

K.S. Mukhtarova  **A.K. Paizova*** 

Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Almaty, Kazakhstan

*e-mail: paizova_aidana@mail.ru

STRATEGIC INSTRUMENTS OF SOFT POWER: THE EXPERIENCE OF GLOBAL ACTORS IN CENTRAL ASIA

This article examines the geopolitical influence of “soft power” on Central Asian countries. It analyzes the conceptual frameworks of “soft power” and “hard power” as tools used by states to influence economic, social, and political spheres. The study emphasizes the dynamic nature of these concepts and their relevance in the context of geoeconomic transformations. As well as it highlights important geoeconomic and geopolitical features of “soft power” employed by leading global players, including the European Union, Iran, China, Russia, the United States, Turkey, and Japan, towards Central Asian countries.

The article examines the key role played by instruments such as educational projects and grants, cultural diplomacy, and the provision of loans and other types of financial assistance. These tools are particularly important in the struggle for geopolitical influence, with non-governmental organizations, socio-cultural institutions, and charitable initiatives playing a leading role.

At the same time, the study recognizes the potential of “soft power” applied by Central Asian states themselves, especially Kazakhstan, which positions itself as a dynamically developing country in the post-Soviet region.

The article concludes with an analysis of the multifaceted nature of “soft power” and the difficulties in measuring it, as well as the challenges in assessing the influence of various actors. It emphasizes the dynamic nature of “soft power” and its evolution as a strategic tool for countries seeking to exert global influence. The study underscores the need for comprehensive approaches to understanding “soft power,” taking into account its historical, cultural, and political context.

Overall, the research contributes to the understanding of “soft power” as a key element in shaping modern geopolitics and highlights its relevance in the context of Central Asia’s strategic importance. It offers valuable insights into the complexities of interstate interactions and the ongoing struggle for influence in the region.

Key words: soft power, Central Asia, geopolitics, geoeconomics, influence, education, socio-cultural diplomacy.

К.С. Мухтарова, А.К. Паизова*

Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университеті, Алматы қ., Қазақстан

*e-mail: paizova_aidana@mail.ru

«Жұмсақ күштің» стратегиялық құралдары: жаһандық акторлардың Орталық Азиядағы тәжірибесі

Бұл мақала Орталық Азия елдеріне «жұмсақ күштің» геосаяси ықпалын зерттейді. Ол «жұмсақ күш» және «қатты күш» тұжырымдамалық шеңберлерін мемлекеттердің экономикалық, әлеуметтік және саяси саласына ықпал ету құралдары ретінде талдайды. Зерттеу осы тұжырымдамалардың динамикалық сипатын және геэкономикалық трансформациялар контекстіндегі маңыздылығын атап өтеді. Сонымен қатар ол Еуропалық Одақ, Иран, Қытай, Ресей, Америка Құрама Штаттары, Түркия және Жапония сияқты жетекші жаһандық ойыншылардың Орталық Азия елдеріне қолданатын «жұмсақ күштің» маңызды геэкономикалық және геосаяси ерекшеліктерін көрсетеді.

Мақалада білім беру жобалары мен гранттар, мәдени дипломатия, несиелер мен басқа да қаржылық көмек түрлерін ұсыну сияқты құралдардың маңызды рөлі қарастырылады. Бұл құралдар геосаяси ықпал үшін күресте ерекше маңызды, мұнда үкіметтік емес ұйымдар, әлеуметтік-мәдени институттар мен қайырымдылық бастамалары жетекші рөл атқарады.

Сонымен қатар, зерттеу Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінің, әсіресе посткеңестік аймақта серпінді дамып келе жатқан ел ретінде өзін көрсететін Қазақстанның қолданатын «жұмсақ күшінің» әлеуетін мойындайды.

Мақала «жұмсақ күштің» көп қырлы сипатын және оны өлшеудегі қиындықтарды, сондай-ақ әртүрлі актерлердің әсерін бағалаудағы қиындықтарды талдаумен аяқталады. Онда «жұмсақ күштің» динамикалық сипаты және оның жаһандық ықпал етуге ұмтылатын елдер үшін стратегиялық құрал ретінде дамуы атап көрсетіледі. Зерттеу «жұмсақ күшті» түсінуге кешенді

лық құрал ретінде дамуы атап көрсетіледі. Зерттеу «жұмсақ күшті» түсінуге кешенді тәсілдерді қолдану қажеттігін атап көрсетеді, оның тарихи, мәдени және саяси контекстін ескере отырып.

Жалпы алғанда, зерттеу қазіргі геосаясатты қалыптастырудағы негізгі элемент ретінде «жұмсақ күшті» түсінуге ықпал етеді және оның Орталық Азияның стратегиялық маңыздылығы контекстіндегі өзектілігін көрсетеді. Ол мемлекетаралық өзара іс-қимылдың күрделілігі және аймақтағы ықпал ету үшін жалғасып жатқан күрес туралы құнды түсініктер ұсынады.

Түйін сөздер: жұмсақ күш, Орталық Азия, геосаясат, геоэкономика, әсер, білім, әлеуметтік-мәдени дипломатия.

К.С. Мухтарова, А.К. Паизова*

Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, г. Алматы, Казахстан

*e-mail: paizova_aidana@mail.ru

Стратегические инструменты «мягкой силы»: опыт глобальных игроков в Центральной Азии

Данная статья рассматривает геополитическое влияние «мягкой силы» на страны Центральной Азии. В ней анализируются концептуальные рамки «мягкой силы» и «жесткой силы» как инструментов, используемых государствами для влияния на экономическую, социальную и политическую сферы. Исследование подчеркивает динамичную природу этих понятий и их актуальность в контексте геоэкономических трансформаций. Также в статье выделяются важные геоэкономические и геополитические особенности «мягкой силы», применяемой ведущими мировыми игроками, включая Европейский Союз, Иран, Китай, Россию, Соединенные Штаты, Турцию и Японию, в отношении стран Центральной Азии.

