

REGIONAL POLITICS

**PROJECTING “SOFT POWER:”
AMERICAN AND
RUSSIAN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY
IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA**

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Introduction

The April 2010 coup in Kyrgyzstan and the ethnic clashes in the south in June attracted a lot of media and academic attention.

Laymen and experts alike associated the events in Bishkek and Osh with the interests of external actors: extraterritorial criminal/terrorist structures, neighboring countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, China, and Afghanistan), and Russia and the United States in particular. The very fact that Washington and Moscow recognized the interim government of Roza Otunbaeva was interpreted as its legitimization; once more the U.S.

and the Russian Federation (a global and regional power, respectively) showed their determination to remain key players in Central Asia.

China, another important regional power with vast economic interests in the Central Asian Soviet successor-states, was very much concerned with the flare-up on its northwestern borders: in 2009, the region was shaken by riots among the local Uighurs.

The European Union and the “medium-sized powers” (Iran and Turkey) likewise have certain interests in Central Asia.

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This has created a “competitive regional milieu in which cooperation and mutual support are intermingled with rivalry, misunderstandings and apprehensions.”¹

In the new conditions, the Great Game is being waged not merely for multimillion-dollar contracts, shares in fuel production, and military bases, but also for the “minds and hearts” of the local people, the target audience of public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy relies on explaining the state’s foreign policy aims to the foreign public,

¹ A.D. Bogaturov, A.S. Dundich, E.F. Troitsky, *Tsentrāl'naiā Aziā: “otlozhenny neytralitet” i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya v 2000-kh godakh. Ocherki tekushchey politiki*, Issue 4, NOFMO, Moscow, 2010, p. 7.

promoting values, national culture, and education through the media, and holding exhibitions and exchange programs to create a long-term favorable climate in its relations with other countries.

Worldwide experience has demonstrated that it is much less expensive and much more effective to “softly” draw the youth, political, business, and cultural elites of foreign countries into the sphere of influence than to count on economic pressure or projecting “hard” military power.²

² For the terminological problems created by using the term “soft” power” in discussions in Russian, see: I.A. Zevlev, M.A. Troitsky, *Sila i vlianie v amerikano-rossiyskikh otnosheniakh: semiotichesky analiz. Ocherki tekushchey politiki*, Issue 2, Nauchno-obrazovatelny forum po mezhdunarodnym otnosheniam, Moscow, 2006, 72 pp.

The Stiff Rivalry of “Soft” Powers

The highly competitive nature of the Central Asian international-political environment is amply confirmed by the public diplomacy the external actors are using in the region. The Russian political elite looks at Central Asia (Central Asia and Kazakhstan of Soviet times) as a traditional sphere of influence where America’s attempts to gain a toehold are inevitably interpreted as a threat to Russia’s interests.

Maxim Starchak explains the problems of the Russian language in the Central Asian countries by the fact that “American information and propaganda undermine Russia’s interests in the region more than anything else.”³ Americans respond with accusations of imperialist ambitions; they never fail to say that Russian diplomats and political strategists in Central Asia are not alien to using “soft power” tools.

In America, the active coverage of the Kyrgyz developments on the eve of the April coup in the Russian media and the inordinate interest displayed by the Russian expert community were interpreted as a “Russian trace” in what followed.⁴

The situation in the “soft power” sphere will not be defused any time soon: people and structures involved in public diplomacy normally exist in an atmosphere of mutual mistrust; this is true of Russian-American relations burdened with the spy-mania of the Cold War period.

In the 2000s, American “soft power” became associated with the manipulative political techniques behind the Color Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. In 2006, the Russian Federation put

³ M.V. Starchak, “Rossiyskoe obrazovanie na russkom iazyke kak factor vliania Rossii v Tsentrāl'noy Azii: chto proiskhodit i chto delat,” available at [<http://www.ruskiymir.ru/ruskiymir/ru/analytics/article/news0003.html>], 29 July, 2010.

⁴ See: A.E. Kramer, “Before Kyrgyz Uprising, Dose of Russian Soft Power,” *The New York Times*, 18 April, 2010, available at [<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/19/world/asia/19kyrgyz.html>], 29 July, 2010.

