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Challenges to the Russia's Soft Power in the Eurasian Economic Union

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Abstract. The paper aims to study the changes to Russia's soft power inside the Eurasian Economic Union. The Union has been considered a tool of Russian soft power, aiming to establish a common market combined with a common information space. The paper examines the consequences of the "Special military operation", started in 2022, on the Russian soft power resources in international news reporting and public discussions in the mass media of the member-states. To achieve this goal, the foreign policy analysis method has been applied. It has been found that Russia has put extensive efforts into building a prominent country image and promoting strong leadership in global politics. The Eurasian Economic Union is one of the successful integration projects for Russia, which combines both soft and hard power. However, recently, more and more countries in the Union prefer exclusive cooperation with Russia to a multi-vector policy. The process gradually gathers momentum in the Eurasian Economic Union, especially in Armenia. It has been found that many points of disagreement provoke further decline of the symbolic leadership of Russia. The paper reports recent challenges to Russia's soft power, which have been provoked by the changes in the international journalism and media policy in the member states.

Keywords: international relations, soft power, Eurasian Economic Union, foreign policy, media policy, political communication, Armenia, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan.

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Introduction

The article highlights the problems of soft power policy applied by Russia toward the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) after 2022. The Eurasian Economic Union is an economic union of several post-Soviet states in Eurasia. The Union was created in 2014 and includes five states: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. Political regimes and domestic political institutions of the member states are quite similar. However, the diplomatic departments of these countries emerged from the Soviet school of diplomacy, which underwent significant changes in the course of government reforms over more than three decades after the collapse of the USSR. Russia tries to use soft power to develop a unified foreign policy in the EAEU [9].

Until recently, Russia considered public diplomacy and soft power to be recognized as an integral part of modern international relations. This was directly stated in the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (2016). In particular, paragraph 9 was formulated as follows: "An integral component of modern international policy is the use of soft power tools to solve foreign policy problems, primarily the capabilities of civil society, information, and communication, humanitarian and other methods, and technologies, in addition to traditional diplomatic methods". Among all the EAEU countries, Russia has the greatest resources and the cultural and historical basis for successfully applying the soft power policy. For example, in 2019, Russia entered the ranking of 30 countries with the highest level of soft power in the World [15]. Russia primarily develops its informational influence through the mass media. For example, the TV channel Mir is a part of the national digital broadcasting packages in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. However, Russia has also created public organizations for engaging soft power abroad: Rossotrudnichestvo, Gorchakov Foundation, RIAC, etc. Russia used to host major international events such as the World Cup, the Valdai Club, the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, the Eastern Economic Forum, etc. The Russian language remains a significant lingua franca in Central Asia, though its prominence is challenged by rising nationalism and the increasing influence of other global languages. While the post-Soviet era has seen a resurgence of national languages and the encroachment of English, Russian continues to serve as a practical tool for interethnic communication, education, and economic activity.

On the other hand, there were many questions about the effects of implementing soft power tools and especially communication technologies on Russia's foreign policy. Ageeva argues that Russia's soft power evolution has the following periodization: the rise (2000-2007/2008), institutionalization (2007/2008-2013/2014), and tightening (2013/2014 - till present) [1]. We think that the new stage of Russia's soft power has started after 2022. The paper aims to study the challenges to Russia's soft power inside the Eurasian Economic Union in that period.

Literature review

The post-war dynamics of international relations and the development of the theory of international relations led to the emergence of the idea of public diplomacy, which, on the one

hand, opposes the ideas of classical “shadow” diplomacy, making political decision-making in world politics transparent, but also complements the arsenal of foreign policy activities with new, mainly non-state participants. Scholars have yet to form a unified understanding of the definition of public diplomacy since it was first proposed in 1965 [2]. At present, there are still discussions in this field on “traditional public diplomacy” and “new public diplomacy”. It is now believed that, since the turn of the twenty-first century, public diplomacy has shown signs of transition and transformation from the former to the latter. Public diplomacy can be defined as a diplomatic activity wherein the government is the initiator, the public is the object, and relevant policy measures, including foreign policy, are introduced through cultural exchanges, media publicity, and other means. At present, academic discussions on the effect of public diplomacy generally associate it with the concept of soft power as proposed by Joseph Nye, and tend to take the size of a country’s soft power as the core measure through which to evaluate the effect of its public diplomacy [18].

