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Soft Power of China in Kyrgyzstan: Impediments and Limitations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beijing clearly understands that, against the backdrop of past frustrating projects, it is necessary to adapt its policy in Kyrgyzstan and intensify its work in the direction of soft power. In this regard, Beijing is revising and updating its soft power tools, conducting institutional adjustments and vaccine diplomacy, and expanding of the list of educational programs and green projects it supports. Nevertheless, the ongoing activities within educational institutions and public policy are primarily declarative and promotional in nature, with only the benefits and positive results of cooperation emphasized. The very process of implementing soft power should resemble a two-way road, where the interests of the two sides coincide. Chinese soft power projects should be synergistic and open to feedback so that both the local population and Chinese agents can benefit. It can be argued that China's soft power in Kyrgyzstan is still characterized by inefficiency and an absence of creative approaches.

China does little work with youth more broadly, focusing more on those who learn and speak Chinese language. However, against the backdrop of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, China has a "window of opportunity" in Central Asia. The extent to which China continues to lean towards soft or hard instruments will determine the success of its policy as a whole. If the balance of China's policy in Central Asia tips in the direction of hard power, then such an imbalance is unlikely to contribute to the conflict-free implementation of Beijing's goals in the region.

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Introduction

For several years, China has not only been an important trade and investment partner for Kyrgyzstan, but also an alternative actor for balancing foreign policy.

Chinese loans and investments in Kyrgyzstan are used to develop certain infrastructure facilities: roads, powerlines, and the combined heat and power plant (CHP) were modernized; oil refineries were built; and the mining industry is also being developed. The presence of China in Kyrgyzstan is widely visible in the latter country. Chinese buses travel around the city and regions, every market has Chinese goods, Chinese restaurants and cafes abound, and internal roads are built with the aid of Chinese workers. However, as the visibility of China's presence strengthens, its image tends to deteriorate. This is confirmed not only by the numerous anti-Chinese rallies now held in Kyrgyzstan, but also by recent sociological surveys.

The Central Asia Barometer (CAB) Survey is a biannual large-scale research project that measures the social, economic and political atmospheres in Central Asian nations by conducting interviews with 1,000-2,000 respondents in each country. The survey was conducted in several waves from 2017 to 2021. Data collected by CAB points to a steady decrease in public sentiment toward China from respondents surveyed in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

Within Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, respondents show an increasingly negative view of China from 2017 to 2021. Views of those in Kyrgyzstan have remained more consistently negative, with the number of those who indicated that they had a "very unfavourable" opinion of the nation steadily rising with each subsequent survey wave.¹

China is criticized in Kyrgyzstan not only due to lack of transparency on cooperation and perceived elements of corruption, but also due to lack of large-scale and breakthrough projects. In particular, unlike Astana, Bishkek cannot boast of any multilateral projects

implemented under the auspices of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. In addition, in recent years, anti-Chinese rallies have led to the disruption of certain agreements: in 2020, Bishkek was forced to abandon plans to build a logistics centre in the Naryn region with Chinese funds in the amount of about \$280 million US.

Despite the existing obstacles, the intention to begin implementation and construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway in the near future was recently announced. The launch of such a multilateral project, the construction of which is planned in 2023, will certainly require the activation and expansion of Chinese soft power, not only in relation to political elites, but also in relation to the population in the regions.

Updates in China's soft power?

Beijing clearly understands that, against the backdrop of past frustrating projects, it is necessary to change something in its policy and intensify its work in the direction of soft power. Soft power is about changing perceptions, and thus how people act. What updates have been made by China in promoting soft power in Kyrgyzstan and what limitations remain? The success of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway construction largely depends on the answers to this and other questions.

Institutional adjustments.

To avoid criticism that China prefers bilateral over multilateral cooperation, Beijing established the C5+1 format in 2020. Forums under the auspices of the C5+1 have demonstrated Beijing's willingness to discuss issues at the regional level. In January 2022, at the "Central Asian States - China" online summit, held on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, China announced that in the next 5 years it will allocate 1,200 positions for

¹ Elizabeth Woods and Thomas Baker, Public Opinion on China Waning in Central Asia, The Diplomat, May 2022, accessed November 15, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/public-opinion-on-china-waning-in-central-asia/>

government scholarships to students from the Central Asian states.² Moreover, such significant events as a youth festival of arts and a camp for young leaders, called “Bridge to the Future,” have been planned.

