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RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA BETWEEN OFFICIAL DISCOURSE AND LOCAL PRACTICE

After 2022, Russia's normative corpus subjects the concept of soft power to a fundamental reorientation. The language of organic attractiveness gives way to that of civilizational confrontation, while categories such as "state-civilization", "civilizational code", and the defence of traditional spiritual and moral values displace the universalist vocabulary that had structured Russian public diplomacy throughout the 2010s. This article examines how that doctrinal shift is being realized at the practical and communicative level in Central Asia. Drawing on poststructuralist discourse analysis and a unified analytical framework built on three operational categories – self-construction, relational positioning (in its spatial, temporal, and ethical dimensions), and the instrumentalization of culture. The study analyzes two doctrinal documents (the 2022 Humanitarian Policy Concept and the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept) alongside a corpus of Instagram posts from the Russian branches in Astana, Bishkek, and Dushanbe (2022–2026). Frame-based content analysis reveals systemic, non-random variation across the three cases and confirms a three-part typology of doctrinal implementation: filtering adaptation in Kazakhstan, gradual convergence in Tajikistan, and open transmission in Kyrgyzstan. The typology correlates with the degree of military-political integration with Russia and with the architecture of Russia's institutional presence, indicating that doctrinal enshrinement provides a repertoire that local Russian houses selectively activate.

Keywords: soft power, Russian public diplomacy, Russian houses, Central Asia, civilizational discourse, state-civilization, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan.

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Ресми дискурс пен жергілікті тәжірибе арасындағы Ресейдің Орталық Азиядағы жұмсақ күші

2022 жылдан кейін ресейлік нормативтік корпусында жұмсақ күш ұғымының елеулі түрде қайта бағдарлануы байқалады. Негізгі тартымдылық тілі өркениеттік қақтығыс тіліне жол беруде, ал «мемлекет-өркениет», «өркениеттік кодекс» және дәстүрлі рухани және моральдық құндылықтарды қорғау сияқты санаттар 2010 жылдары Ресейдің қоғамдық дипломатиясының өзегі болған әмбебап сөздік қорын ығыстыруда. Аталған мақалада Орталық Азияда бұл доктриналық өзгерістің тәжірибелік-коммуникативтік деңгейде қалай жүзеге асырылып жатқандығы қарастырылады. Зерттеу постструктуралистік дискурс талдауына және үш санатты қамтитын бірыңғай аналитикалық негізге сүйенеді, бұл – Ресейдің гуманитарлық актор ретіндегі өзін-өзі қалыптастыруы, Ресейдің кеңістік, уақыт және этика сияқты өлшемдерге негізделген басқа акторлармен қарым-қатынасындағы орны және мәдениетті сыртқы саясат құралы ретінде пайдалану. Зерттеудің эмпирикалық негізін екі доктриналық құжат, атап айтқанда 2022 жылғы Гуманитарлық саясат тұжырымдамасы мен 2023 жылғы Сыртқы саясат тұжырымдамасы, сондай-ақ Астана, Бішкек және Душанбедегі Орыс үйлерінің 2022–2026 жылдар аралығындағы Instagram жарияланымдары құрайды. Фреймдік контент-талдау үш кейс арасындағы жүйелі әрі кездейсоқ емес айырмашылықтарды айқындап, доктринаны жүзеге асырудың үш моделін анықтауға мүмкіндік береді: Қазақстандағы таңдамалы бейімделу, Тәжікстандағы біртіндеп жақындасу және Қырғызстандағы ашық тарату модельдері. Бұл типология Ресейдің әскери-саяси интеграция және институционалдық қатысу деңгейіне байланысты. Алынған нәтижелер доктриналық нұсқау гуманитарлық саясатты іске асырудың бірыңғай сценарийін ұсынбайтындығын көрсетеді. Керісінше, жергілікті Орыс үйлері қабылдаушы мемлекеттің саяси, символдық және инфрақұрылымдық жағдайына қарай таңдамалы түрде іске қосатын мағыналар мен коммуникативтік ресурстар репертуарын қалыптастырады.

Түйін сөздер: жұмсақ күш, Ресейдің қоғамдық дипломатиясы, орыс үйлері, Орталық Азия, өркениеттік дискурс, мемлекет-өркениет, Қазақстан, Қырғызстан, Тәжікстан.

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Российская мягкая сила в Центральной Азии между официальным дискурсом и локальной практикой

