Special Report

Cultural and social integration in Central Eurasia

Elaheh Koolaee and Somayye Zangene (2020)
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Introduction

In anthropology and social science, culture - which has been defined as a set of beliefs, ideas, customs, rituals, behaviours, norms, and values shared by a social group - has an effect on almost every aspect of life. According to constructivists, it shapes identity and interests.

Eurasian states can form a united bloc that represents significant cultural convergence, in contrast to the globalisation of Anglo-Saxon values around the world. These countries are concerned about protecting their stability, sovereignty, and culture against interfering trends of globalisation that aim to eradicate cultural diversity around the world. In other words, it is not only shared values, norms, and mindsets that can contribute to Eurasian convergence but Eurasian convergence can also help to maintain these norms and values.

The Soviet break-up opened a new phase of multi-dimensional interaction for both successor states and other countries involved in this historical evolution. It can be argued that the trend toward convergent policies has evolved and expanded over the long term. Even though, due to independence and the consolidation of sovereignty, Russia’s role in the region has been challenged, a common past and Russian heritage still have profound effects on the convergence of the region’s countries. The Soviet Union created national history, national identity, national heroes, national borders, and governmental institutions for other republics but in fact, nationalism’s content was prepared long before the Soviet collapse. The Eurasian
economic, political, cultural, and social conditions are strongly influenced by pre-independence experiences and the cultural and social integration of these societies will be largely shaped by characteristics and attitudes which are a legacy of the past and which won't easily change.

In this article, Russia is considered a hegemonic power in the post-Soviet space. Post-Soviet history shows that Russia refused to back down as a regular actor in Eurasian affairs.

Russian foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union is based on a combination of pragmatism and a commitment to playing a traditional role as a great power. The position of the Eurasian region in Russian foreign policy has not changed. The cultural, linguistic, geographical, personal, and institutional factors connecting Russians with Eurasia in the post-Soviet era have not disappeared but have become stronger. Taken together, these factors indicate that Russia is trying to dominate the fields of Eurasian integration, including the cultural and social arenas. When Putin came to power, he put bilateral relations with the countries of the region on the agenda. The organisation of the Commonwealth of Independent States is one of the most important regional organisations in Central Asia and the Caucasus. But the goals for which the organisation was founded failed to materialise. Among the most important causes of the organisation's failure to integrate members are concerns about the resurgence of Russian influence, separatist currents, border disputes, other differences between members, and Russian-American competition abroad. The organisation has been unsuccessful in seeing members converge but has been conducive to the grounds for convergence among its members.

Several factors remain favourable to regional convergence: the Russian Monroe doctrine; the presence of Russian nationals in former Soviet republics; the dependence of the
countries of the region on Russia in the fields of energy and security; the single-product economies of these countries, which make them dependent on each other for exports and imports; the Russian language as the second language of most republics that survived the collapse of the Soviet Union; the maintenance of border security; and work to combat fundamentalism and drug trafficking (Koolaee and Sedaghat, 2012, p. 94).

In this article, after a brief look at the fate of national cultures in the age of globalisation and the impact of culture on regional convergence, we will discuss the cultural and social policies of the Soviet era and Russia’s soft power throughout the Yeltsin and Putin presidencies. We will then examine the factors of soft power, including language and the Russian education system.

**Globalisation, national cultures, and regional convergence**

Culture is one of the dynamic aspects of life. No single culture is immune to change over time. Communities with different cultural backgrounds interact with each other to meet their needs and achieve their goals. During this process, cultural characteristics may or may not change but the uniformity of large-scale cultural traits may not result from such interactions. Therefore, we can identify deliberate efforts made by some global power centres to engineer similar models in different societies (Kaul, 2010, p. 345). It is believed that the end of the Cold War accelerated the process of globalisation. Consequently, globalisation has had a prominent place in the analysis of researchers since 1991. Globalists say national economies have been weakened due to capital mobility, economic interdependence, and the increasing role of transnational corporations. They believe that these developments have political and cultural consequences, forcing countries to adjust their policies in various fields to follow the trends
of globalisation. According to proponents of globalisation, national cultures are being destroyed and replaced by globalisation (Martell, 2007, p. 173 and p. 193). Hence, some scholars conclude that globalisation is nothing but the “globalization” of Western political, economic, legal, and cultural models and consequently the severe destruction of local cultures (Scholte, 2008). Therefore, it is believed that globalisation, as the last stage of the expansion of modern capitalism, encompasses political, economic, and cultural realms around the world (Kaul, 2010, p. 341).

Regionalisation - unlike globalization - creates more chances for national governments to pursue their goals independently (Cooper, Hughes, and Lombaerde, 2008). Therefore, regionalism could be understood as an enabling factor for some actors in world politics. Regional organisations can act as constructive coalitions. Alliances with one another, war, development, and creating centres of power around the world, facilitates global conflicts and makes clashes of interests easier (Libman, 2017, p. 85). Neighbouring countries that have formed regional organisations or less long-term regional arrangements can share political, social, and cultural values that pave the way for more effective collaboration in different areas such as the economy and security.

The role of culture in Eurasian convergence

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is the latest and most institutionalised Eurasian convergence project. As Foreign Minister Lavrov has emphasised, the European Economic Union will become one of the poles of the modern world and will be an effective link between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region (Lane, 2016, p. 51). All EAEU members except Belarus are members of the World Trade Organization. Therefore, the EAEU is an external convergence
entity seeking to facilitate intra-regional economic relations while simultaneously integrating into the world trade and economy (Khitakhunov, Mukhamediyyev, and Pomfret, 2017, p. 66).

The Eurasian Economic Union is not a group of unrelated countries that want to form a customs union, but a common language, common history, and similar institutions make their economic integration easier (Khitakhunov, Mukhamediyyev, and Pomfret, 2017, p. 61). It is impossible for the EAEU to select its future members and close partners based solely on economic factors, so most potential members of the organisation are emerging powers that oppose unilateralism and support the consolidation of nation-state sovereignty. Therefore, we may conclude that similar mindsets and approaches from the political leaders of different countries motivate them to form a united bloc to maximise economic benefits and preserve social and political values.

Eurasian convergence is a way of defending unique cultures at the same time. This is consistent with Russia's approach to preserve protective values worldwide (Tsygankov, 2016). Putin has stated that the Eurasian Economic Union represents a value system beyond economic and political aspects (Moldashev and Hassan, 2015, p. 2).

Participants in this project are concerned about the growing threat of religious extremism. Therefore, they want to achieve security by guaranteeing their sovereignty and stability. Moreover, conservative social values are of paramount importance to these countries. They want to support the traditional family to promote social cohesion and prevent the moral breakdown of society (Tafuro, 2014; Keating and Kaczmarska, 2016).
What factors shape cultural integration in the Central Eurasian region?

For countries in the region that want to enter the process of cultural integration, one assumption is that every country should be able to appropriately preserve and enhance its national, ethnic, and religious identity through regional cultural synergy and cultural integration. External factors that threaten national identities, such as extremist currents, are a threat to the preservation of national identity in the region, and need to be confronted.

