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**THE USE OF SOFT POWER BY RUSSIA AND CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA:
THE CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN
RUSYA VE ÇİN'İN ORTA ASYA'DA YUMUŞAK GÜÇ KULLANIMI:
KAZAKİSTAN ÖRNEĞİ**

FATİH DEMİRCİOĞLU¹, HALİL EMRE DENİŞ²

¹Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Hakkari Üniversitesi, Uluslararası İlişkiler, 0000-0001-7057-0795

²Doç. Dr., Hakkari Üniversitesi, Siyaset Bilimi, 0000-0002-9830-5624

Özet

Bu çalışma, Orta Asya'daki Rusya ve Çin'in yumuşak güç stratejilerini, özellikle de Kazakistan üzerindeki etkilerini incelemekte ve değerlendirmektedir. Joseph Nye'in tanımladığı kültür, siyasi değerler ve politika gibi yumuşak güç unsurlarının incelenmesiyle, bu çalışma, Orta Asya'daki güç dinamiklerini anlamak ve Kazakistan'ın dış politikasını şekillendiren faktörleri ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Rusya ve Çin'in Orta Asya'daki etkileşimleri, coğrafi, tarihsel ve kültürel bağlamda karmaşık bir konudur. Bu araştırma, her iki ülkenin de Kazakistan üzerindeki yumuşak güç stratejilerini incelemekte ve bu stratejilerin etkinliğini değerlendirmektedir. Nye'in açıkladığı gibi, yumuşak güç, zorlama veya tehdit gibi güç kullanımı yerine, itibar, ikna, ahlaki doğruluk ve popüler kültür gibi araçlarla siyasi denklemleri değiştirmeyi hedefler. Ancak, Rusya ve Çin'in Kazakistan'daki yumuşak güç stratejilerinin etkinliği üzerine yapılan analiz, her iki ülkenin de bu stratejileri en etkili şekilde kullanmadığını göstermektedir. Özellikle, Rusya'nın Kazakistan'da kültürel, tarihsel ve demografik avantajlarına rağmen, Kazakistan hükümetinin Rus medya etkisini sınırlama ve Rusça içerikleri yerelleştirme çabaları, Rusya'nın yumuşak güç potansiyelinin azalmasına yol açmaktadır. Benzer şekilde, Çin'in ekonomik yatırımlarına rağmen, Kazakistan'da artan bir şekilde ekonomik hegemonya algısıyla karşılaşması, Çin'in yumuşak güç stratejisinin başarısızlığı olarak görülebilir. Bu bağlamda, araştırma, Orta Asya'daki yumuşak güç dinamiklerini anlamak ve Kazakistan'ın bu güçlerle nasıl başa çıktığını değerlendirmek için önemli bir katkı sunmaktadır. Ayrıca, bu çalışma, küreselleşme çağında bile coğrafi yakınlığın yumuşak güç üzerindeki etkisini vurgulamaktadır. Özellikle, kültürel ve siyasi bağlamlarda coğrafi yakınlığın, etkileşim ve etkileyciliğin derecesini belirlediği belirtilmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kazakistan, Rusya, Çin, Yumuşak Güç

Abstract

This study examines and evaluates the soft power strategies of Russia and China in Central Asia, especially their impact on Kazakhstan. By examining the soft power elements such as culture, political values and politics defined by Joseph Nye, this study aims to understand the power dynamics in Central Asia and reveal the factors shaping Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Russia and China's interactions in Central Asia are a complex issue in geographical, historical and cultural context. This research examines the soft power strategies of both countries over Kazakhstan and evaluates the effectiveness of these strategies. As Nye explains, soft power aims to change political equations through tools such as reputation, persuasion, moral rectitude, and popular culture, rather than the use of force such as coercion or threat.