Western NGOs in fairly pinching limits. The spy scandal, which set the ball rolling, was caused by a British Council official, but the American funds and programs which financed all sorts of social and research projects (their own or those implemented by Russian NGOs) drew the fire of the Russian defense and security structures.

Russia's information onslaught, which began in the 2000s, alerted the United States. Determined to improve its international image, Russia started the Russia Today TV information channel and hired the largest consulting and PR agencies. All sorts of lobbying was not forgotten either. The U.S. Department of Justice insists that the American PR companies and media cooperating with foreign governments and companies should publish their reports. The list of Russian partners looks impressive: the RF government, Gazprom, Gazpromexport, Tekhnosnabexport, Oleg Deripaska, and others.⁵

The competition between Russia and the United States in the public diplomacy sphere in Central Asia is stiff; the outcome is unclear, which makes the process all the more interesting.

America has moved into the Central Asian information and cultural expanse to fill the void left by the Soviet Union and Russia's shrinking presence in the region. In the early and mid-1990s, the information and cultural sphere became de-Russified, which echoed in re-orientation of a large part of the local elites, the academic community and the youth to the West. For nearly twenty years, the Americans poured a lot of money into their public diplomacy programs, while Russia consistently moved away from its southern neighbors in an effort to cope with its own problems caused, among other things, by the exodus of Russian speakers from Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

The political effect of the American public diplomacy programs should not be overestimated. This has been confirmed by the 2010 events in Kyrgyzstan, which caught the Americans unawares. Part of the blame is laid on those who authored the Greater Central Asia doctrine in March 2005. It suggested that the region should be divided into 7 "stans:" Kazakhstan, four Central Asian republics, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in an attempt to draw the region's post-Soviet states out of the Eurasian political expanse traditionally dominated by China and Russia.

Contrary to expectations, the project fell through: Washington failed to convince the public and the regional elites that it had come to stay and that the countries could count on consistent, rather than sporadic, support.

It turned out, however, that the Central Asian Soviet successor-states were needed as a convenient approach to Afghanistan and a fuel transit zone. Washington publicly dismissed the Central Asian political regimes as dictatorial, authoritarian, and failed, which did nothing to promote mutual understanding.

The obvious crisis of the United States' Afghan strategy and the 2010 events might force the United States to revise its Central Asian policy; it might also change the public diplomacy priorities in the region and emphasize its anti-Russian component.

Despite the obvious blunders, the potential of America's "soft" power in the region has not yet revealed itself; this is a long process which might take years or even decades of relative stability and consistent attention.

This means that public diplomacy, no matter how "soft" and peaceful, is being pursued amid clashes of national interests. Everything the external actors do to fortify their information and cultural and, hence, economic and political influence is interpreted as a threat; this makes public diplomacy part of the security-related sphere.

⁵ See: R.W. Orttung, "Russia's Use of PR as a Foreign Policy Tool," *Russian Analytical Digest. Russian Public Relations and Soft Power*, No. 81, 16 June, 2010, p. 8, available at [<http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=117631>], 30 July, 2010.

Public Diplomacy of Russia and America in Central Asia: Resources and Efficiency

In practical terms, both countries are carrying out their “soft” power policy in the form of vast information efforts, including positive interpretation of their foreign policies and, quite recently, wide use of the Internet.

All the U.S. embassies and resource centers in the Central Asian countries have their pages on Facebook; they widely rely on Twitter, YouTube, MySpace, etc. to put out their information. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, an ardent supporter of “e-diplomacy,” has earned the name of “the godmother of 21st century statecraft.”⁶

Many in the United States frown at the “digital diplomacy” rage of the American diplomatic team. E. Morozov of Georgetown University has written: “Diplomacy is, perhaps, one element of the U.S. government that should not be subject to the demands of ‘open government’; whenever it works, it is usually because it is done behind closed doors. But this may be increasingly hard to achieve in the age of Twittering bureaucrats.”⁷

Washington knows about the negative sides of the Internet from its own experience: “diplomacy of the 21st century” has caused numerous leaks of classified Pentagon materials which surfaced on the Wikileaks website.

During the presidential campaign of June 2009, Iran relied on social networks to promote anti-Western ideas and track down the dissidents.

In China, the government has blocked access to information on the “human rights,” “Tibet,” “Uighurs,” “Falungong” etc. inquiries; in July 2009, during the riots in Xinjiang, the region was deprived of access to the Internet.

