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THE ROLE OF RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA: TOOLS, INFLUENCE, AND TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract: This article is focused on analyzing the nature of Russian soft power in Central Asia in the post-Soviet period, changing its strategies from traditional dominance to a more negotiated regional order. Based on existing literature on soft power and regional geopolitics, the study explores how Russia sustains its regional influence with the help of cultural, linguistic and institutional mechanisms. It specifically includes the role of the Russian language and organizations such as the CSTO and EEU. However, the article argues that these tools are not quite effective, since there is resistance and strategic silence demonstrated by Central Asian states that are no longer passive actors. Ultimately, the paper concludes that although Russia continues to be a vital actor, its power is no longer hegemonic due to changes in geopolitics and internal transformation of Central Asia

Keywords: Russia, Central Asia, soft power, geopolitics, Russian language, multi-vector diplomacy, regional influence, CSTO, EEU

Methodology

The article utilizes qualitative, literature-based review methodology to explore how influential Russia is in Central Asia. It is focused on secondary sources, including academic books and peer-reviewed articles to synthetize existing views on soft power and regional politics. The approach is considered to be interpretive and analytical, concentrating on significant themes such as cultural influence and institutional interaction. The article puts an accent on concepts such as “soft power” and “strategic silence” to gain a better understanding of the behavior of Central Asian countries.

Introduction

While it is true that when the USSR collapsed, Russia lost its political grip over Central Asian countries, Russia did not just magically disappear. Instead, its influence became less obvious but still robust like a powerful undercurrent force. Many experts saw Russia as attempting to forge its old empire through force and pressure after the collapse but recent scholars reveal that that was not the case and is actually more complicated because Russia's influence is now a two-way street (Cooley, 2012, p. 3; Ziegler, 2014, p. 589). Central Asian nations themselves also influence the ties vis-a-vis their own politics, choices, and strategies internally. So, Russia never really left Central Asia, its power just evolved into a more subtle yet intricate form of influence, which the Central Asian nations actively navigate and negotiate with. According to Cooley (2012, p.16), the survival of regional powers is increasingly viewed as a result of local maneuverability where leaders must successfully navigate ‘local rules’ and at the same time negotiating with big power interests (Cooley, 2012). Instead of labelling Russia as a bully who tries to impose its will, Laruelle et al. (2019) suggest its influence is more like a complex puzzle because it is a two-way street: Russia do tries to exert its power, but the inside politics and social climates of Central Asian countries also play a huge role in keeping Russia

involved (p. 211). Beyond traditional power politics, Russia's influence is sustained through "passive vectors" like its widely spoken language and cultural footprint (Laruelle et al., 2019, p. 211). These provide a practical, "transethnic" channel for communication that remains vital for the region (Kosmarskaya & Kosmarski, 2019, p. 84; Mustajoki et al., 2020, p. 2). Central Asian governments actively shape this relationship, however, using calculated "strategic silence" to balance their reliance on Russia with other interests during events like the war in Ukraine (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2022, p. 1). Traditional experts might argue that the role of Russia in Central Asia to be one that is directly competitive to establish stronghold in the region against other emerging superpowers. But recent research reveals that Russia's influence is not about contesting for power but subtle and deeply rooted as a result of three interrelated factors: local rules, linguistic ties, and the strategic agency of Central Asian countries who use their shared cultural and historical space with Russia to navigate modern global volatility.

