhstan fully and truly understood that due to the Ukraine crisis, Eurasia is caught in the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West, the official statement of ministry was the following: «Kazakhstan's official position on the Ukrainian crisis is open, clear, simple, and based on basic International Law: Ukraine must maintain a stable and independent country with absolute territorial integrity»(see <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-ukraine-crisis-cements-astana-in-russias-orbit>)

The former President Nursultan Nazarbayev said in an interview that he believes that the entire Ukraine crisis stems from the fact that since independence, Ukraine has failed to formulate relevant economic policies to achieve sustainable growth in the country. As a result, it suffered from weak welfare plans, low living standards, and high unemployment rates. The president refuted any so-called conflicts of interest, calling himself an «objective manager. He has no position and remains neutral and can provide constructive solutions.» Further he pointed out that independent Kazakhstan has never recognized any disputed territories, such as Crimea and Abkhazia, and suspects that if Ukraine is indeed further dismembered and new entities appear on the map, Kazakhstan will adopt exactly the same policy (see <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-ukraine-crisis-cements-astana-in-russias-orbit>).

Even in the military and security fields, tensions continued to increase, which has found the strongest foundation in the history of bilateral relations between the two countries. Officially, the relationship between the two countries remained strong, and the two states were still participating in cooperative military operations. However, by 2015, political tensions had penetrated into military affairs. In October, Russia announced the need to deploy a CIS border force in Central Asia to deal with potential spillover effects from Afghanistan. Although it was formally established for regional security, the force also allowed Russia to increase the number of its troops and equipment in Afghanistan (Nurgaliyeva, 2016). The area became more militarized, and as a result the relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan became more complex, threatening by the ability of troops to intervene quickly in any surrounding area when a «need» aroused. Although this move does meet the desire for regional security, it also strengthens Russia's geopolitical control over the region by blocking dissidents. In the past, true and bilateral cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan was

based on common interests, but as the Ukraine incident intensified, militarization reflects that Russia's political interests far outweigh common security concerns.

But if we take the entire Russian-Kazakh relations, the situation with the relations of the elites is slowly but surely deteriorating. First of all, because of the physical withdrawal from the political scene of representatives of the elite, whose career began during the Soviet era. Currently, the paths of the elites of the two countries diverge due to the small number of joint projects and the fact that representatives of the families of the Kazakh elite mainly receive education in the United States and Western Europe. Likewise, an extra issue is that the need country in the CIS for the Russian elite is Ukraine, either as a result of such confidence in the geopolitical constructions of Zbigniew Brzezinski, or due to the relevance of the well-known saying «in Russia there are three chronicled periods – pre-Petrine, post-Petrine and Dnepropetrovsk».

Conclusion

Since neoclassical realism develops theories that include both systemic and unit level factors in its analysis of foreign policy, it has been chosen as the guiding theoretical line of the work. It was revealed that the limiting practical scope of military force significantly influences the ascent of soft power. A hard and fast conflict between great powers can end up being disastrous not just for the sides, but also including for the whole world. Especially, the dangerous threat of nuclear power, which drove extraordinary forces into «absolute impotence» in their contentions with one another, has required the advancement of non-military methods in their great politics. Hence, great powers wonder whether or not to fall back on military force in the goal of their issues. We state, that for Russia in order to sustain its sphere of influence, resort to soft power strategy in variety of forms (cultural diplomacy, economic aid, elite ties, military diplomacy) and its own anti-western direction justifies itself in the region, where its normative, democracy values, narratives are welcomed by the leaders of CA states that are seeking to consolidate their powers in the region.

However, neoclassical realism, along with other branches of realism, have paid little attention to the policies of the conflicting great powers to reach out to the domestic actors that are in between their conflict. Although neoclassical realists have acknowledged the importance of the intervening power of domestic state actors in the formulation of foreign policy, they

have not thoroughly analyzed the policies of great powers to interact with these domestic actors in target states and seek to make use of them. Our paper serves as an attempt to fill in this gap. It argues that the success of soft power in authoritarian states has primarily depends on inter-elite relations with targeted states, as well as their specific interests in the alliance.

Therefore, personal transnational or «Trans imperial» communications serve as the main transmission mechanism of Moscow. For example, without the active support of Nazarbayev, the Eurasian Economic Union (like its predecessor, the Customs Union) would not have been created. In the same way, Putin's support for Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev and the latter's dependence on Kremlin favor are the only and most important factor in Moscow's resurgent influence in this country. Conversely, Russia's leverage is weaker in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where no such personal relationship has developed. However even in these countries, Moscow retains a real ability to influence due to close ties between the relevant influential circles

in the military and security spheres. Thus, it can be said, that the success of the soft power exerted by major powers in authoritarian states as Central Asian, primarily depends on the inter-elite ties between the states as well as on the decisions of their leadership and domestic actors which primarily prefer to bandwagon the stronger state for gaining certain benefits (in the case of CA states Russian's support of the existing regime and economic benefits). Because, if we recall how Uzbekistan until 2005 showed more balanced behavior toward Russia (GUUAM, the agreement with NATO regarding their military presence in the region), after brutal crackdown on opposition groups and the American administration's critiques of the Uzbek government for human right abuses, the leadership thought that aligning with Russia would be less of a threat. Consistently, we can observe how political decisions of weak states are influenced by their internal dynamics and their leadership's preferences that can change their foreign policy, so that «the yesterday's foe might become tomorrow's friend».

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