The impact of Russian soft power in *Kazakhstan*: creating an enabling environment for cooperation between Nur-Sultan and *Moscow*

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**ABSTRACT**

This study of soft power applies a Gramscian notion of hegemony as consent to the international arena. Drawing on an attitudinal survey conducted in autumn 2021 among higher education students in three cities of Kazakhstan, the piece argues that Russia does enjoy cultural-ideational attraction in Kazakhstan, although this does come with some qualifications. By way of explanation, various channels through which Russia communicate with the Kazakhstani audience are presented. With regard to the impact of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan, the article points to various examples of how Kazakhstani relationships and interactions with Russia are facilitated and enhanced by soft power.

**KEYWORDS**

Kazakhstan; Russia; soft power; survey research; political communication

1. Introduction

Between Russia and Kazakhstan there exists a symbiotic relationship, with both sides acknowledging the material and symbolic significance of the other as a partner. Inevitably, given the greater size of the territory, population and economy of the northern party, the two sides must negotiate weighty inequalities in the relationship. Russia maintains numerous potential levers of ‘hard’ power that grant it potential influence over Kazakhstan in various areas. In the economic sphere, these include the fact that the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) pipeline transporting the great majority of Kazakhstani oil to European markets runs through Russian territory, and the significant trade imbalance in Russia’s favour (Mazorenko and Kaisar 2022). Furthermore, at the moment of independence, Kazakhstan, and especially the northern regions adjacent to Russia, were home to millions of ethnic Russians, which gave rise to fears in some quarters that Russia would stoke irredentism as a policy tool (Rees and Williams 2017, p. 816). Often acknowledging their landlocked situation, and the 7000 km shared border, Kazakhstani officials express a sense of the inevitability of close relations. Pragmatically and realistically, President Tokayev reflects this sentiment, observing,

*We have repeatedly noted that Kazakhstan and Russia are neighbours by the grace of God. We have the longest border in the world, and there simply can be no other relationship between our countries except friendship, cooperation and other interaction.* (Tokayev 2022a)
Yet Kazakhstan enjoys its own wealth of mineral and energy resources and is the world’s ninth largest state by area, with a young and rapidly growing population. Its leaders have expressed the aspiration for Kazakhstan to become a great Eurasian power, and one of the top 30 developed countries in the world (Nazarbayev 2017). While strong relations with Russia remain a constant goal, the leadership has sought to draw benefit from their strategic location and natural resources to position the country as a link between Europe and Asia, and to that end pursue a multi-vectoral foreign policy engaging China, Europe and the Turkic world as well as Russia and its Central Asian neighbours as an effective conduit to the pursuit of national interests (Vanderhill et al. 2020, Shayakhmetova 2022). Indeed, even as the friendship narrative remains salient in the discourse of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (b. 1953), as it was under his predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev (b.1940), independence is a leitmotif in the public discourse of Kazakhstani officials.

In this context the present article explores how the cultural and ideational influence of Russia – ‘soft power’ – yields benefits in terms of supporting Moscow’s foreign policy goals in the region, which can be broadly seen as ensuring stability, perpetuating its own regional pre-eminence, and achieving international recognition of that role (Laumulin 2012; Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 2016; Strategicheskii kursRossii s gosudarstvami –uchastnikami Codruzhestva Nezavisimyh Gosudarstv 1995). In the first section a concept of soft power is outlined, which positions soft power as the result of successful communications that socialise audience members into a culturally determined worldview, thereby facilitating the achievement of foreign policy goals. The second section provides methodological insight into how this understanding of soft power is empirically operationalised here, namely by means of a survey to assess how far a section of the Kazakhstani audience – higher education students – accepts the narratives that Russia strives to promote. The third section presents survey findings to substantiate the hypothesis that Russia does indeed enjoy cultural attraction among this key target audience. The fourth section outlines some of the mechanisms through which Russia communicates its ideas to Kazakhstani audiences, observing that often the most effective means are not the state arms of public diplomacy, but indigenous gatekeepers, to the extent that they permit target narratives to be reproduced in the discourse of their own communication outlets. The fifth section considers the benefits that Russia derives as a result of its soft power in Kazakhstan.

2. Conceptual framework

Coined by Harvard professor Joseph Nye in 1990 to explain how US hegemony would be perpetuated by its cultural dominance, despite the erosion of its relative military and economic preponderance, soft power was by no means a strictly new concept. Its pedigree can be traced back to Confucius’ (551–479 BC) concept of dezheng – reign by virtue (Cao 2007, p. 436), via Thucydides work on hegemonia, understood at that time as legitimated leadership, in antiquity to more recent conceptualisations of ‘power over public opinion’ by realist scholar E.H. Carr (2001, p.102). Further, writing in the 1930s, Gramsci refers to the non-coercive ‘civil society apparatuses’ such as the Church, schools, trade unions, political parties, cultural associations, clubs, the family etc.; which perform the task of producing and reproducing cultural hegemony: the winning of consent for leadership. Similarly, Curran (2002, p.139) speaks of ‘socialising
agencies’ and Said (1981, p.43) of ‘cultural apparatus’ to describe the agents involved in processes of socialisation and enculturation: the process of reproducing norms in society. Often operating in tandem with state institutions, whether in a coercive or co-optive capacity, such associations play a role in developing, shaping, disseminating and maintaining discourses bearing the culture, philosophy and morality of the nation’s ruling or, in Gramsci’s terms, hegemonic elite. As Nye notes, ‘the most critical feature for a dominant country is the ability to obtain a broad measure of consent on general principles – principles that ensure the supremacy of the leading state and dominant social classes – and at the same time to offer some prospect of satisfaction to the less powerful (Nye 1990, p. 32).

What was distinctive and contemporary about Nye’s notion was that, reflecting the zeitgeist of the immediate post-Cold War period, it assumed that the US enjoyed cultural influence by virtue of the inherent attraction of its cultural offerings: its values, lifestyle and political practices. In taking this stance, Nye’s conceptualisation of this largely intangible form of power skips lightly over a crucial step in the generation of cultural and ideational attraction: the ability to successfully communicate with a target audience; a process which is itself deeply steeped in ‘hard’ power resources. As an example, the popularity of Hollywood films is merely an indicator of the attraction of the America way of life (2004, p.x,11; Hudson 2014, p. 44), rather than a key tool in communicating with foreign audiences and inculcating attraction among them. Countries were seen to possess soft power attraction to the extent that they aligned with a preconceived list of attributes characteristic of the Western model. Glossing over the active, creative role of communication also elides consideration of the vast ‘hard power’ resources behind the scenes that enabled the US to promote itself in this way: the deep pockets required to support a massive film industry, distribution networks technologically capable of broadcasting to overseas markets, as well as the political, economic and sometimes military clout to gain access to those markets, even in the face of resistance from national gatekeepers (de Grazia 2005, Stephan 2006).