1. The Limits of Hard Power: Geopolitics versus 'Local Rules'

We are going to look closely at who holds the power in Central Asia today. So, instead of just being a place where big countries fight for control (the 'Great Game'), the local nations now have their own power to decide their futures. The 'Great Game' is no longer just about 19th-century empires but what Cooley calls a game played by 'Local Rules' where the Central Asian countries (for example Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan) are the ones actually setting the price for the Great Powers (Cooley, 2012, p. 16), or what Ziegler calls as a balance of security and economics, where Russia provides the military protection and China provides the money (Ziegler, 2014, p. 589). Central Asian leaders are no longer just "pawns" anymore but they are "brokers" who use the competition between Russia and China as their advantage. The basis for argument to understand this change is provided by Alexander Cooley in his work Great Games, Local Rules. Cooley (2012) challenges the common Western perception that Central Asian countries are mere passive pawns in a competition between Russia, the USA and China. Instead, he (p. 16) argues that the 'Great Game' is basically determined by 'local rules' (a framework in which regional powers actively control the interests of great powers to guarantee their own political survival and elite enrichment). For example, Cooley (2012) describes how leaders in the region have historically used "base bidding wars" (especially in Kyrgyzstan, where the U.S and Russia are played against each other), effectively extracting maximum economic and political concessions from both sides without ever fully committing to one (p. 116). This perspective suggests that Russia's 'hard power' is seems to be limited by the clever maneuvering of local agent who understand that their geographic position is a valuable commodity.

Charles Ziegler (2014) adds to this focus on power dynamics but includes a layer of competitive realism. He (p. 589) acknowledges that Russia presently holds a distinct advantage in the region because of the deep-seated "geographic, historical, and cultural ties," and also an important military presence through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, Ziegler (2014) argues that this advantage is likely 'short term' due to Russia faces more and more competition from China's huge economic influence. Yes, Russia is still the primary security provider but it is unable to match China's financial investments which mean its dominance is constantly being challenged (Ziegler, 2014, p. 589). Both Cooley and Ziegler agree that Russia's influence is not absolute. Ziegler (2014, p. 589) emphasizes the external pressure of other great powers like China, acknowledging that despite Russia is currently strong, China is the most likely power to challenge this dominance. On the other hand, Cooley (2012, p. 16) emphasizes the internal pressure of local leaders who refuse to be dominated, arguing that these powers use 'local rules' to tackle great powers for their own political survival. Scholars like Alexander Cooley (Cooley, 2012, p. 116) observed that Central Asian countries like Kyrgyzstan,

is using “base bidding wars” where they would play major powers like the U.S. and Russia against each other for their economic and military benefits. But after the Ukraine crisis, the geopolitical climate became a lot riskier. Taking clear sides could lead to severe backlash from Russia or the West, so the old “bidding” approach became too dangerous. Researchers Dadabaev and Sonoda note that Central Asian countries have shifted to “strategic silence” where they adopt the posture of avoiding strong public statements on contentious issues (such as UN votes on Ukraine) to stand far from rouaing the anger of either Russia or the West (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2022, p. 23). This ‘silence’ is not a sign of weakness but is an purposeful ‘strategic narrative’ employ to deal with their extreme dependence on Russia for labor migration and security while at the same time, to protect their sovereignty and relations with the international community (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2022, p. 1). Comparing these texts indicates a clear transition in the academic paper. In the early 2010s, the focus was on how countries could actively play the great powers for money and status (Cooley, 2012, p. 162). By the 2020s, the focus has moved to how these same countries are intentionally using silence and careful diplomatic distance to survive in a world where Russia is increasingly assertive and the West is increasingly demanding (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2022, p. 1). Ziegler’s (2014) prediction that Russia’s cultural and historical ties would give it a short-term benefit is likely to be true, but as Dadabaev and Sonoda (2022) reveal, those very ties now create a complicated reality where Central Asian leaders must balance their "necessity for postwar coexistence with Russia" against their need for global legitimacy (p. 1). This means that the ‘local rules’ that Cooley (2012, p. 16) talked about are now much harder to follow. Because the ‘Great Game’ is turning into more risky, Central Asian leaders find it more difficult to navigate between the big powers.