Internet technologies and social networking have obviously raised public diplomacy to a new level. Johannes Bohnen and Jan-Friedrich Kallmorgen of Germany have written: “This is how target-ed agenda-setting will work in the future, and savvy professional political campaigns will use extensive distribution lists to harness the power of this phenomenon. Through new technologies, these politicized networks now have powerful leverage to force the policy process to do things their own way.”⁸

So far, Russian diplomacy has not moved as far as that in the sphere of informatics and Web2.0, even though Rossotrudnichestvo and the Russkiy Mir Fund promptly opened their own fairly informative and well-organized websites with access to the social networks.⁹

Social networking creates an outreach which allows public diplomacy to address target audiences; along with the Internet and the media, this can be described as a public diplomacy vehicle. Contacts in the information networks of public diplomacy are realized through structures which I call here resource centers. They are expected to gather and disseminate information flows related to the ongoing programs.

⁶ J. Lichtenstein, “Digital Diplomacy,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 12 July, 2010, available at [<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/18/magazine/18web2-0-t.html?pagewanted=1&r=2>], 29 July, 2010.

⁷ E. Morozov, “The Digital Dictatorship,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 February, 2010, available at [<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703983004575073911147404540.html>], 29 July, 2010.

⁸ J. Bohnen, J.-F. Kallmorgen, “How Web 2.0 is Changing Politics,” *Atlantische Initiative*, available at [http://www.atlantic-community.org/app/webroot/files/articlepdf/Web_2.0_Change_Politics.PDF], 30 July, 2010.

⁹ The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, available at [<http://rs.gov.ru>]; Russkiy Mir Fund, available at [<http://www.russkiymir.ru>].

Normally, this role belongs to the corresponding departments of embassies and consulates (Public Affairs Sections at the U.S. embassies and Rossotrudnichestvo centers at the Russian embassies). Educational exchange programs are financed by the national governments, as well as NGOs: educational and cultural centers, associations of graduates of (American) exchange programs, and cultural associations of Russian compatriots. They are found in different places; the majority of them operate at embassies (consulates), universities, libraries, etc.

Networking is the best organizational principle; even the smallest of resource centers can be used to disseminate information and maintain feedback with remote regions, while high-tech communication means make information exchange stable and cheap.

The table below demonstrates the quantitative correlation between the resource centers of the United States and the Russian Federation borrowed from open sources (websites of Russkiy Mir, Rossotrudnichestvo, and the U.S. and RF embassies in the Central Asian countries).

The broadcasting media are not counted as resource centers, however their presence should be taken into account.

Table

States	Resource Centers of Public Diplomacy	
	The U.S.	Russia
Kazakhstan	22 resource centers: embassy in Astana; 11 American Corners in the largest regional centers; 5 EducationUSA centers (Aktobe, Almaty, Astana, Karaganda, and Shymkent), IREX office in Almaty; ACCELS in Astana and Almaty; the American Peace Corps; Kazakh-American University in Almaty.	36 resource centers: embassy in Astana and general consulate in Almaty, consulate in Uralsk; the Russian Center of Science and Culture; Rossotrudnichestvo office; 3 offices of the Russkiy Mir Fund (Aktobe, Astana, and Ust-Kamenogorsk); 26 non-commercial associations of compatriots; 2 higher educational establishments associated with Russian partners; 7 TV and radio companies broadcasting in Russian.
Kyrgyzstan	15 resource centers: embassy in Bishkek; 5 American Corners (Karakol, Kant, Talas, Jalal-Abad, and Batken); 4 EducationUSA centers (Bishkek, Karakol, Naryn, and Osh); offices of the American Council and IREX in Bishkek; the Peace Corps; American University of Central Asia (Bishkek) and International University of Central Asia (Tokmok).	7 resource centers: embassy in Bishkek; general consulate in Osh; office of Rossotrudnichestvo; 3 Russian Centers (Bishkek, Kant, and Osh), the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University in Bishkek.