This article makes explicit this link between a polity’s cultural offerings (its values, worldview and the cultural manifestations drawing upon them), the ability to successfully communicate them to an audience, and the soft power capital that may consequently be leveraged. The emphasis here is placed on the success of a communications strategy. While a polity may have access to a multitude of ‘tools’ or channels of communication with a given audience, if the audience is not attracted, then soft power cannot be said to be present, and no influence will be generated. Instead of being attracted and reproducing the target narratives in their own statements, audience members may express disbelief, irony, ridicule and/or criticism. The progressive decline in Russian attraction in post-Soviet Ukraine, despite a significant number of methods of reaching the audience is a case in point. Even before the Euromaidan, and the intensification of restrictions on Russian and Russian-language media (Harding 2022), influential constituencies were not attracted by Russian cultural and ideational overtures, despite the extensive and pervasive character of Moscow’s communication networks there. The audience found them offensive and responded with rejection, resentment and even mockery (Hudson 2015). Thus, the approach to soft power taken here draws upon an understanding of audience members as active participants in the process of communication, rather than passive vessels accepting whatever propaganda content is broadcast to them. The audience
members exert friction in the communication process, filtering messages through the lens of their own personal experiences and socialisation, disposition and needs, and other sources (Neuman 1991, p. 87, Fairclough 2001, p. 207; Stuart Hall 1973, Castells 2009, p. 128, Livingstone 1999, p. 100). Whether audiences accept a particular narrative depends less of its intrinsic merits, and more on how strong an account it provides of a given situation at a particular moment in time, given the salience of alternative and oppositional discourse in the given information space, the authority of those articulating the narrative, the ability of the narrative to account for pre-existing audience attributes, and of course, the capacity to actually have ones broadcasts received by target audiences, both in terms of reaching the audience members and them engaging with it.

As with other forms of power, the purpose of soft power is to create an enabling environment for policy, and although it functions largely intangibly by working on ‘hearts and minds’ it can nevertheless yield very tangible benefits. Nye has stated that soft power works by ‘getting others to want what you want’ (Nye 1990, p. 310), which disposes them to accept your leadership, as they share your vision and values, and thus are more ready to acquiesce to policies framed as supporting those assumptions (Nye 2004, p. 10). Although Nye was reluctant to frame his conceptualisation of soft power as ‘procrustean’ (Nye 1990a, p.182–90; 2010, Hudson 2014), soft power may be seen to function analogously to Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, extrapolated to the international arena. Gramsci’s (1971) approach to hegemony illuminates how narratives transmitted through civil society create consent for power as they socialise individuals into the values and worldview that the seat of power claims to represent and pursues in its policies. Such consent for leadership does not always manifest in active enthusiasm, it may simply be indicated by a sufficient degree of passivity or apathy that enables a political movement to succeed, or an inability to credibly argue against policies framed as being grounded in common sense.

The capacity to successfully use cultural means to create consent for domestic power (hegemony) applies well to the international realm as the institutions of a nation’s civil society have their counterparts on the international stage, which facilitate the capillary-like diffusion of ideas and image across borders (Neuman 1991, p. 85, Castells 2009). Concretely, this includes not only public diplomacy narrowly defined, but also any method of conveying a message to foreign citizens, such as manifestations of globalisation, multinational media and cross-border travel, education, the activities and profile of international organisations and charities, consultancy work, and ‘technical assistance’ programmes. Often the path of these cultural vehicles is stabilized by their association with economic incentives such as scholarships, donations, financial transfer, accession promises, and the like. While a polity’s representatives may have different priorities, and may not agree on everything, the point is that their core values are consistent, and provide reciprocal amplification, e.g. US media provides broadly supportive coverage of US government policy abroad, and the US government supports organisations that reproduce its values (Grazia 2005, Stephan 2006).

Soft power enjoyed a short and limited heyday in Moscow around 2013 when it was explicitly mentioned in the new Foreign Policy Concept (2013). Since then, political-military challenges, reflexive reliance on hard power bases of influence, and suspicion of a Western idea have overwhelmed ‘softer’ approaches. Nevertheless, despite a multitude of challenges too extensive to be discussed here, Russia continues to advance its culture,
values and policy perspectives in the world through informational channels (Hudson 2014, 2015, Chatin and Gallarotti 2016, Feklyunina 2016).

3. Methodology

Before reflecting on the myriad of ways in which the salience of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan benefits Moscow, a pause should be made to consider the assumption that Russia does indeed have such cultural attraction in Kazakhstan. Based on the findings of a survey conducted by the author to evaluate the extent of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan, this study concludes broadly in the affirmative. Prior to describing the method in detail, a few general remarks will be useful.

When seeking to evaluate a polity’s attraction, it is theoretically and methodologically problematic to draw a direct line of causality between a given communication or communication strategy and the attitudes of any given audience member, or disentangle the impact of a given factor. As already observed, information received is filtered through the lens of experience, personal disposition and exposure to alternative discourses, which all affect receptivity to a given target narrative. Indeed, it is accepted in the communication studies literature that it is extremely difficult to bring some people to accept things that contradict their deeply held beliefs, even if solid evidence is presented (Castells 2009, p. 154, Curran 2002, p. 133). On the other hand, it tends to be easier to persuade audiences of particular arguments if ideas can be presented as aligning with their pre-existing beliefs. Thus, while it is difficult to state with methodologically and empirically grounded confidence the ‘cause’ of a given attitude held by any individual, the fact that a greater or lesser share of a particular target audience accepts a given narrative is nevertheless of significance to a polity’s soft power status. If the greater part of an audience buys in to a polity’s positions in general, from a political pragmatic perspective, it is less important why. It will just be easier to persuade them of specific issues, because they will already tend to share the values, cultural reference points and assessment of the ‘facts’ upon which the arguments are based. Indeed, as Curran (2002, p.165) notes ‘the principal way in which the media’ – and other sources of information – ‘influence the public is not through campaigning and overt persuasion but through routine representations of reality’.

This article reports on the findings of a survey which aimed to assess the extent of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan by providing insight into the audience’s reception of Russian cultural, value and foreign policy narratives. The survey focused on a specific segment of the Kazakhstani population, namely higher education students, who are viewed as the next generation of leaders and opinion formers, and thus a bellwether of future trends. Rolled out after piloting in autumn 2021, the survey was conducted in three major cities across Kazakhstan, with valid returns 729 (of which 82% in the Russian version and 18% in Kazakh) received from students studying at universities in the national capital Nur-Sultan, in the former capital Almaty and in the predominantly Russian-speaking city of Kostanai in the north of the country.

With the aim of achieving an accurate assessment of the attraction of Russia and what it represents among this target audience, survey respondents were invited to indicate their agreement with 56 statements on a five-point Likert scale, with a score of five indicating a ‘pro-Russian’ response. The statements were arranged in clusters relating to Russia’s culture, values and foreign policy, as proposed by Joseph Nye, as well as socio-economic
attraction. Contrary to Nye’s suggestion, however, these statements were not based on liberal criteria for attraction, but derived from the target narratives that Moscow and its representatives actually project in its public and official diplomacy. In this way, insight should be gained into how ‘attractive’ – or, ‘acceptable’ – Russia is in its own terms.