While the Central Asian and Caucasian countries have many historical, cultural, and religious commonalities, because of negligence, carelessness, and unfounded attempts for superiority, some cultural commonalities have become a source of controversy, for example, struggles regarding literary figures. A significant portion of the region’s heritage and traditions, such as the Nowruz celebration, have particular national or ethnic origins but nowadays have taken on a transnational and trans-ethnic nature. However, the following conditions and factors are essential for the formation of regional cultural convergence.

• Understanding the importance of extremism as a serious threat and a common challenge for all countries in the region.
• Removing unfounded and destructive synergy.
• Explaining the most important shared cultural values among the countries of the region.
• Fostering regional solidarity and a spirit of collaborative interaction and cultural synergy.
• Collectively drawing up and implementing a roadmap to counter extremist currents and through member-state consensus.
• Decision-making in response to extremism that is well prepared, flexible, fast, and that uses new approaches (Maleki, 2016, p. 5).
1) The Soviet Union’s social-cultural policies

In Soviet times, Russian cultural policy followed Marxist-Leninist ideological principles. This cultural system, which was formed in 1920-1930 and despite a series of superficial changes, continued until 1980, led to the establishment of national cultural institutions, the creation a centralised and tightly controlled administrative system, and the establishment of legal, ideological, and regulatory control. Under Communist rule, the most attention was paid to cultural institutions that were able to transfer information at a very high level. These included radio, cinema, the press, which all provided information and news coverage to the entire country.

From the 1960s, with the formation of the ‘Union of Filmmakers’, the ‘Artistic Producers of the Soviet Union’ group was formed. The main task of the union was to control intellectuals and to organise cultural activities in accordance with the wishes and needs of the Bolshevik government. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Khrushchev’s reforms, referred to as ‘melting ice’, created great hopes for a cultural renaissance in the Soviet Union. Then, in mid-1980s, Gorbachev, under Glasnost and Perestroika, made major changes to Soviet culture which led to a reduction in the ideological pressure on the media and less administrative control of the country’s educational and cultural institutions. On the whole, despite the restrictive and totalitarian system of rule over all political, social, cultural, and artistic arenas, the roots of Russian identity and Russian culture remained (Mirzaei, 2009, p. 48-49).

2) Russia’s soft power in Eurasia

Every state and society need a bonding plan and an organising ideology to survive. A state that has expanded its soft power tools - culture, history, geography, and civilisation -
internationally, can by convergence wield effective power on the world stage (Eyvazi at al., 1980, p. 6). The Russian Federation, by relying on Russia's rich culture and political values and by possessing high-level cultural capacities, has always sought to bring about regional convergence abroad and even on the world stage as well. Therefore, we will further examine the quality of the influence of Russian soft power, which includes Russian language and culture, Russian media, the Russian Orthodox Church, and education.

2.1) Russian soft power and its foreign policy in the Yeltsin era

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, 15 new countries emerged from what was then Soviet territory. Russia struggled to resist the challenges of separation amid deep economic and political crises. Yeltsin had to rebuild the country and strived for eight years to rebuild the nation-state and unite the country (Hanson, 2003, p. 147). Immediately after independence, almost all Communist party leaders emphasised the rule of law, market principles, and democratic values, so Russia was no exception. Yeltsin firmly pursued fundamental economic reforms and encouraged convergence with the Western world. Yeltsin's position guaranteed the support of the Western world (Rutland, 2016, pp. 31-50).

Relations with the Commonwealth states were established peacefully in the post-Soviet era. Liberals, who dominated the government, supported foreign policy that boosted Russian relations with the West. Andrei Kozyrev, the then foreign minister, advocated close access to the United States and Europe for financial assistance that promoted economic reform and the democratisation process. Convergence policies with Commonwealth countries were somehow delayed in favour of the West. However, Russian elites had the advantage of restarting relations with the CIS countries themselves (ÖZERTEM, 2009, p. 27).
In an official document issued in September 1995, Russia's foreign policy towards the Commonwealth states that was reflective of Russia's soft policy in Eurasia. It included the following priorities:

Russian television and radio broadcasting abroad must be guaranteed; the Russian press should be supported in the region; and Russia must train national cadres for the CIS countries. Particular attention should be paid to the revival of Russia's status as a major educational centre in the post-Soviet space, considering the necessity of educating the younger generation in these countries in a spirit of friendly relations with Russia. Post-Soviet Russian media organs were tracked by satellites as one element the new dynamics of the 21st century. Russia is still one of the main training centres for CIS member states. However, some issues still need to be resolved in order to maintain Russian dominance in these areas (McDonald, 2007, p. 179).

Russia, with its military and diplomatic tools, played an important role in resolving the Tajik civil war and settling the Moldovan conflict. This helped create an image of Russia as a balancing power in the region. In the cultural field, the Russian government promoted dual citizenship in order to preserve the rights of Russians living in post-Soviet countries. However, it seems that this policy was only successful in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The Yeltsin government then sought to transform the idea of dual citizenship into CIS citizenship but that policy also failed (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 117).

In the 1990s, contrary to the fragmented nature of Eurasia in the Soviet era, it was difficult to define Russia as the only player in the region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a power vacuum that other actors tried to fill, like the European Union and the
United States on the western front and Turkey, Iran, China, and the US in the eastern and southern zones.

NATO's expansion into Russia and Russia's useless opposition have been a feature of this time. The military wing of the Western bloc expanded to the Russian frontier and the European Union as a political entity followed a similar path. The key slogans of these factions were predominantly democratisation, human rights, and economic integration, which can be interpreted as soft power politics. New links were created between the West and countries on the Baltic and in the Caucasus, while at the same time transforming the legal and economic infrastructure to weaken Russia's monopoly. The expansion of NATO is seen by Moscow as more negative than the European Union's policies towards these countries.

Convergence efforts with Eastern European countries such as Ukraine and Belarus, as well as with Kazakhstan, were ongoing at the dawn of dissolution. These efforts were based on security measures and to some extent on economic integration policies between the CIS countries. This can be analysed within the framework of hard power policies (Light, 2005, p. 230).

In the Yeltsin period, Russian foreign policy was in the process of redefining itself and its goals in international arena. At the beginning of Yeltsin's first term, Western-oriented policies prevailed. The post-Soviet space was seen as an extra burden, a notion that evolved when foreign countries were first put on the agenda.

At the beginning, some steps were taken to re-establish Russian control of the region. However, the Russian elite sought policies in Russian-Western relations that reflected a realistic understanding and Cold War legacy of foreign policy. Initially, the main goal was to integrate with the West and the Eurasian region was ignored. From 1993, Russian elites began
to emphasise the importance of post-Soviet geography, including some of the soft power policies in the region. These efforts were initially made by Primakov and his team. Again, the threat of the expansion of Western institutions restricted Russian power and policies implemented for successful convergence did not yield satisfactory results (Independent, 2016).