Table (continued)

States	Resource Centers of Public Diplomacy	
	The U.S.	Russia
Tajikistan	9 resource centers: embassy in Dushanbe; 5 American Corners (Dushanbe, Khujand, Horog, Kulob, and Kurgan-Tube); 2 EducationUSA centers (Dushanbe and Khujand), center of the American Councils and IREX in Dushanbe. Voice of America broadcasts in Farsi, a language easily understood by Tajiks.	7 resource centers: embassy in Dushanbe; general consulate in Khujand; office of Rossotrudnichestvo; 3 Russian Centers, Tajik-Russian Slavic University (all in Dushanbe).
Turkmenistan	5 resource centers: embassy and American Center in Ashghabad and 3 American Corners (Turkmenabad, Dashoguz, and Mary) which unite the resources of EducationUSA, IREX and American Councils.	3 resource centers: embassy in Ashghabad, office of Rossotrudnichestvo, a branch of the Gubkin Russia State Oil and Gas University.
Uzbekistan	1 resource center: EducationUSA center and information resource center at the U.S. embassy in Tashkent. Voice of America broadcasts in Uzbek.	2 resource centers: embassy and the Russian Center of Science and Culture in Tashkent.

The above information is far from complete; Russia's information and cultural presence in Kazakhstan looks much more impressive than in the other republics, mainly because the Russkiy Mir Fund took the trouble to systematize information related to the associations of compatriots and the Russian cultural centers in Kazakhstan. There is no equally detailed information on the other countries, however a mere comparison of the number of resource centers provides an idea about America's and Russia's involvement in the region, their desire to fortify their position there, and the attitude of the local regimes to foreign public diplomacy programs.

America has a fairly developed network of resource centers: the American Corners which first appeared in the 1990s in Russia as "information and educational centers;" the American Corner conception and brand appeared in 2000.

In 2002, the U.S. Bureau of Public Affairs at the Department of State suggested that the American Corner network be spread to the post-Soviet republics, Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, and the Near and Middle East with the prospect of spreading across the world (today 24 of over 400 American Corners¹⁰ function in Central Asia).

¹⁰ See: "American Corners in the World," available at [http://www.americancorner.ru/htmls/american_corners_in_the_world.html], 29 July, 2010. The list is far from complete: information related to the Central Asian countries can be found on the websites of the respective U.S. embassies.

They were set up to promote knowledge about America's foreign policy, lifestyle, work, and education, in short, about everything public diplomacy is concerned with. The fact that the American Corners operate under the U.S. embassies has earned them the tag "U.S. illegal consulates" from the critics of American policies; their employees are paid from the budget and are engaged in pro-American propaganda very much to the detriment of the interests of the country they are stationed in.¹¹

This is not all: other networks of American resource centers—EducationUSA, IREX, American Councils for International Education, Fulbright Programs, etc.—have also come to the region with their programs of educational exchange grants funded by the U.S. Department of State. There are two higher educational establishments—the Kazakh-American University in Almaty and the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek—offering higher education American style.

Despite the more or less equal number of resource centers, Russia's public diplomacy potential, scope, and efficiency are far below America's. The few employees of *Rossotrudnichestvo* and *Russkiy Mir* work mainly in the capitals, while the Americans moved from the very beginning to outlying regions and relied on the alumni of their exchange programs.

Certain measures are taken to remedy the hardly acceptable situation; the *Russkiy Mir* Fund is registering NGOs fit to become resource centers of Russia's public diplomacy. In February 2010, President Medvedev signed a decree On Setting up the A.M. Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Support Fund¹² to finance the international activities of Russia's NGOs. So far, however, there is no clarity about its structure and sphere of responsibility and no tangible results.

The fact that interest in the Russian language and Russian education among young people in the Central Asian countries is steadily declining while English is gaining popularity can be described as highly alarming. This casts doubt on the future of Russian schools and higher educational establishments which use Russian educational curricular; this is particularly true of the Slavic universities in Bishkek and Dushanbe.

In the first six months of 2010, Tajikistan passed several laws that removed the Russian language from the official sphere. In March 2010, for example, the amendments to the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on the Regulatory Legal Acts removed Russian from the document circulation sphere even though previously, in October 2009, during a personal meeting with President Medvedev, President of Tajikistan Rakhmon assured the Russian leader that the sphere in which the Russian language was used would never be contracted.¹³

Russian politicians should have probably paid more attention when, in 2007, the President of Tajikistan recommended getting rid of the Slavic endings of traditional Tajik (Persian) names.¹⁴

The correlation between the "soft" powers of Russia and the U.S. in the Central Asian region varies depending on the particular state they are dealing with and is determined by that state's attitude toward them. Both Russia and the U.S. run up against similar problems, the main being the local regimes' legitimate desire to protect their information expanse.