4. The extent of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan

The data gathered in the survey reported here tends to support the assumption that Russia has a relatively high level of soft power in Kazakhstan among the highly educated sample group.

In each table, ‘Low’ indicates the percentage of respondents whose average score for the questions relating to Russian positions on cultural issues was between 1 and 2.5 out of a possible 5; medium specifies an average of 2.5 to 3.5, while ‘high’ marks an average of greater than 3.5 out of 5.

The data presented in Tables 1-4 suggest that only a relatively small proportion of respondents, around 10%, expressed a generally low level of attitudinal congruency on cultural, values-oriented and foreign policy issues. By contrast, almost two-thirds recorded a ‘high’ level of attraction on the cultural issues; a figure which averaged nearly 40% for the value and foreign policy spheres. Interestingly the overall levels of attraction were much lower for the socio-economic cluster, where questions harnessed, for example, attitudes towards Russia as a destination for work, perceptions of living standards and trajectory of development. The figures also reveal significant intra-regional diversity. In Kostanai, where ethnic Russians were more represented than elsewhere, views were generally more favourable to Russia in comparison with respondents in Nur-Sultan, who were less positively disposed towards what Russia stands for, although by no means particularly hostile in general. Respondents from Almaty tended to vacillate between the two, although broadly closer to their Kostanai colleagues in reflecting the salience of Russian soft power.

| City         | n  | Low % | Medium % | High % |
|--------------|----|-------|----------|--------|
| Nur-Sultan   | 199| 14.6  | 42.7     | 42.7   |
| Almaty       | 230| 10    | 20.4     | 69.6   |
| Kostanai     | 203| 4.4   | 18.7     | 76.8   |
| Total        | 632| 9.7   | 26.9     | 63.4   |

| City         | n  | Low % | Medium % | High % |
|--------------|----|-------|----------|--------|
| Nur-Sultan   | 194| 12.4  | 51.5     | 36.1   |
| Almaty       | 215| 8.8   | 54.4     | 36.7   |
| Kostanai     | 203| 6.7   | 46.4     | 46.9   |
| Total        | 632| 9.3   | 50.9     | 39.8   |
Table 3. Clustered average Russian soft power – foreign policy strands, by city.

| City       | n  | Low | Medium | High |
|------------|----|-----|--------|------|
| Nur-Sultan | 179| 18.4| 57.5   | 24   |
| Almaty     | 185| 10.3| 48.6   | 41.1 |
| Kostanai   | 182| 8.2 | 42.9   | 48.9 |
| Total      | 546| 12.3| 49.6   | 38.1 |

Table 4. Clustered average Russian soft power – socio-economic attraction strands, by city.

| City       | n  | Low | Medium | High |
|------------|----|-----|--------|------|
| Nur-Sultan | 168| 64.9| 27.4   | 7.7  |
| Almaty     | 173| 42.8| 32.4   | 24.9 |
| Kostanai   | 178| 28.1| 44.9   | 27.0 |
| Total      | 519| 44.9| 35.1   | 20.0 |

5. How does Russia project soft power in Kazakhstan?

The cultural influence of soft power refers to the general socialisation of an audience, both on the general public and elites. The communications that generate this occur over an extended period of time. Soft power may be seen to refer to the dissemination of broad ideas, values and images, rather than positions of specific issues, although information spaces where a polity generally enjoys soft power would be seen as fertile ground for garnering support for particular policies. Accordingly, an idea or value discourse is more likely to become dominant if audience members receive it from multiple sources, often repackaged in different ways appropriate to the medium, audience and context (Neuman 1991, p. 85). Ideally, to be successful, these sources (‘tools’ of soft power) would intersect and broadly reinforce one another so as to form a stable background of culturally specific ‘common sense’ knowledge of the world. Embedded in such perspectives, audience members are broadly primed to make judgements in line with positions that support foreign policy objectives. It is highly unlikely that absolute consent would be achieved in this regard, but it suffices for a position to gain sufficient acceptance by an appropriate audience at a key moment in time for the move to be considered a success (e.g., the now discredited ‘45 minute WMD dossier’ that won over British MPs in support of intervention in Iraq in 2003). There are five principal vehicles through which Russian soft power is transmitted in Kazakhstan: co-optive approaches, public diplomacy, Russian language, education and media.

5.1. Co-optive approaches

The rather favourable condition of Russian soft power attested to here may be explained by the fact that Russia is able to diffuse its ideas, values, images and worldview in Kazakhstan through a number of influential channels. Yet, before discussing Moscow’s proactive measures, it is also worthwhile to acknowledge the passive benefits to Russian soft power gleaned through inertia and non-resistance.
Kazakhstan was the last union republic to declare independence from the USSR, and where some of the newly independent states pursued a nation-building approach that defined the titular nation against Russia and the history of imperial domination, Kazakhstan took a more inclusive approach, declaring the country home to a multinational people (Rees and Williams 2017, p. 817, Nazarbayev 2008, 1991). Unlike tangible forms of hard power such as economic clout and military forces, soft power does not immediately or automatically seep away if the methods of its projection are destroyed. Cultural influence may be reduced to the extent new, alternative or oppositional perspectives effectively counter and undermine ideologies, but if such a thorough re-socialisation does not take place, entrenched worldviews may continue to exist in people’s minds, even if not actively propagated. Hence, we may observe some lingering socialisation born of the Soviet period and transmitted to the next generation.

Moreover, a polity’s soft power is not only generated directly through public diplomacy among foreign citizens. It can also arise if target countries’ domestic actors become co-opted – whether that be a result of their own cultural attraction, economic incentives or even threats – and reproduce the polity’s narratives in their own statements. Such co-option is particularly effective when it concerns prominent societal figures, political leaders and gatekeepers able to set the agenda on domestic media networks, but it is also true on a micro or interpersonal level concerning ordinary individuals. Indeed, co-opted communications can be far more effective in disseminating a polity’s narratives than direct communications. Although the message may potentially be diluted with indigenous content, this is not necessarily a disadvantage as it can make the source more authentic, authoritative and credible in the eyes of the receiver, which, coupled with the greater ease of accessing the audience, can make it more effective overall.

Indeed, one of the most significant channels through which Russian ideas and perspectives reach Kazakhstani audiences is through Kazakhstani politicians themselves. Although there are public figures in Kazakhstan who articulate diverging narratives – for instance, more pro-Western or Kazakh nationalist discourses – there is significant overlap in the narratives informing the political discourse produced by Kazakhstani leadership.