However, analysis on the effectiveness of Russia's and China's soft power strategies in Kazakhstan shows that neither country uses these strategies in the most effective way. In particular, despite Russia's cultural, historical and demographic advantages in Kazakhstan, the Kazakhstan government's efforts to limit Russian media influence and localize Russian content lead to a decrease in Russia's soft power potential. Similarly, the fact that China's economic investments, despite its increasing perceived economic hegemony in Kazakhstan, can be seen as a failure of China's soft power strategy. In this context, the research makes an important contribution to understanding soft power dynamics in Central Asia and assessing how Kazakhstan deals with these powers. Additionally, this study highlights the impact of geographical proximity on soft power, even in the age of globalization. In particular, it is stated that geographical proximity determines the degree of interaction and influence in cultural and political contexts.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Russia, China, Soft Power

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Joseph Nye, soft power manifests in three main forms: culture, political values, and policies. In contrast to hard power, which relies on coercion and force for political influence, soft power operates through reputation, persuasion, moral influence, and cultural appeal to reshape the political dynamics between states. While these three aspects of soft power are interconnected and often overlap, culture seems to hold the greatest potential for shaping state behavior, as it influences others to desire similar outcomes as those sought by the influencing state. Political values and policies usually stem from a state's cultural and social values, forming an ideology that defines the core identity of the state and frames its desired outcomes, as described by Nye (Nye, 2004). Understanding this facet of soft power becomes crucial when analyzing dynamics in a post-colonial landscape. If culture emerges as the primary tool for wielding soft power, it logically follows that in a post-imperial setting, the culture of the former colonial power becomes a potent channel for exerting influence. Additionally, the geographical proximity plays a significant role in determining the success or failure of soft power, an aspect often overlooked by scholars of international relations. Despite the era of internet, global trade, and instant communication, the concept of distance decay introduced by geographers in the 1960s remains pertinent. Spatial interaction theory and gravity modeling not only retain their relevance but recent studies indicate that physical space directly influences the extent of social influence (Meyners et al., 2017, p. 49-66). While soft power can take various forms, this discussion will concentrate on cultural manifestations of soft power. This study provides a concise comparative examination of two neighboring states of Kazakhstan, Russia and China, both endeavoring to exert cultural influence through soft power. The argument posited here suggests that although Russia holds a significant advantage over China in terms of soft power potential, neither state has effectively developed a soft power strategy to fully leverage their influence in Kazakh policymaking. Each state has failed to utilize soft power optimally, despite their respective advantages and disadvantages. Subsequent analysis delves into the soft power strategies and endeavors of Russia and China, aiming to contextualize the obstacles each encounters in Kazakhstan's political and cultural milieu, while also offering insights into Kazakh reactions to soft power projection.

2. RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER TOWARDS KAZAKHSTAN

Russia's comparatively low rankings on global soft power indices contrast with its potential to exert soft power influence within the Central Eurasian region. In the contest for soft power dominance in Central Eurasia, Russia holds significant historical advantages over China, Western nations, and other contenders.

Serving as the former imperial power in the region for the past two centuries, Russia ingrained its language and culture in Kazakhstan beginning in the 1820s, a process that reached its peak with the establishment of a comprehensive educational system during the Soviet era, emphasizing the learning of the Russian language and assimilation of Russian culture. Russian traditions and cultural familiarity formed the basis of the cultural identity for the Kazakh elite, with many Kazakhs in the latter half of the twentieth century adopting Russian as their primary language, often forsaking their native language. Russian literature, music, sports, and various facets of daily life, including social customs such as drinking, became commonplace for a significant portion of the Kazakh population. From a geographical standpoint, the proximity of the Russian cultural sphere to the Kazakh territories has facilitated, and continues to facilitate, the assimilation of Russian culture into Kazakh identity. Presently, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Kazakhstan share the longest uninterrupted border between two nations. Approximately 20 percent of the population consists of ethnic Russians, and the Russian language maintains its status as an official language of administration in the country. The Russian minority primarily resides in the regions bordering Russia, including the southern city of Almaty, and robust cross-border connections persist between northern and eastern Kazakhstan and southern Russia (Hanks, 1998, p. 143-162). Kazakhstan's significant Russian minority has generally not shown a tendency towards separatism, apart from a few isolated incidents in the early 1990s. However, both the government and the public are cognizant of the demographic parallels between Crimea and northern Kazakhstan. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 caused considerable apprehension in Kazakhstan, although early public opinion surveys during the conflict indicated substantial support for Russia's actions, particularly among those primarily exposed to Russian media. While Russia's use of hard power in its dispute with Kiev damaged its reputation and hindered efforts to foster softer influence, the cultural advantages Moscow possesses for projecting soft power in Kazakhstan seem to outweigh any repercussions from its assertive stance towards Ukraine (Taizhanov, 2014, p. 37). Russia holds a significant edge over any other competing state in terms of exerting soft power influence in Kazakhstan. The Russian language, particularly prevalent in the northern regions of Kazakhstan, is spoken as commonly as Kazakh, and it remains the primary means of communication among Kazakhstan's elite. The widespread fluency in Russian among educated Kazakhs aged fifty and above provides a communication advantage that surpasses the strategies of both China and the West. Russian-language media, whether broadcasted or accessed online, are regularly consumed by hundreds of thousands of Kazakh citizens on a daily basis. Additionally, popular social media platforms used extensively in Kazakhstan often operate in Russian and are influenced by Russia, enabling Russian commentators to disseminate Moscow's policy objectives widely among the younger generation of Kazakh individuals. Recent research indicates that social media is becoming a crucial platform for extending Russia's soft power influence across much of the post-Soviet region (Helmus et al., 2018). The Russian dominance in broadcast and print media is significant. A considerable portion of the Kazakh population relies heavily on Russian sources for their political news, particularly Russian news broadcasts. For instance, RT's influence in Kazakhstan has been somewhat limited due to its primary focus on projecting Russian soft power globally, with the majority of its content delivered in English. Another example is the Moscow-backed internet news channel, Sputnik, which falls into a similar category. However, these channels primarily aimed at public diplomacy likely do not exert the most significant influence on Kazakh public opinion regarding Russia. Instead, the second vector of Russian programming, which is state-controlled but not specifically tailored to the Kazakh audience, likely plays a more substantial role in projecting Russia's soft power.

