

A scholarly journal and news magazine. August 2023. Vol. XVI:3.
From the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES), Södertörn University.

Trust, cooperation,
and hip-hop in Russia

BALTIC WORLDS

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Soft power strategies.

Filling young minds with authoritarian ideas

Russia's influence in
Central Asia, targeting youth

The international activities
of the Belarusian Republican
Youth Union

Chinese educational
and ideological policies

also in this issue

AUTHORITARIANISM IN AZERBAIJAN / RADICAL RIGHT IN THE BALTIC SEA AREA / EXTREMISM IN TAJIKISTAN

editorial

A new generation under pressure

This issue of *Baltic Worlds* is devoted to one sole theme, which began as an idea before February 24, 2022, and were carried out in the times of difficulties that followed. The guest editors and authors were on hold – as were life, research, and collaborations at large – because of the dramatically and tragically changed landscape due to the war. Finally, however, here comes a well-worked through and rich issue dealing with soft power and authoritarian values and mapping how particularly youth in the region are being targeted.

When the theme took shape, in a workshop in October 2021, the two main competing influencers were Russia and China. However, Russia's war against Ukraine has tended to diminish pro-Russian dominance in Eurasia and make room for a stronger China. This is one observation among many. The idea behind the whole issue and the different contributions are described in more detail in the introduction to the special issue.

The readers may notice that some guest editors also publish peer-reviewed articles. Worth mentioning is that the collaboration between guest editors and me as overall editor is that I still oversee the peer-review process and ensure it is all conducted in accordance with the same guidelines for everyone.

SINCE THE WAR STARTED, *Baltic Worlds* has tried to publish updates and reflections in each issue, commenting on the situation in articles written by researchers in the region who are themselves very much affected. In this issue we are still very aware and concerned about the war and the devastating destruction it has caused, but the focus is nonetheless on the topic of soft power and its long-term consequences. However, also on soft power policies, strategies and its' effectiveness the war has had an impact.

In the upcoming issues of *Baltic Worlds*, we will keep on balancing between following the present war situation up to today in various format and presenting scholarly articles concerning a number of different interesting topics which are the result of months and years of study and revisions after comments from colleagues.

Research and daily life have been forced to adjusted to the new order caused by the war – though without accepting it, of course: rather, carrying on research at large and publishing it is also a way of resisting violence and power extortion against an open society.

A STEADY STREAM of interesting contributions and themes is sent to *Baltic Worlds* and many collaborations are in the making with guest editors and authors from various disciplines, countries, and perspectives.

So, there is much reading to look forward to; however, in your hands you already hold a rich issue that probably will give food for thoughts and concerns about where we are heading in the region when it comes to the instrumentalization of the next generation, to strong states' propaganda machinery and strategies for attacking democratic values ... ✖

Ninna Mörner

in this issue



Governing extremism in Tajikistan

“ We will not allow any foreign power (nerui horiji) to undermine the independence of our state. **Page 29**



Mapping the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU)

“ The BRYU participates, without exception, in all Russia-led international youth initiatives. **Page 52**



ILLUSTRATION: KARIN ZARIC SUNVISSON

colophon

Baltic Worlds is published by the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES) at Södertörn University, Sweden.

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Printed by

Exakta Print AB, Malmö 2023

Printed: ISSN 2000-2955

Online: ISSN 2001-7308

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special issue

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Soft power.

Coopting post-Soviet youth: Russia, China, and transnational authoritarianism

by **Oleg Antonov & Olena Podolian**

Today's international system is to a large extent shaped by the tense confrontation between China and Russia with the West. China and Russia aim to exert strong influence globally and hold primacy in transnational relations. In pursuit of this aim, they use elements of “soft power” (defined by Joseph S. Nye¹ as resting on three pillars: political values, culture, and foreign policy) to undermine third countries' trust in the West and liberal values. Furthermore, there is a growing realization in China and Russia of the importance of developing a loyal young generation who will serve the regimes' goals and reject democratic values associated with the West.

