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Expert Roundtable

Winning Hearts and Minds? Public Diplomacy and Norm Entrepreneurs in Central Asia

26 November 2021, Bishkek
Rapporteur: Aida Aidarova

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Watch [here](#) the recording of the event.

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Introduction

As opposed to the ‘hard power’ or the country’s ‘ability to coerce’, ‘soft power’ is defined as its ‘ability to attract and persuade’¹. Although originally used with respect to the actions of Western liberal democratic countries to promote their norms and values, a challenge arises when considering soft power as a neutral descriptive concept of equal applicability to similar actions undertaken by non-liberal and authoritarian countries. ‘Public diplomacy’, a concept considered an essential part of soft power, has been a rather contested term in academic International Relations, likewise whenever specifically applied to non-liberal and authoritarian countries, as well as to non-state actors. With the rise of online social networks and digitalisation, soft power and public diplomacy are also evolving, both around the globe and within Central Asia.

On 26 November 2021, the OSCE Academy in Bishkek held the expert roundtable, ‘Winning Hearts and Minds? Public Diplomacy and Norm Entrepreneurs in Central Asia’, which sought to explore these issues. Conducted within the framework of the Postdoctoral Fellowship Programme ‘Institutional Change and Social Practice. Research on the Political System, Economy and Society in Central Asia and the Caucasus’ of Bielefeld University, supported by the Volkswagen Foundation, the event gathered an outstanding team of international experts on foreign policy, public diplomacy, soft power, and civil society. It was attended by 93 participants both online and offline.

Aigoul Abdoubaetova, Head of the Academy’s Research and Training Unit (RTU), welcomed the speakers and participants. Following her remarks, additional background information was provided by the organizers, Dr. Aijan Sharshenova, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Academy, and Dr. Chiara Pierobon, Associate Research Fellow also at the Academy and Senior Researcher at Bielefeld University.

The roundtable was divided into two panel sessions. The first panel focused on public diplomacy actors and norm entrepreneurs from the macro-perspective, looking at the region of Central Asia as a whole and discussing the interests of major actors. The presentations of the second panel centered around the meso- and micro-perspectives of public diplomacy on the ground, with particular attention paid to soft power recipients in the Central Asian republics themselves. The panels were followed by sessions devoted to questions and answers with the active involvement of both offline and online attendees. Both panels sparked vivid discussion over the roles of great and regional powers such as Russia, the US, China, the EU, and Turkey. Experts and participants spoke about the various tools employed by these powers, the role of Central Asian states as recipients of transmitted norms and values, whether these values and norms are being accepted, and future perspectives for the region.

¹ See: Joseph S. Nye Jr. ‘Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics’, Hachette UK, 2009.

Public Diplomacy Actors and Norm Entrepreneurs: The Macro-Perspective

Mapping Russia's Public Diplomacy Instruments in Central Asia

Dr. Sharshenova shared the findings of her research into Russia's public diplomacy instruments in Central Asia. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she found that it is difficult to underestimate Russia's role in the region, which is sometimes referred to as Moscow's 'backyard' or 'legitimate sphere of influence'. Russian public diplomacy in Central Asia has evolved as Russia's broader foreign policy has developed since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. Crucially, following the disappointment in Boris Yeltsin's Westward-looking strategy, Russia under Vladimir Putin has reinvented its relations with the other former Soviet republics. Putin's neo-revisionist foreign policy directly seeks to contest the influence of Western norms and values in Central Asia. Toward this end, Moscow has allocated significant resources into soft power and public diplomacy, to the point of being seen as an 'unconventional' aid provider (as opposed to 'conventional' OECD providers) in the region. Note that Russia's soft power and diplomacy should be considered distinct from, and not synonymous with, its notorious propaganda systems.

Central Asia is relatively easy to engage for Russia due to power asymmetries bequeathed by the imperial and communist eras, the role of the Russian language as a regional *lingua franca*, similarities in traditional values and norms, and extensive labour migration and economic connections. Russia under Putin has actively utilised both an extensive inheritance of diplomatic tools from the Soviet and even Tsarist eras, and reinvigorated 'state-to-people' second-track diplomacy, in which the Central Asian grassroots is directly addressed. The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation, otherwise known as *Rosstrudnichestvo*, has missions in 95 countries around the world, while Russia's global media outlet Sputnik translates and creates news content in local languages to effect a feeling of closeness with targeted local populations. Russia has also sought to convey soft power through non-military aspects of military aid cooperation, such as by providing capacity-building training to Central Asian military and law enforcement personnel. Russia also seeks to foster regional integration through institutions like the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisations (CSTO).