Within the framework of the SCO, due to Kyrgyzstan’s initiative, the SCO Cultural and Integration Center was established in Bishkek in 2021. Further projects have been proposed for implementation, including the “International Caravan of the Cultural Belt of the Silk Road” and “International Sports Games of the SCO countries and the Silk Road.”

Vaccine diplomacy.

Vaccine diplomacy has an impact on the image of countries and is also associated with the implementation of soft power. China was able to build its image as a regional rescuer by demonstrating how quickly it was able to provide not only vaccines to the countries of Central Asia, but also assistance in the form of medical masks, equipment, and even medical consultations.

During the C5 + 1 online summit in January 2022, Xi Jinping announced that China will send 50 million doses of coronavirus vaccine to Central Asian countries, and is also ready to allocate 500 million USD for various social projects. Moreover, China will also allocate 5,000 positions for advanced training of specialists in the field of healthcare, information technology, and more. As a result of Zhaparov’s visit to China in February 2022, it was announced that China would provide Kyrgyzstan with another 5 million doses of coronavirus vaccine and provide 8 million USD for security assistance.

In general, it is worth noting that investment from businessmen in medical tourism and Chinese medicine is developing.

Expansion of the list of educational programs.

In addition to government scholarships, there are other types of programs aimed at facilitating student exchange and providing Kyrgyz students with access to Chinese education. In 2021, the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan established the “Following the Chinese Dream” scholarship program. This program is designed for high school graduates in Kyrgyzstan. Selected high school graduates will travel to China to study undergraduate programs with a full scholarship.³ According to the Ministry of Education of the Kyrgyz Republic, in 2017 there were 37 courses in the capital and about 65 throughout the republic. In addition, the market for learning Chinese at private schools in Bishkek is expanding.

About 12 universities in Bishkek have exchange programs organized jointly with Chinese universities. Another promising initiative of the two states is the opening of the Kyrgyz Chinese Silk Road Institute on October 21, 2021, in Bishkek. Minister of Education and Science of Kyrgyzstan Bolotbek Kupeshev noted that the creation of a joint Silk Road Institute is an important step for two large and well-known universities in Kyrgyzstan and China in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. According to him, the creation of a joint Kyrgyz Chinese institute will strengthen the scientific and educational potential of the republic. The Institute will train specialists in bachelor’s, master’s, and postgraduate professional education programs.⁴

² Обзор: Китай и страны Центральной Азии прилагают совместные усилия к высококачественному строительству «Пояса и пути», Синьхуа Новости, March 2022, accessed December 12, 2022, http://russian.news.cn/2022-03/11/c_1310509380.html

³ Объявление о начале регистрации на стипендиальную программу Посольства Китая в Кыргызстане «Следующая за китайской мечтой», Сайт посольства КНР в КР, December 2021, accessed December 12, 2022, http://kg.china-embassy.gov.cn/rus/zyxxfb/202112/t20211207_10463417.htm

⁴ В Кыргызстане торжественно открыт кыргызско-китайский Институт Шелкового пути, DKN World News, 21 October, 2021, accessed November 12, 2022, <https://dknews.kz/ru/shelkovyy-put/204728-v-kyrgyzstane-torzhestvenno-otkryt-kyrgyzsko>

Green cooperation.

China is also actively using a Green Agenda in foreign policy: in 2017, Beijing issued a guide to promoting the Green Belt and Road, as well as a detailed plan of ecological cooperation under the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), which notes the goal of integrating the concept of ecological civilization and green development into the initiative by 2025 and creating a favourable model for sound cooperation in the field of environmental protection.

Green rhetoric was also present during the Belt and Road forums in 2017 and 2019, and in April 2019, the Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC), which includes 120 organizations from 60 countries, was created.

Greening the BRI is timely and well perceived in Central Asia. This process may serve as Beijing’s response to the criticism it receives in recipient countries, such as frequent corruption scandals and accusations of using “debt trap” diplomacy, which has more than once led people in some countries to participate in anti-Chinese protests, including cases in Kyrgyzstan. Official discourse in the implementation of certain projects in Kyrgyzstan with Chinese funds is accompanied by epithets about “win-win and mutually beneficial cooperation” on both sides. At the same time, if neighbouring Astana and Tashkent have already integrated the possibilities of “green” financing from Beijing into their projects, it is rather difficult to find success stories in “green” projects based upon cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and China.

Based on the structure of Chinese investments in Kyrgyzstan, we cannot unfortunately talk about “green” projects yet. Kyrgyzstan had been optimistic that China would build a number of hydroelectric power plants, which never materialized.