2.2) Russia’s soft power and its foreign policy under Putin

Putin was the sixth prime minister to be appointed by Yeltsin in August 1999. Yeltsin served until December 1999 and by the time of the June 2000 presidential election, Putin had strengthened his position and paved the way that led him to the Kremlin. Putin, by assuming presidential power in July 2000, assumed offensive policies in Chechnya and chose a pragmatic stance with the West. Implementing his policies at home and abroad aimed at transforming Russia’s image as a strong and stable country at home and at the same time presented Russia as an active and pragmatic country abroad. The main internal problems were the decentralised federal structure and economic instability due to unsuccessful transition policies. In May 2000, Putin passed a decree dividing the country into seven regions. He appointed a powerful representative for each region, appointed by the president himself. In doing so, he reinforced the federation’s control and delivered the message of a strong authoritarian government (ÖZERTEM, 2009, p. 33-34).

In the political arena such actions helped Russia regain power internally, but for sustainable policies, what Russia needed was a solid economic base to help tackle poverty and problems in the education and health sectors. In addition, the resources available to the Russian government were limited to the use of soft power. While reforming fiscal policies, Putin therefore sought to control the oligarchy (ÖZERTEM, 2009, p. 33-34).
In line with economic reforms, Russia raised taxes and limited the underground economy. This was the next phase of fiscal policy reform that began in 1999 with the aim of simplifying the system and reducing tax rates. Positive developments in the Russian economy were not independent of global trends and balances. A favourable environment in financial markets, growth in other world economies, and rising consumption were the main trends in advance of the financial crisis that occurred in late 2008. Oil prices rose significantly during this period and the Russian Federation and Putin's government as an exporter of oil and gas benefited from this trend (Ross, 2013, p. 34-35). By taking decisive action to overcome past problems and positive developments such as rising oil prices, these developments helped Putin restore the damage done to Russia with greater central government power and wealth (Sakwa, 2008).

Putin followed a relatively pragmatic line in his foreign policy. This change has impacted Russia's relations with the West as well as Russia's image in the international arena. During the Yeltsin era, the rights of Russians abroad were maintained, but during Putin's time, the government's policy of guaranteeing Russian rights in the region changed to encourage them to migrate to Russia to offset the population crisis. Three basic documents were adopted in 2006 to form the basis of practical work with fellow citizens: the ‘Working Programme with Citizens Abroad 2006 - 2008'; the ‘Russian Language Targeting Programme 2006-2010'; and the ‘National Voluntary Resettlement Programme for Compatriots Residing Abroad'. These policies appear to have been implemented at the same time as Russia set a 2025 goal for its population policy and with the goal of investing $19.3 billion in economic and social programmes for the period of 2008-2010 (RIA Novosti, 2007).
Russia also began to create regional organisations to expand its influence in the region, because the Commonwealth of Independent States had failed to achieve this goal. Structural problems in CIS countries paved the way for actions that weakened the position of the organisation.

Russia needed new mechanisms that could replace the organisation or minimise the power vacuum in the region. Two effective organisations were identified: The Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. These mechanisms help Russia control convergence in other areas through influence on other countries (Oldberg, 2015).

In the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the main emphasis was on security issues, but recently there has been cooperation in economic, scientific, and cultural fields. In the field of culture, a consortium of universities established an SCO-related organisation. The members aim to integrate education systems in the region to create a unified educational space for the development of Eurasian dialogue. Besides convergence in education policies, the new development programme contributes student exchange across Eurasia. 40 universities form the network. Most of the universities are owned by the Russian Federation and so far ten universities from China have joined as well. The idea of establishing the ‘Shanghai University’ was put forward by Putin in 2007. In this initiative, Russia not only played a key role in the design of the programme, but also provided the basis for long-term cooperation in education (Weitz, 2016, p. 163).

Russian science and culture centres, operating under the auspices of the Russian Foreign Ministry, succeed the Russian Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (1925-1918) and Soviet Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (1958-1992).
They were established to promote Russian culture and language and are among Russia's measures to dominate the cultural sphere in Eurasia. These centres were founded in 1925 to promote Russian language and culture in non-Soviet countries. They worked under government control during the Soviet era but in the post-Soviet era, they became State Department agencies. Since 2009, 49 centres and 26 agencies in 67 countries have been operating as centres of Russian science and culture.

Under the Putin government, the CIS and Baltic states became the Agency’s new priorities. In 2006, a centre in Astana was the only centre in the whole CIS region, but since 2009 three more centres in Ukraine, Armenia, and Uzbekistan have been established (Prazdnovaniya, 2017). The development of these centres is of great importance to Russia because they promote Russian culture and language, especially for the younger generation of Russian minorities in these countries (ÖZERTEM, 2009, p. 45).

During Putin’s second term, new government soft power initiatives were launched. In 2005, the Department of Interregional and Cultural Relations was established to enhance Russia’s image in the post-Soviet space. The Russkiy Mir Foundation was established on 21 June 2007 by a decree (No. 796) signed by Putin. Under this decree, the founders of the foundation are represented by the Russian Federation, the Russian Foreign Ministry, and the Russian Ministry of Education and Science. The mission of the Foundation is “to promote understanding and peace in the world by supporting and enhancing Russian language, heritage and culture”. To achieve these goals, the Foundation, in collaboration with educational organisations, began developing Russian cultural centres. These centres provide educational activities to promote the Russian language, and conferences and seminars are held to introduce the Russian culture to the countries where these centres are located. The
fund financially supports projects aimed at developing Russian language and culture around the world (Belenkeyeva, 2015). These tools include an English-language television channel known as ‘Russia Today’, and Russian Profile magazine (Maliukevicus, 2017).

Russian soft power tools gained momentum in the Putin era when these new initiatives were created. Russia regained power due to rising oil prices and stability in the country. In terms of foreign policy, this country has been more aggressive, but it has also strengthened regional cooperation, especially in Central Asia, through specific mechanisms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Russian elites have begun to place greater emphasis on soft power discourses. Since 2006, Russian policymakers have emphasised the notion of soft power and twelve English-language documents put forward by high-level bureaucrats testify to this progress. This has changed the foreign policy attitude of political elites.

In conclusion, it can be said that during Putin’s presidency, especially during his second term, Russia emerged as a regional hegemon and increasingly sought influence in post-Soviet space. In Putin’s first term, Russia partially succeeded in resolving major domestic economic and political problems and this led Russia to pursue a more stable foreign policy, both in the post-Soviet space and around the world. In addition, the Russian Federation began to develop new soft power tools to safeguard Russia’s interests in the CIS region (Monaghan, 2018: 726-727).

Russia has sought to establish a cohesive and convergent near abroad in the post-Soviet era. Russian actions have sometimes been top-down efforts, based on institutionalisation, contracts, treaties, or even political and economic threats and coercion. Such methods have failed to accomplish Russia’s goals and foreign countries have shown
divergent, independent approaches. Therefore, Russia has rightly focused on soft, social, and bottom-up regionalism.