Turkey's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Central Asia

The second speaker of the panel, Dr. Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti of the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), presented her ongoing research into Turkish public diplomacy in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Dr. Ambrosetti's findings imply that Turkish public diplomacy is quite a new research area; indeed, the concept itself was invoked by Turkey in 2004, while the first institution officially bearing 'public diplomacy' in its name and function was established only in 2010. Both of these developments occurred as part of a strategy developed by the ruling Justice and Development Party (better known by its Turkish acronym, AKP) and under the auspices of development and aid organisations, such as the Turkish Cooperation, Coordination Agency (also better known by its Turkish acronym, TİKA), and the Turkish Red Crescent. Media also plays a significant function, such as the

Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT). Turkey's domestic climate makes it difficult for non-state public diplomacy actors or civil society organisations to act independently. Making matters even more complicated is the presence of 'hybrid actors' who may have hidden political agenda. In general, Turkey's 'wolf diplomats' who push Central Asian states to close Fetullah Gülen schools, risk reducing the credibility of its public diplomacy efforts inside Central Asia.

Despite the severing of historical ties during the Soviet era, Turkey re-established its connection with the Central Asian republics following the fall of the USSR in 1991. Central Asia holds strategic importance to Ankara due to shared ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic identities, and this understanding informs Turkish public diplomacy. Ankara has sought to portray itself as an elder and economically successful brother. For example, TRT frequently propagates images and narratives intended to make an impression of pan-Turkic unity and solidarity.

The US' Norm-Promotion in Central Asia: Failed, Suspended, or Abandoned?

Dr. Shairbek Dzhuraev, one of the Academy's Postdoctoral Research Fellows and a co-founder of Crossroads Central Asia research institute, focused on American norm promotion in Central Asia. Noting that the very concept of soft power itself, while well-established in academic literature, actually originated from theoretical and concrete US foreign policy discussions during the Cold War, Dr. Dzhuraev argued that the promotion of liberal values and norms has never been an easy fit with more prosaic 'national interests'. Indeed, over the past 30 years, the US has seemingly lost its enthusiasm for values and norm promotion, generally worldwide and particularly in Central Asia. The latter has also proven especially difficult given the direct rivalry of other actors, such as Russia and China. Finally, and crucially, Central Asian elites themselves have grown more resilient in withstanding Western – as well as domestic – pressure to engage in genuine reform.

Implementation of Public Diplomacy on the Ground: The Meso- and Micro-Perspective

Reviving Silk Road Memories with Chinese Characteristics

The last speaker of the first panel was Ms. Niva Yau, a Researcher with the Academy. Ms. Yau presented her research into how historical memories of the Silk Road are utilised in Chinese public diplomacy efforts in the region. She explained how Central Asia as a distinct region with its own internal dynamics is actually a somewhat new concept in Chinese public discourse, literature, and policy-making.

Before the Russian Empire conquered Central Asia, for two millennia the area was known to Chinese people as '*Xiyu*', i.e., '[The] Western Region', and it encompassed the lands between modern-day Xinjiang and the Caspian Sea. It also had a somewhat negative connotation due to the pre-modern tradition of being the destination of banished state officials who fell out of favor in the Chinese imperial capital. In fact, *Xiyu* is still the preferred term in Chinese for Central Asia. Indeed, according to statistics compiled by Joanna Waley-Cohen in her book,

Exile in Mid-Qing China, in 1794 alone, out of 20,000 Qing dynasty officials, some 500 served sentences of exile on the territory of modern-day Central Asia.

Given this history, it has been of the utmost importance for modern Chinese public diplomacy to present a positive image of the historical roots of bilateral and multilateral relations between China and Central Asia, particularly with respect to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Toward this end, Beijing has been selecting and tailoring certain memories associated with the Silk Road that engender a positive narrative. For instance, President Xi Jinping often uses historical references when discussing Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

German Political Foundations as Norm Entrepreneurs in Kyrgyzstan: The Social Capital Perspective

Dr. Pierobon started the second panel with an analysis of Germany's public diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan. German public diplomacy is not a new phenomenon, but it has assumed a role of central importance following the Second World War, as it has been deployed to repair the country's ruined international image. 'Parteinähe' or 'politische Stiftungen', i.e., 'political foundations', are central to such efforts, as these conduct socio-political education programmes in developing countries.

German political foundations enjoy a unique legal and political status. Publicly supported organisations affiliated with German political parties, they are important channels for transmitting norms and values and establishing political contacts, as well as for implementing 'state-to-people' and 'people-to-people' communication. Given their wide range of functions, political foundations have the potential to create effective social capital in the form of 'citizen engagement in [the] community sphere, which can have a powerful influence on the performance of government and other social institutions'. Such social capital is fostered by 'connections among individuals and social networks and norms of reciprocities and trustworthiness that arise from that.'