In response, China has begun to ramp up its investment activities in green projects in

Kyrgyzstan, although still to a limited extent. Thus, in 2022, on April 8, in Bishkek, within the framework of the International Energy Forum “Transformation of the energy sector of the Kyrgyz Republic on the way to affordable and sustainable energy of the future,” held by Government of the Kyrgyz Republic with the assistance of the World Bank Group, an Investment Agreement was signed between the heads of the Ministry of Economy and Trade and Ministry of Transport and Communications of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Chinese companies “China Power International Development Limited (CPID)” and “China Railway 20 Bureau Group Corporation (CR20G).” The purpose of the signed Agreement is to allow for cooperation with a consortium of the above companies in the design, construction, and operation of a 1000 MW solar power plant in the Ton district of the Issyk-Kul region, as well as the design, construction, and operation of an overhead line (500 kV) to the Kemin substation, and design, construction, and operation of the Alabuga hydroelectric power plant with a capacity of 600 MW in the Toguz-Toro district of the Jalal-Abad region.⁵ In addition, this year, the Ministry of Energy of Kyrgyzstan signed another investment agreement with a Chinese state-owned company for the construction of a 500-megawatt hydroelectric power plant in the Issyk-Kul region.⁶

Furthermore, there has been an increase in China’s use of soft power on social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The Chinese service TikTok is very popular among Kyrgyz youth, where positive reels about Chinese culture and society promoted by PR specialists present a favourable picture of China. At the end of September 2021, TikTok announced that the app’s monthly audience had surpassed one billion users. Moreover, Chinese agents of soft power realized the importance of having their own profiles on popular social networks in the region: Chinese newspapers and the Chinese Embassy also promote their pages on social networks quite competently.

⁵ Подписано Инвестиционное соглашение в целях необходимости повышения энергетической безопасности КР, Министерство экономики и коммерции КР, 08 April 2022, accessed November 15, 2022, <http://mine-conom.gov.kg/ru/post/7734>

⁶ Китайская компания построит на Иссык-Куле ГЭС на 500 МВт, Кыргызское национальное информационное агентство Кабар, March 31, 2022, accessed December 18, 2022, <https://kabar.kg/news/kitaiskaia-kompaniia-postroit-na-issyk-kule-ges-na-500-mvt/>

China's soft power obstacles

Public diplomacy: propaganda and congruence with Russian methods

In the implementation of soft power, one of the most important target groups is young people, whose passion and support can ensure the success of a particular task. In spite of this, Chinese agents of soft power have paid insufficient attention to the youth of the Central Asian region, focusing on decision makers and political elites or close associates. Given its nature, soft power should be especially focused on the general populus from varying social strata, and only then on the political elite. In this way, the image of the state will enjoy great success and have influence that can be used in the right direction. As Joseph Nye has noted “China lacks the many non-governmental organizations that generate much of America's soft power.”⁷

It is worth noting here that the work of local non-governmental organizations involved with Chinese agents of power is rather sluggish, with a focus on local educational institutions where roundtables and conferences are organized. Moreover, it is important to note that, as a rule, the participants in such events are a limited and repetitive circle of people, as well as experts with a deliberately pro-Chinese position. Events are usually held in a propagandistic spirit, where only the advantages of bilateral and multilateral cooperation are emphasized while problematic moments are smoothly skipped. The titles of some events already emphasize the focus on advocacy, using the evaluative adjectives “successful,” “friendly,” “promising” and/or “mutually beneficial.”⁸ Such a deliberately positive tone for conferences and roundtables purposely deprives the agents of Chinese soft power of the ability to analyse their failures and successes, and thus to work on their mistakes. There is practically no public diplomacy in the form of a broad discussion of Kyrgyz-Chinese

cooperation and the implementation of future projects, the search for new solutions, or new approaches to bilateral relations. If we compare the level of activity in the implementation of China's soft power in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (including events to discuss the BRI and projects in mass media), we can see that in Kyrgyzstan it is much lower. There is a critical lack of joint research projects which study the strengths and advantages of the Belt and Road, nor are there enough platforms and events to bring together the expert communities of the Kyrgyz Republic and China to exchange ideas and discuss new possible areas of cooperation. Kyrgyzstan, despite its proximity to China, has not been able to strengthen its own school of Sinology on the basis of which specialists could provide expert support for decisions made at the state level.