Although this programming does not explicitly promote Russia's official political stances, its more nuanced presentation of Russian perspectives may be more effective in shaping Kazakh attitudes. This form of programming is widespread in Kazakhstan's television landscape, with numerous channels regularly airing Russian-produced content. However, the proportion of airtime dedicated to these programs is diminishing. They contend that the Kazakh government is presently reducing the presence of imported Russian-language broadcasts in favor of domestically produced content, thereby increasing Nursultan's influence over public opinion. Nevertheless, the effects of this transition on Russia's soft power in Kazakhstan are not expected to be immediate, given Moscow's two-decade advantage and the continued popularity of Russian-produced broadcasts (Laruelle et al., 2019, p. 225-226).

3. CHINA'S SOFT POWER TOWARDS KAZAKHSTAN

China lacks the historical and cultural advantages that Russia possesses for implementing a soft power strategy in Kazakhstan. Unlike Russia, China did not colonize significant territories in Central Asia beyond its current control of Xinjiang, and its cultural influence in the region has been notably weaker over the past three centuries. Although the number of Kazakh students attending Chinese universities has increased significantly since the mid-2000s, it remains relatively modest compared to those attending institutions in Russia and neighboring Kyrgyzstan. In 2015, more than 80 percent of Kazakh students studying abroad were enrolled in universities in these two countries, with the majority studying in Russia. Furthermore, throughout the final three decades of the Soviet era, China was often perceived as a potential, and in certain cases, a genuine adversary of the USSR. This perspective was instilled in the minds of Kazakhs through official media channels and Communist Party propaganda. Additionally, sensitive policy disagreements between Nursultan and Beijing have contributed to tarnishing the Chinese reputation in Kazakhstan, particularly controversies surrounding the treatment of Uyghur and Kazakh minorities in Xinjiang, as well as issues related to the management and utilization of water resources in the same region. Some former Kazakh officials, possessing firsthand knowledge of China, express strong criticism of Chinese intentions towards their country. Datas suggest that China faces an image problem among the Kazakh public when compared to Russia. Furthermore, these datas reinforce the perception that a significant portion of the Kazakh population regards China with suspicion. For instance, surveys revealed widespread stereotyping and prejudice towards Chinese individuals within Kazakh society, with anti-Chinese sentiment actually increasing within her sample (Sadovskaya, 2015). Interestingly, there appears to be an ethnic divide among Kazakhs regarding attitudes towards the Chinese, with ethnic Russians exhibiting less nationalist sentiments than their Kazakh counterparts (Burkhanov and Chen, 2016, p. 2134-2138). Nevertheless, the number of legally employed Chinese workers in Kazakhstan continues to rise steadily. However, despite the increasing number of Chinese guest workers, their ability to disseminate Chinese soft power seems limited, as most are employed in the petroleum industry in Western Kazakhstan, concentrated in relatively few locations, and have limited interactions with local residents beyond occasional business dealings (Sadovskaya. 2015). The surge in Kazakh students studying in China over the past decade has been remarkable. However, some observers from Kazakhstan doubt that this exchange is significantly enhancing Chinese influence in the country. Kazakh students who study in China often encounter limited opportunities upon their return to Kazakhstan, with the majority of benefits from the expanded student exchange program accruing to China (Toleukhanova, 2016). Researches on public sentiments and geographical perceptions, conducted around the time of the land leasing dispute in 2010, revealed that while approximately 55 percent of respondents held an ambivalent view towards China, only 25 percent expressed a favorable opinion.