После 2022 года в российском нормативном корпусе происходит заметная переориентация понятия мягкой силы. Язык органической привлекательности уступает место языку цивилизационного противостояния, а такие категории, как «государство-цивилизация», «цивилизационный код» и защита традиционных духовно-нравственных ценностей, вытесняют универсалистскую лексику, которая структурировала российскую публичную дипломатию на протяжении 2010-х годов. В статье рассматривается, как этот доктринальный сдвиг реализуется на практико-коммуникативном уровне в Центральной Азии. Исследование опирается на постструктуралистский дискурс-анализ и единую аналитическую рамку, построенную вокруг трех операциональных категорий, таких как самоконструирование, реляционного позиционирования в его пространственном, временном и этическом измерениях, а также инструментализации культуры. Эмпирическую основу исследования составляют два доктринальных документа, Концепция гуманитарной политики 2022 года и Концепция внешней политики 2023 года, а также корпус Instagram-публикаций Русских домов в Астане, Бишкеке и Душанбе (2022–2026 г.). Фреймовый контент-анализ на выявляет системные, неслучайные различия между тремя кейсами и подтверждает трехчастную типологию реализации доктрины: фильтрующую адаптацию в Казахстане, постепенную конвергенцию в Таджикистане и открытую трансляцию в Кыргызстане. Данная типология коррелирует со степенью военно-политической интеграции с Россией и с архитектурой российского институционального присутствия. Полученные результаты показывают, что доктринальное закрепление не задает единого сценария реализации гуманитарной политики, а формирует репертуар смыслов и коммуникативных ресурсов, которые локальные Русские дома активируют избирательно в зависимости от политического, символического и инфраструктурного контекста принимающего государства.

Ключевые слова: мягкая сила, российская публичная дипломатия, российские дома, Центральная Азия, цивилизационный дискурс, государство-цивилизация, Казахстан, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан.

Introduction

J. Nye's concept of soft power has anchored international relations theory for three decades and has been among the foreign policy concepts most readily appropriated by non-Western states (Nye, 2004). Russia, like China, Turkey, and Iran, took up soft power not as a finished theoretical construct but as a resource for self-interpretation in foreign policy. From the mid-2000s onward, the term entered Russia's political vocabulary, was codified in the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept (Foreign Policy Concept, 2013), and came to underwrite the institutional architecture of Russia's cultural and humanitarian work abroad, including Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russkiy Mir Foundation, programs supporting compatriots, and Russian Houses network.

The radical transformation of the international context since 2022 raises questions about the future of this concept in official Russian discourse. The adoption of the Concept of the Russian Federation's Humanitarian Policy Abroad (2022) and the Russian Federation's Foreign Policy Concept (2023) reflects a significant reconfiguration of how the state

articulates its humanitarian influence (Concept of the Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad [HPC], 2022; Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation [FPC], 2023). The language of organic attractiveness gives way to that of civilizational confrontation. The concept of soft power is increasingly displaced by notions such as the "state-civilization" and the "civilizational code"; while the promotion of universal values is supplanted by the emphasis on defending traditional spiritual and moral values. These developments are not merely stylistic, they indicate a transformation of the conceptual structure of Russian public diplomacy, marked by a decreasing use of the term "soft power" and its replacement with civilizational categories.

Central Asia is an especially productive site for tracing how this shift translates in practice. The region has long been treated as a priority space for Russia's humanitarian presence, sustained by developed institutional structures and a substantial Russian-speaking population. Yet the relationships individual states maintain with Russia diverge sharply, ranging from strategic alliance within the CSTO format to multi-vector diplomacy. This inter-

nal heterogeneity makes the region a natural setting for comparative analysis, since a single doctrinal framework is implemented across three distinct national contexts.

The article examines how far the post-2022 conceptualization of soft power in Russia's normative corpus aligns with the practical-communicative activities of Russian Houses in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and which doctrinal principles are implemented consistently or differentiated across these country contexts.

To address this question, this study draws on poststructuralist discourse analysis and constructivist approaches to foreign policy identity. The analysis proceeds through three operational categories: self-construction, relational positioning (in its spatial, temporal, and ethical dimensions), and the instrumentalization of culture. The study applies this apparatus to both the doctrinal corpus and the Instagram corpus of Russian houses in Astana, Bishkek, and Dushanbe (2022–early 2026), comparing doctrinal principles with their practical implementation through frame-based content analysis.

Literature review

In the academic literature, Russian soft power is predominantly interpreted as a state-centered and instrumentally conceived form of external influence, where strategic planning and the leading role of state institutions are central (Wilson, 2015). J. L. Wilson argues that the Russian model of soft power emerged as a response to the perception of Western humanitarian instruments not as a neutral mechanism of attraction, but as tools capable of affecting state sovereignty and internal stability. In this view, the external promotion of values and institutional models is framed as interference in domestic affairs, while soft power itself is understood not as society-driven process but as an instrument shaped and controlled by the state. At the institutional level, this approach is implemented through state structures, primarily *Rosstrudnichestvo*, and draws on the accumulated Soviet experience of cultural and humanitarian engagement abroad.

Sergunin and Karabeshkin's position aligns with this approach; conceptualizing soft power as a set of foreign policy tools that encompass economic appeal, cultural and educational channels, engagement with compatriots, and the involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church, alongside institutional infrastructure such as the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation and its affiliated entities. The authors argue that the

effectiveness of this model is constrained by the predominance of administrative mechanisms, duplication of functions, and a cautious perception among partner countries, which intensified following the crises of 2008 and 2014–2015 (Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015).