3. Russian language and culture

The Russian language is a very important tool to integrate and maintain Russian influence abroad because it has been a unifying factor in the vast space of this block since the Soviet Union (Tsygankoy, 2013, p. 260). Russian-speaking societies are the basis of Russia’s actions abroad. Investing in and strengthening the Russian language is vital to foster pro-Russian thinking. Therefore, Russia strengthens its language position by working with universities and research institutes in the region to justify domination over republics in its near abroad; Vladimir Putin has resorted to a combination of the doctrine of the Russian Empire and the Soviet legacy (Al-Waqt, 2016).

In a decree in December 2014, Putin communicated to the executive branch about government policies regarding the Russian language and the languages of other ethnic groups in the Russian Federation, as well as about patriotic literature and cultural policy. What was emphasised was the resumption of teaching of some humanities courses, including literary history, in schools and universities as well as in Russian language textbooks.

However, the younger generation is gradually moving away from the Russian language. In the Republic of Azerbaijan, the percentage of young people fluent in Russian has decreased from 14% in 2009 to 7% in 2015; In Georgia, English has been replaced by Russian as the dominant language (Mkhoyan, 2017, p. 6).
Even though the decline in popularity of the Russian language began after the collapse of the Soviet Union, events such as the colour revolutions, the Georgia war, and the annexation of Crimea have accelerated these language trends.

This trend is also visible in Belarus, Russia’s closest ally among the foreign republics. Lukashenko - the president of Belarus - after heavy Russian sanctions on Ukraine, demanded more attention for the Belarusian language in high schools. In early 2015, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev said all elementary students in the country should learn English and in the last two years of school, they only have to learn one foreign language. Later, Sergei Lavrov announced that Kazakhstan’s transition from the Cyrillic to Latin alphabets does not violate the rights of Russian-speaking residents of the country and does not interfere with the two countries’ relations.

Currently, 4% of Armenians, 9% of Georgians and 27% of Azeris have no basic knowledge of Russian (Mkhoian, 2017, pp. 7-8)

The establishment of the Russian World Foundation aimed at teaching Russian in the near abroad, is one of the Kremlin’s efforts to maintain its influence in the region. Russian is the language of Russian-led organisations abroad, including the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union (Rotaro, 2017, p. 4). Russia seeks to redefine a ‘Russian world’ civilisation and its own soft external authority by using the linguistic and literary capacities of its civilisational background (Laruelle, 2015, pp. 2-15).

Russian popular culture supports the production of soft power and the spread of the Russian language. Russian culture is the most powerful instrument of soft power in Russia and it has a special place among the elites of the countries in Russia's near abroad and also
even in the Baltic states. This includes contemporary music, books, movies, and television programmes, which have made it easier for people in the outside world to access Russian culture. This ease of access represents a valuable tool in Russian foreign policy (Euronews, 2018).

3.1) Russian language in the South Caucasus

The process of Russianisation has had consequences in Azerbaijan’s politics and parallel tendencies with nationalist movements have appeared in the field of linguistic politics. After independence, the Cyrillic alphabet was replaced by the Latin alphabet on 25 December 1991 (Öçalan, 2015, p. 10). The 1995 constitution included clauses that state that the official language of the state is Azeri and that the Republic of Azerbaijan guarantees the free use and development of other languages. Since 2007, the lowest level of Russian language proficiency among the CIS countries has been in the Republic of Azerbaijan, where 24% of people speak Russian. In fact, most Azeris were not fluent in Russian, but compared to the 1989 census figures, this figure has dropped dramatically, from 32.1% to 24%, reflecting a decline in Russian language proficiency in the new generation. English, on the other hand, is on the rise. Cultural and educational exchange programmes with the United States and the promotion of English in the media and educational institutions support this trend among young people.

Russian is now seen as a somewhat elitist language used in government and international offices; in the capital there is still widespread fluency in Russian. However, compared to other foreign languages, Russian is used as a second language. In this sense, for Russia’s soft power, it is a good channel to reach the elite class in the country (ÖZERTEM, 2009, p. 66). Unlike other post-Soviet countries, the number of Russian-language schools in the
post-independence period has not declined. About 378 schools still teaching Russian are an important indicator of the next generation’s skills being maintained (Heyat, 2016, p. 401).

Armenia is similar to Azerbaijan. According to 2019 data, the number of Russians in the Republic of Azerbaijan is 140,000, of which 120,000 live in Baku. Also, the number of Armenians in the Republic of Azerbaijan is 120,000, of which 20,000 live in Baku. Like Azerbaijan, Armenia has experienced a significant decline in the Russian-dominated population. Prior to independence, 41.6% of the population was fluent in Russian, but since 2007, this has fallen to 33%. Most people speak the local language at home; this is while only 3% speak Russian. However, this number is even higher than the Russian minority in Armenia (Pavlenko, 2018)

According to the Armenian constitution, the official language of the country is Armenian (Article 12) and citizens of ethnic minorities have the right to uphold their traditions and develop their culture and language (Article 37). There is a problem with education for students belonging to minority groups, because it takes many years for a student to understand the Armenian language and some of them prefer Russian language education. Russian as an essential foreign language is taught with another foreign language such as English, German, or French. With the Armenian-Russian friendship pact, the mutual cooperation and support agreement signed in 1997 improved the status of the Russian language. Under this treaty, Russian is taught in the Armenian education system and the Armenian government agreed to implement the plan. Following this development, the Armenian government adopted Resolution No. 4 in 1999 and well-staffed schools offer Armenian language courses 4-to-6 hours per week (Pavlenko, 2018, p. 289).
In Georgia, language was important even in the Soviet era. Political initiatives were taken to suspend the status of other languages, but the passage of the Russian language in the context of the 1978 constitutional draft caused social unrest, with student protests in Tbilisi forcing Moscow to withdraw. This helped preserve the Georgian language rather than the Russian language (Solchanyk, 2016, p. 23). The Georgian language is one of the ancient languages of the Caucasus region and has its own alphabet. During the Soviet era, the Cyrillic alphabet was not replaced, which was an important factor in preserving Georgia’s identity. According to the 1995 constitution, the official language of the country is Georgian and in Abkhazia it also Abkhazian (Article 8). Minorities in Georgia have their own schools in their own language and subjects like Georgian history are taught in the Georgian language (Batiashvili, 2009).

All these developments have caused Russia to lose its place in the country. 64% of people think Russian education is unnecessary for Georgians. Since 2007, only 5% of Russian-language students have studied in Russia. Georgia’s President Saakashvili has explained this issue in connection with Russian-Georgian bilateral relations. Russian visas are not issued; trade with Russia is on decline. If anybody wants to pursue a career, they don’t need to learn Russian. Learning English or Turkish is a must (Gradirovski and Esipova, 2008, p. 18).