The relative stability in Kazakhstan, its obvious orientation toward greater internationalization of its economy, and its claim to be a Eurasian bridge between the East and the West create a favorable climate for the public diplomacy networks of both countries.

¹¹ See, for example: E. Golinger, "Conspiracy and Propaganda Centers: Illegal US Consulates in Venezuela," *YVKE Radio Mundial*. Axis of Logic, Saturday, 28 March, 2009, available at [http://axisoflogic.com/artman/publish/article_29988.shtml], 29 July, 2010.

¹² See: "Dmitry Medvedev podpisal rasporyazhenie 'O sozdanii Fonda podderzhki publichnoy diplomatii imeni A.M. Gorchakova,'" *Prezident Rossii*, 3 February, 2010, available at [<http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/6780>], 29 July, 2010.

¹³ See: "Emomali Rakhmon: russkiy yazyk v Tadzhikestane ne ushemliaetsia," *Vesti.ru*, 22 October, 2009, available at [<http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=321960>], 29 July, 2010.

¹⁴ See: M. Zygar, "Tadzhikistan reformiruiut do posledney bukvy," *Kommersant*, No. 50 (3626), 28 March, 2007, available at [<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?fromsearch=73d0cd46-4a50-47e8-b734-07b4c06eb219&docid=753739>], 29 July, 2010.

In 2006, the republic found itself in a slightly comical situation created by the American film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*; the nation was offended by the caricature of a Kazakh journalist Borat Sagdiev and the country as a whole.

In some countries, Russia being one of them, the film was banned or, at least, “not recommended.” President of Kazakhstan Nazarbaev meanwhile called on the film audiences to accept the film with a great deal of humor and to judge the country by its real achievements. He invited British comic Sasha Baron Cohen and others wishing to see the country with their own eyes to visit Kazakhstan. In short, the president managed to get out of this far from simple situation with flying colors.

The “Come to Kazakhstan, It’s Nice!” campaign made the country highly popular in the West.¹⁵ Minister of Culture and Information of Kazakhstan E. Ertysbaev said in this connection that “the film had a positive effect on the republic’s international image even though its humor can be described as half-baked, vulgar, and even stupid;”¹⁶ in 2006-2007, foreign journalists flocked to the country to compare reality and the film.

Foreign centers of public diplomacy are free to operate in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which need external assistance from any side, be it Russia or the West.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are relatively more closed than their neighbors. The former, which is gradually moving away from the most offensive manifestations of Saparmurad Niyazov’s personality cult, is slowly opening up to the world: the new leaders are resolved to improve the republic’s previously ludicrous image to attract foreign investors to its gas sector.

In Uzbekistan, the American public diplomacy programs essentially stalled after the 2005 events in Andijan. There is no network of resource centers; everything done in this republic is limited to the U.S. embassy in Tashkent.

Russia’s “soft” power in Uzbekistan is also limited: the Internet is practically fully controlled by the state; the republic’s defense and security structures censor the content and weed out undesirable information in English and Russian; users are deprived access to many of the news and analytical websites. The republic’s leaders are very concerned about their international image and reject criticism, however they limit their objections to information supplied by the Russian media. Criticism of a Russian newspaper or a TV program is presented as “polemics among equals, which stresses Uzbekistan’s independence, even if symbolic.”¹⁷

This is the echo of the last 20 years spent building a national political and ideological system pinned on the concept of independence; it rejected the past, when Uzbekistan was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, as colonial. E. Abdullaev has the following to say on this score: “This was typical of the political elites of the newly independent countries: in their discourse on nation-building they interpreted the past in the terms of suffering, trauma, and resistance.”¹⁸

“The Battle for Minds and Hearts:” Defying Challenges

The academic community, very aware of the need to offer much stiffer rivalry to America’s “soft” power, is actively discussing adequate ways and means. So far, great hopes are being pinned on wider

¹⁵ See: “Nazarbaev zakhotel uvidet Borata i priglasil britantsev v Kazakhstan,” *News.ru*, 22 November, 2006, available at [<http://www.newsru.org/world/22nov2006/borrat.html>], 29 July, 2010.

