

## RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN KAZAKHSTAN

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### Abstract

*The objective of this study is to examine the various components of soft power employed by the Russian Federation in shaping inter-state relations with the Republic of Kazakhstan. This article explores methodologies for constructing state rankings through the soft power index, including the criteria underlying the formation of this index. Utilizing statistical data from the USC Center on Public Diplomacy reports from the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Central Asia Initiative, and Brand Finance's Global Soft Power data, the study assesses Kazakhstan's and Russia's standings in the overall ranking and compares the two countries based on key indicators of the soft power index. Evidence for this is provided by Russia's significant visibility score, which is partly attributed to its inheritance of the Soviet Union's legacy, whereas other post-Soviet states have lost such an opportunity. It is noted that despite the apparent effectiveness of Russian soft power policy in Kazakhstan—evident in the legislative requirement for Russian language education and its use in state and local government bodies—the legislative formulations can be characterized as a form of soft resistance to soft power.*

**Keywords:** *Central Asia; Cooperation programs; Cultural diplomacy; Foreign policy; Geopolitics*

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## INTRODUCTION

Soft power is a distinctive approach to shaping inter-state relations, based on achieving foreign policy objectives through fostering cooperation and exploring alternative ways to resolve conflicts. This approach relies on the development of trust and the recognition of the positive attributes of the actor in international politics by the counterpart state (Gallarotti, 2022). Therefore, achieving political goals through the application of soft power is grounded in the voluntary desire of the opposing side to build relations while considering the perspective of the other state. This facilitates the creation of mutually beneficial relationships, whereas a hard power approach often results in either failure or extreme instability. Influencing the behavior of foreign states through soft management techniques and coordinated actions is feasible, effective, and efficient in the vast majority of cases, as the personal interests of the using side are perceived by partners as their own. These advantages of soft power explain its utilization even by the most influential players in international politics, including the United States (Nye, 1990). At the same time, the dichotomy between soft power and hard power necessitates further analysis of soft power itself, as it can be characterized as either benign or malevolent, resulting from manipulation and deception (Marlin-Bennett, 2022). In the latter case, while soft power remains preferable to hard power in terms of avoiding open conflict, an insufficiently objective evaluation of it poses a significant threat to the national security of the state to which it is applied. Conversely, a rational combination of hard power tools and benign soft power is described as smart power, capable of achieving political goals in the most favorable context, with a preference for soft power (Baniya, 2021). It should also be noted that soft power is a tool not only for building bilateral relations but also for influencing regional politics, reflecting the understanding by more powerful regional political actors of their role and responsibility for the situation in the region (Ahmed, Karin, 2024).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union prompted neighboring countries to increase their influence in Central Asian states. While Russia relies on its long historical relationship within the Soviet framework, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran base their cultural diplomacy on shared aspects of mentality, lifestyle, and certain religious beliefs (Dehshiri et al., 2021). The first quarter of the 21st century has been marked by critical global destabilization, numerous regional conflicts, and severe threats that could potentially lead to a global catastrophe. In these complex conditions,

Kazakhstan continues to adhere to the core principles of the United Nations Charter, as well as the principles of multi-vectorism and pragmatism in its foreign policy (REN, 2022). One of Kazakhstan's foreign policy priorities is the Russian Federation, with which it maintains a strategic partnership and cooperation across a broad spectrum of areas (Akorda, 2020b). This approach is driven in part by geopolitical conditions, the necessity of considering security factors in relations with Russia, which shares the world's longest land border with Kazakhstan. Additionally, there are objective factors that significantly influence the bilateral relationship, such as the substantial Russian-speaking ethnic population in border regions and the interconnected economies of the two countries in the oil transit sector (Girma, 2023). At the same time, Kazakhstan harbors its own international ambitions, aiming for a leading position in the region, which necessitates a multi-vector policy (Hudson, 2022). Consequently, the principle of peaceful coexistence with Russia and an understanding of its soft power techniques in building relationships with Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries are crucial for ensuring equitable and balanced relations between the two states and protecting Kazakhstan's national interests. In this context, the dominant principle in relations with Russia, as with any other state, is pragmatism. Thus, alongside political, trade, economic, military, informational, and other areas of cooperation, key components of these relations include traditional areas of soft power, such as cultural, humanitarian, and educational spheres (EL, 2023; Karpuntsov, Veresha, 2023).