This approach allows discursive space for Kazakh nation-building. Indeed, independence has been stressed in a number of significant public speeches by the political leadership (Ekberova 2021, Tokayev 2021). Yet the fact that themes such as imperialism, chauvinism and domination are not stressed in statements by most national leaders relating to Russia means that what currently count as Kazakhstani self-understandings tend not to be defined in contrast to Moscow. Compare, for instance, the handling of the famine of early 1930s, as a result of which millions died in the USSR. This event, known as Holodomor [death by hunger in Ukrainian] and considered a genocide against the Ukrainian nation by the emphatically Russia-lead Soviet Union in Kyiv, forms a prominent part in Ukrainian nation-building narratives, where it contributes to emotive justifications for re-orienting away from Russia. By contrast, although Kazakhstani leaders also suffered greatly during this period, the topic is thus far under-scrutinized and tends to be framed as a tragedy which befell many Soviet countries including Kazakhstan as a result of, as President Nazarbayev put it, the ‘inhumane totalitarian system’ (Glushkova...
2012) by Nur-Sultan (Richter 2020), rather than an intentional policy directed at the Kazakh nationality.

Critique of the West is not actively propagated in Kazakhstani official public discourse in the way it is in Russia, but neither are Russian narratives countered, which may be seen to reflect the pragmatic, non-confrontational and multi-vectorial approach to foreign policy of the Kazakhstani elite, who see Kazakhstan as a major nation of the future, and wishes to avoid dampening its potential by creating unnecessary distractions and contradictions. There appears to be wide-spread acceptance of the need for good relations with Kazakhstan’s northern neighbour, both on an elite and popular level. The discursive agenda set by the Kazakhstani leadership may be said to shape the boundaries of what constitutes acceptable public speech for others in society and public life, and sets cues for the emphasis and tone taken in their communications. While the leaders acknowledge differences, these are largely played out behind closed doors and ‘with respect’ (Putin 2022). Thus, the Kazakhstani political elite may be seen to facilitate a rather favourable or at least largely benign environment for active Russian public diplomacy.

5.2. Public diplomacy

From about 2006 Russia sought to re-engage actively with cultural influence abroad, and a network of Russian public diplomacy organisations, political bodies and programmes sprung up across the globe to promote Russia’s culture, language, image and perspectives. Among the most high-profile such organisations is the Russian World Foundation, which was founded by presidential decree in 2007 and includes a number of influential political figures among its leadership. As of 2022, the foundation maintains Russkiy Mir [Russian World] centres, based within universities in Aktobe and Almaty. Furthermore, Rossotrudnichestvo, the Federal Agency for Commonwealth of Independent States’ Affairs, Compatriots Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, is in Nur-Sultan, at the Russian Centre for Science and Culture at 39 Keneasary Street. One of the objectives of these organisations is to promote the Russian language. Statistics are not publicly available on their work in this regard in Kazakhstan, but its impact is likely to be relatively marginal as Russian is already widely spoken as a result of family language heritage and schooling. Additionally, the Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Foundation also runs a School on Central Asia among its regional projects bringing together young leaders and it foster ties with Russia and Russians on an occasional basis. While these bodies provide information, cultural entertainment and language learning support, they arguably communicate with a limited audience of those already predisposed towards Russia. Perhaps their most important function is as a hub where a nation’s friends abroad can come together to maintain their identity, network and develop initiatives that potentially amplify the nation’s position.

5.3. Russian language

The Russian language is a significant factor in matters of soft power because it not only enables people to directly access information from Russia – thereby aiding their socialisation by the perspectives found there – but also facilitates their feeling part of a shared cultural space. Figures indicate that the position of the Russian language is in decline in
Kazakhstan (Ivanov 2019); a phenomenon that likely stems at least in part from the reduction in the number of Russian-language schools in Kazakhstan, which dropped from 32% of all general schools in 2008 to 17% in 2020, with a corresponding drop from 36% to 12% in the number of pupils studying fully in Russian over the same period. This trend is a reflection of demographic changes shifting the balance in favour of the Kazakh population, which has increased its share of the population from 40% in 1989 to 66.5% in 2016 (Hudson 2022: p.346), and nation-building policies (Narottum 2006, Aitymbetov et al. 2015, Burkhano 2017).

Yet in spite of this clear trend, the survey referenced here supports that the notion that the Russian language continues to be widely spoken to a high level among the most highly educated sections of Kazakhstani society, including among ethnic Kazakhs of the post-Soviet generation. 90% of the higher education students surveyed considered Russian as their native language or spoke it fluently, which compared favourably to those with a similar mastery of English, at 36%. Furthermore, 76% of respondents agreed (of which 48% strongly) that Russian was their preferred language of interethnic communication.

Thus, while much has been said about the decline of the Russian language in the post-Soviet space, including Kazakhstan, this tendency appears to be unevenly distributed, and seems less applicable to the country’s next generation of leaders.

5.4. Education

The continued prevalence of Russian language in Kazakhstani society creates favourable conditions for a range of Russian education exports. Indeed, education is a major channel through which Russia is able to communicate with the population of Kazakhstan, and while the number of Russian-medium schools may be in the decline, Russia-based higher education remains a significant and growing factor in Kazakhstan. Recognising the manifold benefits of exporting education services, the Russian government has issued a number of statutory documents aiming to advance the goal of increasing this sector. Being a desirable destination for education is acknowledged as a significant and prestigious marker of soft power by relevant international rankings. UNESCO statistics indicate that the Russian Federation is in the top flight of desirable study destinations globally, ranking fifth – after USA, Australia, UK and Germany – by number of incoming students in 2019. Indeed, Russia has increased its share of the international higher education market from 2.38% in 1998 to 5.94% in 2017, and in 2019 returned a net gain of 234,762 students.

In spite of these developments, Russian universities are presently rather modestly positioned in international rankings (Rozhenkova & Rust 2018). Nevertheless, the strong reputation of Russian higher education persists in Kazakhstan, and Russian universities are very well regarded (Peleshchuk 2019). This is attested to by the survey referenced here, which indicated that 41% of survey respondents (of whom 54% strongly) agreeing with the statement ‘Russia offers attractive and useful educational opportunities’; a figure that rises to 53% in Kostanai and 67% among ethnic Russian Kazakhstani.

Such positive perceptions nourish a fertile market for Russian higher education in Kazakhstan. Indeed, of the 282,922 international students studying in Russia in 2017, 65,237 or 23% hailed from Kazakhstan alone, which reflects a steady trend since
Table 5. Kazakhstani students studying abroad, by year (selected) \(^9\)

| Year  | 2000  | 2005  | 2011  | 2015  | 2019  |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Total Kazakhstani HE students studying abroad | 17,214 | 28,009 | 39,734 | 78,035 | 88,105 |
| Of which, studying in Russia | n | 15,300 | 20,780 | 29,865 | 59,295 |
| % | 89% | 74% | 75% | 76% | 81% |

independence. Indeed, the Russian Federation remains the primary destination for Kazakhstani students seeking to study abroad, with the share of Kazakhstani students studying in Russia keeping pace with the dramatic growth in international student mobility among Kazakhstanis over the past two decades, as indicated in Table 5 below.