¹⁶ “Minkult Kazakhstana: pozitivny ‘Borat’ vyzval takuiu zhe reaktsiu, kak kogda-to ‘Revizor’ Gogolia,” *News.ru*, 21 November, 2006, available at [http://www.newsru.org/cinema/21nov2006/borat_and_kazaxi.html], 29 July, 2010.

¹⁷ E. Abdullaev, “‘Obraz Rossii’ v sovremennom Uzbekistane: pamiat, vytesnenie, transformatsia,” in: *Rossia i ES v Tsentral’noy Azii. Doklady Instituta Evropy RAN*, No. 222, ed. by M. Nosov, IE RAS, Moscow, 2008, pp. 66-90.

¹⁸ E. Abdullaev, op. cit.

educational and humanitarian cooperation at the bilateral and regional levels (within EurAsEC and SCO), as well as on more active support of Russian-language courses at schools and universities. It is suggested that the Russian schools in the Central Asian countries should become part of the Russian educational system, while Russia and the local countries should be more actively involved in academic exchange; the number of funds and programs designed to promote Russia's interests in the region should be increased.¹⁹

Russian analysts never tire of pointing out that Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russkiy Mir Fund, and the Russia Today TV Channel, as well as the Western PR companies working on Russian contract, address a fairly limited range of tasks, which explains the vague and far from structuralized forms of their activity.

A. Dolinskiy of the Russkiy Mir Fund has pointed out: "Today, Russian public diplomacy is geared toward tactical tasks; at the present level of conceptualization of goals and institutional development, it is unable to deal with strategic aims. To succeed, this segment of state policy should be systematized and institutionalized."²⁰

Russia needs a single center of public diplomacy or a state agency similar to the American USIA liquidated in 1999 (which is still believed to be Bill Clinton's mistake).

"Conceptualization of goals" is another matter. The task is not an easy one, probably because in Russia there is no agreement about the "image of the country" to be projected abroad.

"The country's image" is a synthetic concept made up of intertwined associations tested inside and outside the country. The associations bear emotional and axiological meanings and are based on all sorts of past events, ethnic and cultural specifics, art, traditions, the economy, social and political reality, as well as geography, climate, landscapes, etc.²¹

In the post-Soviet expanse, Russia is consistently associated with a number of positive stereotypes: it is the world's largest country with vast natural riches; it can affect what is going on in the world and stand opposed to the West; it is a natural integration center of the post-Soviet economies and an heir to high culture, science, and art. Much of this, with the exception of the natural and geographic factors, can be doubted or even disproved.²²

Soviet public diplomacy (the term, however, was not used in Soviet times) worked toward the image of a great socialist power, a paragon of internationalism, and a successful opponent of the capitalist West. The Russian language, culture, and higher education were elements of this "set of attractions." China picked up the fallen banner of the "Big Brother" of the developing countries abandoned after the Soviet Union's disintegration and not needed by the new Russian elites. Communist China built its "soft power" on an incredible synthesis of leftist ideology, global economic expansion, and ancient culture.

Russkiy Mir and Rossotrudnichestvo are creating a positive image of Russia on a cultural and linguistic foundation; they are following in the footsteps of the leaders of the Western world (France, the U.K., Germany, and Japan) who are concentrating their efforts on their languages and culture and know how to ignite interest abroad. In any rivalry with the United States (if Russia intends to compete with America), the Russian Federation should move toward categories of a higher order—*universal* ideas and values—and make them attractive to wide foreign audiences.

¹⁹ See: M.V. Starchak, op. cit.

²⁰ A.V. Dolinskiy, "Prakticheskie voprosy optimizatsii rossiiskoy publichnoy diplomatii," *Vserossiyskiy konkurs intellektualnykh proektov 'Derzhava.'* Nominatsia 'Russkiy mir', available at [www.fondedin.ru/dok/dolinskiy.pdf], 29 July, 2010, p. 12.

²¹ See: E. Abdullaev, op. cit., p. 66.