According to Nye, soft power is “the ability to achieve goals in foreign policy, using the attractiveness of one’s country, which, in turn, is based on the attraction of culture (both high and mass), political ideals and values, as well as on foreign policy actions that are legitimate in the eyes of other states” [10]. Nye claims that soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Or, more specifically, “soft power is the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction to obtain preferred outcomes” [9]. We argue that Nye’s definition of soft power follows the relational power approach formulated by Robert Dahl [3]. There are two ways to define power within the realm of political science. One is the “power-as-resources” approach, which treats power as an asset and attribute inherent in the state, emphasizing the material resources needed to constitute it. The other is the “relational power” approach, which emphasizes the impact of power on human behavior. Based on the relational power approach, Dahl gave a classic definition that is widely accepted and cited in the field of international relations: The so-called power is the ability of A to get B to do something he or she would otherwise not do. The “power-as-resources” approach defines power as what we now commonly refer to as “capability”. The “relational power” approach emphasizes the effect of the “power” of one actor on the behavior of other actors [2].

What Nye calls soft power emphasizes the influence of one actor, rather than of the resources he owns, on the behavior of another actor. Nye points out that the common ground between soft and hard power is that both kinds of power can change the behavior of other countries. The difference between them consists in bringing about this change in different ways. Soft power works through attraction, and hard power through coercion or inducement. As Aisulu Seilkhan points out, “Nye’s concept of “soft power” has expanded the state’s view in international relations, incorporating the core concepts of the liberal theory of international relations, but also incorporating some aspects of neorealism, such as the role of the state and military might” [14].

In 2017, the idea of ‘sharp power’ was suggested. Sharp power, as stated by Christopher Walker, takes “advantage of the asymmetry between free and unfree systems, allowing authoritarian regimes both to limit free expression and to distort political environments in democracies while simultaneously shielding their own domestic public spaces from democratic

appeals coming from abroad" [18]. This idea has been widely debated regarding foreign policy executed by modern authoritarian regimes [16].

In 2020, Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman introduced the theory of informational autocracy [4]. Their work explores how modern autocrats use information manipulation, propaganda, and selective censorship to maintain control while minimizing outright repression. Informational autocracy represents a sophisticated evolution of traditional authoritarian regimes, leveraging the complexities of information dissemination and manipulation to sustain power while maintaining a semblance of legitimacy. Informational autocracies differ significantly from their classical counterparts in their approach to information control. Traditional autocracies rely heavily on overt repression and censorship to maintain power. In contrast, informational autocracies use subtler techniques to manage the flow of information, employing strategies such as propaganda, controlled pluralism, and selective censorship. These regimes understand that outright repression is less effective in a globally connected world where information can bypass traditional barriers.

Informational autocracies invest heavily in state-controlled media and communication platforms to propagate favorable narratives. By crafting a controlled narrative, they can shape public perception and opinion. This approach includes not only promoting positive stories about the regime but also discrediting opponents and presenting them as threats to national stability and prosperity. These regimes often allow a limited degree of political competition and dissent, creating an illusion of democracy and pluralism. By permitting controlled opposition, they can monitor dissenting voices and co-opt or neutralize potential threats. This also helps in presenting the regime as tolerant and democratic to both domestic and international audiences. Rather than blanket censorship, informational autocracies employ selective censorship to target specific threats. This approach includes shutting down particular websites, arresting key opposition figures, and infiltrating dissident networks. The goal is to prevent the organization of effective opposition without drawing undue attention to widespread repression. Leveraging modern technology, these regimes employ sophisticated surveillance and data analytics to monitor public sentiment and preemptively address potential sources of unrest. This allows for targeted interventions that can neutralize threats before they materialize into significant challenges to the regime's authority.