According to Dr. Pierobon, Kyrgyzstan hosts four out of seven political foundations that are active in Germany. Her analysis revealed a high level of convergence between them despite subtle differences in strategy and *modus operandi*. German political foundations in Kyrgyzstan are working on similar issues, such as promoting good governance, inclusive and professional media, women empowerment and gender equality, environmental protection and environmental education, and public dialogue on foreign policy and security issues. Overall, Dr. Pierobon feels that the model of German public diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan calls into questioning the Anglo-American procedural model of understanding, informing and influencing, and offers an alternative based on partnership, cooperation and dialogue.

Soft Power of Neoliberal Civil Society in Tajikistan

Dr. Karolina Kluczevska, a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Ghent University in Belgium, spoke about the soft power in the theoretical context of 'neoliberal civil society', using Tajikistan as her case study. The concept of soft power in its original definition might be challenged when zooming at specific cases, as soft power evolves overtime due to different internal and external factors. According to Dr. Kluczevska, civil society in Tajikistan can be considered neoliberal, in the sense that the soft power it facilitates is not projected by a particular state from the outside, but by local actors on the ground, viz., non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Indeed, NGOs in Tajikistan are associated with promoting free-market capitalism and individualism as the means for achieving social wellbeing, rather than the state. Initially, these norms and values came conditionally with development aid following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the opening of a political space for international donor organisations and their affiliated NGOs in Tajikistan was not a function of democratisation per se, but rather a consequence of the civil war of 1992-1997 that weakened the Tajik state. Also important is the fact that much of the NGO sector was and remains staffed by mainly urban, well-educated, secular young people, often with family ties to the old Soviet elite. This is because there were no other spheres available for their activism, to say nothing of sources of income, these young activists became involved in NGOs.

Attitudes toward neoliberal civil society are rapidly changing for the worse. By 2007, approximately 3500 NGOs were registered in Tajikistan. The state has grown skeptical of those organisations working on political issues, but welcomes those working with women, children and vulnerable populations. The same attitudes can be found among grassroots, who also tend to view activists working for politically-themed NGOs as either working for the West or 'mercenaries'. The increased conditionality of funding, projectisation and bureaucratisation of NGOs in recent years has also transformed them into service providers to international organisations and donors rather than partners for discussions, leading to increased resentment among NGO workers themselves toward the system of aid and development.

The EU's Public Diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

The last speaker of the second panel was Prof. Dr. Fabienne Bossuyt, also of Ghent University, who shared her research into the EU's public diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Based on her findings, Dr. Bossuyt argued that the EU is losing the struggle for the hearts and minds of people in Central Asia. The rise of China as a rival economic influencer, the persistence of Russia as a competing model of social and political conservatism, the reemergence of Islam as another competing model of social and political conservatism, and the resiliency of local regimes, are all intersecting in such a fashion as to diminish the potency of European soft power.

Where does hope for EU soft power lie? For the last three decades, the EU has positioned itself in terms of cultural diplomacy only to evolve as a development aid donor and become the leading actor in trade and investment in the region. This economic dimension of European soft power, in which the EU is presented as a model of advanced economic development, social welfare and high living standards, continues to be appealing. Dr. Bossuyt thus recommends that the EU decrease its Eurocentric and neoliberal approach, and recognise that societies in Central Asia are more collectivistic than the West. In doing so, the EU may be able to retain some of its legitimacy, and hence some of its soft power, in the region.

Conclusion

The expert roundtable proved to be timely and not only theoretical, but also practical. Both the speakers and participants agreed that there is an importance difference between the methods and content of public diplomacy. While some actors present themselves as guarantors of liberal democracy and universal values and norms, others appeal to the 'homegrown traditional concepts' of collective community, family and self-organisation. There also remains a problem of Central Asia still being cast in the role of passive recipient to the messages projected onto it, instead of being an active participant in the messaging process. Dr. Pierobon noted that there is a tendency to think about soft power and public diplomacy primarily in terms of the diffusion of norms and values and not in terms of how the 'message' is perceived, interpreted and implemented by the targeted populations.