В статье рассматривается ключевая роль, которую играют такие инструменты, как образовательные проекты и гранты, культурная дипломатия, а также предоставление кредитов и других видов финансовой помощи. Эти инструменты особенно важны в борьбе за геополитическое влияние, причем ведущую роль играют неправительственные организации, социально-культурные институты и благотворительные инициативы.

Одновременно, исследование признает потенциал «мягкой силы», применяемой самими государствами Центральной Азии, особенно Казахстаном, который позиционирует себя как динамично развивающуюся страну в постсоветском регионе.

Статья завершается анализом многогранного характера «мягкой силы» и сложностей ее измерения, а также сложностей оценки влияния различных акторов. В ней подчеркивается динамичный характер «мягкой силы» и ее эволюция как стратегического инструмента для стран, стремящихся оказывать глобальное влияние. Исследование подчеркивает необходимость применения комплексных подходов к пониманию «мягкой силы», учитывая ее исторический, культурный и политический контекст.

В общей совокупности, исследование вносит вклад в понимание «мягкой силы» как ключевого элемента в формировании современной геополитики и подчеркивает ее актуальность в контексте стратегического значения Центральной Азии. Оно предлагает ценные сведения о сложностях межгосударственного взаимодействия и продолжающейся борьбе за влияние в регионе.

Ключевые слова: мягкая сила, Центральная Азия, геополитика, геоэкономика, влияние, образование, социокультурная дипломатия.

Basic provisions

By examining the geopolitical influence of “soft power” on Central Asian countries, the authors have concluded that this tool plays not just a passive role, but is an active factor that shapes regional politics and changes depending on the context. The authors’ hypothesis is that “soft power” is dynamic and relevant in the context of contemporary geoeconomic transformations, and its significance for Central Asia cannot be underestimated.

During their research, the authors have found that “soft power” is actively used by leading global players such as the EU, Iran, China, Russia, the

USA, Turkey, and Japan to strengthen their influence in the region and achieve their political goals. “Soft power” is implemented through various instruments: educational projects, cultural diplomacy, and financial aid. The execution of “soft power” strategies heavily relies on various civil society actors, including philanthropic organizations, cultural establishments, and NGOs, which serve as key instruments in this process.

The authors have also become convinced that “soft power” has significant potential in Central Asia itself. The countries of the region, particularly Kazakhstan, actively use “soft power”, positioning themselves as dynamically developing countries

and seeking to strengthen their influence in the post-Soviet space.

It is important to understand that “soft power” is not a static tool, but a complex and dynamic process of interaction, where both traditional tools (education, culture, finance) and more modern tools (technology, media, diplomacy) play a role. Therefore, the authors believe that “soft power” should not be viewed as an isolated phenomenon, but as part of complex and multifaceted processes of interaction that actively shape the geopolitical landscape in Central Asia.

Introduction

Currently, the Concept of “soft and hard power” is generating global interest among all countries and communities involved in the dynamically developing process of this phenomenon’s influence; this determines the relevance and necessity of studying it from the perspective of both theoretical and applied research questions.

Andreev (2023) emphasizes that this phenomenon requires the most comprehensive and deep rethinking, which implies the importance of studying its multilateral aspects, reflecting differences in political experience, mentality, traditions, historical experience, as well as in the institutional and technological capabilities of players in the international arena.

A special place in the presented study is occupied by various approaches aimed at studying the potential and volume of “soft and hard power” of key states as subjects of world politics, among which China, Iran, Russia, the USA, Turkey, and Japan should be named first. The analysis examines various “soft power” mechanisms employed internationally, with particular focus on how major powers outside the region exert their influence in Central Asian nations, which constitute the primary focus of this research.

The aim of the scientific article is the authors’ attempt to assess the nature and degree of implementation by global players of the most common approaches in the international practice of applying “soft and hard power”, which is due to the desire to form their own positive image in the process and result of using various instruments of influence on the Central Asian region. In addition, the authors of the article presented to readers comprehensively analyze the spheres and nature of positioning in Central Asian countries, where non-regional states implement strategic mechanisms, and as emphasized earlier, to expand and strengthen their geopolitical influence to a greater extent in the long term.

The scientific article examines expert opinions, analytical conclusions and recommendations of research groups and individual scientist-practitioners, as well as official documentation on social and political issues of “soft power” applied in the Central Asian region.

A fundamental conclusion of this study highlights the inherent difficulty in quantitatively assessing the impact magnitude of both “soft power” and “hard power” mechanisms, given their multidimensional nature and extensive spheres of influence. The challenge lies in precisely gauging the effectiveness of foreign states’ diverse influence instruments. The research emphasizes that when examining non-regional actors, their strategic relevance and significance within the region serve as crucial analytical criteria, particularly as these factors continuously evolve in response to transforming geopolitical dynamics.

The investigation’s methodology rests on multiple analytical pillars, encompassing theoretical foundations, temporal analysis across past and present contexts, and future projections. The research process combines systematic comparison, expert consultation, and structured analytical reasoning.

Key findings indicate that “soft power” operates as a dynamic framework, transforming in response to domestic conditions and international geopolitical developments. Its application methods demonstrate considerable adaptability, evolving alongside changing political strategies and external pressures affecting Central Asian nations.

Literature review

To date, numerous works have been written dedicated to the analysis of the global concept of the so-called “Soft Power” policy, revealing its goals and implementation directions. Among the many studies, attention should be paid to a number of scientific works and applied research (articles, reports, monographs) by international experts and organizations.

A multilateral review of the policy called “Soft Power” comes down to the interpretation and consideration of various approaches existing in world practice. Thus, the analysis of the conceptual apparatus and its characteristics are presented in this study by well-known foreign scholars-practitioners (Andreev, 2023; Nye, 2002, 2004, 2005; Garbuzarova, 2022; Lebedeva, 2014; Lebedeva & Faure, 2009).

Expert studies on this topic contain a country-specific approach, where well-known non-regional

players are clearly identified, actively participating in integration processes in Central Asian countries and declaring their preferences in organizing certain areas of influence. Among such studies, the works of Vlasov (2013), Naumkin et al. (2013), Fominykh (2010), and Garbuzarova (2022) are of scientific and practical interest and relevance.