It should also be borne in mind that this process also relates to the ethnic structure and activities of the nation. A significant minority of the population still speaks Russian (33%) but at home, more people prefer to speak Georgian (86%) (Batiashvili, 2009).
3.2) Russian language in Eastern Europe

Glasnost and nationalist tendencies affected Belarus in the late 1980s and in 1990, the Belarusian language was adopted as the only state language. However, the transition period was not smooth and the Belarusians had to cope with a recession after independence, which caused problems in establishing a national identity and led to diminishing support for reform. Corruption and economic problems also paved the way for government failure. In 1994, Alexander Lukashenko, a charismatic figure and head of the parliament’s corruption commission, was elected as Belarus’ new president. During his presidency, Belarusian identity was destroyed and Russian identity strengthened, which had a direct impact on linguistic policies (Kirill, 2018).

Since 2007, only 6% of Belarusian people have been speaking at home in the local language. Belarus has, proportionately, the highest Russian-speaking population among the CIS countries. Recognition of the Russian language paved the way for the closure of schools of education in Belarus. In Belarus, citizens have the right to study in Belarusian, Russian, Polish, and Lithuanian, but 77% of schools teach in Russian (Giger and Sloboda, 2008, p. 318). Most newspapers and magazines are in Russian. Even today, the official television and radio station and the mass media release, ‘Sustaya Belarus’, are in Russian (Medvedev, 2007, p. 325). In conclusion, it can be said that the election of a particular leader and the lack of resistance to the preservation of Belarusian identity have led to the loss of a defense process against Russia. As a result, the Russian language maintained its dominance in all areas of life. In Belarus, Russian and Belarusian are the official languages. 70.2% speak Russian, 23.4% speak Belarusian, and 3.1% speak Ukrainian and Dutch (EST, 2009).
In Moldova, language policies and education have played a major role in the country’s identity. In the country’s population structure, approximately 36% of the population are minority groups and post-independence language law enforcement has led to issues of language preservation within the country (Roper, 2015, p. 503).

The reform process in Moldova dates back to 1989, when Moldovan was declared the only official language, causing unrest in the country and conflict between the Trans-Austrian region and the central government. The situation has never been resolved clearly, and it can now be considered a frozen conflict.

Post-independence policies have made the Russian language disappear, at least at the state level. The official Moldovan language was enacted in the 1994 constitution and speaking the Moldovan language was mandated in government departments. As a result, Russian-only students were recruited into the private sector or migrated to Russia or Ukraine to find a job (Gradirovski and Esipova, 2008). Existing statistics show that 69% of the population speaks Moldovan. In less than two decades, Russian has lost its main place in society, but most people can still communicate in Russian (Gradirovski and Esipova, 2008).

In Ukraine, language is a sensitive subject and represents the choice between Ukrainian and Russian (Melnyk, 2008, p. 340). Although the majority of the Ukrainian population is Ukrainian, the unequal distribution of ethnicities in the country creates an imbalance between the eastern and western parts of the country and the Crimean Autonomous Republic is another anomaly because the majority of its population is Russian. The Russian language is the most common language after the Ukrainian language. The Ukrainian alphabet is similar to the Cyrillic Russian language and the difference between the two is slight (Hesli, 2016, p. 170).
The eastern part of the country was one of the industrial centers of the Soviet Union, with Russians and other experienced people coming to Donetsk from other countries. Crimea, on the other hand, is of strategic importance because it includes ports for the Russian fleet. It joined Russia in 2014. Therefore, in these two regions, Russian is the first language of the people. As of 2007, 93% of people speak Russian and 73% of people are proficient in Russian. Although Russians make up 17% of the population, 38% of Ukrainians speak Russian at home, and 17% speak Russian and Ukrainian at home (Bilaniuk and Melnyk, 2008, p. 352).

3.3) Russian language in Central Asian countries

In Kazakhstan, the ethnic structure and large population of Russians in the country played an important role in the nation-building process. Even if the state language is Kazakh, the constitution of 1995 provides for the official status of Russian. In line with the policies of civil nationalism, the government provides the conditions for the study and development of minority languages (Fierman, 2003, p. 110). The government also implements specific policies to promote local language. The higher education entrance exam is in Kazakh and students who want to pursue higher education must know the local language. The share of Kazakh language schools increased after the independence. In 1991, Kazakh language use was 32.4%, but in 2004 it reached 56%. Nazarbayev sought to create a Kazakh identity because of its fragile ethnic structure. In these circumstances, it is hard to say that Russia is losing its place in this country. Even Kazakh diplomats speak Russian and Russian radio and television programmes are popular in the country. 69% of people are proficient in the Russian language and only about 1% of people do not know it. People prefer to speak Russian (43%) at home rather than Kazakh (32%) (Fierman, 2003, p. 110).
Russia attaches the utmost importance to its bilateral relations with Kazakhstan. The year 2003 was the 'Year of Kazakhstan' in Russia and 2004 was the year of 'Russian Culture in Kazakhstan'. In this context, many cultural and scientific events were held in Kazakhstan in 2004 which helped the development of Russian culture in the country. Russian media outlets in Kazakhstan are popular and active, including radio and television channels such as ATT, NTV. (Muzapparova, 2016, p. 152). Political and economic relations with Russia have made Russian a commercial and strategic language for Kazakhstan.

Kyrgyzstan has a multi-ethnic structure and its population is predominantly made up of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian, and other ethnic minorities. Kyrgyz people make up 64.9% of the population, while the second-largest minority group after the Uzbeks (13.8%), Russians make up 12.5%. The Kyrgyz language was declared the only state language in 1989 and although the law was enacted in the Kyrgyz constitution in 1993, it did not reduce Russian language use (Mustajoki and Protassova, 2018, p. 480).

After the 1990s, the educated Russian population, important for the survival of Kyrgyzstan’s economy, was shrinking and was one of the main reasons for the government’s language policies. In these circumstances, the parliament unanimously voted to make Russian the official language of the country on 26 May 2000. President Askar Akayev signed the laws but maintained Kyrgyz’s status as the state language. (Utyaganova, 2009). Although the Russian population makes up only 12.5% of the total population, the majority of the Kyrgyz population speaks or knows Russian and 38% of the population is proficient in Russian. In social life and at home, the majority of people prefer to speak the local language (56%) but the political elite speak Russian. There is a strong tendency to use English and Turkish among the upper classes but Russian has maintained its position in first place. Unlike English or Turkish, Russian is not considered a foreign language. Therefore, it can be said that Russia has maintained its
position in Kyrgyzstan and has created a conducive environment for the transmission of Russian culture through the media, education, and diplomatic channels (Orusbayev, 2008, p. 495).

In Tajikistan the state language is Tajik, but Russian is the language of common communication. Unlike other Turkic countries in Central Asia, Tajikistan does not belong to a Turkish language group but it has similarities to Farsi. After independence, the country’s population structure changed to the benefit of the Tajik nation. In 1989, Tajiks made up 62.3% of the population and within a decade, the share of Tajiks reached 80%, while the Russian population declined from 7.6% to 1.1%. The dramatic decline of the Russian population in Tajikistan was a result of the civil war that took place between 1994 and 1997.

