

POLICY BRIEF

#85, JUNE 2023



Winning hearts and minds abroad: Public diplomacy and why it is important for the Kyrgyz Republic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Contemporary international politics is a dynamic environment with an unprecedented variety of foreign policy actors. This unique environment offers countries a chance to tap into the wealth of opportunities offered by the digital and public dimensions of diplomacy and to use these for their foreign policy dimensions.

This policy brief explores public diplomacy as a foreign policy and nation branding instrument. It proposes complementing the implementation of Kyrgyz foreign policy objectives with public diplomacy mechanisms. Based on public diplomacy theory, this policy brief highlights the need for simple yet efficient solutions in Kyrgyzstan. In the first section, this brief presents the context of foreign policy decision-making and implementation in Kyrgyzstan. In the second section, it focusses on proposed policy and personnel changes, and suggests a shift from conventional approaches to foreign policy in Kyrgyzstan towards global trends. Finally, this policy brief recommends the incorporation of public diplomacy mechanisms into foreign policy.

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Soft Power and Public Diplomacy

The USA is among those leading the research on public diplomacy and has explored public diplomacy both at theoretical and practical levels. The USA's formidable use of cultural and science diplomacy¹ (think of Hollywood films and their impact on the world), which created, shaped and controlled the narratives regarding the USA, its values, and its international positioning, as well as many other aspects of US foreign policy, during the Cold War era, has created a rich body of empirical data for public diplomacy research. Other countries, most notably Russia, have included public diplomacy in their official foreign policy documents. In Central Asia, public diplomacy still needs to be incorporated into foreign policy toolkits. Kazakhstan has been ahead of its regional peers in this regard (Cull 2018).

Soft power, public diplomacy and nation branding require some explanation in the context of this paper. Joseph Nye described soft power as the ability of a country to “obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it.” (Nye 2004, p. 5). Nye identified three sources of soft power: culture (in places where it is attractive to others), political values (when it is lived up to at home and abroad), and foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority) (Nye 2004, p. 11).

Public diplomacy is a concept closely associated with soft power. Public diplomacy, also known as the second-track diplomacy, refers to states' practice of communicating with foreign publics directly. In other words, state-to-state diplomacy is a conventional form diplomacy, while state-to-foreign public diplomacy is public diplomacy.

Nations' activities aimed at shaping positive perceptions of themselves abroad through deliberate construction of their image are referred to as “nation branding.” Unlike public diplomacy, nation branding is a larger concept that cuts across a variety of domains (not just diplomacy) and focuses on nation-specific features.

How to measure soft power?

There are several ways to measure soft power. While none of these can claim absolute accuracy, they provide insights into the nature and forms of soft power. For example, the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index² (NBI) uses six indicators to measure the success of a nation's brand: *exports, governance, culture, people, tourism, immigration, and investment*. According to the NBI, Germany is a soft power superpower as it topped the global charts between 2018 and 2022. The British Institute for Governance³ and the Monocle⁴ published soft power surveys based on following indicators: *business and innovation, culture, government, diplomacy, and education*. The most recent survey dates to 2019 and placed France, Germany, and Japan as the top soft power superpowers.⁵

Portland Communications⁶ also offers a detailed global ranking: The Soft Power 30.⁷ Their methodology is based on a mix of objective data (65%) and polling data (35%). Objective data includes such categories as *government, digital, culture, enterprise, engagement, and education*. Polling data collates public opinions on *cuisine, technical products, perceived friendliness, culture, luxury goods, foreign policy, and liveability*

¹ Cultural diplomacy refers to the exchange of cultural products among nations and communities to ensure mutual understanding; science diplomacy refers to practices where science, usually scientific achievements, are used to support foreign policy objectives.

² The NBI ranking is available at <https://www.ipsos.com/en/nation-brands-index-2022>, last accessed on 3 May 2023

³ IfG methodology available at <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/new-persuaders>, last accessed on 3 May 2023

⁴ Monocle website is available at <https://monocle.com>, last accessed on 3 May 2023

⁵ Monocle's soft power survey is available at <https://monocle.com/film/affairs/soft-power-survey-2018-19/>, last accessed on 3 May 2023

⁶ Portland Communications website is available at <https://portland-communications.com/>, last accessed on 3 May 2023

⁷ The “Soft Power 30” ranking is available at <https://softpower30.com/>, last accessed on 3 May 2023

(attractiveness of lifestyle). The report only focuses on the top 30 best performing soft power leaders.⁸ According to this index, France, the UK and Germany topped the soft power leader board in 2019.