K. Nourzhanov takes up the regional dimension in Central Asia, showing that the institutional architecture of Russia's soft power developed gradually and that, within the broader system of foreign policy instruments, it has long played a supporting role to military-political and economic levers. Central Asia emerges as a priority area for engagement, where the most durable results lie in educational sphere, while cultural and informational instruments depend heavily on social context and do not always produce stable trust (Nourzhanov, 2021). Hudson's empirical work brings the picture to ground in Kazakhstan, where she finds a more pronounced attractiveness in the cultural and value spheres against more restrained socio-economic assessments and highlights the role of Kazakhstani political and media actors, whose public statements consistently frame the alliance with Russia (Hudson, 2022).

Tsvetkova and Ruschin provide a clearer picture of the institutional and substantive evolution. They trace a gradual shift away from prioritizing cultural and humanitarian formats toward models of strategic information impact and observe that the expansion of organizational structure and resource base has not translated into a qualitative gain in influence. Their key finding is that there is a gap between quantitative indicators of presence and actual impact, which depends on audience perception and the competitive information environment (Tsvetkova & Rushchin, 2021).

This article addresses three issues that have received less attention in the existing literature. First, the 2022–2023 conceptual shift has not yet been looked at as a whole, since most studies either predate it or mention it only in passing. Second, doctrinal analysis and the study of public diplomacy practices are typically conducted separately. Conceptual work rarely reaches the level of implementation, and empirical studies of regional activity are not always considered within the context of existing normative frameworks. Third, country-level variation in public diplomacy practices in Central Asia is mostly described case by case, with less attention to how doctrinal elements are taken up differently depending on the bilateral relationship and institutional setup on the ground.

Methods and methodology

The source corpus is organized at two levels. The first, normative level comprises two doctrinal documents: the *Concept of the Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad* (HPC, 2022) and the *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (FPC, 2023), which together form a hierarchical pair. The Foreign Policy Concept defines the broader geopolitical framework, while the Humanitarian Policy Concept operationalizes it through instruments, target audiences, and geographical priorities. The second, practical-communicative level consists of Instagram publications of Russian Houses in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan for the period 2022–early 2026 (Russian House in Astana, n.d.; Russian House in Bishkek, n.d.; Russian House in Dushanbe, n.d.). The choice of these three cases is justified by their shared membership in the CSTO and the EAEU, the presence of operating Russian Houses with regularly updated Instagram communication, and significant differences in the character of their bilateral relations with Russia.

The analytical framework of this study is based on poststructuralist discourse analysis and constructivist approaches to foreign policy identity. Discourse is understood not as a neutral reflection of reality, but as a relational system of meanings through which actors define themselves, others, and the world around them. In this perspective, identity is not fixed in advance; it is constructed through relations of similarity, difference, inclusion, exclusion, and hierarchy. Campbell's contribution is important for understanding foreign policy as a discursive practice that reproduces political identity through representations of danger, difference, and alienation (Campbell, 2010). Wendt's constructivist approach is relevant for understanding that relations between actors are socially constructed and can take various forms (Wendt, 1999). Hansen's model of foreign policy discourse analysis provides a useful methodological framework for tracing how identity constructions are linked to spatial, temporal, and ethical representations (Hansen, 2012).

On this basis, the study does not consider the category of the "Other" as a fixed enemy figure. Instead, it uses the broader category of relational positioning. This allows the analysis to identify how external actors, target audiences, institutional partners, and politically significant spaces are positioned in relation to the Russian Self. Thus, the analysis distinguishes between actors represented as Others and politically significant spaces that function as sites of

symbolic legitimation. These spaces can be represented through narratives of protection, historical justice, humanitarian responsibility, reconstruction, youth mobility, and cultural integration.

The analysis is structured as a qualitative content analysis conducted in two stages. In the first stage, stable thematic clusters are inductively identified within the material. At the normative level, these include segments of doctrinal texts dealing with the target audiences, tools, and priorities of humanitarian policy. At the practical-communicative level, they include the main thematic areas of Russian Houses' Instagram communications such as education and the Russian language, historical memory, cultural promotion, science and technology, youth mobility, inclusion and civil society, compatriots and the diaspora, humanitarian cooperation, traditional values, and representations of politically significant spaces.

At the second stage, the material is analyzed using three operational categories developed for this study. The first is Self-construction, which refers to the attributes through which Russia is presented as a humanitarian actor: custodian of civilizational heritage, provider of education, defender of traditional values, center of a multipolar world, and source of educational and cultural opportunities.

The second category is relational positioning. It concerns how external actors, target audiences, institutional partners, and politically significant spaces are positioned in relation to the Russian self. This category is operationalized in three dimensions. The spatial dimension reflects how territories and symbolic sites are incorporated into Russia's humanitarian geography through youth, educational, scientific, commemorative, or cultural formats. The temporal dimension reflects the interconnectedness of the past, present, and future, particularly through references to the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet legacy, contemporary memorial practices, and narratives of continuity, protection, and restoration. The ethical dimension reflects how responsibility, justice, humanitarian duty, suffering, solidarity, traditional values, and protection are invoked in representations of Russia's role.

The third category is the instrumentalization of culture. It refers to the ways in which humanitarian instruments, such as education, language, historical memory, literature, music, cinema, youth programs, and volunteer projects are discursively linked to broader foreign policy goals and embedded in specific identity constructions. Applying this unified analytical framework to both levels of the corpus

makes it possible to compare doctrinal principles with their practical and communicative implementation in the Instagram activity of Russian houses, and to identify which elements are reproduced, adapted, muted, or selectively activated in different country contexts.