While previous research has primarily focused on individual aspects of soft power or specific country cases, our study offers a comprehensive comparative analysis of multiple global actors' soft power strategies in Central Asia simultaneously. This research uniquely combines the examination of traditional soft power mechanisms with an analysis of their effectiveness in the specific cultural and political context of Central Asia, particularly focusing on how different external actors adapt their approaches to regional specificities. Furthermore, our study contributes to the existing literature by examining how Central Asian states themselves, especially Kazakhstan, have begun to develop and implement their own soft power strategies, an aspect that has received limited attention in previous research.

Research on Central Asian policy frameworks and regional interests spans multiple scholarly perspectives, from Nye's (2002, 2004, 2005) foundational work to recent contributions by Ibragimov (2023). These studies provide comprehensive insights into regional policy dynamics and implementation strategies.

A significant portion of the research examines how major international actors develop their geopolitical approaches in Central Asia. Special attention is paid to the EU's systematic development of socio-humanitarian cooperation with the region, marking distinct evolutionary stages in these relationships.

These scholarly works are connected by their shared focus on socio-cultural and political elements, examining them through the lens of global challenges and their role in reshaping the international system.

Description of materials and methods

The research methodology employed a comprehensive qualitative approach focused on systematic document analysis and theoretical framework examination. The study design emphasized multiple analytical dimensions to thoroughly investigate the implementation and impact of soft power strategies in Central Asia.

The primary analytical framework relied on an extensive review of theoretical literature, beginning

with Nye's foundational works (2002, 2004, 2005) and extending to contemporary academic discourse on soft power dynamics in Central Asia published between 2010 and 2023. This theoretical foundation was complemented by detailed examination of official policy documents, strategic frameworks, and institutional reports from major global actors engaging with the region, including the European Union, Iran, China, Russia, the United States, Turkey, and Japan.

The methodological structure incorporated a systematic comparative analysis of different actors' soft power approaches, evaluating various instruments such as educational programs, cultural initiatives, and financial assistance mechanisms. By comparing different countries' approaches, we were able to discover unique features in how each state promotes its interests in the region without resorting to forceful methods.

The work was carried out in three steps. First, we gathered and sorted all available materials from primary sources. Then we conducted an in-depth study of how different countries try to win sympathies in the region, paying attention to the peculiarities of their actions. Finally, we brought together all the findings to see the big picture of how the situation with external influence is developing in Central Asia.

The research was based on Nye's concept, which helps understand how countries use different types of influence – from soft persuasion to hard pressure. This helped us create clear measurements for evaluating different approaches and systematically organize all the methods of influence being applied in Central Asia.

Such a comprehensive view allowed us not only to understand how different powers try to win over the countries of the region but also to grasp how difficult it is to measure the success of such attempts. Thanks to this, we were able to delve deeper into both the theory and practice of international relations in Central Asia, which provided a more complete understanding of the geopolitical processes taking place there.

Results


The concept and feature of the "Soft Power" policy

Let us examine the essence of the "soft power" policy, whose potentialities elicit particular interest, specifically within the realm of scientific research practice.

The concept of “soft power” was practically first introduced by American political scientist Joseph Nye in his authored monograph “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power,” which was published in 1990. In this fundamental work, Nye defined “soft power” as a form of political power that allows achieving goals through the permanent use of distinctive manipulations of personal sympathy based on the voluntary desire of the soft power object itself (Ibragimov, 2023).

Nye’s (2002) work contains a clear comparative analysis of the author’s idea of “soft” and “hard” power, the fundamental difference between which can be visually demonstrated using a graphical representation (p. 9) – see Figure 1.

Note: The translation maintains the academic style and terminology of the original text. The references to Ibragimov (2023) and Nye (2002, p. 9) have been preserved as they appear in the original text, maintaining the integrity of the source citations.

POWER				
The spectrum of behavior	hard		soft	
	Coercion	Stimulation	Definition of goal setting	The attractiveness
				
The most likely resources	The command method		Cooperation	
	Power methods, sanctions	Payments and bribes	Institutions	Value, cultural attitudes, rules

The figure is based on Nye (2002).

Figure 1 – Comparison of «soft» and «hard» power

Figure 1 demonstrates the tools and actions of “soft power,” which include “language,” “culture,” and “public diplomacy.” Alongside this, the graph shows the tools of “hard power” as the opposite of “soft power,” including the concept of “coercion.” In simplified terms, according to Joseph Nye himself, the aforementioned definition can be described as when one country achieves policy implementation from other countries based on agreed desire. This approach can be called “cooperative” or “soft” power, which radically differs from the concept of “hard” or “command” power, designed to specifically direct other recipient countries (or donor countries – authors’ note) to do what the policy-bearing country imposes on them.

In other words, according to J. S. Nye’s conceptual position, “soft power” represents the attractiveness of certain aspects of policy, accompanied by the attractiveness of actions. In this approach, according to the above-mentioned concept, the attractiveness of the example (in this context, “an example of using soft power” – authors’ note) stands in contrast to compulsory measures and enforcement techniques, which constitute what is known as “hard power.”

Nye’s foundational research highlights that effective “soft power” implementation demands sub-

stantive and strategic activities beyond mere attractiveness. Though “soft” and “hard” power function as distinct forms of influence, Nye (2005) suggests that there is no clear dividing line between these approaches. He further elaborates on the delicate balance between legitimate soft power influence and manipulative methods.

Lebedeva’s (2014) analysis further develops this concept by positioning “hard” and “soft” power along a single continuum, suggesting these apparently opposing approaches exist on the same spectrum of influence rather than as isolated phenomena.

Another contemporary foreign researcher summarizes that the concept of “soft power” includes such a notion as the ability of socially organized actors in the public geopolitical environment to achieve their goals through persuasion and gaining sympathy from interacting participants in the process of political interactions.