In addition to attracting Kazakhstanis to study in Russia, a number of prestigious Russian universities have also established branch campuses in Kazakhstan (e.g. Chelyabinsk State University in Kostanai and Lomonosov Moscow State University in Nur-Sultan among others) offering Russian diplomas recognised in Kazakhstan and internationally. \(^10\)

That Russia has broadly retained its share of the outwardly mobile Kazakhstani education market, despite the opening up of new opportunities posed by globalisation, is likely due to the relatively low price of Russian offerings, geographic proximity and linguistic accessibility of Russian language content. Numbers are also boosted by various state and university funding schemes that support scholarships for students from Kazakhstan and other neighbouring countries. Furthermore, in recent months, four Russian universities have been added to the list of eligible institutions for the prestigious Bolashaq scholarship scheme, which is funded by the Kazakhstani government to support about 11,000 students to study abroad, mostly thus far in the USA and UK (Alimova 2022).

For those that opt to study at a Russian HEI, the experience cannot only inculcate them with the Russian worldview and nurture positive emotions at an influential life juncture, but can also provide a foundation for friendships and professional networks which potentially serve as conduits of soft Russian influence long after the period of study has finished. Indeed, many members of the Kazakhstani elite, including President Tokayev, studied in Moscow. As Alina Nefedova observes ‘it’s not like foreign students are subjected to hours-long lecture sessions of pure agitprop. Rather, studying in major cities like Moscow gives them invaluable insight into how Russia’s political, economic and social systems are built. And students will bring those lessons back home with them’ (Peleschuk 2019).

This trend looks set to continue as presidents Putin and Tokayev agreed on 28 December 2021 to establish branches of several renowned Russian universities in Kazakhstan. \(^11\) At the same meeting, the two leaders declared the intention to focus on developing technical capacity. While this move will likely benefit the Kazakhstani economy, the implied intention to reduce attention on the humanities is, at least, unlikely to further Kazakhstani nation-building or provide the basis for a cultural growth away from the Russian world.

5.5. Media

Another major source of cultural influence is exercised through the mass media. The most direct means of engaging with foreign publics is to have them access your media
outlets themselves, directly. This may mean subscribing to print media, tuning in to Russian domestic programming via cable networks, surfing Russia-based websites, listening to Russian radio stations, etc. Yet while this is a significant method of influencing foreign citizens, particularly in regions adjacent to the Russian border, it relies upon the audience member having an already quite pronounced interest in Russia, and being willing to imbibe media content that is preoccupied with distant places. This requires the person to overlook local, domestic options in favour of Russian ones, which demands a choice that could be seen as potentially unpatriotic.

Although less overtly political than current-affairs content, entertainment programming such as shows and films are still significant from a soft power perspective as they propagate values, reproduce common-sense understandings, and generate cultural touchpoints that become shared reference points among a cultural community. They also project a vision of a lifestyle in the country concerned and disseminate images of a shared ‘post-Soviet’ geography so that the overall vision tends to cultivate identification with a country and its people among the audience.

Polities whose languages are spoken in other countries are at an advantage in the global film and TV programming market as the significant investments needed to produce content can more easily be offset by the possibility of exporting it to other countries. Given the capital needed to produce media content, countries whose film industries and distribution networks are relatively undeveloped have fewer chances to recoup that investment by export, and are often inclined to import content, and thereby open their doors to the cultural influence radiated by other cultures. Similarly, in major print or online media, a national publication or news agency may still rely on content provided by the Moscow branch. Even if translated into the local language, the ideas, perspectives and values often remain the same. Consequently, an efficient method of accessing foreign audiences via mass media involves going through local gatekeepers to have ones content syndicated through domestic media. This has often occurred in the former Soviet countries, where the relatively small domestic market and low levels of investment have not incentivised producers to generate national content, but rather buy into Russian-made programming, which has tended to have the advantage of being significantly cheaper than Western-produced content.12

According to Kazakhstan’s register of foreign TV and radio channels,13 and indicated in Table 6, there are 274 overseas outlets active on Kazakhstani territory, of which 58% broadcast in Russian, with a further 25% of the channels using both Russian and English, including some outlets based in Moscow.

However, while the Russian language clearly dominates foreign-owned broadcasting, that should not automatically be equated as a wholesale boon to Russian soft power tools since the ownership of even Russophone and Russia-based channels varies in a way that does not unambiguously favour Moscow. Table 7 details that while 72% per cent of the

| Language      | Russian | Russian & English | English | Multiple languages (3+) | Turkish | French | Other | Total |
|---------------|---------|-------------------|--------|-------------------------|---------|--------|-------|-------|
| n             | 159     | 69                | 21     | 7                       | 4       | 3      | 11    | 274   |
| %             | 58%     | 25%               | 8%     | 3%                      | 1%      | 1%     | 4%    |       |

Table 6. Language of foreign TV and radio registered in Kazakhstan, 5 May 2022.
Table 7. Distribution of foreign registered TV and radio channels in Kazakhstan by city of legal address, including companies owning multiple channels.

| Place of legal address | Moscow | Elsewhere in Russia | USA | UK | Paris | Tallinn | Turkey | Other European | Other |
|------------------------|--------|---------------------|-----|----|-------|---------|--------|----------------|-------|
| Number of channels based there | 170 | 23 | 19 | 17 | 14 | 13 | 6 | 3 | 2 |
| Names of companies owning multiple channels in that place (number of channels) | First Channel (x11) | First TVCh in St Petersburg (x10) | Bloomberg | MTV | FOX | BBC | World |
| | Red Media (x 22) | | | | | | |
| | All Russian State TV and Radio (x 3) | | | | | | |
| | Discovery Europe (x 10) | | | | | | |
| | Signal (x13) | | | | | | |
| | VIASAT (x 20) | | | | | | |
| | MediaMart (x11) | | | | | | |
| | STRIM (x 12) | | | | | | |

Source: Register of foreign TV and radio channels, *Ministry of Information and Social Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (standing as of 5 May 2022) [https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/documents/details/42554?lang=en](https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/qogam/documents/details/42554?lang=en) [accessed 10 May 2022]
269 foreign-based channels are based in Russia, the majority of the remaining channels are based in Western countries and are owned by major Western soft-power players such as Fox, Bloomberg, BBC, Disney, MTV and Tallinn-based Central Media Distribution; even if these expand their audience by broadcasting in Russian. The 170 Moscow-based channels are owned by 54 production companies of varying sizes, including 8 big players accounting for 60% of these. Nearly one third (29%) of these companies are owned by Viasat and Discovery, and thus not ultimately Russian, despite being based in Moscow. Thus, while the majority of domestic TV stations are owned by the Kazakhstani state or other major domestic groups, foreign players can broadcast to those who have access to cable or satellite TV, although in this market Russian channels of influence must jostle for place with major Western counterparts. How useful this is for shaping young people is questionable, however, as this cohort is known to use TV less than their elders (Kosenov 2012, Poletaev 2018); a fact which was supported by my survey, which found that 50% of respondents ‘never’ used TV to access information about global events, compared with 95% who ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ turned to internet sources for this purpose.

In sum, the picture painted here suggests that Russian cultural and informational influence in Kazakhstan stems less from a concerted campaign of direct public diplomacy by Moscow than a tacit consent which allows the continued reproduction of Moscow’s worldview (or at least significant aspects of it) in official political discourse and in the media-information sphere more generally without fundamental challenge in the legislative and discursive arenas (e.g., Ukraine, especially since 2014).