Moreover, there is growing evidence that China and Russia's youth policies are being exported to the countries that depend on them historically, politically and/or economically, such as Central Asia (the focus of China) and Eastern Europe (the focus of Russia). There is also cross-regional influence, such as China's in Belarus. For instance, since 2019 the Belarusian Republican Youth Union and the All-China Youth Federation have been developing interregional cooperation. China has been exercising its own state-supported version of “soft power” through the network of Confucian centers, with five functioning in Kazakhstan

alone. Russia adheres to practicing “soft power” in a more traditional form. This includes education in the Russian Federation, short-term trips of foreign youth to Russia, development of youth organizations, and cooperation with young Russians living abroad.

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE is based on the symposium *Coopting post-Soviet Youth: Russia, China and transnational authoritarianism*, which took place on October 29, 2021 and was funded by CBEES. This issue was prepared for publication during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It is dedicated

**“CHINA AND
 RUSSIA AIM TO
 EXERT STRONG
 INFLUENCE
 GLOBALLY.”**

to the issue of youth and authoritarian values in the context of the domestic and international influence of “soft power” in post-Soviet states, presenting comparative research on the question of youth participation in political life in the broader Eurasian region with an emphasis on post-communist countries, including the Russian Federation, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Central Asian states (Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), Estonia, Latvia and Poland.

The authors of these eight articles endeavor to analyze more deeply different aspects of the influence of transnational “soft power” aimed at coopting youth in authoritarian and hybrid regimes through radical and nationalist youth organizations, patriotic education, and youth wings of ruling parties. By means of such activities, governments try to distract the youth from countercultural movements and opposition politics as well as to educate an obedient and loyal generation. The purpose is to “vaccinate” such generations with illiberal or authoritarian values in order to eliminate potential threats to regimes' stability.

As Sofie Bedford notes in her article *Ring out the old and ring in the young: Upgrading authoritarianism in Azerbaijan*, developments since 2019 such as the inclusion by Azerbaijan's authorities of representatives of the new generation into the president's administration, parliament, civil society, the media landscape and religious institutes, as well as the appointment of a woman as a vice-president (as a role model for many young women), can be interpreted as part of a wider ambition of strengthening the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime and authoritarian modernization. The author states that bringing on the new future loyal and

devoted elite is an effective method of regime renewal. By actions like these, the authorities want to prove that the system is available not only to older people and is ready for a change. In this sense Azerbaijani authorities seek to carry out reforms within authoritarian modernization in the country's own interests, in order not only to prevent the brain drain, but to bring opposition and dissent under control and eliminate any threats to the regime, as well as to make Azerbaijan more attractive for youth both inside the country and abroad.

At the same time, Nurlan Aliyev, the author of essay *What do Azerbaijani youth prefer: Silicon Valley, Pushkin, or Confucius?* considers that although Russia has controlled the region for about 200 years and has close cultural and social ties with three states (Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia), its soft power has become less influential since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The influence of the Kremlin has further weakened after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the detrimental effect of the sanctions imposed on Russia. Moscow, realizing its weaknesses, often uses its influence of soft power in addition to hard power. Regarding China's foreign policy and soft power, the author points out that Beijing is trying to improve its image in the Caucasus. He expresses the opinion that Western countries definitely have more to offer than Russia. For example, education in the West and even in China is more attractive to young people than in Russia, and in recent years the influence of the Russian language in the region has decreased, as young people generally prefer to speak English.

The author concludes that currently the Western influence is much stronger: however, everything can change overnight in terms of the balance of "soft power" between the West, Russia and China in the region. But as usual, time will tell.