In the context of escalating regional crises and the search for peaceful methods of constructing international relations, the study of soft power policies employed by Russia holds both scientific and practical significance. Accordingly, relevant research directions include evaluating the role of soft power tools as the foundation for shaping Russia's foreign policy strategy and enhancing its image abroad. The objective of this study is to examine the soft political influence tools used by Russia in relation to the Republic of Kazakhstan during the first quarter of the 21st century. Specifically, this evaluation is based on existing bilateral investment and educational, cultural, scientific, and other humanitarian projects through which Russia aims to strengthen its influence in Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region more broadly.

Without claiming to provide a comprehensive review of soft power policies or to revise its traditional understanding, this article focuses on the regional application of soft power, its characteristics, and future prospects, considering that Russian soft power in Kazakhstan can be characterized as having significant reach.

## 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The concepts of soft and hard power represent two fundamental approaches in the examination of power dynamics within the context of international politics. Their application is not strictly separated but rather constitutes a unified interaction framework, where soft power serves as an additional tool. Gaining particular relevance following the events of the 1990s, soft power has acquired a new developmental trajectory in the 2020s due to shifts in the global political structure and changes in the roles of specific regions (Shahriar, 2022). Concurrently, there is a process aimed at the restoration of reputation by major global political actors, particularly the United States, as they seek to reassert themselves as key players utilizing soft power strategies (Ohnesorge, 2023).

Soft power can manifest in various forms, characterized by its complex structure and reliance on cultural, diplomatic, educational, and other activities. The application of soft power necessitates a balanced strategic approach, which requires continuous monitoring and adjustment in response to the evolving political landscape (Saaida, 2023; Tokareva et al., 2024). Diplomacy likely holds a leading role within soft power politics, often serving as a means to advance other forms of soft power. A shift from soft power to hard power is typically seen as a scenario where diplomatic efforts have failed. In all other instances, the activities of diplomatic missions, beyond resolving contentious issues, involve assessing the situation and understanding the needs of the host country, which can subsequently be used as a foundation for promoting relevant cooperation programs within the framework of soft power (Buruah, 2024).

A recognized tool of soft power is educational cooperation, whose significance continues to grow. This trend aligns with the characteristics of post-industrial societies, where intellectual capital plays a predominant role and becomes a new arena for competition. Consequently, a party capable of providing such resources has the potential to enhance its own ranking. Simultaneously, participation in exchange educational programs facilitates the use of soft power tools such as cultural influence and closer acquaintance with the host country (Gauttam et al., 2024). Additionally, language intervention, as an integral component of cultural influence, represents another form of soft power application. The prevalence of a language and the capacity to exert soft power are directly correlated with the creation of a favorable global image of the state (Akbar, 2023). Educational policy is a recognized instrument of soft power, aimed at expanding international

cooperation in this domain. This approach can be viewed as a soft power tool for both parties involved, as educational projects provide an opportunity for each side to influence the other's perceptions of their country, culture, and mentality (Amirbek, Ydyrys, 2014).

In the contemporary world, soft power is no longer confined to intangible means of influence. The processes of economic globalization and, consequently, the increasing interdependence impart a material dimension to soft power, although it remains distinct from the potential for overt aggression. The enhancement of the soft power concept is also a result of the development of democratic processes, the establishment and operation of supranational institutions, and the growing awareness of the limited effectiveness of military confrontations given the advancement of modern military technologies (Gallarotti, 2022).

Simultaneously, it is proposed to augment the concept of soft power, and consequently, the soft power index, with a contrasting concept provisionally termed Negative Watch. This concept reflects reputational and other national branding losses and is also measured based on relevant criteria, ultimately forming an index of such losses. Thus, the theoretical framework of soft power is expanded by evaluating both positive and negative shifts in foreign policy (Durrani, 2023).

The concurrent use of hard methods is assessed as a discrepancy between the declared soft power policy and actual practices, leading to a significant reduction in political ratings even in countries where hard power has not been employed. It must be noted that, in modern conditions, even with substantial resources for hard influence, achieving objectives without cooperation with other political actors is ephemeral. An example of this is the task of combating terrorism, whose success largely relies on international collaboration (Nye, 2023).

Kazakhstan's response to attempts by Russia to increase regional influence, which began in the mid-1990s, was initially based on maintaining a balance through the use of soft political methods. Thus, while seeking to establish close cooperation with Russia, Kazakhstan simultaneously aimed to counterbalance the growing Russian influence (Nurgaliyeva, 2015). Additionally, Kazakhstan is pursuing the expansion of regional cooperation while striving to preserve and enhance its independent status in the Asian region. This is notably reflected in its participation in initiatives led by influential regional powers such as China (Pieter, 2021).