This framing of the issue emerged at the turn of the 1980s-1990s, which reflected the evolution in that historical situation when “soft” power transformed from an auxiliary tool, which it had been for centuries, into a factor of strategic importance. At present, the concept of “soft power,” according to

Andreev (2023), is confidently becoming a key element of modern political thinking.

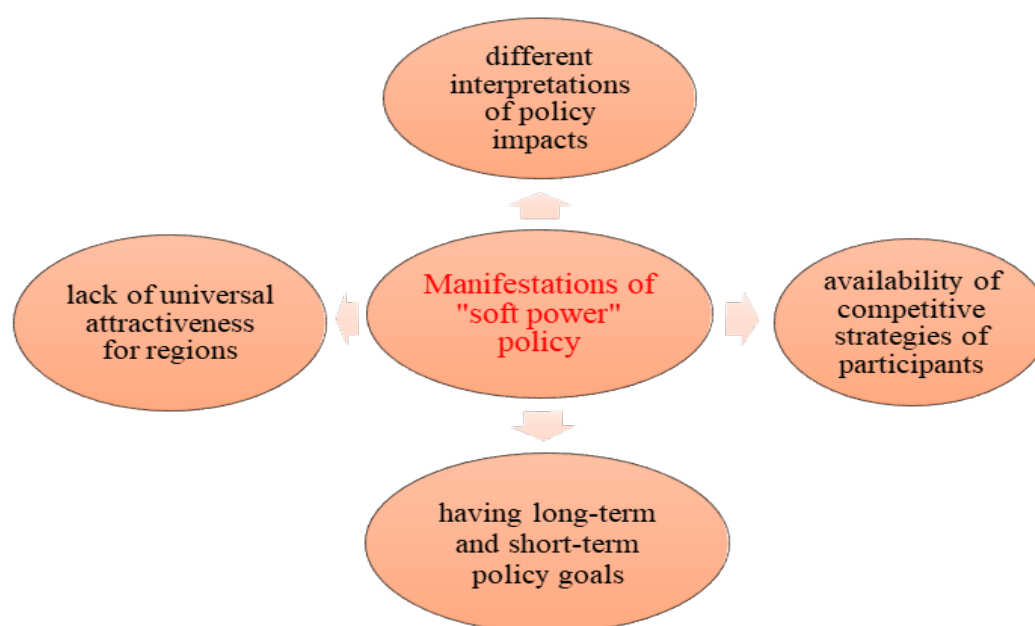
The core essence of “soft power” manifests through multiple defining elements: its nature as an evolving global phenomenon, its capacity to build regional support through ostensibly humanitarian aims (thereby enhancing extra-regional actors’ reputations), and its utilization of varied political influence tactics.

Lebedeva (2014) introduces a critical observation regarding “soft power” implementation: while

some actors with genuine “soft power” resources may choose not to utilize them, others lacking such capabilities might attempt to fabricate them through deceptive propaganda. However, she emphasizes that such manufactured attempts fall outside the true definition of “soft power.”

Let’s analyze the content of Figure 2 below – see Figure 2:

[Note: The text refers to a figure 2, which is not provided in the given excerpt. The analysis of this figure cannot be translated without the actual image.]



Compiled based on Panova (2011)

Figure 2 – Features of the manifestation of the «soft power» policy

The academic literature on “Soft Power” is extensive, yet according to Panova (2011), many scholarly works tend to focus primarily on attractiveness while overlooking several other important dimensions of this concept.

Nye (2004) highlights a critical bias in “soft power” research, which predominantly focuses on particular states while neglecting the role of other state and non-state actors who also exercise “soft power” influence.

This dynamic inevitably leads to competition among entities deploying “soft power” strategies, with policy effectiveness contingent on the development and implementation of these approaches.

The intensity of “soft power” influence can vary significantly, producing different levels of impact

on target populations. This variation allows for multiple interpretations of effectiveness and reach.

A comprehensive analytical framework becomes essential when studying “soft power,” as it must account for the diverse range of actors and their varying degrees of influence.

The inherent heterogeneity of societies means that “soft power” cannot achieve universal appeal. Panova (2011) illustrates this through the example of medical education: Indian students are particularly drawn to Russian medical education programs due to their practical alignment with India’s healthcare realities. The Russian approach to medical training is especially relevant for practitioners who will work in India’s rural and central regions, where access to advanced medical technology may be lim-

ited. However, this same educational system holds little attraction for students from the US or UK, where advanced medical technology is standard.

Furthermore, “soft power” initiatives can be categorized by their temporal objectives. Higher education typically serves long-term strategic goals, while mass media operations often target shorter-term outcomes. Additionally, states can simultaneously be both donors and recipients of “soft power” influence, creating complex webs of interaction where what appeals to one nation may hold little value for another.

Discussion

«Soft power» in the Central Asian region

The selection of Central Asian states as objects of «soft power» analysis is justified by several factors.

The region commands global attention due to its vast natural resource wealth, while its deep-rooted cultural traditions and historical legacy provide essential insights for “soft power” implementation strategies.

However, the regional landscape is complicated by multiple challenges: political instability, inter-ethnic tensions, Islamic radicalization, and narcotics trafficking. The influence of traditional clan and tribal structures further complicates conventional “soft power” deployment methods.

Nevertheless, the region remains strategically vital for numerous external powers, whose competing interests and objectives converge in Central Asia, making it a crucial arena for studying «soft power» dynamics.

To achieve a clear understanding of the goals and strategies of donor countries, let's consider the positions and influence on the Central Asian region of such key extra-regional players, in our view, as the European Union, Iran, China, Russia, the USA, Turkey, Japan, and others.

The European Union. The European Union's approach to soft power engagement in Central Asia has developed into a complex, multifaceted strategy that has undergone substantial transformation since these nations gained independence, as analyzed by Zhakiyanova (2023). This comprehensive approach manifests through the implementation of diverse projects that span multiple sectors, with particular emphasis on economic development initiatives and educational advancement programs.

The EU initially established its presence in Central Asia through the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS)

program, which served as the primary channel for European engagement in the region. This initiative created a foundation for sustained European influence by providing specialized technical support and expertise sharing.