In contrast, 68 percent held a favorable opinion of Russia. A minority, albeit vocal, perceives a tangible threat of invasion or occupation of Kazakhstan by China, while others perceive the threat of Chinese dominance as more subtle and pervasive, with China gradually gaining control over Kazakhstan's resources and economy. Some of this concern stems from the perceived geographic and demographic disparity between the two countries: some Kazakh citizens see China as an densely populated nation seeking to expand its control into relatively empty neighboring territories, with Kazakhstan being a prime target for such ambitions (Koch, 2013, p. 119-121). Some doubts is expressed in analyses regarding the widespread perception of a Chinese threat among Kazakhs. However, evidence has accumulated over the past decade indicating that China and its people are indeed viewed with unease, if not fear, by a significant portion of the Kazakh population. If winning over the hearts and minds is considered a key indicator of soft power success, China faces considerable challenges in gaining acceptance among the Kazakh public. Studies tended to portray China in a negative light. While independent Russian-language publications also displayed a negative bias towards China, it was not as direct as seen in their Kazakh-language counterparts. Some researchers identified notable levels of Sinophobia in the media regarding various aspects of the Kazakhstan-China relationship, including the location of Chinese-owned factories and tourism. Intriguingly, researches unveiled a widespread distrust of China across different social strata within the country (Burkhanov and Chen, 2016, p. 2134-2143). Beijing has astutely acknowledged the challenges it faces in Kazakhstan and the broader Central Asian region regarding the cultivation of soft power through cultural connections, particularly in comparison to Russia. In the mid-2000s, the Chinese government embarked on a comprehensive global strategy aimed at promoting the dissemination of Mandarin language and Chinese culture, exemplified by the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs). These institutes, spanning over 120 countries with more than 480 establishments worldwide as of 2019, unequivocally serve as conduits for Chinese soft power projection (Paradise, 2009, p. 647-669; Yang, 2010, p. 235-234). In Kazakhstan, the first CI was inaugurated at the Eurasian National University in Nursultan in 2007, with subsequent ones established in Aktobe, Karaganda, and Almaty. However, the capacity of these centers to bolster Chinese cultural soft power in Kazakhstan appears to be severely constrained. Ainur Nogayeva postulates that the CIs in Kazakhstan encounter limitations in their outreach endeavors, as they are perceived by the Kazakh populace as politicized instruments of Chinese foreign policy. While Nogayeva anticipates that the CIs may serve as venues for and geopolitical actors in ongoing geopolitical dynamics, China's backing of its network of CIs in Kazakhstan has yielded minimal advancement in augmenting Beijing's soft power influence in the region (Nogayeva, 2015, p. 596-598). Recent public demonstrations in Kazakhstan reflect a depreciation of the Chinese reputation in the country. In 2016, amidst the Nazarbayev regime's reconsideration of leasing land to foreign entities, widespread public protests emerged, many marked by explicit anti-China sentiments. These demonstrations compelled the government to suppress the protests and abandon the plan to streamline land leasing for foreign investors once again. Three years later, anti-Chinese protests erupted in Zhanaozen, Western Kazakhstan, with smaller rallies occurring in cities nationwide. Intriguingly, these protests were sparked by reports of Chinese companies intending to invest in numerous new factories in the region -a development that should have been welcomed in Kazakhstan, where the economy has suffered following the global decline in petroleum prices since 2014. During the protests, some speakers expressed adamant opposition to Chinese involvement, stating that they preferred to preserve jobs rather than invite Chinese investment. This challenges the notion that Beijing's soft power strategy in Kazakhstan is effective, as it suggests that substantial economic investment from China alone cannot overcome deep-rooted anti-China sentiments among Kazakhs.