Contemporary academic literature addresses a broad range of issues related to the theoretical aspects of soft power and its application by leading

global nations. At the same time, due to international events from 2022 to 2024, the application of soft power policies in the post-Soviet space has gained particular relevance. It is important to note, however, that despite significant historical similarities, the political situations in post-Soviet countries are evolving according to different scenarios. In this context, Central Asian countries in general, and Kazakhstan in particular, have their own specific characteristics, the study of which constitutes a crucial area of contemporary political research.

### **1.1 Problem statement**

The early 2020s have marked a period of destabilization in the global international environment. The actively implemented and proclaimed policy of soft power is increasingly accompanied by the frequent use of hard power, involving a growing number of countries in this process. In this context, the Republic of Kazakhstan remains committed to soft power policies and makes every effort to maintain peace and stability in the Central Asian region. Simultaneously, Kazakhstan itself is a focal point of political interest from both its immediate and regional neighbors. With an extensive border with the Russian Federation and established bilateral ties, Kazakhstan seeks to build its relationship with Russia while considering Russia's interests. This approach results from both Kazakhstan's own political decisions and the application of Russian soft power strategies towards Kazakhstan.

At the same time, Kazakhstan strives to preserve its independence to the maximum extent, adhere to a multi-vector foreign policy, and maintain control over the stability of both the country and the region. Achieving these goals necessitates continuous monitoring and analysis of the methods of soft power employed by Russia to safeguard Kazakhstan's national interests and security. The objective of this study is to analyze the current impact of Russian soft power on the foreign policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

To achieve this objective, the following tasks were set:

-To provide a general characterization of soft power policy and to describe the current application of soft power by the Republic of Kazakhstan and Russia, within the context of its global application and in a comparative analysis of the two countries.

- To analyze how Russia's application of soft power towards Kazakhstan is reflected in bilateral agreements, as well as in the legislative and regulatory frameworks of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

– Combine quantitative data from international indicators with analyses of the content of national legislation and actual manifestations of soft power influence.

– Based on the obtained data, to characterize the Republic of Kazakhstan's response to the application of soft power methods by Russia and to identify issues requiring special attention to maintain peace and stability in Kazakhstan.

## **2 METHODS AND MATERIALS**

The first stage of the research involved a general characterization of soft power policy and an assessment of Kazakhstan and Russia's positions in the global ranking of its application. Soft power policy is not a static phenomenon. To demonstrate the dynamics in the ranking of countries employing soft power among the top thirty nations from 2015 to 2019, statistical data from the USC Center on Public Diplomacy (USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2019) were utilized. This comparison is based on the "soft power index," which is calculated using evaluations across six domains: production, culture, informatization, relevant government activities, engagement in cooperation (including diplomatic activity), and education. This data also facilitates an assessment of the Russian Federation's application of soft power.

To evaluate Kazakhstan's response to the events of 2022 reports from the Foreign Policy Research Institute under the Central Asia Initiative project (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2024) were used. The findings indicated that there was no categorical response from Kazakhstan to Russia's actions. However, Kazakhstan's firm stance on maintaining a multi-vector foreign policy and its negative attitude towards the use of hard power were noted. The assessment of soft power rankings for Kazakhstan and Russia among the 193 UN member states as of 2024 was based on the Brand Finance report (Brand Finance, 2024), which examines soft power policy as a basis for national branding. The comparison of the 2024 soft power index data showed that differences in overall rankings do not necessarily reflect significant gaps across all criteria.

The second part of the research focused on identifying indicators of Russia's application of soft power and the results of such application through the analysis of bilateral intergovernmental agreements in traditionally soft power domains (cultural, educational), as well as national program documents and legislative acts. Specifically, the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Akorda, 1995), the Law of

the Republic of Kazakhstan on Education (Law of Republic of Kazakhstan 2007), and the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030 (Akorda, 2020a) were analyzed. Additionally, issues related to the internationalization of higher education in Kazakhstan and the use of educational domains for soft power application were examined based on the OECD report “Higher Education in Kazakhstan” for 2017 (OECD, 2017) and data from the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation regarding the number of Kazakhstani students studying in Russian universities (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation, 2024).