The EU has since expanded its educational outreach through several prestigious academic programs. The evolution of these initiatives includes the Tempus program for modernizing higher education systems, followed by the Erasmus Mundus scholarship initiative, and currently the more comprehensive Erasmus Plus program. These educational frameworks have successfully established lasting academic partnerships and meaningful knowledge exchange between European and Central Asian educational institutions.

The EU's strategic position among other extra-regional actors has been strengthened through its consistent efforts to promote and expand its presence in Central Asia. According to Zhakiyanova's (2023) research, the European Union's regional approach rests on three fundamental pillars that distinguish it from other international actors: the strategic and systematic application of soft power mechanisms, its well-established historical democratic traditions, and its comprehensive framework for human rights advocacy.

The period following Central Asian independence has seen the European Union systematically developing bilateral relations in the socio-humanitarian sphere, resulting in today's stable and mature partnerships. This high-level diplomatic engagement is particularly evident in the proliferation of multilateral forums and dialogue platforms. Diplomatic interactions between the regions have taken various forms, including the “five plus one” meeting format and the special German direction of cooperation with Central Asia. Over recent years, more than eighty high-level meetings have been held, indicating the systematic nature and depth of these relationships. Recent studies show the European Parliament's particular interest in developing ties with Central Asian states in four key areas – education, science, culture, and tourism. These directions have proven themselves to be the most effective for strengthening long-term connections between the societies of both regions.

Germany has successfully developed its presence in Central Asia through soft power tools, giving primary attention to educational programs. The country has built a multi-level system of educational cooperation. In higher education, strong connections have been established between universities, enabling student and faculty exchanges, joint research, and

curriculum development. Such cooperation creates a solid foundation for long-term institutional relationships and knowledge exchange.

The German Academic Exchange Service serves as a key instrument of Germany's educational diplomacy in the region. This organization provides extensive opportunities for scholarships to students and researchers from Central Asia, funds academic projects, and supports German language learning. Thanks to this program, a community of Central Asian specialists maintaining close contacts with Germany has formed.

Iran. In the aftermath of Soviet dissolution, cultural ties between Iran and Central Asia underwent a remarkable transformation. Building on deep historical connections spanning millennia, Iran crafted a sophisticated strategy to rekindle relationships with its northern neighbors. This approach particularly emphasized their rich shared literary traditions, tapping into the profound legacy of Persian poetry and scholarly works that had historically flourished throughout these territories.

Language emerged as a cornerstone of this cultural bridge-building effort. Iranian institutions developed comprehensive initiatives that seamlessly blended language education, academic collaboration, and cultural programming. Such endeavors resonated particularly strongly in regions where Persian linguistic heritage had maintained deep historical significance. Iranian diplomatic outposts function as dynamic centers for these cultural initiatives. Their dedicated cultural departments orchestrate a wide spectrum of events – spanning intellectual forums to artistic exhibitions – while simultaneously providing vital backing to regional institutions focused on Iranian studies and Persian language instruction. Here the scope of this cultural engagement extends far beyond conventional exchange initiatives. Through careful emphasis on shared historical narratives and cultural reference points, Iran has established profound connections with Central Asian communities. These meticulously nurtured relationships shape regional dynamics and strengthen Iran's diplomatic influence across Central Asia.

This strategic approach illustrates the potential of leveraging historical and cultural bonds to forge genuine modern connections between societies. Through sustained commitment and emphasis on common heritage, Iran has established enduring pathways for cultural dialogue with its Central Asian neighbors, creating a robust foundation for continued regional engagement.

China. Central Asia has become an important focus of China's cultural outreach efforts in recent

years. The approach combines traditional cultural elements with modern media platforms, creating multiple channels for engagement with local populations. Through a carefully developed network, Chinese cultural content reaches audiences across the region in various forms – from books and films to digital media and online entertainment.

The distribution of these cultural materials follows a well-structured pattern, ensuring consistent presence across different platforms and formats. By sharing its cultural products through multiple channels, China has established a significant cultural footprint in Central Asian societies. This approach helps create familiarity with Chinese culture and perspectives among local audiences.

This cultural presence builds on broader engagement efforts, forming part of China's comprehensive strategy for developing relationships with Central Asian nations. The careful selection and distribution of cultural content helps shape understanding and perception of Chinese society and values throughout the region.

The strategy demonstrates how cultural engagement can serve as an effective tool for building meaningful connections between societies. Through sustained and systematic sharing of cultural materials, China has developed lasting channels for cultural dialogue with its Central Asian neighbors.

China's educational and cultural outreach in Central Asia is primarily channeled through its network of Confucius Institutes. These centers are strategically integrated into prominent regional universities, serving as comprehensive hubs for both language education and cultural engagement. The institutes facilitate extensive educational mobility programs, cultural activities, and scholarly partnerships, establishing enduring pathways for Sino-Central Asian cultural exchange and mutual understanding. Their role extends beyond traditional education to encompass broader cultural diplomacy objectives.

In its regional positioning, China deliberately cultivates an image as a peace-oriented nation, emphasizing its commitment to harmonious development and peaceful coexistence. This strategic narrative aligns with China's broader foreign policy objectives and its vision of regional development. Through this carefully constructed self-presentation, China seeks to establish itself as a reliable partner for Central Asian nations, emphasizing mutual benefit and shared development goals while promoting stability and cooperation in the region.

Russia. Russia's approach to Central Asia experienced a significant shift and deepening of diplomatic ties as it entered the twenty-first century,

signaling a new era in regional relations. (Garbuzarova, 2022). This transformation manifested through a sophisticated deployment of soft power mechanisms, with particular emphasis on humanitarian and informational channels of influence, representing a significant evolution in Russia's regional approach.