In addition to global powers, each region has its own trend-setters. Until recently, Russia was an undisputed soft power leader in Central Asia thanks to the shared past, intensive labour migration to Russia, and Russian language being the regional *lingua franca* (Valenza 2022). These peculiarities are not often captured by the existing rankings and require additional research.

How can public diplomacy be operationalised?

Public diplomacy has the capacity to facilitate the implementation of foreign policy goals. New forms of public diplomacy focus on building relationships with civil societies abroad and facilitating networks between non-governmental actors across borders. This has led to an important evolution since a “country’s branding, its image, standing and influence is today less dependent on direct state activities than it used to be” (Sölter 2008). In this regard, artists and musicians, visiting professors and exchange students, and foreign correspondents and tourists are today’s new diplomats, who “enjoy a higher degree of autonomy and thus more credibility than apparatchiks and bureaucrats representing some anonymous foreign state machinery” (Sölter 2008). Public diplomacy has been reconceptualized as a two-way process that involves listening as well as talking and has shifted attention towards people-to-people forms of engagement.

Public diplomacy includes five activities: listening to the target audience abroad to understand their needs, values, and aspirations; advocacy to persuade people to

understand your policy; conducting cultural diplomacy; and various exchanges and mobility programmes which are usually mutual – in which parties both teach about their culture and learn about other cultures. Finally, public diplomacy can be complemented with broadcasting news and information via state-funded international media.

Public diplomacy in the Kyrgyz Republic: The current state of affairs

In the Kyrgyz Republic, public diplomacy is not often mentioned in official policy documents. The Foreign Policy Concept of 2019 does not mention public diplomacy as a foreign policy component. Nevertheless, it does include a section on cultural and humanitarian cooperation, which could be tied to public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is also not currently taught to future Kyrgyz diplomats. The Diplomatic Academy under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that it does not include public diplomacy in its curriculum at the moment.⁹ Other state stakeholders involved in foreign policy decision-making in the Kyrgyz Republic (the President, the Parliament, or the Cabinet of Ministers) also do not seem to mention public diplomacy.

This lack of public diplomacy in the foreign policy toolkit of the Kyrgyz Republic is not surprising. As a former Soviet country, the Kyrgyz Republic has inherited the formidable diplomatic tradition of the Soviet Union, which did not explicitly separate public diplomacy as an individual foreign policy tool. Yet, given the increasing role of strategic communications held by states with publics in third countries, using public diplomacy as a foreign policy tool is an efficient way to boost foreign policy implementation and nation branding efforts. In the next section, I provide some suggestions as to how to approach the task of including public diplomacy in the foreign policy of the Kyrgyz Republic.

⁸ The “Soft Power 30” report is available at <https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2019-1.pdf>, last accessed on May 3rd, 2023

⁹ As per the Diplomatic Academy’s letter dated 27.12.2021 in response to author’s enquiry.

Stakeholder mapping: Potential actors in developing public diplomacy policy

Actors involved in foreign policy formation and implementation in Kyrgyzstan include the following. At the policy level, the *President* defines the key directions of domestic and foreign policy (Kyrgyz Constitution, art.6). At the executive level, the Chair of the *Cabinet of Ministers* coordinates implementation of key directives of domestic and foreign policy.¹⁰ The *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*¹¹ is the leading executive body. Its structural subdivision, the *Diplomatic Academy* plays an important role as a training and research hub, and as such would be key for training current and future career diplomats in public diplomacy theory and implementation.

In addition to these government stakeholders, there are state agencies who could help identify objectives, build core messaging, and provide overall expert support in the implementation of public diplomacy innovations. These include the following state agencies in their respective areas:

- In the area of cultural diplomacy, the Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports and Youth Policy needs to be consulted;
- In the area of digital diplomacy, the Ministry of Digital Development will need to provide its expert assistance and training to all civil service on how to make the most of social media management for their work;
- For science diplomacy, the Ministry of Education and Science, along with the National Academy of Sciences, could provide invaluable input;
- Given the close interrelation between foreign policy and national security, the State Committee of National Security would need to be a part of the proposed task force;

- As public diplomacy goes hand-in-hand with foreign investment climate and migration, the Ministry of Economy and Commerce and the Ministry of Social Development and Migration should also be involved.

What could be done?