One limitation should be noted. The Instagram corpus records official public self-presentation and does not provide direct access to the reception of these narratives by local audiences. Therefore, the question of reception remains a separate area for further research.

The Conceptualization of Soft Power in the Normative Corpus: The Doctrinal Shift of 2022–2023

Applying the analytical categories of Self-construction, relational positioning, and the instrumentalization of culture to the normative corpus reveals three interrelated shifts that move the Russian conceptualization of soft power away from Joseph Nye's classical model of attraction and embed it in a protective-civilizational logic.

In Nye's reading, soft power rests on organic attractiveness $\frac{3}{4}$ the capacity of a state's culture, political values, and foreign policy practices to induce desired behavior in others without coercion or material incentives. The analyzed corpus approaches soft power within a fundamentally different logic, presenting it as a tool operating under conditions of constant external pressure. Paragraph 13 of the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept characterizes the policy of the United States and its "satellites" as a "new type of hybrid warfare" aimed at "undermining Russia's constructive civilizational role", limiting its sovereignty, and "destroying its territorial integrity" (FPC, 2023, para. 13). Paragraph 8 designates the "imposition of destructive neoliberal ideological attitudes" that contradict traditional spiritual and moral values as a "widespread form of interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states" (FPC, 2023, para. 8), and paragraph 9 frames Western efforts to replace international law with a "rules-based order" as part of the same systemic pressure (FPC, 2023, para. 9). Within this logic, humanitarian engagement is conceived not as a space of organic attraction but as a sphere in which Russia simultaneously defends itself and exerts counter influence and this position is institutionalized in paragraph 43, where the goals of international humanitarian cooperation are formulated jointly as strengthening Russia's role in the global humanitarian space and "countering the campaign of Russophobia" (FPC, 2023, para. 43) conducted by unfriendly states

The 2022 Humanitarian Policy Concept, adopted a year earlier, reflects a transitional stage in this evolution. While it retains language of partnership, mutual enrichment of cultures, and non-interference (HPC, 2022, paras. 4, 16), it already signals a shift. Paragraph 9 records "increasing attempts to diminish the significance of Russian culture" and "discredit the Russian world, its traditions, and ideals, replacing them with pseudo-values", while paragraph 10 frames the "politicization of the humanitarian sphere" and its use as a "tool of pressure on states" as threats to global security (HPC, 2022, paras. 9–10). Remarkably, paragraph 30 explicitly describes Russian culture as an "instrument of soft power" and this formulation that detaches the term from organic appeal and reattaches it to counter influence (HPC, 2022, para. 30). Such wording detaches the term soft power from its organic appeal and reconnects it with the logic of counter-influence. The 2022 Concept can be therefore read as the starting point of a doctrinal transformation that the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept completes by integrating humanitarian action into the framework of overt confrontation. Both texts operate with a discursively divided field. Unfriendly states and their "Russophobia campaign" are positioned as sources of threat (FPC, 2023, paras. 13, 43; HPC, 2022, paras. 9–10), while the CIS countries, the Global South, and the "friendly Islamic civilization" are positioned as partners in building a just multipolar order" (FPC, 2023, paras. 18, 43.5, 56). Soft power thereby loses its universal scope and acquires a selectively targeted, alliance-based form of communication.

A further marker of this shift is the use of the term itself. In the 2022 Humanitarian Policy Concept it appears only three times, each time narrowed to a specific instrumental register. Russian culture as a means of neutralizing anti-Russian sentiment (HPC, 2022, para. 30) and new media as the most effective soft power channel for promoting the Russian language and culture abroad (HPC, 2022, paras. 26, 72). In the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, the term disappears entirely. The concept that occupied a central place in the foreign policy language throughout the 2010s is reduced to a residual technical reference and ultimately removed from the highest-order doctrinal text.

The conceptual gap is filled by an alternative concept. Paragraph 4 of the FPC constructs Russia as a "special state-civilization", a major Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power that "has united the Russian people and other peoples that make up the cultural and civilizational community of the Russian World"

(FPC, 2023, para. 4). Paragraph 5 reinforces this by assigning Russia a “historically formed unique mission” of maintaining the global balance of power and building a multipolar international system (FPC, 2023, para. 5), while paragraph 46 defines Russia as “the core of the civilizational community of the Russian World” (FPC, 2023, para. 46). On the humanitarian side, paragraphs 65–66 of the HPC introduce the “cultural (civilizational) code” as the principal mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of identity (HPC, 2022, paras. 65–66), while paragraph 106 asserts that contemporary Russian society itself is “united by a single cultural (civilizational) code” (HPC, 2022, para. 106). Where Nye’s soft power presupposes the dissemination of universal values through their adoption by other actors; “state-civilization” and “civilizational code” are oriented toward the internal consolidation of a particular, bounded identity, which is then projected outward as a structural element of a multipolar order anchored in the rejection of Western dominance (FPC, 2023, paras. 18.7, 19.1), not as a candidate for universal acceptance.