The institutionalization of Russia's soft power projection materialized through the establishment of several strategically significant organizations. The Russian World Foundation and the Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund emerged as key institutional pillars, charged with the dual mandate of promoting Russian linguistic and cultural interests while advancing comprehensive public diplomacy initiatives. The institutional landscape of Russia's regional engagement was significantly enhanced in 2008 through the creation of Rossotrudnichestvo. This new federal agency was established by presidential decree with dual objectives: to develop humanitarian cooperation initiatives and to strengthen connections with Russian-speaking communities across Central Asia.

Russia's foreign policy underwent a strategic evolution as it incorporated soft power elements, adapting these concepts to align with its regional goals. A defining moment in this process was the release of Russia's 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, which specially recognized the strategic importance of Central Asia. This document placed particular emphasis on maintaining regional stability, especially given the security considerations related to Afghanistan. The strategic significance of Central Asia in Russian foreign policy receives substantial corroboration through numerous policy documents and scholarly analyses (Lebedeva, 2014), with contemporary research highlighting the multifaceted nature of Russian influence in the region. This influence encompasses cultural and linguistic elements that carry equal weight with economic and military-political instruments in advancing Russian interests (Naumkin et al., 2013, p. 48).

Russia's soft power projection operates through a sophisticated network of channels, with particular emphasis on educational initiatives and cultural programs. The establishment of Russian-language educational institutions across Central Asia represents a cornerstone of this strategy, exemplified by institutions such as the Pushkin School in Turkmenistan and specialized schools in Kyrgyzstan. These educational initiatives are complemented by substantial scholarship programs and academic grants, creating sustainable pathways for students from the region to study at Russian institutions.

The impact of Russia's soft power approach can be measured through increasing youth participation in Russian-led initiatives, particularly within CIS Interparliamentary Assembly activities and Eurasian integration frameworks. According to Garbuzarova (2022), Russia has successfully maintained its position in the region's information landscape since the post-Soviet period, effectively transmitting its cultural perspectives and value systems throughout Central Asian societies.

Russia's strategic deployment of soft power demonstrates its profound grasp of Central Asia's unique cultural and historical context. This deep-rooted understanding enables Russia to craft and implement sophisticated approaches to maintaining its regional influence while advancing its broader strategic goals in the region.

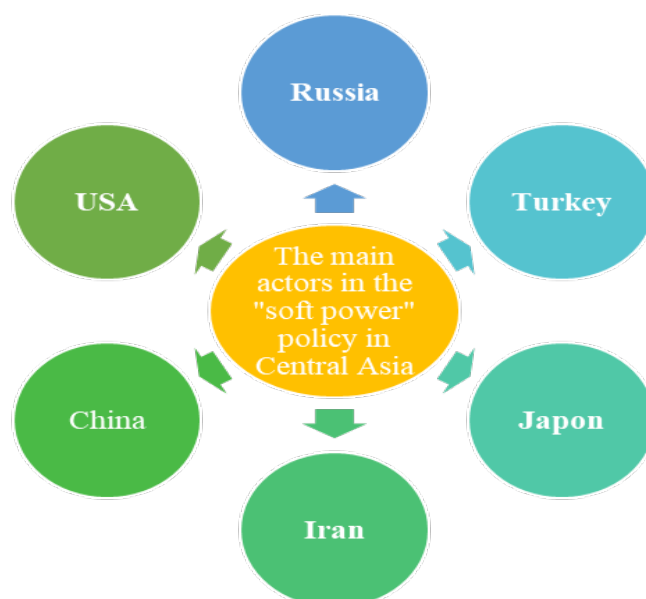
USA. The implementation of soft power strategies in Central Asia takes place amid intense international competition, where multiple global powers are actively pursuing their regional interests. Each major actor – from Western powers like the United States and European Union to Asian players such as China, Japan, Iran, and Turkey – deploys various soft power instruments to advance their strategic objectives in the region.

[Note: The text refers to a figure 3, which is not provided in the given excerpt. The analysis of this figure cannot be translated without the actual image.]

The early 2000s marked a crucial shift in American soft power implementation, especially after the events of September 11, 2001. As Lebedeva (2014) observes, this period saw an enhanced focus on soft power strategies, particularly aimed at improving America's image among Muslim populations worldwide.

During the 1990s, America's involvement in Central Asia was primarily characterized by economic support through USAID programs. According to Garbuzarova (2022), this approach combined financial assistance with the promotion of democratic values, utilizing a wide-ranging network of educational organizations, NGOs, and academic exchange initiatives.

Western institutional presence in the region has been substantial, with both American and European organizations playing significant roles. Vlasov (2013) documents the active participation of various institutions, from the Soros Foundation and IREX to German organizations like the Adenauer Foundation, Ebert Foundation, Goethe Institute, and DAAD, all contributing to soft power projection through their grant programs.



Note: compiled by the authors

Figure 3 – The main actors in the «soft power» policy in Central Asia

The American soft power approach in Central Asia places significant emphasis on education, incorporating multiple elements: from language training and academic exchanges to faculty development and educational consulting. USAID's influence extends into various sectors, including public health (with specific focus on AIDS and tuberculosis control), democracy building, human rights, environmental conservation, and economic advancement programs.

A key development in educational partnerships was the creation of the Kazakh-American University (KAU), which represents a successful fusion of American and Kazakhstani educational approaches. The spread of American cultural presence in the region operates through various established channels. Different institutions work together – from dedicated resource hubs and embassy cultural sections to networks of libraries providing access to materials and information. Additionally, volunteer organizations maintain ongoing programs in certain countries, with particularly active engagement in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Turkey. The foundation of Turkish engagement with Central Asia builds on centuries-old bonds uniting these peoples through shared Turkic heritage, cultural traditions, and linguistic family ties. This natural affinity supports broad regional cooperation, backed by multibillion-dollar investments and development programs shaped by Turkey's own modernization path since the 1920s – an experience

particularly relevant for Central Asian nations seeking to balance tradition with progress.

Turkish influence operates through several key institutions working in coordination. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) manages infrastructure and development projects worth hundreds of millions annually. TURKSOY organizes major cultural festivals, arts exhibitions, and literary exchanges across the region. The Parliamentary Assembly (TurkPA) facilitates regular meetings between lawmakers on issues from trade to security. Together, these bodies create multiple channels for sustained engagement between Turkey and Central Asian societies.