Policy makers need to be fully informed about the potential and importance of public diplomacy as a foreign policy tool. A reasonable starting point would be to hold an expert discussion with the participation of relevant state and non-state stakeholders to agree on a shared understanding of public diplomacy, best practices from other countries (e.g., the incredible case of South Korean soft power), and an appropriate set of public diplomacy instruments for Kyrgyzstan. The state already has a suitable platform – the National Institute for Strategic Studies – which could lead the preliminary discussions. In addition, Kyrgyzstan has a variety of research hubs and think tanks which could contribute to the discussion. For example, the OSCE Academy has held at least three policy-relevant expert roundtables¹² which discussed public diplomacy and foreign policy in Central Asia.

A second step would be to start preparing professionals within the established training system of the diplomatic service of the Kyrgyz Republic. Incorporation of public diplomacy Studies into the curriculum of the Diplomatic Academy would boost professional development of foreign policy specialists and, hopefully, launch intra-institutional conversations on practical approaches to public diplomacy. Given the presence of a friendly and vibrant diplomatic corps in Bishkek, foreign diplomats could be invited to give guest talks and share their experiences in implementing public diplomacy in the region.

¹⁰ The Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic and responsibilities of the Prime Minister are available at the Government web portal at https://www.gov.kg/ru/p/pm_responsibility, last accessed on May 3rd, 2023

¹¹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, available at <https://mfa.gov.kg/ru>, last accessed on May 3rd, 2023

¹² These include the Expert Round Table “Winning Hearts and Minds? Public Diplomacy and Norm Entrepreneurs in Central Asia” held in November 2021, event information available at <https://osce-academy.net/en/news/full/996.html>; Expert Roundtable on «Public Diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia: Local Actors, Global Actions», event information available at <https://osce-academy.net/en/news/full/1192.html>; and “Central Asia’s International Relations: Decision-Making Actors and Processes”, event information available at <https://osce-academy.net/en/news/full/1289.html>

Given that foreign policy planning and implementation involve a variety of state and non-state actors, it would be reasonable to run an extensive domestic stakeholder mapping project to identify relevant actors in Kyrgyzstan. The basic stakeholder mapping exercise in this brief provides an example of what needs to be done at a larger and more thorough scale. Based on this, a task force needs to be created to further explore the purposes and practicalities of incorporating public diplomacy into foreign policy practice. Introduction of a public diplomacy task force, or even a separate public diplomacy department, is a cost-effective mechanism. It does, however, require a strong political will and sufficient understanding of public diplomacy at the political decision-making level.

Finally, Kyrgyzstan has a distinct advantage in the development of public diplomacy – a very vibrant civil society. As in all other aspects of public policy making, the state could and should benefit from including civil society representatives with relevant experience and expertise in the public diplomacy task force. Working together, the state would be capable of building an efficient, modern, and resilient public diplomacy toolkit to further the interests of the state and the people of Kyrgyzstan.

Recommendations:

- Conduct a thorough stakeholder mapping exercise to identify leading government partners for consultation in the creation and implementation of a public diplomacy policy.
- Create an inter-departmental task force charged with the objective of creating and implementing a public diplomacy policy.
- Engage civil society to enhance public diplomacy policy.
- Conduct external stakeholder mapping to identify which audiences abroad should be given priority. Market research is required to identify key target audiences (countries, languages, social groups).
- Engage in public relations, ensure transparent communication, design and control the narrative.
- Develop a nation branding strategy for

the country. This nation branding strategy should include a value proposition, brand messaging, and rough data on target customers. The nation branding strategy should revolve around the country's value proposition: what Kyrgyzstan stands for, how it works, and why it deserves public support. The overall goal is to develop and communicate a global narrative about Kyrgyzstan that would complement Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy goals. The World Nomad Games was an interesting attempt to do that.

- Identify, engage, and retain available domestic soft power resources – social media influencers, civil society, notable persons (sportspeople, artists, etc.).
- Generate engaging informational content targeted at foreign audiences.

Conclusion

International relations and diplomacy have been significantly transformed, accelerated and re-shaped through increasing public access to information, ubiquitous digitalisation, and the diversification of international relations actors. Diplomacy and international politics are no longer the exclusive privilege of governments but an area of transnational interaction among diverse state, non-state and sub-state actors. The Kyrgyz Republic needs to make the most of this unique enabling environment and develop its public policy potential through a series of simple yet cost-efficient steps. An efficient and agile public diplomacy toolkit needs political will, competent human resources, and efficient decision-making.

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