The third stage of the research consisted of qualitative analysis using the method of thematic coding. At this stage, the documents and data considered in the previous stages were categorised into the following categories: language, education, culture, media and diplomacy. For each category, wording was identified (content analysis was conducted) indicating the use of soft power in relation to that category.

## **2.1 Methodological limitations**

The data from the USC Center on Public Diplomacy for the years (USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2019) and the Brand Finance report (Brand Finance, 2024) are not directly comparable, as they utilize different sets of criteria in the formation of their soft power indices. However, they demonstrate that, despite these methodological differences, countries that maintain a consistent approach to using soft power as a primary tool of political influence will exhibit a similar overall trend.

## **2.2 Ethical issues**

This study does not address issues related to interethnic relations within each country.

## **3 RESULTS**

### **3.1 Soft power policy as a tool for shaping national branding**

Soft power policy represents a significant tool in contemporary international relations. However, despite its importance, it does not directly translate into quantitative metrics, making it difficult to assess. Nevertheless,

periodic attempts by various institutions to develop methodologies for such assessments provide a generalized understanding of the role that soft power plays in the foreign policy of individual countries. Below are the data derived from the examination of the reports “The Soft Power 30” for the years 2015–2019, prepared by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Dynamics of the Soft Power Index for the Top 30 Leading Countries from 2015 to 2019

Country/Year	Soft power index				
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
United Kingdom	75.61	75.97	75.72	80.55	79.47
Germany	73.89	72.60	73.67	78.87	78.62
United States	73.68	77.96	75.02	77.80	77.40
France	73.64	72.14	75.75	80.14	80.28
Canada	71.71	72.53	72.90	75.70	75.89
Australia	68.92	69.29	70.15	72.91	73.16
Switzerland	76.52	67.65	70.45	74.96	77.04
Japan	66.86	67.78	71.66	76.22	75.71
Sweden	66.49	66.97	69.32	74.77	77.41
Netherlands	65.21	64.14	67.89	73.79	72.03
Denmark	63.20	62.57	65.48	70.70	68.86
Italy	63.09	63.79	64.70	70.40	71.58
Austria	62.00	60.99	63.75	67.23	67.98
Spain	61.70	63.47	63.57	69.11	71.05
Finland	60.19	62.13	62.37	67.71	68.35
New Zealand	60.00	61.51	61.96	66.68	67.45
Belgium	58.85	59.70	62.80	67.25	67.17
Norway	57.96	61.64	65.20	69.60	71.07
Ireland	55.61	57.02	60.62	62.78	63.00
Korea, Rep.	54.32	51.44	58.40	62.75	63.00
Singapore	52.50	58.09	58.55	62.44	61.51
Portugal	48.97	51.79	54.43	57.98	59.28
Brazil	46.63	47.69	47.41	50.69	51.34
Poland	46.50	48.07	51.27	54.14	55.16
Greece	45.73	46.98	52.17	54.63	53.74
Israel	44.51	-	-	-	-
Czechia	43.26	44.43	48.73	52.64	54.35
Turkey	42.55	-	45.35	-	49.70
Mexico	42.52	-	-	-	
China	40.85	45.04	50.50	51.85	51.25
Hungary	-	46.96	48.16	53.49	50.39
Russia	-	46.58	49.60	51.10	48.64
Argentina	-	44.17	-	48.89	-

*Source: Authors' development based on Data from USC Center on Public Diplomacy (2019).*

In this case, the assessment was based on criteria defined as indicators of soft power. These indicators included aspects related to production activities, cultural exchange, the use of modern technologies to expand influence, relevant state policies, involvement in international cooperation (including diplomatic activities), and educational programs. The data presented in Table 1 illustrate that the soft power index, influenced by a range of objective conditions, causes countries to fluctuate within the overall ranking. When evaluating the data, it is important to consider both the dynamic progression of a country in the ranking based on changes in the soft power index and the presence or absence of personal progress. Movement in the overall ranking is directly related to the dynamics of other countries, whereas personal ranking reflects the success of national soft power policies. For example, statistics on the use of soft power show that, having first entered the top thirty leaders in 2016, the Russian Federation did not make significant progress in this area over the following three years, moving from 27th to 30th place. However, it should be noted that from 2016 to 2018, the country made progress in soft power based on individual indicators, although in 2019 there was a decline in Russia's soft power index.