The third shift concerns the role assigned to humanitarian instruments such as education, culture, support for compatriots, and the promotion of the Russian language. In the classic interpretation, these serve as tools of external attraction, aimed at shaping a positive image of the state among foreign audiences. The corpus reconfigures their function. They operate simultaneously as instruments of external influence and as means of preserving and transmitting a specific value model. Paragraph 15.8 of the FPC establishes the “strengthening of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values” as a national interest in foreign policy (FPC, 2023, para. 15.8), while paragraph 19.9 prioritizes the consolidation of international efforts aimed at “respecting and protecting universal and traditional spiritual and moral values” and neutralizing attempts to impose “pseudo-humanistic and other neoliberal ideological attitudes” (FPC, 2023, para. 19.9). In the HPC Paragraph 13.1, the protection of these values stands at the head of the list of national interests in the humanitarian sphere (HPC, 2022, para. 13.1), and paragraph 19 articulates the corresponding Self-identification directly (HPC, 2022, para. 19). In response to the “growing global demand for traditional values, primarily family values”, and to “the aggressive imposition of neoliberal views by a number of states”, Russia “is increasingly perceived abroad as the custodian and protector of traditional spiritual and moral values” and of the spiritual heritage of

world civilization. Thus, values function in two registers at once, as an object of external pressure and as a resource for positioning addressed primarily to non-Western audiences (FPC, 2023, paras. 18.7, 56; HPC, 2022, para. 19), producing a logic of competing legitimizations in which universalist vocabulary is retained while its content is detached from Western interpretations.

After 2022, Russian official discourse does not abandon the concept of soft power, but reorients it. It embeds the concept in a logic of integrating civilizational confrontation and a selectively targeted, alliance-based mode of communication and operationalizes it for the post-Soviet space through paragraph 43.5 of the FPC, which designates “the formation of a unified humanitarian space between the Russian Federation and the CIS member states” and the preservation of “centuries-old civilizational and spiritual ties” as an explicit priority (FPC, 2023, para. 43.5). Doctrinal enshrinement, however, does not by itself answer how this logic is implemented in public diplomacy practice, or whether it is reproduced uniformly or selectively adapted across the country contexts. That question requires turning to the practical-communicative level.

A Comparative Analysis of the Practical and Communicative Activities of the Russian Houses

Before turning to a substantive analysis, it is necessary to establish the structural parameters of the three corpora, since the configuration of communicative activity itself already represents a significant discursive characteristic. The corpora of Instagram posts from Russian Houses in Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Astana for the period 2022–beginning of 2026 vary significantly in volume, thematic diversity, and stability of communication (Russian House in Astana, n.d.; Russian House in Bishkek, n.d.; Russian House in Dushanbe, n.d.).

The Bishkek corpus, comprising approximately 2.96 million characters, 6,200 hashtags, and 1,626 unique tags, is the largest and most thematically diversified. The distribution of publications by year is relatively stable: 286/300/202/229/87 for 2022 and for the beginning of 2026 respectively. The Dushanbe corpus, comprising 3,141 hashtags, and 356 unique tags, demonstrates the opposite pattern: a sharp decline in activity after 2022, with 74/24/10/20/8 annual date mentions for the same time period. This indicates a narrowing of the repertoire and the standardization of communication. The Astana corpus, comprising 2,239 hashtags, and 387 unique tags, is characterized by a rise in activity by

2024: 126/210/250/192/70. This reflects institutional mobilization around the celebration of the 225th anniversary of A. S. Pushkin and the “More than 30” project, dedicated to the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan.