2. The Bedrock of Soft Power: Language, culture and local affinity

This portion of the paper explores how Russia keeps its grip on Central Asia through "soft power" which is a force far more subtle than the tanks or trade leverage discussed previously. This influence is woven into daily life and sustained primarily via the usage of Russian language and shared cultural habits. Recent scholar suggests this is not necessarily a top-down imposition by Russia, but a choice made by locals who find these cultural links useful or intrinsic to their identity. A useful framework for understanding influence in the region, offered by Laruelle et al. (2019, p. 211), is the distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ vectors. “Active vectors" refer to something like a state-led propaganda or official initiatives aimed at influencing how public think, while "passive vectors" refer to more lasting presence of Russian such as T.V programmes and language, which actually contain more significant power. They use the term ‘endogenous’ to describe Kazakhstani ‘Russophilia,’ suggesting that this cultural affinity is a homegrown phenomenon rather than an external product forced upon them (Laruelle et al., 2019, p. 211). For many in the region, engaging with Russian media is simply a matter of routine because it does not necessarily reveal political agreement with Russia. Thus, this passive influence becomes a cultural "bedrock" that allows Russia to keep its status without having to depend on hard power all the time. One of the most important parts of this soft power is the Russian language itself. Some might see the language as an instrument of old imperial dominance, Mustajoki et al. (2020, p. 2) argue that it is actually becoming ‘pluricentric’ i.e. the Russian language is evolving into different local versions that are separate from the standard Russian spoken in Moscow. In this narrative, Russian is not just mere language for Russia only anymore but a regional tool that functions as a lingua franca for trade, business, and social mobility across all of Central Asia (Mustajoki et al., 2020, p. 2). As an example, a businessman from Kyrgyzstan and a partner from Uzbekistan will likely use Russian to speak to each other. Because it is very easy and useful for getting a better job done or for talking across borders, the language remains strong despite people

are unhappy with Russian politics. This linguistic influence is "independent of Moscow's control" since it is driven by the practical needs of the people in the region (Mustajoki et al., 2020, p. 2). This influence creates a unique kind of 'cultural hybridity' especially in the big cities. Kosmarskaya and Kosmarski (2019, p. 84) mention how Russian culture in Almaty, Kazakhstan, as a "transethnic phenomenon" where Russian culture is not just for ethnic Russians. In their study, they found that many ethnic Kazakhs use the Russian language and follow Russian cultural habits as a way to portray they have a modern, urban, or a kind of "European" identity. In Almaty city center, they found that almost all speaks Russian in cafes and public spaces, irrespective of their ethnicity (Kosmarskaya & Kosmarski, 2019, p. 84). For these urban residents, speaking Russian is seen as being cosmopolitan or connected to a wider modern world. This suggests that Russian culture has become a kind of marker of status that locals use for their own social reasons, which is another example of influence being "endogenous" (coming from the inside). However, it is also important to note the historical starting points of this cultural prestige. Although modern influence may look like it is voluntary, David MacFadyen (2006) recounts that this was originally part of an intentional imperial project. MacFadyen (2006, p. 2) talks about how the Russian empire peddled its civilization and language as a way to modernize the region. It adds to our understanding of why Russian is still perceived as a language of "high culture" or "urbanity" until now.

The soft power we are witnessing presently is forged upon a long period of Russian institutions, schools, and media being the main contributors of information and education in Central Asia. Therefore, soft power of Russia in Central Asia is a combination of ancient history and modern practical needs. Laruelle et al. (2019), Mustajoki et al. (2020), and Kosmarskaya and Kosmarski (2019), all discussed how Russia's webs of influence are much deeper than just its politics. It is formed from the language people speak for work and the culture they practice to as their identity as modern people. This makes it not easy for other superpowers, such as China or the West, to get rid of Russia's influence, since one cannot easily alter a language or a culture that people have been engraving on their social fabrics for many generations. Even if the Central Asian countries want to be more independent politically, they are still connected to Russia through these 'passive' and 'endogenous' cultural links.