Method

The study applies a mixed research methodology. The methodology combines two research methods. As the main research method, the work uses the comparative method, which is usually used to analyze the similarities and differences between different countries in the study of world politics. By examining several cases, this method allows researchers to identify patterns, generalizations, and meaningful conclusions about the international system. One of the key advantages of the comparative method is its ability to provide a deeper understanding of complex phenomena. The creators of big international relations theories like neorealism or the civilizational approach tend to study the largest countries and overlook the smallest countries [13]. By systematically comparing cases, researchers can identify causal relationships,

evaluate the effects of variables, and evaluate the validity of existing theories. In addition, the comparative method allows researchers to gain insight into the processes of change. By tracking developments across countries and over time, scientists can identify patterns of transformation, understand drivers of change, and evaluate the effectiveness of different policy approaches. This aspect is especially valuable for politicians who want to learn from the experience of other countries. In our case, we are talking about the five member countries of the EAEU. The union was created in 2014 and, according to the union agreement, assumed deep economic integration of the countries, but did not set the task of forming a single cultural and communication space.

The second research method applied is a foreign policy analysis. Public policy analysis is closely associated with legislative analysis. The policy analysis usually starts with the process of legislation adoption, then continues with collecting the data on the law implementation and finishes with the results of the policy. The legal framework works as an objective fact given in written norms, laws, and court decisions. The research at hand is based on the analysis of the official foreign policy documents and practices of international relations within the EAEU.

New Directions of Russia's Soft Power

The results of the study are based on an analysis of the conceptual foreign policy documents of the EAEU member countries (see Table 1), as well as well-known communication campaigns for the development of “soft power” in these countries. The analysis of foreign policy concepts and strategies was greatly facilitated by the fact that all of them have been translated into Russian and presented in the public domain.

Table 1. Fundamental foreign policy documents of the EAEU countries

Country	Title	Year
Armenia	National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia	2020
Belarus	The main directions of domestic and foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus	2015
Kazakhstan	The concept of foreign policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030	2020
Kyrgyz Republic	Foreign Policy Concept of the Kyrgyz Republic	2019
Russia	The concept of foreign policy of the Russian Federation	2023

The fundamental foreign policy document of the Republic of Armenia is entitled “The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia”. It was adopted in 2020 and reflects the difficult geopolitical situation of the country. The previous version of the document dates back to 2007. A comparative analysis of the documents shows that there is a mention of “soft power” in the new document, which was not there before. Thus, paragraph 1.6 reads: “To counter the threats and challenges of the changing world, ensure its security, as well as effectively fulfill its role in ensuring regional and international security, Armenia will continue to strengthen its position in the international arena. To this end, Armenia will develop all power tools, including

the capabilities of “soft power”, emphasizing its most important resource – human capital. At the same time, human capital is also considered in the context of combining the forces of pan-Armenians. Both documents focus primarily on the Diaspora and the development of the Armenian language. The Department of Mass Media and Public Diplomacy has been established in the structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is mainly engaged in organizing information support for foreign policy. The cultural, educational, scientific, sports, and other activities supported by the Ministry have not been very developed due to the weak resource base and the focus on the diaspora, especially due to the new round of the conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh. Recent developments in the Caucasus region tend to weaken Russia’s soft power in Armenia.

The main foreign policy document of the Republic of Belarus is “The main directions of domestic and foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus”. It was adopted in 2005, underwent several changes. The latest revision refers to 2015. There is no direct mention of public diplomacy in this document, but there is a direct reference to the image of the state. Article 34 refers to “the formation of the image of the Republic of Belarus as a region attractive for the development of tourism and the promotion of the national tourist product to the foreign market” of the main directions in the field of international cooperation. President of Belarus, A.G. Lukashenko, periodically talks about “people’s diplomacy”. Notable information assets of Belarus in the post-Soviet space include the festival “Slavic Bazaar” and “medical tourism”. Belarus tends to be closest to Russia in international relations. The country is heavily affected by Russia’s soft power.