²² S.V. Bespalov, A.V. Vlasov, P.V. Golubtsov, A.A. Kazantsev, A.V. Karavaev, V.N. Merkushev, "Pozitivnye stereotipy obraza Rossii v postsovetskoy Evrazii," *Informatzionno-analiticheskiy Tsentr izucheniya obshchestvenno-politicheskikh protsessov na postsovetskom prostranstve*, 11 January, 2008, available at [http://www.ia-centr.ru/expert/206/], 29 July, 2010.

So far, the axiological and ideological components of Russia's public diplomacy are fairly vague. Dmitry Trenin minced no words when writing about the Kremlin's foreign policy maxims: "The cause of Russia is Russia as it is (rather than an archaic empire or abstract general human interests); the cause of Russia is business (what is good for Gazprom is good for the country); Russia will never permit interference into its internal affairs ('sovereign democracy')." ²³

"Sovereign democracy" can be accepted or even developed by the Central Asian elites in their interests, but it will have to compete with the much better known ideas of liberal democracy, the core of the Western public diplomacy programs. The Eurasian theme, as one of the possible elements of Russia's public diplomacy concepts, has been "usurped" by Kazakhstan. ²⁴

Russia's positive image in Central Asia dates back to the Soviet period: "The idea of Russia (Moscow) as an efficient center of power and justice is reproduced in the mass consciousness and passed on through family and other social informal channels (family histories, photographs, etc.) from the older to the younger generations," writes E. Abdullaev. Contemporary Russia is a symbolic substitute of the Soviet Union, a strong and rich power always ready to help. ²⁵ This was behind the relative success of the Russian information and political actions timed to coincide with the 65th anniversary of the Soviet Victory in the Great Patriotic War. ²⁶

Russian diplomacy in Central Asia can still rely on the so far fairly wide knowledge of Russian. This is, however, a trace of the "gradually waning glory:" today young people either do not know Russian at all or speak basic Russian. In Russia itself little is being done to educate specialists in the Central Asian countries and languages.

The United States, very concerned about its worsening image and the rising anti-American sentiments across the world after 9/11, launched educational programs under President George W. Bush to train experts on "problem" regions funded from the state budget. Americans studying under the National Security Education Program (NSEP) are taught "critically important" languages (the list of over 70 languages includes the Central Asian languages and Russian); they are obliged to spend several years in the civil service.

In 2010, 264 of the 1,006 NSEP graduates were employed by the U.S. Defense Department and 244 by the U.S. Department of State. ²⁷

The American public diplomacy programs can rely on their vast experience in Afghanistan (which shares many factors with Central Asia) to enrich U.S. public diplomacy in the Central Asian Soviet successor-states: the Americans can appeal to the authority of elders and religious leaders and invite linguists and experts on religion, psychology, and social anthropology to cooperate with career diplomats. The Pentagon has already tested this within the Human Terrain System and Minerva Initiative. ²⁸

Russian diplomacy in Central Asia has its own human reserve. A. Volos, a Russian writer born in Dushanbe, writes: "Russians who left Central Asia might have become Russia's gold reserves. Anyone born in Central Asia differs from the average man born on the Russian plains by undetectable psychological traits created by education and growing up in the region, habits, and ways of

²³ D. Trenin, "Vneshniaia politika Rossii: samoutverzhenie ili mobilizatsionny resurs?" *Polit.ru*, 13 May, 2008, available at [<http://www.polit.ru/institutes/2008/05/13/vneshpol.html>], 29 July, 2010.

²⁴ This is amply confirmed by the republic's branding "Astana—the Hearth of Eurasia" at EXPO 2010 in Shanghai (see: "EXPO 2010 Shanghai China," available at [http://en.expo2010.cn/c/en_gj_tpl_82.htm], 29 July, 2010).

²⁵ See: E. Abdullaev, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

²⁶ President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov was absent from the Victory Parade in Moscow on 9 May, 2010; a very significant fact.

²⁷ See: "National Security Education Program," available at [<http://www.nsep.gov>].

²⁸ See: Shah Mahmud, "Potentsial 'narodnoy diplomatii' i znachenie ee primeneniia v Afganistane," *Afghanistan.Ru*, 3 May, 2009, available at [<http://www.afghanistan.ru/doc/14632.html>], 29 July, 2010.

communication. Today, however, Russia has neither the strength nor inner urge to look after its gold reserves.”²⁹

The writer is referring to ethnic Russians; there are also thousands of Tajik intellectuals who found refuge in Russia after the civil war; there are millions of labor migrants who taken together can be described as a vast potential resource of influence. So far, Russia has been neglecting them. In fact, the government and the media describe the huge numbers of seasonal workers from Central Asia as a threat to security; the population associates them with rising crime, drug trafficking, epidemics, etc.