The events of 2022 necessitated a reassessment of the approaches to interstate relations between Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation. Based on reports dedicated to this situation from the Foreign Policy Research Institute, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn regarding the state of soft power in the relationship between the two countries. It is evident that the desire to maintain relations within a specific framework resulted in a cautious and restrained reaction to the escalation of Russian-Ukrainian relations from both Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries. No direct criticism of Russia's actions was voiced. This reaction is largely attributed to the importance of Russia not only in the realms of economic relations and security but also as a labor market and provider of access to healthcare institutions (Pannier, 2022a). Concurrently, Kazakh authorities advised citizens to exercise restraint in posting and commenting on social media and to avoid using these platforms to provoke interethnic conflicts (Pannier, 2022b). A distinctive signal of "soft protest" was Kazakhstan's decision to cancel the traditional post-Soviet celebration of Victory Day. Diplomatic signals were also marked by restraint, as reflected in Kazakhstan's voting on resolutions concerning Russia's actions in Ukraine within the United Nations (Hess, 2022a). Thus, experts from the Foreign Policy Research Institute reasonably conclude that Russia's influence in the Central Asian region, and specifically in Kazakhstan, has somewhat diminished. The January

2022 crisis, during which Russia demonstrated its capacity for hard power, and subsequent attempts at economic pressure, did not enable it to retain its influence, while Kazakhstan continues to confidently pursue a multi-vector policy (Hess, 2022b). Thus, Russia's policy post-2022 exemplifies how meticulously cultivated influence based on soft power can be swiftly undermined.

A broader range of criteria for constructing the soft power index and more comprehensive statistics covering all UN member states is offered by the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index methodology, which includes 55 indicators (Brand Finance, 2024). Analysis of the provided data reveals a clear negative impact of any use of hard power on a country's position in this ranking. This is exemplified by the continuing decline in Russia's ranking, which dropped by three positions over the past year, moving from 13th to 16th place. Kazakhstan, meanwhile, holds the 80th position in this ranking, having also lost one position compared to 2023. Despite the significant differences in the rankings of each country, a comparison of the core indicators used to determine the overall score demonstrates that such disparities are often due to objective factors (Table 2).

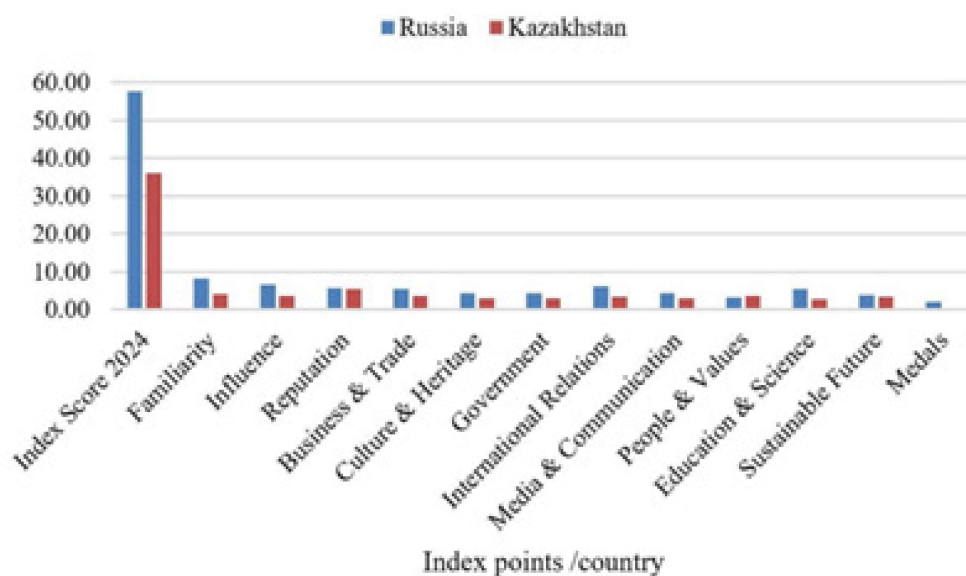
**Table 2:** *Comparison of Specific Indicators Underpinning the Soft Power Index for Kazakhstan and Russia*