The new President of Kazakhstan, Tokayev, previously held the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs. Therefore, one of the first things in the office of the President was the adoption of “The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030”. The concept of “soft power” is not mentioned in this document, but its important elements are present: “humanitarian diplomacy”, “digital diplomacy”, and “people’s diplomacy”. In particular, chapter 4 explicitly sets the following task: “activation of ‘humanitarian diplomacy’, popularization of a positive image of the country in the world community”. To achieve these goals, Kazakhstan uses various events in the fields of culture, education, sports, etc. So, in 2022, a large festival “Russia – Kazakhstan: Cultural heritage” was held, and consulates and embassies of Kazakhstan abroad hold festivals of national culture “Feel Kazakhstan”. However, since 2022, public opinion toward Russia in Kazakhstan has been changing dramatically. The surveys show that favorable opinion about Russia has dropped from 92 % to 67 % in 2023. At the same time, the share of Kazakhstanis with an unfavorable opinion about Russian foreign policy has noticeably increased (up to 33%) [6]. As for Russia’s soft power, it has been surpassed by Turkish cultural influence.

The goals and instruments of Kyrgyzstan’s foreign policy are described in a document entitled “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic” in 2019. As in the previous version of the document from 2007, it does not contain the concepts of public diplomacy and soft power. However, the idea of “promoting a positive image of the country in the international community” still occupies a large place. It is mentioned twice, although it was mentioned four times in the previous version. Resources and opportunities to promote a positive image of the country are largely limited due to resource constraints, political instability, and a difficult geopolitical

situation. In this regard, Kyrgyzstan in the post-Soviet space does not so much promote its soft power as it is a good laboratory for researchers of the use of soft power inside the country by other large countries: the United States, Russia, and China.

As for Russia, in 2023, "The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation" underwent the most significant changes. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, the previous version from 2016 contained an explicit mention of soft power. The new version uses a different term. Thus, Article 43 states that priority attention should be "given to the development of mechanisms of public diplomacy with the participation of representatives and institutions of civil society who are constructive towards Russia, as well as political scientists, representatives of the expert and scientific community, youth, volunteer, search and other social movements. Also, in the current version, the description of media tools has been significantly expanded. However, the most noticeable was the general message of dividing countries into "friendly" and "unfriendly".

International news as a format of political communication is dominating the political agenda of Russia in the mainstream media. Anastassiya Kazun reported that in 2017, domestic news got only a 30 % share of the agenda [5]. Sometimes it causes international scandals in the media. For example, Margarita Simonyan (the head of RT), having learned about the attitude of the citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan towards "the special military operation", accused them of ingratitude and almost betrayal. This statement was heavily criticized in Kazakhstan. The other example of negative reaction from the member-states of EAEU was about Russia's mass media comments and migration policy toward working migrants from Kyrgyzstan. The president of Kyrgyzstan had to express "concerns about this situation".

Conclusions

Among the most serious problems in the development of public diplomacy in the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union, several points can be highlighted. Firstly, since 2004, Russia has been using force in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine, which has reinforced negative stereotypes of Russia as a hard power, fulfilling negative stereotypes of the Soviet and Russian Empires. Sergunin and Karabeshkin point out that the Kremlin has always been inclined to combine soft and hard power strategies in foreign policy. However, Rutland and Kazantsev argue that "for these reasons, Russian leaders have largely failed to develop soft power as an effective policy tool" [12]. Mutual interdependency within the EAEU helps to dominate the region, but soft power does not play the leading role. As Ospanova and Rakhmatulin report, "Russia uses the opportunities and advantages of spreading Russian as one of the main instruments of soft power. There is also a military political presence in the region within the framework of mutually cooperative relations" [8]. It means that in case of losing hard power, Russia is highly likely shell drop leadership in the EAEU.

Secondly, it is noteworthy that all the countries studied give priority to institutions of state power in the development of elements of "soft power". Civil society, and especially ordinary citizens, are practically not used in foreign policy communications. At best, we are talking about public organizations with government funding or state media. Many researchers have written

about the practice of state control over foreign policy communications in Russia and post-Soviet countries [2, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 17]. The main reason for the weak use of civil society institutions is the specificity of the political regimes existing in these countries. To our opinion, public diplomacy cannot be reduced to public relations by transferring information and selling a positive image to the foreign publics. It must involve building long-term relationships [2]. However, “The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation” (2023) indicates that Russia’s foreign policy will continue to use governmental media and organizations as for soft power. This approach contradicts to the basic idea of soft power as it was conceptualized by Nye.