In the educational sphere, Turkish presence is particularly visible through a network of schools and universities established since the 1990s. The Turkish-Kazakh partnership illustrates this well – by 2023, they jointly operated dozens of educational institutions, from primary schools to research centers. Religious cooperation has also expanded, with the Diyanet Foundation supporting the construction of over 40 mosques and maintaining numerous educational programs that combine religious studies with modern curriculum.

This strategic approach leverages historical connections while serving contemporary interests. Annual trade volumes between Turkey and Central Asian states have grown significantly, exceeding \$10 billion in recent years. Cultural programs reach millions through language courses, student

exchanges, and media partnerships. These concrete initiatives demonstrate how Turkey has transformed traditional bonds into practical modern relationships throughout Central Asia.

The strategy shows how deep historical ties can evolve into meaningful present-day cooperation when supported by substantial institutional frameworks and resources. However, this influence operates within a complex regional environment where multiple powers – from China to Russia to Western nations – also seek to maintain their presence and pursue their interests.

Japan. Japan's engagement with Central Asia represents a distinctive model of soft power projection, characterized by its emphasis on economic development paradigms and humanitarian cooperation within a multilateral framework. The nation's approach to regional influence is particularly notable in its cultural diplomacy initiatives, encompassing targeted investments in cultural and educational programming designed to enhance its regional presence.

A key component of Japan's soft power strategy involves the systematic promotion of Japanese linguistic and cultural elements throughout Central Asia. This cultural diplomacy serves the dual purpose of strengthening Japan's regional image while facilitating deeper cross-cultural understanding.

According to Usmonov and Inagaki (2021), Japan's interaction with Central Asian states has been predominantly structured around financial support mechanisms, specifically through the Official Development Assistance (ODA) framework, complemented by technical cooperation initiatives. However, their research indicates that Japan's overall regional impact has been constrained by significant geographic limitations. The substantial physical distance separating Japan from Central Asian territories presents considerable logistical challenges, particularly in the context of resource trade relationships. While Japanese commercial entities have demonstrated interest in Central Asian natural resources, the complexities and costs associated with long-distance transportation have rendered such economic partnerships less economically viable compared to arrangements with geographically proximate nations.

This complex interplay of cultural diplomacy, economic assistance, and geographical constraints characterizes Japan's nuanced approach to developing its presence in Central Asia, reflecting a carefully calibrated strategy that acknowledges both opportunities and limitations in regional engagement.

Conclusion

The theoretical significance of the research lies in its contribution to the scientific understanding of the "soft power" phenomenon. In addition to the widely known concept of J. Nye, the scientific article presents other alternative opinions and assessments, as well as scientific and practical conclusions of researchers and organizations. The authors believe that the practical significance of the "Soft Power" Concept is determined by the demands of the current geoeconomic and geopolitical situation in the world.

The development of alternative interpretations of "soft power," based on the development of historical experience and the influence of global players, determines the multiplicity of "soft power" models, which are more extensively considered by the authors within the framework of the socio-humanitarian aspects of the research.

The formation and dissemination of "soft power" is a special global process, which is associated with many factors that shape and fill the Concept of "soft power." The key factors are the history of the development of a country with its socio-humanitarian conditions of formation; the state of that society at a particular moment, its culture, traditions, and mentality.

According to the authors' analysis, Central Asia emerges as one of the most attractive regions for soft power implementation, based on three fundamental criteria they identify:

The primary criterion emphasizes Central Asia's significance for numerous global actors, predominantly due to its abundant natural resources. The second criterion acknowledges the region's distinctive feature of possessing ancient cultures and traditions, where ignorance of these elements by extra-regional states implementing soft power policies can lead to outcomes contrary to their intended objectives. The third criterion recognizes the region's complexity, characterized by global challenges including: political stability issues within Central Asian states, interethnic conflicts, radical Islamic trends, drug trafficking, and the presence of established relationships heavily influenced by clan and inter-tribal dynamics, which complicates traditional soft power implementation mechanisms.

The authors' core research provides a detailed examination of the geoeconomic soft power policies directed toward Central Asian countries by major global powers: the European Union, Iran, China, Russia, the United States, Turkey, and Japan. They present these powers' socio-humanitarian strate-

gic aspects as simultaneously universal in certain aspects while exhibiting specific characteristics unique to each extra-regional actor.

Their research analyzes the implementation pathways of soft power policies by these aforementioned states, focusing on methods that increasingly impact positive perception and authority within so-

cio-humanitarian interactions and international relations on the global stage.

The authors particularly highlight that Central Asian states themselves are actively employing soft power potential, with Kazakhstan identified as especially proactive in this direction among post-Soviet nations.