6. The impact of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan

Previous sections have already highlighted the extent of Russian soft power among a particular segment of the Kazakhstani population, and explored how this is perpetuated through a network of communication channels. This part will explore the potential benefits to Moscow of Russian soft power attraction, as attested by the relatively favourable reception of Moscow’s narratives among the Kazakhstani population.

As already suggested, it is methodologically and theoretically problematic to assert direct causality among particular communications, attitudes and behaviours. On a more general level, however, it may be stated with credibility that more favourable attitudes nurture a more fertile soil for the pursuit of national interests in foreign policy. While it is empirically and conceptually problematic to claim complete and transparent access as a layperson to the ‘true’ balance of interests driving foreign policy decision-making, especially in an authoritarian context, one may infer the presence of ‘soft power’ attraction as a factor when issues of common culture, values and shared perspectives are drawn upon in justificatory discourse. As a diffuse form of influence, soft power shouldn’t be expected to lead to consistent and immediate toady to a polity’s lead, as a range of other factors affect decision-making, not least the other interests and power resources of the receiving polity itself.

As already mentioned, although Kazakhstan is to a certain degree dependent on Russia, it nevertheless pursues a multilateral foreign policy reflecting its own resources and ambitions. Among other more tangible variables, soft power factors are reflected in the central role of the relationship with Russia in Kazakhstani foreign policy making. On one hand, the relative attraction of Moscow among the elite – reflected in elements of
common culture and practices – makes the country an easier partner in economic, political and security dealings. On the other, the salience of soft power among the wider population means there is greater acceptance of cooperation with state-level Russian ventures. Furthermore, individuals are more likely to engage in behaviours that positively impact Russia.

This section will explore the ways in which Russian soft power in Kazakhstan may be seen to benefit Moscow by supporting interactions and institutionalised relationships. I look at 5 areas of impact: cooperation, bloody January, Ukraine, migration, and economics.

6.1. International cooperation

While economic and other hard power factors surely play a key role, soft power supports and facilitates the fact that Kazakhstan cooperates with Russia in a number of international organisations on the Eurasian space. Kazakhstan is party to a number of organisations and agreements involving Russia, and, by contrast, is not a member of those that exclude Russia in its neighbourhood, such as GUAM.

Both states were among the original Shanghai Five, the precursor to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), an intergovernmental organisation with the stated aims of enhancing mutual trust in the military sphere, intraregional security, and economic cooperation. The SCO also aims to move ‘towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order.’

With Russian and Chinese as its official working languages, the SCO proceeds ‘from the Shanghai Spirit, [and] pursues its internal policy based on the principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, mutual consultations, respect for cultural diversity, and a desire for common development, while its external policy is conducted in accordance with the principles of non-alignment, non-targeting any third country, and openness’. As such, this outlook reflects the alignment in perspectives of the member states.

A key forum of Russo-Kazakhstani cooperation is also the Eurasian Union(EAEU), the idea for which is considered to stem from a speech at Moscow State University in 1994 by then Kazakhstan president and ‘father of the nation’ Nursultan Nazarbayev, who envisaged ‘supranational bodies designed to solve two key tasks: the formation of a common economic space and the provision of a common defence policy’. In a speech on the signing of the treaty creating the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014, Nazarbayev hailed a ‘fundamentally new model of good neighbourliness and interaction between peoples in the great expanse of Eurasia. The foundation for it is the history-tested high trust, strong friendship and mutual support of our states’ (Nazarbayev 2014).

Since then the original three members (Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia), have been joined by Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, with various observers besides, which suggests a favourable momentum behind the project. While decision-making is said to work by consensus and political integration is not among its objectives, widespread consent on a cultural level is surely a necessary factor supporting integration in a project in which Russia – by virtue of the size of its economy – is the bigger partner.

Kazakhstan also cooperates with Russia in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO); an intergovernmental alliance focussing on cooperation in security and defence
matters. The CSTO became a vehicle for Russian involvement in Kazakhstan in January 2022, which is discussed in the following section.

These organisations help Russia realise its interests in the ‘hard power’ spheres of security and economics in the region and beyond. Soft power helps facilitate integration by sustaining a vision of Russia as a stable and predictable regional partner with an attractive global culture that shares key elements with that of its neighbours. Momentum behind Russian-led nation-gathering projects also, in turn, boosts Russia’s soft power by supporting framings of Moscow as a prestigious major player capable of exercising international leadership independent of the West.

6.2. Bloody January events across Kazakhstan

The intervention of Russian-led CSTO peacekeeping troops to defend certain key sites in Kazakhstan in January 2022 provides a pertinent example of how soft power serves as a useful facilitator in international political interactions.

The fact that narratives about Russo-Kazakhstani friendship enjoy significant salience in Kazakhstan, in the sense of being broadly accepted by a significant proportion of the audience, made it politically easier for President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to request help – in the form of targeted military intervention from the CSTO to ensure the continuation of his rule, whether that was in the face of inter-elite wrangling as analysts have suggested, or foreign terrorism as the president himself has claimed. It is a familiar truth that power abhors a vacuum, and this equally applies to soft power. Had Russian soft power narratives not been widely accepted in the Kazakhstani information space, then alternative worldviews would have been salient. Likely as not an alternative way of making sense of the world would have been shaped by pro-Western or Kazakh nationalist visions, which would have made framing Russian intervention in positive or acceptable terms much harder as these narratives tend to couch Russian in threatening and/or imperialist-chauvinist terms. Under such discursive conditions, trust in the short-term nature of the intervention would have been harder to find, and Tokayev would have come under great pressure from accusations of national betrayal. Indeed, the developments gave rise to a number of expressions of concern, although these lost much traction after the CSTO troops departed on schedule once stability had been restored.

That Russia, through the CSTO, could lead a military intervention in Kazakhstan is likely to offer Moscow a number of concrete benefits. Firstly, part of Russia’s soft power in the post-Soviet region relates to the image it projects as a strong, reliable partner and ‘guarantor of stability’ in the region. The display of hard power potency will likely have boosted that facet of Russia’s soft power by providing demonstrable proof. The efficient Russian-led CSTO intervention in Kazakhstan also allowed Russia to act out the role of great power in this way, which is gratifying to domestic elites and supports ‘good news’ stories on the domestic arena, which boosts support for the authorities. Secondly, it is widely perceived in Kazakhstan that the Moscow’s support has made Tokayev to some degree beholden to Russia. While there is no transparent information about this, reciprocity does tend to be a key element of strong relationships. At any rate, Tokayev (2022a) himself acknowledged the intensification of relations in the wake of the Bloody January events, noting ‘I think that, without any exaggeration, the current talks were some of the most important, if not the most important, that took place in recent years
between Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation’. Thirdly, the rapid and decisive response to Tokayev’s request for support lends demonstrable proof of Moscow’s readiness to act practically to support actual and potential allies, which may boost their loyalty. The proactive and efficient show of resolve also has an audience in the West, where it underscores – however reluctantly – Russia’s status as an actor whose interests must be considered, unlike in the 1990s when Moscow was dismayed to find itself not consulted over NATO bombing of its ally Serbia.