According to data for 2019, about 7 thousand students study at Confucius Institutes in Kyrgyzstan. These institutes conduct educational activities and also stimulate interest in learning the Chinese language. However, it is difficult to call them classic agents of soft power due to the fact that they are under the patronage of Chinese state structures. Growth of Central Asian citizens striving to learn Chinese cannot alone be an effective basis for solving the problems of soft power.

As a rule, agents of Chinese soft power prefer to focus on those who either already speak Chinese or are in process of learning it. However, the percentage of Chinese native speakers in Kyrgyzstan and in the region is still quite low, which means that the scope of Chinese soft power is quite narrow and limited. Such countries as the USA, the EU, or Turkey⁹ by contrast engage in soft power not only with native speakers or learners of their respective languages, but also with those who are still limited by the knowledge of one language, be it Kyrgyz or Russian.

⁷ Joseph S. Nye, “The Limits of Chinese Soft Power”, July 10, 2015, accessed December 18, 2022, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/limits-chinese-soft-power>

⁸ For instance, the inter-university youth forum “Kyrgyz-Chinese Friendship Belt - 30 years of successful interaction”, dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Kyrgyz Republic and the People's Republic of China, was held in December 2021; “Round table “One Belt, One Road”, dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Good Neighborliness between the Kyrgyz Republic and China in November 2022; etc.

⁹ The author's report was discussed during the round table, organised by IWPR CA and the OSCE academy on June 30, 2022, details: <https://cabar.asia/en/perception-of-china-in-central-asia-problems-and-perspectives>

The ongoing activities within educational institutions are thus primarily declarative and promotional in nature, where only the benefits and positive results of cooperation are emphasized. At the same time, China sees no need to support the study of Sinology in Kyrgyzstan under the auspices of which open and objective research could be conducted. In this regard, Chinese soft power is congruent with Russian soft power, whose agents have practically lost the ability to hear criticism, be ready for feedback, or adjust their programs based on rapidly changing realities.

Information policy: media diversification without influencing strategies

According to the report under the program “Understanding China in Central Asia,”¹⁰ four Chinese mass media organizations operate in Kyrgyzstan: the Xinhua news agency, the New Observation of the Silk Road newspaper, the Dolon TV television company, and the Kontimost magazine. These media organizations systematically publish materials about Kyrgyz-Chinese relations and promote Chinese culture, history, and values.

As China is actively entering the information space of Kyrgyzstan and other countries of Central Asia, there is a trend towards the diversification of information resources and tools used by China and an increase in the number of positive articles on cooperation with China; however, one can agree with the conclusion of a Senior Researcher at the OSCE Academy, Niva Yau, that “despite the fact that inserting content from the Chinese media into the Kyrgyzstani media gives China a great control over the creation of their own narrative. Chinese media are often unable to adapt to the interests and habits of the Kyrgyz people. This is due to a serious misunderstanding of local specifics.”¹¹

Given the rather tough rhetoric of Chinese

“Wolf Warrior” diplomats, is difficult to synthesize the messages spread via this information policy and soft power tools. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, it is worth recalling the requirements of the Chinese Ambassador to ensure the safety of Chinese enterprises. In addition, talk of a Chinese military base in Tajikistan, still unconfirmed by the Chinese authorities, raises many questions from civil society in the countries of Central Asia and can fuel anti-Chinese sentiment and suspicion.

Although it is too early to say that Chinese mass media organizations are shaping the public consciousness in Kyrgyzstan, the interest and desire of the Chinese authorities to occupy their own niche in this direction is evident.

Soft power projects: a one-way road?

The very process of implementing soft power should resemble a two-way road, where the interests of the two sides coincide. Chinese soft power projects should be synergistic and open to feedback so that both the local population and Chinese agents can benefit.

In this regard, the content orientation of Chinese projects can also be a subject for discussion. In the implementation of Chinese programs, such as projects in the field of education as well as the mass media, those which aim to strengthen the influence of China and the export of Chinese values prevail. At the same time, there is a small number of programs that could strengthen the positive image of Kyrgyz Chinese relations via emphasis on mutual interests, for example, in the fields of ecology, support for start-ups, and/or technological internships.