Consequently, prioritizing soft power through economic investment rather than improving China's cultural image among Kazakhs may be counterproductive, as the public perceives it as a means for China to gain control over Kazakhstan's economy (Umirbekov, 2019). China's extensive investment endeavor, known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been promoted not only as a means of integrating Eurasia but also as a method of embedding Chinese soft power influence in partner countries. While it is not feasible within the scope of this brief commentary to thoroughly examine all potential implications of the BRI on Chinese soft power in Kazakhstan, it is worth mentioning that merely investing in Kazakhstan might not be adequate to substantially enhance China's influence (Rolland, 2017, p. 64-67).

4. KAZAKHSTAN'S REACTIONS TO THE SOFT POWER EFFORTS OF CHINA AND RUSSIA

Both the Kazakh government and the general populace actively engage with and respond to the cultural and economic influence wielded by external actors, rather than merely receiving it passively. Growing evidence suggests that despite China's economic advantages and Russia's cultural and historical ties in the region, the soft power tactics of both countries are experiencing a decline in influence within the broader framework of official and public perceptions. While surveys, anecdotal evidence, and other sources used to assess the effectiveness and nature of soft power provide only a static snapshot of the situation, collectively they may indicate longer-term shifts in Kazakhstan's soft power landscape. Many analysts have noted, economic development doesn't necessarily translate into substantial gains in public diplomacy and soft power. Despite China's significant investments in Kazakhstan over nearly two decades, recent surveys suggest a potential increase in anti-Chinese sentiment among the Kazakh populace. There is scant evidence indicating that China has made notable strides in advancing its interests in Kazakhstan through soft power mechanisms. A survey conducted in April 2020 revealed discouraging results for China's soft power aspirations in Kazakhstan. Despite China's considerable investments, a majority of Kazakh citizens desire a diminished Chinese influence. Additionally, among survey respondents who identified a primary enemy among the world's nations, China was the top choice, selected by 10 percent. Less than 4 percent of respondents viewed China as a role model for Kazakhstan, despite China's growing reputation as a global economic powerhouse and regional power (Simonov, 2019; Shibutov et al., 2019). However, Russia cannot simply rejoice in the setbacks faced by its regional competitor in Kazakhstan. The same survey mentioned earlier, which highlights China's struggle to gain traction with the Kazakh public, also carries some warning signs for Moscow. Seventeen percent of respondents expressed a preference for Russia to maintain a lower profile in Kazakh society, and somewhat unexpectedly, nearly a quarter did not see Russia as a role model for Kazakhstan to emulate. In 2017, 81 percent of a group of Kazakh individuals identified Russia as a "friendly state," while approximately 19 percent held differing opinions, closely aligning with the 17 percent who expressed a desire for reduced Russian influence in the nation. The same study revealed that only 55 percent of respondents trusted Russian goods, and a mere 39 percent expressed gratitude for Russian investments in Kazakhstan. Although these percentages are higher compared to those for any other country, given Russia's significant advantages in media exposure, cultural connections, and shared language, they are lower than one might expect. A notable portion of Kazakh citizens appear to possess a critical mindset, acknowledging the influence of soft power in their lives, and formulating independent perspectives irrespective of public diplomacy efforts and cultural dominance (Shibutov et al., 2019).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Regarding soft power, Nye is well-known for stating that the best propaganda is not propaganda, emphasizing the importance of credibility and transparency for those seeking to project soft power. Consequently, regimes that have neglected to foster civil society institutions and embrace diversity face inherent weaknesses when attempting to shape a national image through soft power channels. In other words soft power cannot be bought, it must be earned (Shambaugh, 2015, p. 104). China, however, has yet to grasp this principle, both in its global soft power approach and specifically in Kazakhstan. Notably, extensive economic investments without concurrent efforts to promote cultural soft power seem to have tarnished China's reputation among many in Kazakhstan. They perceive Beijing's motivations as primarily centered on resource extraction, economic dominance, and the exportation of surplus labor, rather than fostering cooperation based on mutual respect and shared developmental objectives. In the case of Russia, the notion of soft power, as defined by Nye, has been twisted into a hybrid model reminiscent of the Soviet concept of agitprop, where image management and public diplomacy serve merely as extensions of more direct measures. Russia's official defense strategy views soft power as a tool or component of Moscow's broader military posture. In this context, soft power transforms into a form of soft coercion, diverging significantly from Nye's concept as applied in free societies. Surveys of Kazakh public opinion and the pervasive presence of Russian media lead analysts to conclude that Russia maintains a broad and effective soft power presence in the country. However, this evaluation needs to be considered within the framework of Russia's historical, cultural, linguistic, and demographic advantages, which may gradually be diminishing.

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