3. The imperial shadow: Historical continuity and the Soviet nostalgia

In this part, my paper explores the historical continuity and the 'imperial shadow' to attempt at explaining why Russia keeps so much influence today. Of course, one must look at the history of the region because the current relationship between Russia and Central Asian countries is not a new thing but is formed on a long history of imperial and Soviet rule. This section will talk about how Russian culture was used in the past as an instrument of modernization in the region and how memories of that past pretty much still help Russia keep its rein on the region at present day. A crucial perspective on this historical background is provided by David MacFadyen in his study of Uzbekistan. MacFadyen (2006, p. 2) mentions that the Russian presence in Central Asia was originally an 'imperial civilization' that promoted itself through high culture. During the Tsarist and Soviet eras, Russian art forms like opera, ballet, and classical music were essentially advertised to the local people as being superior and more advanced. According to MacFadyen (2006, p. 2), this was an intended effort to paint a modern Uzbekistan that was carved by Russian values. By bringing these European-style arts to Tashkent and other cities, the imperial center attempted to depict that it was bringing civilization to the region (MacFadyen, 2006, p. 1). This process then generated a sort of hierarchy where Russian culture was valued as at the top and being associated with the appearance of modernity and educated. Even today, this past experience cultivated Russian language and culture to be

associated with prestige to many people in Uzbekistan, because it was pegged to the very idea of evolving into a modern nation. This historical shadow does not just dwell in old buildings or theaters but it lives in the minds of the people through past memories. Several authors discuss that this nostalgia for the Soviet past is a "potent tool" for Russian influence: Kosmarskaya and Kosmarski (2019, p. 104) argue that many people in the region remember the Soviet era as a "golden past", where they subscribed to the idea of the "imaginary West" to explain this. For many Central Asians, the Soviet version of modernity (i.e. with its high quality education, stability, and "European" cultural style) represented a vision of progress that was comfortable and familiar (Kosmarskaya & Kosmarski, 2019, p. 104). This version of the West is different from the modern Western world (e.g. the US or the EU) which requires complicated democratic reforms.

In addition, Nourzhanov and Peyrouse (2021, p. 9) mention that this nostalgia functions as a form of "soft power" that stubbornly resists Western style democratization efforts. Because many people still feel a connection to this shared Soviet history, they are more inclined to Russia's style of leadership and stability than to Western political ideas. Russia uses this shared history to craft a feeling of "belonging" to a broader "Russian World" (Nourzhanov & Peyrouse, 2021, p. 9). This makes it easy for Russia to proclaim that Russia and Central Asia belong together because they have a shared information space and a shared history (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2022, p. 1). The power of this nostalgia is more apparent mostly in big cities. Kosmarskaya and Kosmarski (2019, p. 104) discuss that when people remember the Soviet urban life, they do not just miss the old politics but they miss the cosmopolitan identity they felt by speaking Russian. This nostalgic emotion helps them resist 'neo-traditionalism' movements that started after 1991. For many people, Russia represents a 'civilized' past they want to remember. This is the reason why the "imperial project" was so successful because it made Russian culture a part of being "modern" in Central Asia (MacFadyen, 2006, p. 2). Moreover, present leaders employ this historical connection for their own strategy. According to Dadabaev and Sonoda (2022, p. 1), leaders use a "shared information space" to remind people of their history with Russia which helps the government explain why they stick close to Russia, even when other countries pressure them to leave. When these countries remain silent during international conflicts, it is partly because they want to maintain the status quo and do not want to break these deep cultural and historical ties (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2022, p. 1). To recap, the influence Russia has today is not merely revolving around modern treaties but is also about a historical continuity that can be traced back to the imperial promoting of Russian culture (MacFadyen, 2006, p. 2) and lasted until a golden reminiscence of the Soviet era (Kosmarskaya & Kosmarski, 2019, p. 104). This "imperial shadow" renders Russian influence feel natural and internal rather than like something forced externally. Because Russia is tied with the region's history of modernization, it captures a psychological space that other powers like China find very difficult to enter. For many in Central Asia, the "Russian world" is not a foreign empire, but a familiar part of their own story.