Furthermore, while some analysts have interpreted the January events as an expression of intra–elite wrangling, in his diagnosis, Tokayev (2022a) has framed the unrest in terms of external intervention, noting ‘Indeed, it was a carefully prepared operation of international terrorists and bandits who attacked Kazakhstan with the aim, first of all, to undermine the constitutional order and, of course, to commit a coup d’état’. In this way his diagnosis of the context reproduces a narrative articulated by Russia in relation to countries as diverse as Ukraine and Syria to undermine the perceived authenticity, indigeneity and thereby legitimacy of large-scale protest movements, and to justify tough measures against them. It is likely that the foreign–terrorist-coup-plot narrative was already familiar to the Kazakhstani audience through media coverage of high-profile Russian involvement in Syria and Ukraine. To the extent that the coverage portrayed this interpretation in credible terms, it will have given credence to the notion that such issues constitute a real potential threat in general terms. With such ideas normalised as a ‘common-sense’ possibility, they become a usable discursive framework to credibly interpret events in Kazakhstan, rendering the ‘shoot to kill’ order issued by Tokayev and the temporary shutdown of the internet more acceptable as plausibly necessary responses to an existing threat in the eyes of the audience, whether that be domestic or international. The fact that Tokayev chose to draw on a narrative employed and disseminated by Russia, is also beneficial to the Kremlin because Russian media will doubtless reflect this interpretation back to their domestic audience, reinforcing – insofar as the discourse is accepted by the audience – the notion of foreign-backed terrorism as a pertinent issue, and normalising the necessarily tough response to swiftly restore order.

6.3. Ukraine crisis

As well as encouraging and facilitating behaviours, soft power also constrains action, particularly that which could be outside the discursive boundaries of the bilateral relationship as the parties understand it. One area where Kazakhstani allyship – and its limits – with the Russian Federation is observable is in relationship to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. Events related to the revolution in Ukraine in early 2014 have driven a number of UN resolutions sponsored by Western countries. In line with its multivectoral foreign policy and the fact of the strong trade ties to Europe, Kazakhstan has sought to tread a careful path in this regard. In addition, abstaining from voting on the UN General Assembly resolution 68/262 of 27 March 2014 on the territorial integrity of Ukraine, Kazakhstan has in recent years also abstained from three votes on Ukraine and voted against several resolutions concerning the situation of human rights in Crimea. Each of these resolutions criticised Russia, and although each of the resolutions passed by a significant majority, Kazakhstani support, or at least non-support to
contending positions – variably in tandem with India, China, some former Soviet republics, non-aligned nations and others, resists notions of Russian marginalisation in this regard.

Furthermore, while Kazakhstan has not followed Russia in recognising the People’s Republics of Luhansk and Donets, it has done so delicately, referring to the UN Charter and the contradiction between the principles of a state’s territorial integrity and the right of a nation to self-determination enshrined therein. Responding to a question posed by session moderator and RT chief Margarita Simonyan in a plenary at the 25th St Petersburg International Economic Forum, Tokayev (2022b) sought to strike a politically neutral non-confrontational tone, noting

_Actually, it was calculated that if all nations in the world use their right to self-determination, there will be over 500 or 600 states instead of 193 that are members of the UN today._

_That would be chaos. And for that reason, we do not recognise Taiwan, Kosovo, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. And this principle will be used towards the quasi-state territories such as Lugansk and Donetsk, as we believe them to be. This is an honest answer to your honest question._

Furthermore, Nur-Sultan has not joined the accusatory chorus of condemnation with regard to Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Rather, Kazakhstani authorities have stated that they perceive the referendum in Crimea as a free expression of will by the population of the Ukrainian region and treats Russia’s decision ‘with understanding’ (Biryukov et al 2016; Dossymkhan et al. 2019). In this vein, Tokayev has taken a conciliatory tone, observing,

_Firstly, we don’t call what happened in Crimea annexation. What happened, happened. Annexation is too tough a word in relation to Crimea. Secondly, as you say, there was fear as we have absolutely trusting, good neighbourly relations with the Russian Federation. From the beginning, we’ve believed in the wisdom and decency of the Russian leadership. […] To date, the Minsk agreements are, in fact, the only legal document that can ultimately lead to the settlement of the so-called Ukrainian conflict._ (Nemtsov 2019)

Furthermore, it is likely that President Tokayev had ongoing tensions with NATO over Ukraine in mind when, in the in-person talks with President Putin on 10th February, he noted that ‘we support Russia’s position regarding the indivisibility of security in the Eurasian space. In the end, this principle was enshrined in the declaration signed following the 2010 OSCE Summit in Astana. We agree that in the modern world it is impossible and essentially irrational to strengthen your own security at the expense of the security of others’ (Tokayev 2022a).

In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Western countries have applied sanctions on Russia with the aim of putting pressure on the state’s economy, industrial sector and consumer experience. In line with the need to balance Kazakhstan’s foreign policy interests, and not aggravate Western partners, Tokayev has made clear that Kazakhstan would respect these sanctions, stating in an interview with Russia’s Rossiya-24 TV channel that ‘We cannot violate them, especially because we receive warnings about possible so-called secondary sanctions against our economy from the West if we did violate the sanctions’ (Baunov 2022).
While this might be taken as demonstrating a lack of solidarity or even as the Kyiv Post noted, 'humiliation', the sting is reduced as it nods to Russian discourses that frame Western countries as striving to dominate and rule for all by highlighting the negative consequences. Moreover, while acknowledging the need to factor the sanctions into trade and economic strategies, the Kazakhstani president also noted that,

*Kazakhstan must honour its commitments under its agreements with the Russian Federation. Moreover, as I said in my remarks, geography, let alone history, have bound our two nations together. We must keep working together in these, should I say, peculiar circumstances. I mentioned the special programme for industrial cooperation between our countries in the new reality. This means that we will work together.* (Tokayev 2022b)

He stressed that Kazakhstan 'still adheres to its duties as an ally of Russia' and that 'we continue working with the Russian government, I would say in an intensified manner and reach necessary agreements, while not violating the sanctions' (Baunov 2022). For instance, Tokayev suggests 'Kazakhstan could be instrumental in its role of a buffer market', outlining that

*We have a special plan, a programme for industrial cooperation in the new circumstances. Investors from Russia will be provided with industrial sites complete with infrastructure, and a favourable investment climate will be created for them. As a matter of fact, this is already being done.* (Tokayev 2022b)

For its part, Washington has flagged Kazakhstan as a potential facilitator of sanctions evasion along with 17 other countries, as it constitutes 'common transshipment points through which restricted or controlled exports have been known to pass before reaching destinations in Russia or Belarus' (Lillis 2022).