Despite the declining Russian population, the Russian language appears to have retained its importance in the country. 35% of Tajiks are fluent in Russian and the 8% of Tajiks who do not understand Russian are mostly from the Soviet-era population (ÖZERTEM, 2009, p. 81). At home and in social life, people prefer to speak Tajik (73%) while only 18% of the population over 18 are fluent in Russian. This is still important for preserving the Russian language in this country. Geographical proximity to Russia and the appeal of Russian popular culture can play a role in this process. Close relationships in academic circles and labour migration to Russia (93% of the workforce) are important factors that enhance Russian language education.

A law was passed in 2003 by the President of Tajikistan to improve Russian language learning and according to the law, the Russian language is taught at all stages of education starting at primary school (Nagzibekova, 2008, p. 506).

Recently, Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov proposed a ban on the use of the Russian language in public institutions and official documents. However, the Russian language
still dominates Tajikistan’s science, government, and industry (RIA Novosti, 2019). In Tajikistan, the state language is Tajik, but Russian is the language of common communication.

In Turkmenistan, where the majority ethnic group is Turkmen, with an estimated 150,000 resident Russians, only 100,000 people are fluent in Russian, another 3.8 million speak or understand Russian, but lack skill. Turkmenistan appears to be pursuing ethno-centric and nationalistic policies and has made knowledge of the state language compulsory. Its population structure indicates a favourable environment for this, but the Russian position as an inter-ethnic language in the language law adopted in 1990 is still maintained. In the Niyazov era, known as Turkmenbashi, Turkmen myths have been created by the president himself. His poems are written in the Turkmen language and his epic is called the ‘Spirit Book’ by students in Turkmen schools (Tishkov, 2008, p. 28).

Turkmenistan adopted the Latin alphabet instead of the Cyrillic alphabet in 1993 as part of the reform process. Niyazov took steps to strengthen and revive Turkmen culture, increase the country’s ability to communicate with other countries, and expand citizens’ access to information technology and computers. The change of alphabet and the similarities between the Turkic and Turkish languages paved the way for Turkish literature and media to enter the country. Books produced by the Turkish government for education are also used in Turkmenistan and Turkish television networks are followed (Clement, 2017, p. 276).

Uzbekistan has a multi-ethnic population. Since 2008, Uzbeks have made up 81% of the population. The largest minorities are Tajiks, 5%; Russians, 3.4%; and Kazakhs, 3.2% (Uzbekistan Embassy, 2019). The constitution stipulates that Uzbek is the state language of Uzbekistan, but the republic guarantees respect for the languages, customs, and traditions of all nationalities and ethnicities and aims to create the conditions necessary for their development. There is no direct reference to the Russian language in the constitution, but
language norms promote inter-ethnic communication. Nearly 1.2 million people are fluent in Russian, and another 5 million understand or speak the language (Tishkov, 2008, p. 28).

After independence, in the context of language reform, Uzbekistan changed the Cyrillic alphabet to Latin in 1993. There are regulations against the Russian language. These policies restricted access to Russian networks and newspapers but Russian television and media are popular among the Uzbek population and are still followed via satellite (Parpiev, 2009). Contrary to government policies to promote the Uzbek language, the desire for Uzbeks to learn Russian remains strong, especially among residents of large cities such as Samarkand, Namangan, and Tashkent (Gradirovski and Esipova, 2008). The Russian language is taught in schools as a compulsory course and another foreign language such as French, German, or English is taught as an optional course. Uzbekistan supports the education of its citizen in native languages. In a society influenced by education and customs, Russian may have become a local language that is easy to use and is the first foreign language of the Uzbek elite. Close political and economic relations with Russia, especially after the Andijan events, have helped to strengthen Russia’s position in Uzbekistan (ERTZERTEM, 2009, p. 85).

Russia has a significant linguistic advantage in the CIS region, which contributes to its soft power capacity. The Russian language has maintained its position in the region, especially among the elites. Currently there are 163.8 million native Russian speakers and 114 million speakers of Russian as a second language (Arefyev, 2016). Estimates show that by 2050, Russian speaking young people will be reduced to 30% of the total by some regional factors, including nation-building processes and the impact of other languages such as English, Turkish, or French, as well as some structural factors such as population issues. Throughout the region, due to the migration of Russian minorities from post-Soviet countries to Russia, there has been a negative trend in terms of Russian population in the region (ZERTEM, 2009, p. 87-88).
Russian elites are trying to develop policies to prevent this negative trend by creating new tools and mechanisms.

Table 1: Number of people fluent in Russian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Census of the year</th>
<th>Post-soviet era</th>
<th>Percentage change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>119865/9 Million</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>11356 Million</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan</td>
<td>6228 Million</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
<td>1653 Million</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>1342 Million</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>-14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>906 Million</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>-22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>917 Million</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>-34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>475 Million</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>-26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>344 Million</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>-36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>562 Million</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>-64.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkmenistan</td>
<td>334 Million</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azerbaijan</td>
<td>392 Million</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>-63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Value</td>
<td>Value1</td>
<td>Value2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>145155/9</td>
<td>133710.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not including Russia</td>
<td>25290</td>
<td>17842.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commonwealth of</td>
<td>14340/9</td>
<td>132436.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent States</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baltic States</td>
<td>1725</td>
<td>1274.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eurasian Heritage Foundation

4. Russian media

The Colour revolutions persuaded Russia’s political elite that controlling the information-exchange space is one of the smartest ways to ensure the internal stability of Russian political regimes and Russia’s management of its near abroad.

The Kremlin has prioritised the control of information and the media to maintain the internal stability of political regimes, the credibility and legitimacy of political system, and to prevent foreign actors from penetrating the intellectual middle classes and the broader class of writers. In line with this logic, in the first decade of the 21st century, the Kremlin has directly or indirectly acquired control of much of the media outside its domestic arena for greater convergence in macro politics (Mastriano and O’Malley, 2015, p. 36).

Since coming to power, Putin has pursued economic power alongside economic empowerment and has sought to replace American power with Russian (Hamedi, 2017). The influence of the Russian media abroad is very different and with the use of the Russian
language, widespread news and entertainment programmes being broadcast in the CIS countries, the Russian media is one of the most important sources of information for many citizens. According to a 2015 poll of 63% of the Moldovan population, television is an important source of information and 53% of the population fully trusts the Russian media (IPP, 2015).

Russia’s most circulated newspapers have a special edition in most foreign countries. Russian news agencies such as RIA Novosti, Regnum, and InoSIM are some of the most trusted sources in its near abroad (Ćwiek-Karpowicz, 2013, p. 28).

Russia Today is a powerful Russian tool and somehow acts like a weapon in Russian diplomacy amidst conflicts scenarios (Makarychev, 2018, p. 9-10).