Xenophobia and the negative attitude toward people from Central Asian is a grave problem; racial and religious tolerance of Russians has become a myth. There is the widespread conviction that the Central Asian countries are *doomed* to political and economic dependence on Russia.

Remittances from Russia constitute the bulk of the national incomes in Central Asia, which means that violence in the streets and racism will hardly scare the guest workers away. Russia is not very bothered about its image among them; Russian society hardly noticed the scandal caused by the comedy *Nasha Russia: Yaytsa sudby* with “Tajik” construction workers Rovshan and Jumshut as the main characters. The film was banned in Tajikistan: the country’s leaders thought it insulted Tajik labor migrants,³⁰ while the Tajik Labor Migrants movement described it as “moral genocide of the Tajik nation.”³¹ The stir aroused by this “hack job” probably increased its ratings but did nothing for Russia’s relations with Tajikistan.

Many diplomats of the old school are very aware that genuine rather than declared tolerance and openness of Russian society could become an enormous advantage of Russia’s public diplomacy.

In one of his interviews, Evgeni Primakov pointed out: “We badly need internationalism as an idea. There was anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union at the everyday and, most important, state level, even though this was never openly recognized. At the same time, no one dared use the term ‘nigger’ or beat up people of different nationalities. This was impossible, and not only because people feared arrest. It was impossible at the mental level because society would have condemned this. This is what we lack today.”³² If Russian public diplomacy is determined to represent the interests of a great power in earnest, it should arm itself with the above.

C o n c l u s i o n

The United States and the Russian Federation have come to stay in the informational and cultural expanse of the Central Asian Soviet successor-states, however their “soft” impact varies from country to country. The political and legal milieu in which their resource centers are operating is highly unstable. In the wake of the 2010 events in Kyrgyzstan, America and Russia have to reassess their information priorities: the old assessments of their potential proved wrong, while much of what was done to reach the target audiences was ineffective. This means that information rivalry between the two states is one of the priorities. Carried away by the struggle over human resources (the youth and the elites) and mutual discrediting, America and Russia alike sometimes neglect the strategic soft power component, viz. the need to create their positive and attractive images.

²⁹ A. Volos, “Dushanbintsy vsekh stran, ob’ediniaytes!,” available at [http://dushanbe1.narod.ru/_chronicle/volos.html], 29 July, 2010.

³⁰ See: V Tadjikistane zapretili prodazhu filma *Nasha Russia: Yaytsa sudby*,” *Ferghana.Ru*, 6 April, 2010, available at [<http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=14361&mode=snews>], 29 July, 2010.

³¹ “Rossia: Dvizhenie ‘Tadjikskie trudovye migranty’ potrebovalo zapretit film *Yaytsa sudby* i komediynoe show ‘Nasha Russia’,” *Ferghana.Ru*, 22 March, 2010, available at [<http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=14275&mode=snews>], 29 July, 2010.

³² “Prosveshchennaia elita: interview E.M. Primakova,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta (Nedelia)*, No. 5129, 1 March, 2010, available at [<http://www.rg.ru/2010/03/11/primakov.html>], 29 July, 2010.

Russia, the soft power of which survives on Soviet momentum which is slowly dying out, should work hard to create a positive image of its own. This aim will remain unattainable as long as the Russian political elites and the media describe Central Asia as a backyard of sorts and a source of threat and instability. The present conception of Russia's public diplomacy rarely complements and often contradicts the Kremlin's *Realpolitik* in the region.

It seems that the current image of Russia should likewise be corrected: an open, multinational, and multi-confessional country stands a much better chance in its competition with the American "melting pot" and with united Europe, which has hoisted the "Unity in Diversity" banner.

This calls for a U-turn: Russian society should become mature enough to abandon the vulgar pragmatism of "pipeline diplomacy" in favor of a more flexible and softer foreign policy. This, however, is related to Russia's domestic policy, which is beyond the scope of the present article.