4. The evolution of analysis: from top-down politics to bottom-up sociology

In this part, my paper examines how the way we study about Russian influence has shifted over time. By comparing the different methods used by the authors, we can observe a clear change from focusing on big political structures to focusing at the everyday lives and opinions of people in Central Asia. Earlier research, like that of MacFadyen (2006) and Cooley (2012), depends entirely on historical and political analysis. For example, MacFadyen (2006, p. 2) focuses on historical archives and cultural history to reveal how the imperial project was formed

over long periods. Likewise, Cooley (2012, p. 3) focuses on high level political events, like the closing of military bases and official treaties between governments. These are excellent studies to understand the "Great Game" between superpowers, they look at Central Asia from the top-down, zooming more on what leaders do rather than what the public thinks. For comparison, more recent studies from 2019 to 2022 uncover a methodological change toward sociological data. Scholars like Laruelle et al. (2019), Dadabaev and Sonoda (2022), and Mustajoki et al. (2020) use public opinion polls, interviews, and linguistic field studies. For example, Mustajoki et al. (2020, p. 2) do not just look at government laws about language but study how people actually use Russian in the knowledge economy for their own social mobility. Likewise, Dadabaev and Sonoda (2022, p. 23) use data from the United Nations and regional surveys to strengthen their theory of 'strategic silence'. This newer approach is more robust since it captures the bottom-up reality of how influence works in daily life. Nevertheless, each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses. A major strength of Laruelle's (2019, p. 211) research is the detailed and careful distinction between "exogenous" and "endogenous" influence. This helps us comprehend how Russia's power is not just forced externally but is supported internally by local society. Conversely, a potential weakness in the wider "Soft Power" literature, like that of Nourzhanov and Peyrouse (2021, p. 9), is the difficulty of measuring the actual 'payoff' where it is clear that many people feel "Soviet nostalgia" or a "cultural attraction" to Russia, it is not easy to prove exactly how this emotion changes a country's official policy or its decisions during a war. It stays difficult to see where cultural love ends and hard political pressure starts.

Conclusion: The Fragmented Puzzle

To conclude, Russian influence in Central Asia cannot be seen as a simple and one-sided force but rather a nuanced or what Laruelle et al., described as "fragmented puzzle" (2019, p. 211). This paper tries to demonstrate that while Russia has significant hard power, its ability to win the region is constantly challenged by the "local rules" set by Central Asian leaders who prioritize their own political survival (Cooley, 2012, p. 16). The true strength of the Russian presence cannot be found in formal military or economic orders, but in the passive vectors of language and culture that have become an "endogenous" portion of local identity (Laruelle et al., 2019, p. 211). The enduring legacy of the Russian language works as a pluricentric tool for social mobility, serving as a regional lingua franca that exists independently of Russia's direct control (Mustajoki et al., 2020, p. 2). This cultural bedrock becomes a baseline of influence that Russia frequently attempts to weaponize through formal institutions like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). However, as recent geopolitical changes and the Ukrainian crisis have uncovered, these efforts face "strategic silence" from countries that are no longer willing to engage in the past's active "bidding wars" (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2022, p. 1). The "status quo" is becoming increasingly challenging for Russia to keep as its traditional "imperial civilization" model (MacFadyen, 2006, p. 2) clashes with the modern desire for sovereign agency. Looking ahead, the "Great Game" is entering an entirely new phase where historical nostalgia no longer be sufficient to warrant Russian dominance. Future research should focus on the "Nazarbayev Generation" and even younger cohorts who lack a direct personal connection to the Soviet "golden past" (Kosmarskaya & Kosmarski, 2019, p. 104). As these younger generation comes to power, they are likely to reshape the "local rules" in manners that incline towards multi-vector diplomacy over historical loyalty. All things considered, Russia's influence in Central Asia remains deep, but it is no longer a monolith since it is a changing landscape where the "last say" belongs increasingly to the local actors themselves.

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