In this regard, US soft power programs demonstrate inclusiveness and diversity: they include projects to support women in entrepreneurship, support for people with

¹⁰ Niva Yau, “Managing Sentiments in the Western Periphery: Chinese Information Operations in the Kyrgyz Republic”, *Understanding China in Central Asia*, August, 2022, accessed December 30, 2022, <https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/ChinaAffairsENG.pdf>

¹¹ *Ibid*, 7-8

disabilities, financing high-tech projects, etc. In Kyrgyzstan there is a currently high demand for environmental projects and startups. Despite beginning to finance some green projects in Kyrgyzstan, the Celestial Empire is still not seen as a green civilization. China is in the top 10 most polluting countries according to the BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2021.¹² Chinese loans and investments have also had negative consequences, especially after scandals over the modernization of the thermal power plant in the city of Bishkek and the subsequent deterioration of the air quality in the capital.

Educational programs: management, vectors, and sustainability

The website of the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek is visually unattractive, as well as being uninformative in terms of content regarding available opportunities for citizens of Kyrgyzstan.¹³ While the websites of the embassies of EU countries or the US in Central Asia act as a kind of harmonious aggregator of all available programs, internships, and competitions, on the website of the Chinese embassy, announcements about programs appear sporadically and not on a systematic basis. In the “culture and education” tab on the site, there is no information about the educational opportunities of China in the form of a list of all provided programs and internships for Kyrgyzstan, there are only announcements of current competitions.

The process of submitting documents for some educational programs is run through the website of the Ministry of Education of Kyrgyzstan, while other parts of the same competitions or programs may be run through the website of the embassy itself. This indicates an imbalance in program management and contributes to the low enrolment of local citizens in educational opportunities in China.

Such blunders demonstrate the lack of a unified information system for China’s educational opportunities in the countries of Central Asia. It is important to note that the number of educational programs, as mentioned above, has indeed expanded both in terms of coverage of undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate studies as well as in terms of the number of grant placements. However, if we talk about the vectors of educational programs, they are all directed to China, while to this day there are no branches of Chinese higher institutions in the region itself, nor is there a Central Asian-Chinese institution. This is despite the fact that it is universities, as idea factories and conductors of knowledge, that form values and act as the forge of future cadre personnel.

According to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Chinese language is taught in the eight largest universities in the country: the Bishkek Humanities University (K. Karasaeva BSU), the Kyrgyz National University (J. Balasagyn KNU), the Kyrgyz State University (I. Arabaeva KSU), the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University (B.N. Yeltsin KRSU), the Naryn State University, the Osh State University, and the Osh Technological University, as well as the Osh Humanitarian Pedagogical Institute and the “Bilim” Lyceum under the Osh State University.¹⁴ In 2017, in Bishkek, in the Jal micro district, school No. 95 was built at the expense of a Chinese grant to offer in-depth study of the Chinese language. In this regard, one can say that Turkish, Russian, and American educational institutions are a priority in Kyrgyzstan. Chinese programs either focus on education in China itself or focus on learning the language through Confucius Institutes, private institutions, or through a Kyrgyz Chinese school.

However, such institutions cannot act as conductors of China’s values and culture or serve as a prism for China’s worldview. These projects and programs together create a base mainly for learning the language, but not for projecting Chinese soft power.

¹² Most polluted countries in the world: 2022 ranking, Climate Consulting, accessed December 18, 2022, <https://climate.selectra.com/en/carbon-footprint/most-polluting-countries>

¹³ Website of the Embassy of PRC in Kyrgyz Republic, <http://kg.china-embassy.gov.cn/rus/>

¹⁴ Бердаков Денис, “Механизмы «мягкой силы» Китая в Кыргызстане”, Eurasia Expert, February 28, 2018, Accessed December 22, 2022, https://eurasia.expert/mekhanizmy-myagkoy-sily-kitaya-v-kyrgyzstane/?utm_source=yandex.ru&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=yandex.ru&utm_referrer=yandex.ru

Additionally, it is worth noting that Chinese soft power as it has been conducted is not sustainable. Chinese educational exchange programs are sustained through online communications with the teaching staff and colleagues in Chinese institutions, communication which is informal rather than institutional or official. The participants in Chinese exchange programs, as well as graduates from Confucius Institutes (interviewed in March 2021) noted that Chinese education is not fully respected owing to difficulties with the notarization of diplomas from China, which can cause problems when applying for work and create doubts about the expertise of China-trained specialists (e.g. medical professionals).

Thus, Russian educational programs are more sustainable in Kyrgyzstan on the basis of simple recognition of diplomas and the availability of subsequent employment opportunities.