Russia helped Yanukovych, Ukraine’s former president in Ukraine’s 2004 and 2010 elections. In the Ukraine crisis of 2013-2015, the main purpose of the Russian media was to pressure the Kiev authorities and to keep the events in line with their goals. The inability of the Ukrainian government to repay its debts to Russia heightened awareness of the danger of a Westernising narrative (Darczewska, 2015, p. 12). As a result, the Ukrainian government suspended 14 Russian networks. In 2015, Moldova also suspended 24 Russian radio activities in its territory (Rotaru, 2017, p. 7). According to the latest opinion polls in Moldova, television is the most popular medium (it is the first source of information for 88% of reviewed and trusted media). The ‘Russian Channel one’ (formerly known ORT) is the most popular source of information (49.4%), followed by the Moldovan state television channel.

These facts indicate that Russia’s soft power resources in the Eurasian region are being challenged. The Russian media are tools for exerting Russian soft power for greater convergence in its near abroad. The country seeks organise public opinion of the people of the region in line with the goals of Russia’s strategies by producing content on the issues and problems of people in foreign countries.
5. Training

Education, like language, is an important channel for building identity and linking nations. In this sense, it plays a role that can be examined in the context of soft power policies (ZERTEM, 2009, p. 89). Education is one of the main channels of national identity creation. Education is crucial in shaping the ideology and value system of a society and creating shared memory (Barr, 2004, p. 264).

Training is a long-term policy tool, the power of which is not as clearly visible as tools of hard power. The essence of soft power rests on three bases: culture, foreign policy, and political values. Education plays a prominent role in all of these factors (Healey, 2009, p. 11). The ideology of the unification of the Russian education system and its dominance of Russian culture was formed in 1953 and textbooks were the same in all schools across the republics and all teachers followed the same curriculum. Therefore, the Russian higher education system is similar to higher education institutions in the CIS. Russian universities are still popular in the Commonwealth of Independent States and students prefer Russia as a destination for education over Western institutions.

There are Russian higher education institutions in the Republic of Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine, with 25,000 people studying in these institutions since 2008 (Sebastien, 2018, p. 10). However, the ability to take advantage of these benefits requires sufficient awareness, political will, and resources to maintain or develop Russia’s position as a major destination of higher education in the post-Soviet space, as well as globally.
5.1) Russia’s post-Soviet education system

During the transition process, education was one of the most important priorities of the Russian Federation. As in the Commonwealth, one of the most important challenges was the development of a new curriculum that did not include the ideological foundations of the Communist era. Creating a new system tailored to the needs of the new era was important, but due to problems such as the economic crisis, deeper problems began and corruption in education became a reality in everyday life (Kamchev, 2018). Putin emphasised the importance of education by saying that Russia needs a competitive education system; otherwise it would face the real threat that the quality of its education would not meet modern demands. Most importantly, he said that Russia must support higher education institutions that implement innovative programmes, including purchasing the latest Russian and foreign technology and equipment.

The Russian political elite views education as an important strategic asset for young people across the country (Kuzio, 2016, p. 77). The intrinsic role of educational policies in the process of building the Russian nation-state and developing or transmitting state ideology is crucial. Most CIS students prefer Russian higher education institutions as their first or second choice destination. When returning to their home countries, these students are regarded as Russian human capital (Kessikbayev, 2009). The cost of the Russian federation for the education system in 2016 rose 3.7% of GDP in 2016 (World Bank, 2017).

5.2) The Russian education system in Central Asia

The two main destinations that Central Asian students prefer for postgraduate education are Turkey and Kyrgyzstan. Turkey’s position is different from that of the Kyrgyz Republic. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey formulated an annual scholarship policy for students
who came from the outside Turkish Republic. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan became a training centre thanks to geographical, political, and economic factors in the post-Soviet era. One of the main factors supporting this trend is the existence of international universities in the country. There are 20 universities in the country, but five have been established by the United States, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Russia. There are six Russian higher education institutes in Bishkek, Osh, Manas and Karakol, and one training academy in Bishkek. These institutions have made the country especially attractive to Kazakh and Uzbek students (Joldosho, 2016, p. 13).

Although Russia has lost its dominance in international education in Central Asia, it is still the first or second choice destination for Central Asian students (ERTZERTEM, 2009, p. 113). The majority of students who prefer Russia for higher education are from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, because the populations of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are about three times larger than the populations of Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. In addition, Russian is the second language for people from these two countries. Studying at Russian universities is good for students who want to work in the public sector. With the exception of Turkmenistan, all Russian Central Higher Education Institutions exist in the Russian Federation (Peyrouse, 2008, p. 17).

5.3) The Russian educational system in the South Caucasus

Russia’s position in the Republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia can be explained as follows. There are 2 million Azeris in Russia (Asgharzadeh, 2017, p. 7) and since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been trying to rebuild its image through diplomatic channels, especially since the Karabakh conflict began.
Russia supports universities because they are important for the presentation of a positive image of Russia in Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Turkey’s position in this country is also important. The country has been able to establish good relations with Azerbaijan since the collapse of the Soviet Union and seems to balance Russia’s position in education. Azerbaijani students prefer Turkey for education. Scholarships granted by the Turkish government to the Republic of Azerbaijan, as well linguistic and cultural factors, have had important effects on Azerbaijani preferences. During the period 1992-2002, 2,884 Azerbaijani students benefited from Turkish scholarships.

Armenian students have three main destinations: Russia, France, and the United States. The existence of the Armenian diaspora in those countries is a common factor. In 2007, 55% of Armenian students who went abroad to study chose Russia. In terms of the internal presence of Russian institutions in Armenia, it can be noted that in addition to Moscow State University, and the Universities of Economy, Statistics and Information Technologies, there is also the Slavic university.

Georgia is different from Azerbaijan and Armenia. Georgian students prefer three destinations: Germany, Russia, and Armenia. Georgia has the lowest number of students who have gone to Russia for graduate studies compared to Azerbaijan and Armenia. Unlike Azerbaijan and Armenia, there are no Russian higher education institutions in Georgia. In 2004, almost 46.5% of students who went abroad to study opted for Russian higher education, but that number dropped dramatically to 37.4 percent by 2007.

On 24 November 2009, the Republic of Azerbaijan became the first post-Soviet country to open a Russian bookstore. The inauguration ceremony was attended by Sergei Naryshkin, Russia’s head of the government (Kornilov and Makarychev, 2014, p. 230). Only two pro-
Russian NGOs operate in Georgia: The Eurasian Institute and Eurasian Choice (Dzvelishvili, 2015, p. 50).

The Moscow-based Center for Strategic Forecasting has recently expanded its research links with the Yerevan Noravank foundation. The Russian institute for strategic studies held joint seminars with the Institute of Oriental Studies and the Armenian Academy of Sciences as well as with the Institute of Political and Social Research in the Black Sea region.

In 2013, the Russian foundation for joint research held a joint commission with the Armenian state committee of science and the Ministry of Education and Science, even though it was only for natural science projects. The Moscow Institute of International Relations is the first international alumni forum in Baku.