### 6.4. Migration

Soft power also benefits Russia in so far as it encourages migration to the Russian Federation, a factor which is recognised as indicating international appeal in various indexes of soft power. Naturally, migration decisions are driven by a range of push and pull factors, but cultural proximity and language proficiency are more likely to create greater incentives to move, and therefore have a compounding effect on material factors. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia suffered a demographic crisis due to unfavourable fecundity, mortality, and morbidity rates; a negative trend that was exacerbated by emigration, often on the part of highly skilled professionals. Attracting inward migration has been seen as a way of combatting the resulting 'brain-drain', which threatens Russia’s economic competitiveness. Kazakhstan has played a significant role in this 'brain-gain'. During the 1990s, uncertainty, material difficulties and fears of discrimination drove ethnic Russians living in the newly independent states to repatriate, although the restoration of stability brought about a relative lull in migration during the first decade of the new millennium. According to official figures, the period since 2011 has witnessed increased migratory inflows, particularly since 2013/2014, when the exodus from Ukraine boosted the figures. Indeed, since 1997 Kazakhstan has been second only to Ukraine in terms of the number of people migrating to Russia, peaking in 2019 – prior to the COVID-2019 pandemic...
and the associated restrictions on cross-border movement – when arrivals from Kazakhstan reached 86,311 or 12% of the total inflow, as shown in Table 8.

### 6.5. Economic benefits

When it comes to the economic benefits of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan, one can point to numerous examples of the advantages of cooperation: the positive attitudes associated with soft power surely drive demand for Russian products and services, while the close cultural ties likely position Russian companies favorably in the Kazakhstani market. Nevertheless, as ever it remains problematic to disentangle the ‘soft power’ driving forces from more material factors.

The liberalisation of trade facilitated through the EAEU has led to increased trade flows between Russia and Kazakhstan, which is seen to have benefitted Russia in particular (Tarr 2016). In 2021, Kazakh-Russian bilateral trade reached US $25bn and looks set to exceed that in 2022 (Devonshire-Ellis 2022). Trade concerns in particular the products of the fuel and energy sectors, and the transit of Kazakhstani oil across Russian territory, although the war in Ukraine is predicted by some to increase volumes and broader trade sectors as Russia seeks to solve import and supply problems related to the punitive sanctions related to the invasion. With Russia’s accumulated investments in Kazakhstan totaling US$13bn, Russia is one of the largest investors in Kazakhstan, and itself receives US$4bn of investments from Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, according to official statistics, there are about 6500 Kazakh-Russian joint ventures in operation (Pritchin 2021).

Longer-term population movements from Kazakhstan to Russia in the form of seasonal migration and resettlement also benefit the Russian economy by supplying manual labourers and professional specialists to the relevant sectors. As already noted, these (see figures above) combat ‘brain-drain’ and help drive economic development, although it is hard to put a figure on this.

When it comes to education as an export, in Western countries foreign students are seen as a cash cow, with fees and living expenses important sources of revenue for the universities and the economy as a whole. This is less true in Russia, however, where soft power and influencing people are considered to be a more important factor driving international recruitment (Grove 2017). Indeed, state support for scholarships meant that in 2017/18, only 63.3% of foreign students were paying fees (Dekhnich et al. 2021, p. 248). The economy receives a modest boost through the US $650-680 that researchers revealed the average foreign student budgets per month (in Belgorod, at least, where the study took place, excluding tuition fees and accommodation) (Ibid, p.249).

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**Table 8. Official figures on migration to the Russian Federation, selected years**

| Year | Arrivals in the RF | Of those, from CIS countries | From Kazakhstan | From Ukraine |
|------|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 1997 | 597,651         | 547,386                    | 235,903         | 138,231      |
| 2000 | 359,330         | 326,561                    | 124,903         | 74,748       |
| 2005 | 177,230         | 163,101                    | 51,945          | 30,760       |
| 2010 | 191,656         | 171,940                    | 27,862          | 27,508       |
| 2015 | 598,617         | 536,157                    | 65,750          | 194,180      |
| 2019 | 701,234         | 617,997                    | 86,311          | 161,351      |
| 2020 | 594,146         | 535,923                    | 64,493          | 143,987      |
The historical ties, and vast distances plus associated costs to reach European markets make Russia a natural partner for Kazakhstan. The presence of positive relations between the countries reduces any sense of urgency about diversification of transit routes to reduce dependence on Russia, and helps maintain support for Eurasian integration projects.

7. Concluding remarks

Following an empirically grounded assessment of the degree of Russian soft power among a key constituency in Kazakhstan, and an examination of some of the ways in which Russian perspectives are disseminated through the Kazakhstani information space, this study has pointed to some of the potential benefits that accrue to Russia as a result – directly and indirectly – of its soft power in Kazakhstan. Speaking broadly, these advantages relate to Moscow’s ability to pursue its economic, political and security interests in the region, and enable it to play the role of a great power that enjoys the prestigious capability of attracting foreign citizens and polities alike to engage in relationships with Russia. Kazakhstan is an interesting case through which to explore Russian soft power. On one hand, historic and contemporary factors facilitate receptivity to Moscow’s cultural-ideational overtures, which in turn support measures that ensure the perpetuation of cooperative measures that iteratively continue that sense of a close relationship between people and countries. On other hand, though, buoyed by a sense of its own potential and the readiness of alternative partners to cooperate, Kazakhstan is carving out its own distinct national identity narratives, even as it strives to balance the exigencies of Western partners, while keeping its statements and behaviours within the discursive boundaries of its relationship with Russia. As much a reflection of geography and economic realism as cultural attraction as such, Russia, ‘has retained Kazakhstan among its few relatively reliable partners on the international stage.’23 Yet, despite the relatively non-critical stance of the Kazakhstani authorities, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused some in Kazakhstan to question the assumption of the inevitable cultural and political proximity to Russia, and may lead to pushes to balance the relationship by strengthening ties with other partners.

Notes

1. Of course, as Gallarotti (2011) notes, radical visions of ideational power are quite different from soft power in that they posit a conflict of interests among the parties (i.e., false consciousness), whereas soft power eschews conflicts of interests.
2. According to the Russkiy Mir website, Kazakhstan does not currently host any ‘Kabinety Russkogo mira’, which support the activities of non-profit organisations in promoting Russian language, literature and culture, are seen as a starting place for working towards organising a Russian centre. See: [http://russkiymir.ru/rucenter/cabinet.php [Accessed 16 May 2022]].
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5. These include the 'Education Development' for 2013–2020” programme, the priority project 'Export of education', the Russian President's Decree No. 204 of 7 May 2018 entitled ‘On national goals and strategic objectives of Russia’s development till 2024’ and the Russian Ministry of Science and Education's Project ”.5–100, which aims to 'maximize the competitive position of a group of leading Russian universities in the global research and education market'. https://www.5top100.ru/en/ [accessed 31 August 2022].
6. See for instance the Global Soft Power Index https://brandirectory.com/softpower; Soft Power 30 report by Portland in conjunction with the USC Center for Cultural Diplomacy https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2019-1.pdf; Monocle’s Soft Power Survey monolcom.
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