Annex: Agenda

Venue: OSCE Academy in Bishkek

Format: Hybrid (Offline and Online)

14:00-14:15	Opening remarks Ms. Aigoul Abdubaetova , Head of the Research and Training Unit, OSCE Academy, Kyrgyzstan Dr. Aijan Sharshenova , Postdoctoral Research Fellow, OSCE Academy, Kyrgyzstan Dr. Chiara Pierobon , Associate Research Fellow and Senior Researcher, Bielefeld University, Germany
14:15-15:45	Panel I: Public Diplomacy Actors and Norm Entrepreneurs: The Macro Perspective Moderator: Dr. Chiara Pierobon, Associate Research Fellow of the OSCE Academy and Senior Researcher, Bielefeld University, Germany <i>Mapping Russia's Public Diplomacy Instruments in Central Asia</i> Dr. Aijan Sharshenova , Postdoctoral Research Fellow, OSCE Academy, Kyrgyzstan <i>Turkey's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Central Asia</i> Dr. Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti , Research Fellow, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, Italy (online) <i>The US's Norm-Promotion in Central Asia: Failed, Suspended, or Abandoned?</i> Dr. Shairbek Dzhuraev , Postdoctoral Research Fellow, OSCE Academy, Kyrgyzstan Q&A
15:45-16:15	Coffee break

16:15-17:45	<p>Panel II: Implementation of Public Diplomacy on the Ground: The Meso and Micro Perspective Moderator: Dr. Aijan Sharshenova, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, OSCE Academy, Kyrgyzstan</p> <p><i>Reviving Silk Road Memories with Chinese Characteristics</i></p> <p>Ms. Niva Yau, Researcher, OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan</p> <p><i>German Political Foundations as Norm Entrepreneurs in Kyrgyzstan: The Social Capital Perspective</i></p> <p>Dr. Chiara Pierobon, Senior Researcher, Bielefeld University, Germany</p> <p><i>Soft Power of Neoliberal Civil Society in Tajikistan</i></p> <p>Dr. Karolina Kluczevska, Postdoctoral Researcher, Ghent University, Belgium (online)</p> <p><i>The EU's Public Diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan</i></p> <p>Prof. Dr. Fabienne Bossuyt, Assistant Professor, Ghent University, Belgium (online)</p> <p>Q&A</p>
17:45-18:00	Closing remarks

About the Speakers

Dr. Aijan Sharshenova is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the OSCE Academy (Kyrgyzstan). Dr. Sharshenova holds a PhD in Politics awarded by the University of Leeds (United Kingdom). Prior to joining the Academy, Dr. Sharshenova worked at the UN and UNDP country offices in the Middle East. Dr. Sharshenova's current research focuses on on Russia's soft power and public diplomacy in Central Asia.

Dr. Chiara Pierobon is a Senior Researcher at Bielefeld University (Germany) and Associate Research Fellow at the Academy (Kyrgyzstan). She holds a PhD in Sociology and Social Research awarded by the University of Bielefeld (Germany) and the University of Trento (Italy). In the past, Dr. Pierobon served as manager and executive director of international research projects and educational exchange programmes in Europe, Central Asia, and Russia funded by the European Commission, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and the Volkswagen Foundation. In addition to her academic activities, she has been active as a consultant and trainer for DVV International, Europe-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM), European Neighbourhood Council (ENC), and the UNESCO Cluster Office for Central Asia.

Dr. Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti is a Research Fellow at the Russia, Caucasus, and Central Asia Centre at Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). Prior to that, she was a Marie Curie fellow based at the Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, Turkey, where she also pursued her PhD. Dr. Ambrosetti's areas of interest include Russian and Turkish foreign policy, EU-Russia and Russia-Turkey relations, and EU neighbourhood policies (especially with Eastern neighbours).

Dr. Fabienne Bossuyt is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science at Ghent University (Belgium). In addition, she is coordinator of the Ghent Institute for International and European Studies, and co-director of the Russia Platform of Ghent University. She is also a professorial fellow at the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS) and an associate researcher at EUCAM. Her main area of expertise is the EU's relations with Central Asia. Her most recent research projects focus on various aspects of the EU's relations with and policies towards Central Asia and other post-Soviet countries, including development policy, human rights promotion, and connectivity.

Dr. Karolina Kluczewska is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Ghent Institute for International and European Studies, Ghent University in Belgium. She received her PhD degree in International Relations from the University of St Andrews in the UK. Her research interests include development aid and welfare governance in Central Asia.

Ms. Niva Yau is a Researcher at the Academy and a Fellow at the Eurasia Programme of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia (United States). Her work focuses on global China affairs, particularly on China's foreign policy, trade, and security in its western neighbourhood, including Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Dr. Shairbek Dzhuraev is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Academy and a co-founder of Crossroads Central Asia research institute. He previously served as deputy director of the Academy and dean of academic development at the American University of Central Asia. Dr. Dzhuraev has a PhD in International Relations from the University of St. Andrews (United Kingdom).