The SCO as an attempt to promote China's soft power on international level

Given the clout and expanse of the SCO, a number of experts have written about the normative strength of the organization, known as the "Shanghai Spirit." Under this thinking, cooperation within the SCO is distinguished by the norms of "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity and inspiration for common development."¹⁵

Although decisions in the SCO are made by consensus, experts from India write that China informally puts pressure on SCO party states to adopt official documents and disseminate as widely as possible most of its terminology and its understanding of international events. This involves the use of such well-established statements and descriptors as "a new type

of international relations," "community of common destiny," "three forces of evil," and the "Belt and Road."¹⁶ This use of China-promoted terms as common SCO terminology can be seen an example of how China is promoting its soft power, but within the framework of the SCO institution. It is noteworthy that the term "Samarkand spirit" was used during SCO summit in 2022: "The "Samarkand Spirit" is intended to organically complement the "Shanghai Spirit," thanks to which more than 20 years ago the countries decided to create a new organization," the President of the Uzbek Republic emphasized.¹⁷ This could indicate that Uzbekistan has decided to be more active and also promote its proposals and narratives.

Although the influence of the SCO in Eurasia is clear, the problem of establishing the identity of the SCO remains on the agenda. As a result, the image of the organization as a "club of authoritarian countries" or an uninfluential "debating club" is still discussed in the media and among experts. Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism already coexist within the SCO. However, the terms promoted by China such as "Shanghai spirit" and "community of common destiny" are vague and incomprehensible to a wide range of citizens from the participating countries.

While the ideas of liberal values, democracy, human rights, etc. promoted by Western countries are universal, Chinese values have not yet acquired a streamlined form and content. What is the "Shanghai spirit" whose name already contains Sino-centrism? What is the makeup and content of the "community of common destiny" promoted and often repeated by Chinese politicians? What does Chinese soft power offer besides a multipolar world order? How attractive is the Chinese political system for the population of the Central Asian countries, who are watching with apprehension the expanding "digital dictatorship" and re-education camps?

¹⁵ Song, W, "China's Regulatory Foreign Policy and Its Multilateral Engagement in Asia", Pacific Focus, 35(2), 2020, 229-249.

¹⁶ Srikanth Kondapalli, "5 issues to watch out for at SCO's Qingdao summit", June 08, 2018, Accessed December 22, 2022, <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/5-issues-to-watch-out-for-at-scos-qingdao-summit/20180608.htm>

¹⁷ Мирзиёев написал статью о Самаркандском саммите ШОС, PodrobnoUz, September 12, 2022, Accessed December 22, 2022, <https://www.podrobno.uz/cat/politic/mirziyeev-napisal-statyu-o-samarkandskom-sam-mite-shos-/>

As a rule, only those values that are based on inter-civilizational interaction can improve cohesion, and their universality can serve as a basis for bonding divergent interests and reducing mutual claims. The SCO still lacks a single identity or a ready-made institution or common ground that would generate and promote such values such as its own think tank. The SCO Network University, which includes 78 institutions from six SCO states, cannot fulfil this function. Such an omission does not allow for the increase or strengthening of the humanitarian direction of cooperation within the framework of the SCO.

Therefore, one can say that while Chinese soft power is poorly implemented through the format of the SCO as an international organization, China attempts to promote its narratives through this institutional mechanism.

Conclusions

As has been discussed, China, in its policy in Kyrgyzstan, still relies more on hard power than on soft power. The topic of the debt trap and economic dependence of Kyrgyzstan on China is still the most discussed, while not much is said about the positive aspects of cooperation. It is worth noting that China is indeed working on optimizing its soft power tools and projects, but a number of restraints have significantly reduced the effectiveness of soft investments. It can be argued that China's soft power in Kyrgyzstan is still characterized by inefficiency and a lack of creative approaches.

China does little work with youth, focusing more on those who learn Chinese language. Despite the desire to expand China's soft power tools, its implementation and sphere of influence is difficult to measure with the ever-increasing popularity of Western countries' soft power. China also lacks ideological content and specificity. If Russia promotes the ideas of Eurasianism, taking advantage of the Russian-speaking environment, then the countries of the West have occupied a solid niche in the promotion of universal values. What idea and values China can offer in its soft power is still

a question. However, against the backdrop of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, China has a "window of opportunity" in Central Asia. The extent to which China continues to lean towards soft or hard instruments will determine the success of its policy as a whole. If the balance of China's policy in Central Asia goes in the direction of hard power, then such an imbalance is unlikely to contribute to the conflict-free implementation of Beijing's goals in the region.

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