Thirdly, in our opinion, within the EAEU, there is a problem of developing a common value platform for cooperation. The union is based on the idea of economic development and cooperation, which in itself cannot work if there is no common value foundation behind it. The positive effects of soft power occur over a long period and only if a predominantly consistent set of values is transmitted externally. This set of values mustn't undergo serious transformations over a long period. In our opinion, serious changes in this area continue in several EAEU countries. Thus, in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Armenia, in the last years, significant changes in foreign policy concepts have occurred. That is why there are concerns about whether the values transmitted by the EAEU member countries form a reliable foundation for a sustainable union. Russia turns to the so-called “traditional” values, which bring inherent limitations of Russia’s conservative soft power [7].

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Еуразиялық экономикалық одақтағы Ресейдің жұмсақ күшіне қатысты мәселелер

Андатпа. Бұл мақала Еуразиялық экономикалық одақ аясындағы Ресейдің жұмсақ күшіндегі өзгерістерді зерттеуге бағытталған. Одақ жалпы ақпараттық кеңістікпен біріктірілген ортақ нарықты құруға бағытталған ресейлік жұмсақ күштің құралы болып саналды. Мақалада 2022 жылы басталған «Арнайы әскери операцияның» халықаралық жаңалықтар репортажында және мүше-мемлекеттердің бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарында қоғамдық пікірталастарында ресейлік жұмсақ күш ресурстарына салдары қарастырылған. Осы мақсатқа жету үшін сыртқы саяси талдау әдісі қолданылды. Ресейдің көрнекті елдің имиджін қалыптастыруға және жаһандық саясатта күшті көшбасшылықты ілгерілетуге көп күш салғаны белгілі. Еуразиялық экономикалық одақ – жұмсақ және қатты күшті біріктіретін Ресей үшін сәтті интеграциялық жобалардың бірі. Дегенмен соңғы кездері Одаққа мүше елдер көп векторлы саясаттан гөрі Ресеймен эксклюзивті ынтымақтастықты қалайды. Бұл үдеріс Еуразиялық экономикалық одақта, әсіресе Арменияда бірте-бірте қарқын алуда. Көптеген келіспеушіліктер Ресейдің символдық басшылығының одан әрі құлдырауын тудыратыны анықталды. Бұл мақалада халықаралық журналистика мен мүше-мемлекеттердегі БАҚ саясатындағы өзгерістерден туындаған Ресейдің жұмсақ күшіне қатысты соңғы қиындықтар туралы баяндалады.

Түйін сөздер: халықаралық қатынастар, жұмсақ күш, Еуразиялық экономикалық одақ, сыртқы саясат, Армения, Ресей, Беларусь, Қазақстан, Қырғызстан.

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Вызовы мягкой силе России в странах Евразийского экономического союза

Аннотация. Цель статьи заключается в исследовании изменений в мягкой силе России в рамках Евразийского экономического союза. Союз рассматривается как инструмент российской мягкой силы, направленный на создание общего рынка в сочетании с общим информационным пространством. В статье рассматриваются последствия «Специальной военной операции», начатой в 2022 году, для ресурсов российской мягкой силы в международных новостных репортажах и публичных дискуссиях в СМИ государств-членов. Для достижения этой цели был применен метод анализа внешней политики. Установлено, что Россия приложила значительные усилия для формирования заметного имиджа страны и продвижения сильного лидерства в мировой политике. Евразийский экономический союз является одним из успешных интеграционных проектов для России, сочетающим как мягкую, так и жесткую силу. Однако в последнее время все больше стран Союза предпочитают исключительное сотрудничество с Россией многовекторной политике. Этот процесс постепенно набирает обороты в Евразийском экономическом союзе, особенно в Армении. Установлено, что многие пункты разногласий провоцируют дальнейшее падение символического лидерства России. В статье рассматриваются недавние вызовы российской мягкой силе, вызванные изменениями в международной журналистике и медиаполитике государств-членов.

Ключевые слова: международные отношения, мягкая сила, Евразийский экономический союз, внешняя политика, Армения, Россия, Беларусь, Казахстан, Кыргызстан.

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