Index points /country	Russia	Kazakhstan	Difference (%)
Index Score 2024	57.7	35.9	37.7
Familiarity	8.3	4.1	50.6
Influence	6.5	3.5	46.15
Business & Trade	5.5	3.5	36.36
Culture & Heritage	4.2	3.0	28.5
Government	4.3	2.9	32.5
International Relations	6.1	3.3	45.9
Media & Communication	4.2	3.0	28.5
People & Values	3.1	3.6	13.8
Education & Science	5.4	2.7	50
Sustainable Future	3.9	3.3	15.38
Medals	2	-	100

*Source: Authors' development based on Brand Finance (2024).*

For example, there is a significant gap (50.6%) in the indicator of global familiarity (Familiarity), which appears justified given that Russia, following the dissolution of the USSR, positioned itself as the successor state of an already well-known “brand.” There is also a notable disparity in the indicator of global influence (Influence) – 46.15% – and participation in international relations (45.9%). These discrepancies are closely tied to the widely recognized global brand. Conversely, the indicator of reputation (Reputation) shows no substantial differences (3.57%), and Kazakhstan surpasses Russia by 13.8% in the measure of human resources and values (People & Values). The gap in the indicator of sustainable future (Sustainable Future) is also not significant – 15.38%. Thus, substantial differences are observed in 5 out of 12 indicators (including the Medals indicator), three of which are attributed to historical factors. A more visual representation of the soft power index indicators for Russia and Kazakhstan is provided in the diagram (Figure1).

**Figure 1:** *Criteria Underlying the Formation of the Soft Power Index for Kazakhstan and Russia*



*Source: Authors' development based on Brand Finance (2024).*

Thus, when evaluating a state’s soft power policy, it is crucial to assess the available indicators not only in quantitative terms but also to consider historical factors that may have influenced the formation of the soft power index and the specific ranking position.

### **3.2 Reflection of Russia's soft power policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan**

The specificity of international relations is also reflected in the formalization of agreements through the signing of relevant international (intergovernmental) accords.

A second indicator of the effectiveness of one party's soft power policy in international relations is the direct or indirect reflection of such policy results in domestic legal and regulatory acts (Karpuntsov, Veresha, 2022). When examining the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan from the perspective of the influence of Russian soft power, attention should first be directed to Article 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The first part of this article establishes the status of the Kazakh language as the state language; however, the second part effectively mitigates the Kazakh language's status as the state language by requiring government bodies and local authorities to ensure the simultaneous official use of the Russian language (Akorda, 1995). This provision has been further developed in sectoral legislation.

In this context, it is important to consider the field of education, which is particularly susceptible to the impact of soft power policies. The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Education includes Article 9, which defines requirements for the language used in the educational process. Parts 2 and 4 of this article, while emphasizing the state status of the Kazakh language, also stipulate the mandatory study of the Russian language (Law of Republic of Kazakhstan, 2007). Therefore, it can be argued that Russian soft power policy has been successful in the linguistic sphere, as Russian, although not legally recognized as a state language, effectively functions as such in practice. Conversely, this situation can be viewed as a form of soft resistance to Russian influence, as the mere mention of the mandatory use of Russian does not equate to granting it the status of a state language.

It is also important to note that this approach to the study of the Russian language can be seen in the context of expanding educational opportunities for Kazakh students. According to data from the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation, Kazakh students constitute the largest group of foreign students in Russian higher education institutions, numbering approximately 67,000 in the 2022/2023 academic year, with nearly half studying on a budget basis. There is a growing trend among Kazakh students to choose educational programs offered by Russian institutions that align with the needs of Kazakhstan's national economy. In

turn, diplomatic and consular institutions of Kazakhstan make efforts to maintain constant contact with the Kazakh student community, not only to provide assistance but also to offer current information about life and political events in Kazakhstan, including through updates on the official websites of these institutions (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation, 2024). This alternative source of information also serves as a tool of soft power, as remaining well-informed about the situation in Kazakhstan helps Kazakh students become less susceptible to other targeted influences and also allows them to serve as sources of accurate information. Thus, the education of Kazakh students in Russian higher education institutions is bilateral. On one hand, Kazakh students are subjects of soft power influence; on the other hand, they are also agents of this influence, carrying elements of their national culture and gaining essential connections and understanding of another country's realities.

Furthermore, the attainment of independence marked the beginning of the process of internationalizing higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Key aspects of this process include joining the Bologna Process and revising national curricula in line with international standards (OECD, 2017). This approach also serves as an indirect tool of soft power, as it both facilitates opportunities for Kazakh students to study abroad and enhances the attractiveness of the national higher education system. Importantly, this approach benefits not only students but also the academic community as a whole. Efforts to internationalize Kazakhstan's higher education system can also be viewed as an expression of a multi-vector policy that is not solely focused on cooperation with the Russian Federation.