The Russian humanities foundation launched projects with Abkhazia and South Ossetia but this does not include Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (Kornilov and Makarychev, 2014, p. 245). Finally, it can be said that Russia’s ‘soft power’ has been activated after 2013, especially in Georgia, which relies heavily on NGOs and the media. But while the number of such organisations is steadily increasing, it should be noted that they are mainly founded and directed by the same people (Dzvelishvili, 2015, p. 51).

5.4) The Russian education system in Eastern Europe

During the dissolution period, Russia tried to unite with Belarus and Ukraine, and these efforts continued especially with Belarus, although the union in question could not be established. Since then, Russia has pursued a precautionary policy toward these countries, especially because of strategic concerns about the security of Russia’s western borders.
On the other hand, Russian foreign policy on Moldova is less important than relations with Belarus or Ukraine. One of the most important factors affecting bilateral relations between Moldova and Russia has been ethnic conflict involving the central Moldovan government since the 1990s (ERTZERTEM, 2009, p. 114). Russia grants Moldovan students about 100-200 scholarships annually. These are usually given to young people in Transnistria-Gagozia, and creative people. On the other hand, Romania granted 5,000 scholarships to Moldovan students for the 2012-2013 school year (Liik, 2015, p. 73).

In the case of Belarus, there is a clear Russian dominance in education. 57% of students preferred to go to Russia in 2007, while Ukraine attracted only 12.8% of Belarusian students who went abroad to study. In both countries, there is a language advantage for Belarussian students as well as a geographical advantage. Russia and Ukraine neighbour Belarus and Russian is also widely spoken in Ukraine. Belarus is a special case in Eastern Europe. The number of students who went abroad during 2007 increased significantly (about 41%) and this was directly reflected in the number of students who went to Russia to study. In Belarus, there is an institute of higher education linked to Russian universities: Belarus-Russia University, Minsk Branch; State University of Economics; Moscow State Statistical and Information Technology; and Russian State Social University. Most Ukrainian students who wish to study abroad choose Western destinations, including Germany, Poland, the United States, and Hungary.

Overall, Russia has slightly strengthened its position in international education in Eastern Europe. The results of education, both domestically and abroad, can only be achieved in the long run. It is an important soft power tool for creating doctrines, values, ideologies, and links between nations. Russian higher education institutions continue to be popular in the post-Soviet space as the first or second destination for students going abroad. Among
other international students who go to Russia for education. CIS students have the highest share in the Russian education system. In Central Asia, however, students prefer to go to Western institutions, but in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, Russia still retains its position, with even a slight increase (ÖZERTEM, 2009, p. 118).

In sum, Russia’s role in the social and cultural integration of Eurasia can be summarised as follows:

- There is a comprehensive impact of Russia on the culture and identity of the region’s nations.
- The institutionalisation of the Russian language in the region as a scientific language and a common language of the nations of the region is key.
- Almost identical structures and cultural systems connect Russia and the countries of the region.
- The capacity for cultural effectiveness and the power of Russian discourse in the region’s countries is supported by its status as the cultural hub of the region.
- Russia’s extensive and strategic relations with countries in the region are key.
- The dispersal of ethnic Russians in the countries of the region is also influential.
- There is a widespread presence of immigrants and citizens of various ethnic groups and countries in Russia.
- Russia’s unique ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity.
- Russian literature has an influence on the people of the region.
- Russia has a central and decisive role in the region, especially in maintaining regional security and stability and countering foreign influence.
- There is partnership and cooperation by regional countries with Russia in international and regional organisations.
- Russia’s vast media capacity and virtual environment in the region is significant.
- Russia’s vast artistic and cultural capacity, including cinema, music, visual arts, performing arts, and its publishing capacity are influential.
- There is widespread influence of the Russian Orthodox Church across the region.
Conclusion

Russia lost its place in the international system in the post-Cold War era and consequently attempted, through its foreign policy, to redefine its position in the 1990s. It came up with new tools and policies that fitted the needs of the new era, which was more dynamic and turbulent than the Cold War era. While Russia has been trying to redefine itself as a great power, it has been able to maintain its interests. However, the legacy of the Cold War provided the basis for a renewed use of hard power and identity analysis. Policies implemented in line with hard power, such as the use of energy as leverage and the Chechen War, reinforced Russia’s image of hard power.

However, contrary to the prevailing notion that defines Russia in terms of hard power, this study argues that with the onset of the Putin era, the development of soft power tools also began to help Russia rebuild its international image as a great power and to maximise its benefits in the post-Soviet space, strengthening its position across Eurasia. This has been based on two important tools: language and education, which act as important cultural channels and play an important role in fostering identity, ideology, and the transfer of value systems from country to country.

In the first period of Putin’s presidency, some steps were taken to consolidate the country and strengthen the central government, which, to some extent, helped the Russian elite resolve some of the major domestic problems in the field of economy and politics. Domestic stability helped Russia regain power and follow relatively stable foreign policy both locally and globally. This helped the Russian Federation gain confidence and improve its damaged image after the Soviet dissolution. In addition, Russia began to develop multilateral and bilateral relations, in a preemptive manner, with countries in the post-Soviet space, which had implications for the political behaviour of the elites. The Russian Federation began
developing new tools to safeguard Russia’s interests, especially in the CIS region, using both hard power and soft power. These tools included cultural centres and partnerships in education, language, media, and religion. In Putin’s second term, soft power policy implemented both rhetorically and practically.

Available data show that the Russian language still retains its importance in the region even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is very useful for the Russian Federation in creating channels through Russian media that influence education, science, and culture. In addition, the Russian language is better placed than any other foreign language because it is not seen as a foreign language by most people but rather as a language spoken often in daily social life.

However, processes of migration, whereby Russian minorities returned home, undermined the position of the Russian language, especially among the younger generation. However, the position of the Russian language in Central Asia and Eastern Europe is stronger than in the South Caucasus and the Baltics. Globally, Russia has lost its position as a destination for higher education but it is still popular as the first or second choice destination for Eurasian students who wish to study abroad. Among other international students going to Russia for education, CIS students have the highest share in the Russian education system. But in Central Asia, Russian education is now less influential as students prefer to go to Western institutions. Russian interests in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus could benefit in the long run from the fact Russian education has maintained its position.

Improvements in Russian foreign policy are evident, especially compared to the first half of the 1990s. Sustainable stability, emerging economies, and newly developed tools have all played a role. Russia is developing its soft power capabilities but many problems still remain unresolved as a powerful soft power. In the region, hard power policies such as
military action or economic leverage to control the Commonwealth of Independent States can create structural problems between Russia and the region. Hard power policies do not appear to have had a positive impact on Russia’s image. Both soft power and hard power policies must be applied alongside the creation of a favourable environment for the Russian Federation in post-Soviet geography. Russian language and Russian higher education institutions in the region are its most important soft power tools.

**Elaheh Koolaee**  
*Professor of Regional Studies, University of Tehran*

**Somayye Zangene**  
*PhD candidate in Regional Studies, University of Tehran*
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