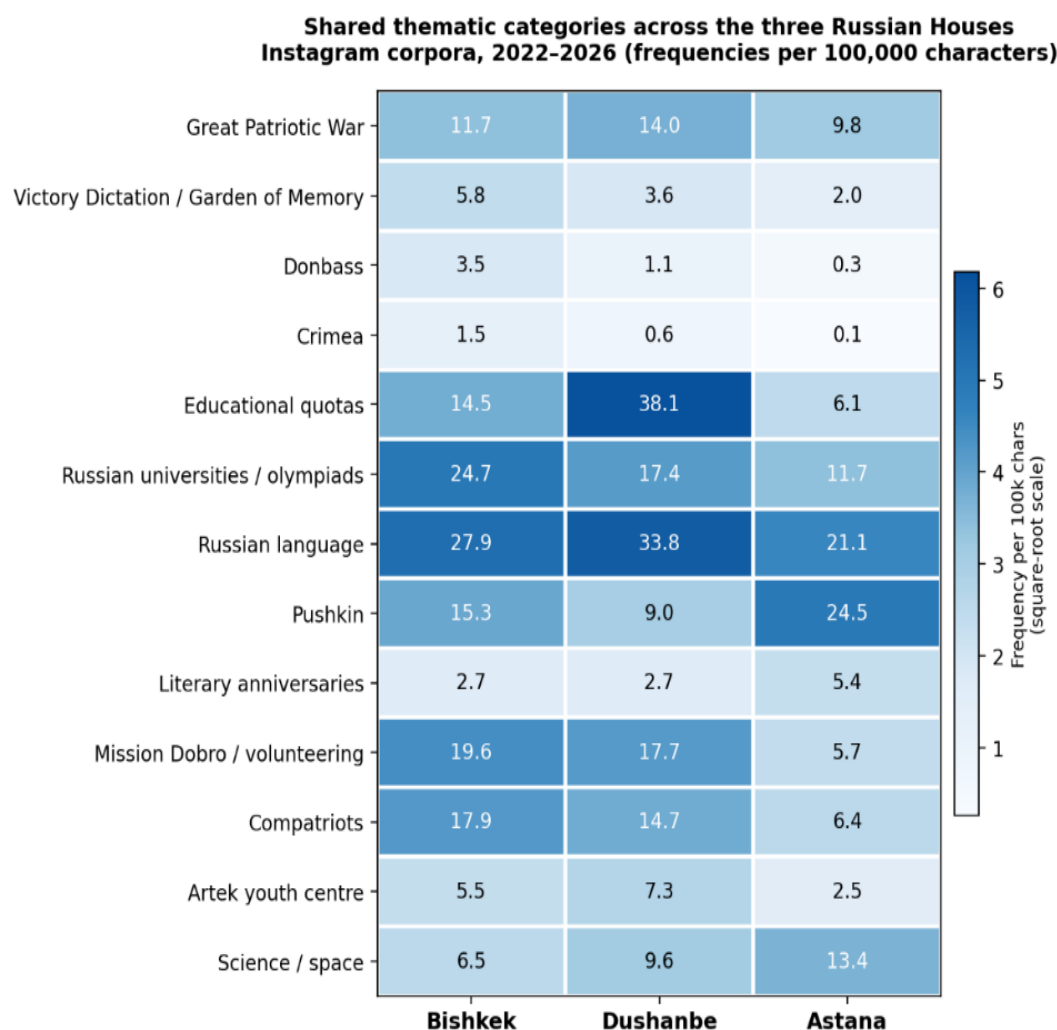
These structural differences demonstrate that the three Russian Houses do not implement a single communicative model, but rather localized strategies in which the normative principles of Russian humanitarian policy are adapted to the political, symbolic, and infrastructural conditions of the host state.

Figure 1 maps the thematic profile of three corpora across thirteen categories grouped along

the methodological axes of the study: relational positioning (the Great Patriotic War, the Victory Dictate/Garden of Memory, Donbass, Crimea), Self-construction as a provider of education and bearer of culture (educational quotas, Russian universities and Olympiads, the Russian language, Pushkin, literary anniversaries), the instrumentalization of culture in its ethical register (Mission Dobro/volunteering, compatriots, the Artek youth center), and Self-construction as a center of science (science/space). Frequencies are normalized per 100,000 characters, which makes the three corpora directly comparable despite the differences in absolute volume reported above.

Figure 1

Shared thematic categories across the three Russian Houses' Instagram corpora, 2022 – early 2026 (frequencies per 100,000 characters)



Note. Compiled by the authors

Three patterns emerge that the rest of this section unpacks in detail. First, Bishkek concentrates markers of the post-2022 doctrinal discourse: Donbas (3.5), Crimea (1.5), Mission Dobro/volunteering (19.6), and compatriots (17.9) all occupy peak in this corpus. Second, Dushanbe is dominated by the education channel: education quotas reach 38.1, the highest single value in the figure, while politically sensitive frames (Donbas 1.1, Crimea 0.6) remain marginal. Third, Astana inverts the priority order, with Pushkin (24.5) and science/space (13.4) are its strongest frames, while new-territories markers practically absent (Donbas 0.3, Crimea 0.1). These quantitative contours match the qualitative readings developed in the following sections.

Application of the first operational category as the Russian Self reveals three stable, but distinctly emphatic, models of self-presentation.

In the Bishkek corpus, Russia is constructed through the simultaneous mobilization of several roles like a provider of educational opportunities (94 mentions of education in Russia, 43 of quotas, 49 of higher education), a bearer of classical culture (33 mentions of literature, 27 of music, 22 of classical music, 35 of theatre, including the ongoing activities of the Stanislavsky Theatre School #StanislavskyKG), a custodian of civilizational heritage, and a moral opponent of the “collective West.”

It should also be added that the Bishkek Russian House is the only one of the three openly conveys the most politically sensitive elements of official Russian discourse: 12 references to “Russophobia”, 8 to “special military operations”, and 13 to the categories of “multipolar world” and “civilization”. Publications on humanitarian aid to Donbas and condemnations of the cancellation of a Dostoevsky course at the University of Milan “due to the special military operation in Ukraine” directly reinforce the narrative of protecting Russian culture from external discrimination. In this way, an image of Russia is being constructed in Bishkek as simultaneously an educational hub, a cultural donor, and a moral and political pole in the context of global conflict.