In discussing the reflection of Russia's soft power policy in Kazakhstan, it is also important to consider the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030 (Akorda, 2020a). This document explicitly outlines the intention to further develop cooperation with Russia (sections 2.9, 4.2). However, it is crucial to note that while emphasizing the significance of relations with Russia, the Concept also articulates a range of provisions aimed at enhancing Kazakhstan's position on the international stage through the application of soft power tools. Furthermore, it reiterates that the country's policy remains multi-vector in nature.

### 3.3 Content-analytical assessment of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan and Kazakhstan's response to it

A comprehensive approach to assessing Russia's use of soft power and Kazakhstan's response to it requires combining the quantitative data of international indicators discussed above with an analysis of the content of national legislation and actual manifestations of soft power (where such an assessment is possible). For the practical implementation of this task, five categories were defined: language, education, culture, media and diplomacy (Table 3).

**Table 3:** *Content-analytical assessment of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan and Kazakhstan's reaction to it*

Analysis category	Act	Citation / data	Code	Interpretation as a soft-power instrument
Language	Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Education"	State bodies and local self-government bodies are obliged to use Russian language along with Kazakh Education is conducted in the state language, Russian, as well as, if necessary, in other languages	Language-institutionalisation  The obligation of Russian language	Formal consolidation of the Russian language as a mandatory language in public administration is an instrument of Russia's influence.  Russian language as a mandatory element of the education system.
Education	Report of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Russia	Approximately 67,000 Kazakh students study at Russian universities	Academic migration	Students become both objects of Russian influence and agents of „reverse“ influence.
	OECD Report	Inclusion of Kazakhstan in the Bologna process	Diversification of education	Demonstration of the desire for multi-vectorality and reduction of dependence on the Russian Federation.

Culture	Kazakhstan-Russia Plan of Cooperation in the field of culture	Festivals, days of culture, theatre tours	Bilateral projects in the culture sphere	Formation of a positive image of the Russian Federation through cultural exchanges.
	Brand Finance Index "Culture & Heritage" Section	Russia - 4.2, Kazakhstan- 3.0	Comparative attractiveness of Russian and Kazakh culture	Russia's higher rating reflects its stable cultural presence.
Media	FPRI Report	Authorities of Kazakhstan calls to avoid provocations in social networks	Soft resistance in the media sphere	Kazakhstan restricts the space for excessive Russian influence in the information field.
	Brand Finance Index "Media & Communication" Section	Russia - 4.2, Kazakhstan- 3.0	Comparative power of Russian and Kazakh media	The Russian Federation has a significantly greater recognition and communication coverage.
Diplomacy	External Policy Conception of Kazakhstan	The Republic of Kazakhstan intends to develop cooperation with the Russian Federation (p. 2.9; 4.2)	Strategic partnership	Confirmation of the stability of relations and recognition of the role of the Russian Federation.
	Kazakhstan UN voting results on resolutions on the Russian Federation aggression in Ukraine	No direct criticism of Russian politics	Restrained protest	Kazakhstan demonstrates distancing without open confrontation.

*Source: developed by the author on the basis of the data of Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Akorda, 1995), the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Education (Law of Republic of Kazakhstan, 2007), report of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation regarding the number of Kazakhstani students studying in Russian universities (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation, 2024); OECD report "Higher Education in Kazakhstan" for 2017 (OECD, 2017); Kazakhstan-Russia Plan of Cooperation in the field of culture (EmbassyLife, 2024); Brand Finance report (Brand Finance, 2024); Foreign Policy Research Institute under the Central Asia Initiative project (Foreign Policy Research*

*Institute, 2024); the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030 (Akorda, 2020a); Kazakhstan’s voting on resolutions concerning Russia’s actions in Ukraine within the United Nations (Hess, 2022a).*

Thus, the combination of quantitative indices with qualitative analysis of national legislation and international documents allows us to say that Russia’s soft power in Kazakhstan is especially manifested in the language and educational sphere. At the same time, Kazakhstan is forming a “soft resistance”, which is manifested in a restrained diplomatic response, which allows it to maintain a multi-vector foreign policy.