References

- Андреев, И. А. (2023). Феномен «мягкой» силы: концептуальные, институциональные и технологические аспекты [Электронный ресурс]. https://www.rudn.ru/storage/media/science_dissertation/e7254a9e-6a62-4d96-a000-694fcc9aef70/vV2rTjp2Lx18uIBXuCx10ca6iwwouY6s6Rayjhd.pdf
- Fominykh, A. (2010). Projecting “soft power”: American and Russian public diplomacy in post-Soviet Central Asia. *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 13(3), 73-86.
- Гарбузарова, Е. Г. (2022). Центральная Азия в условиях трансформации мирового порядка [Автореферат докторской диссертации]. Москва.
- Ибрагимов, Ж. Ю. (2023). Мягкая сила Южной Кореи и Японии: привлекательность и потенциал в Центральной Азии. *Молодой ученый*, 22(469), 365-368. <https://moluch.ru/archive/469/103384/>
- Лебедева, М. М. (2014). «Мягкая сила» в отношении Центральной Азии: участники и их действия. *Вестник МГИМО-Университета*, 2(35), 47-55. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2014-2-35-47-55>
- Лебедева, М. М., & Фор, Ж. (2009). Высшее образование как потенциал «мягкой силы» России. *Вестник МГИМО-Университета*, 6, 200-205.
- Наумкин, В. В. и др. (2013). Интересы России в Центральной Азии: содержание, перспективы, ограничители. *Российский совет по международным делам*, 10. http://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/RIAC_Central_Asia.pdf
- Nye, J. S. (2002). *The paradox of American power: Why the world's only superpower can't go it alone*. Oxford University Press.
- Nye, J. (2004). Soft power and higher education. *EDUCAUSE*. <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/FFP0502S.pdf>
- Nye, J. (2005). Soft power matters in Asia. *The Japan Times*.
- Панова, Е. П. (2011). Высшее образование как потенциал «мягкой силы» государства. *Вестник МГИМО-Университета*, 2(15), 157-161.
- Usmonov, F., & Inagaki, F. (2021). The Japanese policy of “soft power” and its specifics in Central Asia. *CA&C Press AB*. <https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.21.1.03>
- Власов, А. (2013). Россия и Центральная Азия: упущенные возможности и новые перспективы. *Российский совет по международным делам*. http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=1392#top
- Жакиянова, А. М. (2023). Академическая мобильность как инструмент мягкой силы в системе международных отношений в XXI веке [Автореферат докторской диссертации]. https://dissovet.ablaikhan.kz/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/27.11_%D0%BF%

References

- Andreev, I. A. (2023). Fenomen “myagkoy” sily: kontseptual'nye, institutsional'nye i tekhnologicheskie aspekty [The phenomenon of “soft” power: conceptual, institutional and technological aspects]. https://www.rudn.ru/storage/media/science_dissertation/e7254a9e-6a62-4d96-a000-694fcc9aef70/vV2rTjp2Lx18uIBXuCx10ca6iwwouY6s6Rayjhd.pdf
- Fominykh, A. (2010). Projecting “soft power”: American and Russian public diplomacy in post-Soviet Central Asia. *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 13(3), 73-86.
- Garbuzarova, E. G. (2022). Tsentral'naya Aziya v usloviyakh transformatsii mirovogo poryadka [Central Asia in the context of the transformation of the world order] [Abstract of doctoral dissertation]. Moscow.
- Ibragimov, J. Y. (2023). Myagkaya sila Yuzhnoy Korei i Yaponii: privlekatel'nost' i potentsial v Tsentral'noy Azii [The soft power of South Korea and Japan: Attractiveness and potential in Central Asia]. *Molodoy uchenyy*, 22(469), 365-368. <https://moluch.ru/archive/469/103384/>
- Lebedeva, M. M. (2014). “Myagkaya sila” v otnoshenii Tsentral'noy Azii: uchastniki i ikh deystviya [“Soft power” in relation to Central Asia: Participants and their actions]. *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta*, 2(35), 47-55. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2014-2-35-47-55>
- Lebedeva, M. M., & Faure, J. (2009). Vysshee obrazovanie kak potentsial “myagkoy sily” Rossii [Higher education as the potential of Russia's “soft power”]. *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta*, 6, 200-205.
- Naumkin, V. V., et al. (2013). Interesy Rossii v Tsentral'noy Azii: sodержanie, perspektivy, ogranichiteli [Russia's interests in Central Asia: Content, prospects, constraints]. *Rossiyskiy sovet po mezhdunarodnym delam*, 10. http://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/RIAC_Central_Asia.pdf
- Nye, J. S. (2002). *The paradox of American power: Why the world's only superpower can't go it alone*. Oxford University Press.
- Nye, J. (2004). Soft power and higher education. *EDUCAUSE*. <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/FFP0502S.pdf>

Nye, J. (2005). Soft power matters in Asia. The Japan Times.

Panova, E. P. (2011). Vysshee obrazovanie kak potentsial “myagkoy sily” gosudarstva [Higher education as the potential of the “soft power” of the state]. Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta, 2(15), 157-161.

Usmonov, F., & Inagaki, F. (2021). The Japanese policy of “soft power” and its specifics in Central Asia. CA&C Press AB. <https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.21.1.03>

Vlasov, A. (2013). Rossiya i Tsentral’naya Aziya: upushchennye vozmozhnosti i novye perspektivy [Russia and Central Asia: Missed opportunities and new prospects]. Rossiyskiy sovet po mezhdunarodnym delam. http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=1392#top

Zhakiyanova, A. M. (2023). Akademicheskaya mobil’nost’ kak instrument myagkoy sily v sisteme mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy v XXI veke [Academic mobility as a tool of soft power in the system of international relations in the XXI century] [Abstract of doctoral dissertation]. https://dissovet.ablaikhan.kz/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/27.11_%D0%BF%

Information about authors:

Mukhtarova Karlygash Saparovna – Doctor of Economics, Professor at the Faculty of International Relations, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: karlusha777mukhtarova@gmail.com)

Paizova Aidana Kanatkyzy – 2nd year PhD student at the Faculty of International Relations, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: paizova_aidana@mail.ru)

Авторлар туралы мәлімет:

Мухтарова Карлыгаш Сапаровна – экономика ғылымдарының докторы, Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университетінің халықаралық қатынастар факультетінің профессоры (Алматы қ., Қазақстан, e-mail: karlusha777mukhtarova@gmail.com)

Паизова Айдана Қанатқызы – Әл-Фараби атындағы Қазақ ұлттық университетінің халықаралық қатынастар факультетінің 2-курс докторанты (Алматы қ., Қазақстан, E-mail: paizova_aidana@mail.ru)

Информация об авторах:

Мухтарова Карлыгаш Сапаровна – доктор экономических наук, профессор факультета международных отношений Казахского национального университета имени аль-Фараби (г. Алматы, Казахстан, E-mail: karlusha777mukhtarova@gmail.com)

Паизова Айдана Қанатқызы – докторант 2-курса факультета международных отношений Казахского национального университета имени аль-Фараби (г. Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: paizova_aidana@mail.ru)

Previously sent May 28, 2024.

Re-registered September 27, 2024.

Accepted December 5, 2024.