Russian house in Dushanbe’s self-presentation is the most institutionally focused and ideologically restrained. The image of Russia as a “civilizational pole” is not constructed here, instead, a narrower but institutionally stable model of “Russia – education plus memory” is in effect. Russia’s dominant role is that of a provider of higher education: the top hashtags for this group (#QuotaCampaign – 62, #RussianUniversities – 34, #UniversityFair – 12, #School for Young Journalists – 58, #RDCours-

es – 18) shape the image of Russia as a practically attainable educational prospect for Tajik youth. The second pillar is the shared memory of the Great Patriotic War (#IRememberAndAmProud, #Victory-Dictation, #ImmortalRegiment, #WWII). This can be explained by Tajikistan’s cautious foreign policy stance and the significance of labor migration in Russian-Tajik relations, which requires maintaining the functional neutrality of communication.

The Astana Model differs from the two previous ones in both structure and tone. The central project for the 2022–2024 period is the international initiative #MoreThan30 (98 mentions) which is coincided with the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Russia and Kazakhstan and accompanied by 52 mentions in the “Russian-Kazakh” category. Here, Russia is portrayed not as a senior center or a civilizational pole, but as an equal strategic partner in institutionalized bilateral relations.

Alongside the partner framework, the Astana branch is presenting the most extensive literary anniversary program: 740 mentions of Pushkin (twice as many as in Bishkek, and nearly nine times as many as in Dushanbe), separate campaigns #Pushkin225 and #Pushkin224, anniversary projects dedicated to Mayakovsky (130 years), Rachmaninoff (150 years), Tsvetaeva, and Griboyedov, as well as popular science formats such as #ProScience, #Gagarin90, and #space. Here, Russia is constructed through the image of a bearer of high culture and science, rather than through religious-civilizational or military-political categories. It is important to note that references to “special operation” and “Russophobia” are virtually absent, while references to the “collective West” are embedded in more neutral cultural and historical contexts.

Spatial positioning reveals the most notable differences among the three cases. In the Bishkek corpus, Kyrgyzstan is incorporated into Russian humanitarian space through a network of localized events, such as tours in Osh (465 mentions) and the Issyk-Kul Region (86), the reconstruction of the memorial landscape (the “Kyzyl-Asker” Fraternal Cemetery as the site of the annual “Garden of Memory” event), and the integration of the “Manas” epic into the narrative of Russian researchers in Central Asia (through the figures of V. V. Radlov, P. P. Semenov-Tyan-Shansky). Kyrgyzstan is presented as a space historically and scientifically “discovered” by Russia and continuing to be embedded in its cultural infrastructure.

The Dushanbe corpus constructs a spatial map centered on two locations as Dushanbe (1,855 men-

tions) and Khujand/Khodjent (162 + 386), thereby creating an image of a dual institutional presence. Localization is achieved by including the national holiday of Navruz (74 mentions) in the Russian House's program, establishment of its offices at addresses symbolic of Tajik national identity (Ismail Somoni Avenue), and collaborating with the Russian-Tajik (Slavic) University. Humanitarian space here is more modest in scope but institutionally rooted.

The Astana corpus is shaping the humanitarian space through a series of literary and educational initiatives, such as the #PushkinWalksThroughKazakhstan project (62 mentions), the Unified Children's Dictation, the Total Dictation, the Easter Festival, poetry battles, and film screenings. Kazakhstan is incorporated into Russian humanitarian geography primarily as a space for literary commemoration and educational and enlightenment activities, rather than as a venue for joint Soviet-style memorial practices.

In addition, references to Donbas and the so-called "new territories" appear in all three corpora, though the functional significance of these references varies. In Bishkek, Donbas is presented as an object of humanitarian concern and moral solidarity (aid shipments from Makhachkala and Khakassia). In Dushanbe and Astana, references to the DPR and LPR appear almost exclusively in enumerative constructions (lists of participants in multilateral delegations, CIS+ library and youth projects), which allows these territories to be included in the general humanitarian framework without making them the subject of separate support.

The temporal framing in all three textual corpora is based on the narrative of the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet legacy, though its specific configuration varies. In Bishkek, the memory of the Great Patriotic War is integrated into the broader pantheon of the peoples of Russia (the "Peoples of Russia" section-Tatars, Belarusians, etc.) and into the memorial infrastructure (the Fraternal Cemetery). Succession is constructed as a continuation of Soviet internationalism in the form of modern Russian-Kyrgyz friendship (hashtags #RussiaKyrgyzstan, #RussiaKyrgyzstan), as well as through regular anniversary publications about Russian and Central Asian researchers.

In Dushanbe, commemorative program is structurally oriented toward restoring and maintaining a shared Soviet narrative. This is reflected in reference to the Alley of Glory, the improvement of military burial sites, the heroism of 250,000 Tajikistanis

on the front lines of the Great Patriotic War, and Alexander Mironenko, a Hero of the Soviet Union who died in Afghanistan. The temporal logic here is to maintain the continuity of Soviet memory as a resource for legitimizing the contemporary Russian presence. The post-Soviet rupture is not addressed.

In Astana, the temporal construction is most complex and two-layered. On the one hand, the framework of shared Soviet memory is remains active, but with a nationalized modification: "Kazakhstani soldiers", "KazakhstanRemembers", the transfer of the remains of "Kazakhstani soldiers" to their relatives, and ceremonies at the State Military History Museum of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Memory of the Great Patriotic War is constructed as a Kazakhstani memory, in which Russia emerges as a partner rather than the sole custodian of the narrative. On the other hand, through the #MoreThan30 project, the temporal axis shifts from the Soviet past to the thirty-year history of post-Soviet bilateral relations, thereby affirming Kazakhstan's subjectivity as an independent state.