#### **4 DISCUSSION**

A critical aspect addressed in academic research is the notable failure of Russia’s soft power policy in certain regions, particularly Ukraine and Georgia, which has led to a damaging shift towards armed aggression, undermining its political image (Rutland, Kazantsev, 2016). This suggests that soft power is not a fundamental principle of Russian foreign policy but rather often a tool for political manipulation. This necessitates a critical evaluation of the stability of relations with Russia based on soft power tools, recognizing that significant deviations from this approach may occur in response to attempts by counterpart states to alter their political course. Rashidi also highlights significant discrepancies between the proclaimed soft power and the actual policies pursued by Russia in international relations (Rashidi, 2019). This was notably evidenced by Russia’s actions in Kazakhstan in January 2022. Despite the support of Kazakhstan’s official authorities, Russia’s actions demonstrate a readiness to resort to coercive methods to maintain its influence, which should be considered when forecasting Kazakhstan’s foreign policy in relation to Russia. This understanding is reflected in the work of Kazakh scholars, who suggest that Russia’s application of soft power should be viewed more as an exception rather than the norm (Paizova et al., 2021). Conversely, the increasing role of soft power globally and its significance for Kazakh-Russian relations, particularly in higher education cooperation, is emphasized (Osanova et al., 2024).

One aspect not explored in this study, but which must be considered in light of Russia’s declining scores in soft power rankings, is the issue of competition in the application of soft power. Specifically, the political ambitions of China, which has consistently promoted its own soft power policy, cannot be overlooked. China is evaluated as a sufficiently influential

actor in international politics (Tanzim, Juhra, 2021). The need to consider this factor is significantly driven by Kazakhstan's orientation towards a multi-vector foreign policy, as highlighted in this study.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that despite efforts to develop methodologies for evaluating soft power and standardizing it through indices such as the soft power index, it remains an ancillary tool to hard power. The tools and methods for measuring hard power are mathematically precise (Henne, 2022). This approach is justified to some extent because the promotion of soft power methods often relies on a foundation of hard power. Conversely, as demonstrated by the example of Kazakh students studying at Russian universities, it is frequently challenging to determine who exactly utilizes the soft power tool. Since the effectiveness of soft power promotion is often influenced by human factors, it is difficult to predict which students will become the object and which will become the subject of influence, and consequently, which side will advance its objectives.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Soft power is a crucial instrument of political influence, enabling not only the achievement of desired outcomes in foreign relations but also the establishment of a country's image as a reliable and secure partner. Scholarly institutions propose various approaches to constructing soft power indices. Although these indices often rely on different criteria, countries with a consistent tendency to base their national policies on soft power generally exhibit stable high performance in such rankings.

A comparison between Kazakhstan and Russia on the key indicators underlying the soft power index reveals that discrepancies in rankings may be attributed to objective factors, including historical ones. However, the ability to compare specific national soft power indicators with those of global leaders in the field highlights areas that require increased attention. Such assessments can serve as a basis for developing relevant national programs and plans. In 2024, a significant gap is observed between Kazakhstan and Russia in terms of soft power application, with the latter demonstrating higher results. Nevertheless, a comparison of specific criteria used to form the soft power index shows that the substantial gap in the effectiveness of soft power is partly due to historical factors. For example, Russia's succession from the USSR endowed it with a politically influential international brand, thereby significantly enhancing the effectiveness of other soft power tools. Conversely, Kazakhstan surpasses Russia by 13.8% in the People & Values

indicator, and differences in other indicators (reputation, sustainable future, media and communications, culture) are less than 30%.

Analysis of Kazakhstan's national legislation indicates the ongoing influence of Russia on the country's language policy. At the same time, the constitutional status of the Russian language as mandatory but non-official can be seen as a form of soft resistance to this influence. When considered alongside the use of the education sector as a tool of soft power, it is evident that this approach to the Russian language not only expands educational opportunities for Kazakh students but also transforms them into both objects and subjects of Russian influence. Studying in Russian universities allows the next generation of leaders to gain essential experience, connections, and understanding of the specifics of the counterpart country.

### **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

The practical significance of this research lies in its potential applications for planning future relations with Russia, as well as for developing relevant bilateral agreements and cooperation programs. Future research directions could include the development of strategies for advancing Kazakhstan's soft power policy, informed by the study and consideration of the experiences of leading countries worldwide with respect to specific criteria of the soft power index. Another avenue for further investigation could be the continued exploration of the concept of a three-vector structure of soft power: influence – decline – soft resistance.

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