Ethical positioning is the clearest point of difference between three Russian houses. In Bishkek, this dimension is both the most developed and highly politicized. The corpus contains 677 references to "compatriot" and "protection", as well as publications on humanitarian aid to Donbas, criticism of "Russophobia", the defense of Russian culture, including the case of Dostoevsky at the University of Milan, and the volunteer movement #MissionDobro, which appears 21 times. In this case, Russia is presented as an actor that has moral responsibility to protect compatriots, cultural heritage, and the right to its own historical narrative.

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In Dushanbe, the ethical positioning is much narrower. It is main built around humanitarian cooperation, educational support, and shared historical memory, without moving into openly contested political themes. References to protection and responsibility appear mostly in connection with the Great Patriotic War and support for the Russian universi-

ties. The broader narrative of “defending the Russian world” as a form of confrontation with the West is not developed here.

In Astana, the ethical framework is constructed through the categories of partnership, shared responsibility for preserving historical memory and cultural education. This includes the returns of soldiers’ remains, the Stalingrad lesson and projects aimed at retaining archival documents about the wartime heroism of Kazakhstanis. Russia is therefore positioned not as a protector, but as a partner in memory politics and a cultural actor. The idea of “protection” appears mainly in literary and commemorative contexts, such as the safeguarding the legacy of classical writers, rather than in relation to political confrontation.

The third operational category, the instrumentalization of culture, makes it possible to identify which specific formats of cultural activity are prioritized and how they are linked to broader foreign policy objectives.

Bishkek presents the broadest and most diverse range of activities, including educational quotas, competitions, which are referenced 71 times, master classes with 33 mentions, festivals and concerts, referenced 77 times, theatrical initiatives, including #StanislavskyKG as an independent long-term project, volunteering referenced 19 times, youth forums with 20 mentions, photo projects, and literary events. A distinctive feature is the clear integration of volunteer and youth activities into the political framework through #MissionDobro, support for Special Military Operation participants, humanitarian aid to Donbas. Thus, culture is mobilized as a resource for both soft power and moral mobilization.

In Dushanbe, by contrast, activity is concentrated around three main areas. These are educational quotas and admission campaigns for Russian universities, Russian language programs, including the School of Young Journalists, Living Classics, preparatory courses, and commemorative events. Cultural formats, such as concerts by the Turetsky Choir, touring performances are integrated into the institutional calendar, but they do not constitute an independent ideological framework. In this case, culture functions primarily as a supplement to the educational channel and as a means of sustaining shared memory, while more ambitious projects of “civilizational” positioning are absent.

In Astana, culture is instrumentalized in a more refined way, mainly through classical literary and scientific heritage. The dominant formats are anniversary commemorations devoted to Pushkin’s 225

anniversary, Mayakovsky’s 130th, Rachmaninoff’s 150th, Griboyedov’s 230th, Tsvetaeva’s 130th, educational projects for children and young people, including Unified Children’s Dictation, Children’s Book Week, #Givebookswithlove, which appears 70 times, as well as popular science film lectures, and #ProScience formats. Literary classics and scientific heritage become the main “language” of Russia’s humanitarian presence in Astana. This language is neutral, prestigious, and compatible with Kazakhstan’s official position. Ideologically sensitive formats are absent or marginal.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis makes it possible to formulate a typology of three local communicative strategies for Russian humanitarian policy in Central Asia.

The Bishkek model can be described as expansive and ideologically dense. It is marked by a broad thematic range, active self-construction through civilizational and moral categories, open transmission of politically contested narratives, and the mobilizing use of youth and volunteer formats. This model shows the closest alignment between the normative and doctrinal level of Russian humanitarian policy and its local implementation.

The Dushanbe model is compressed and functional. It is based on a narrow and institutionally stable range of activities focused on education and shared memory. Politically sensitive categories, such as Russophobia, multipolarity, special military operation, are clearly absent, while publication activity declines after 2022. This model demonstrates the priority of functional tasks, above all maintain the flow of students to Russia and supporting the Russian language, broader over symbolic expansion.

The Astana model is partnership-oriented and culturally educational. It emphasizes the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations as its key temporal frame, gives priority to classical literary and scholarly heritage over political and civilizational categories, carefully neutralizes the most pressing elements of Russia’s official discourse, and nationalizes shared memory through the category of “Kazakhstani soldiers.” This model is adapted to Kazakhstan’s dual position as a Russia’s strategic partner and as a state pursuing a balanced, multi-vector foreign policy.

A comparison of the three corpora reveals that the unified normative framework of Russian human-

itarian policy is implemented through significantly different local strategies. Within these strategies, some elements of doctrinal discourse are reproduced, others are muted, and others are selectively strengthened depending on the political, symbolic, and infrastructural conditions of the host state. This means that Russian Houses do not operate merely as channels for transmitting a single message from the centre. Rather, they function but as points of localized adaptation, where the construction of Russian identity and its relative positioning are reassembled anew in each country.

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