Meanwhile, Edward Lemon's text, based on his keynote lecture entitled *Governing extremism through communi-*



The US-based *Foreign Policy* reporting about how "China's Long Arm Reaches Into American Campuses", in 2018.

ties in Tajikistan, pays attention to the very important and interesting process which authoritarian regimes willingly use in order to control and pacify disloyal youth and dissent as well as opposition. Using the example of Tajikistan where authoritarian leader Emomali Rahmon has ruled for over 30 years since 1992, the author shows that the protests which have erupted across Tajikistan since 2016 were directed not against the government but against opposition groups, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) and Group 24, as well as sympathizing foreign collaborators. Those protests were mostly organized and led by the pro-government youth organization Vanguard, involving students of Tajik universities, under the slogan "Youth against the ideology of terrorism and extremism". They burned the flags of Western countries and images of Muhiddin Kabiri, the IRPT leader, in front of representations of the UN and OSCE, as well as diplomatic missions of the US and

EU countries in Dushanbe. The author notes that the state media covered the nationwide scale of the protests as countermeasures and actions to counter extremism and terrorism in Tajikistan and Central Asia as a whole. Lemon states that these protests are not simple destructive actions to ban groups, arrest dissidents, suppress opposition, or regulate religion. On the contrary, by mimicking civic activism, organizing actions and events to counter extremism and using representatives of the local community for these purposes, pro-government youth organizations and movements in post-Soviet Tajikistan and other Central Asian republics seek to ensure the stability and security of secular authoritarian regimes in the region.

CONTINUING OUR discussion about youth and the Eurasian region, we move on to the article by Oleg

Antonov and Parviz Mullojonov, which presents the topic *The Role of Russian soft power in promoting authoritarianism: targeting youth of post-Soviet Central Asia*. The authors discuss "soft power" which Russia started to apply in its work with youth in authoritarian and what are known as "hybrid" countries some time ago. According to Antonov and Mullojonov, over the last two decades Russia has developed a rather complex and effective mechanism of "soft power", designed to attract youth and ensure the sustainability of allied political regimes. Moreover, Russian "soft power" increasingly is becoming an integral part of "hybrid war" in the context of a military-geopolitical strategy which combines military and non-military as well as covert and open methods including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular armed forces. On the one hand, the authors indicate that even today Russia's "soft power" still dominates in the CIS countries, including Central Asia. On the other hand, they note that in today's situation of Russia's profound confrontation with the West,

military invasion of Ukraine and deficit of financial resources, the gradual decrease of pro-Russian sentiment in Central Asian countries is being observed. In this regard the authors think that in the long-term perspective the future of Russian “soft power” in Central Asia does not look so rosy because of the consequences of the war in Ukraine and newly emerging tendencies within youth communities of countries in post-Soviet Central Asia.

ALSO INTERESTING is the fact that articles collected and published in this special issue represent diverse regions. A good illustration is the essay *Chinese youth: Domestic issues and transnational developments* by Marina Svensson. Her article describes ideological and political education in Chinese universities which targets Chinese youth in higher education. Svensson claims that the main goal of the nationalist/transnational ideological educational policy of authoritarian Chinese authorities is to establish full control over higher education through the ideological and political education of young people at all levels of the education system. They also apply excessive efforts to establish contacts with Chinese students abroad and control them as an important segment of Chinese population. The authorities conduct intensive propaganda work in this direction in order to increase the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and to prevent any influence of liberal and democratic values on Chinese students abroad. Along with this, the author notes that this kind of influence of democratic values and human rights and freedoms on Chinese students is perceived in Beijing exclusively as an external threat, which could transform itself into a domestic threat for the authoritarian regime. This is why the Chinese authorities started paying much more attention to the ideological and political education in Chinese universities as well as applying efforts to establish contacts with Chinese students abroad and to control them in order to propagate and instill into the young Chinese generation the nationalist ideology aimed at protection of China’s interests. Marina Svensson concludes that this is meant to minimize Western liberal and democratic values and make them less attractive.

MOVING FROM CHINA to Europe, in the article *International activities of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union: East versus West* Kristiina Silvan studies the international activities of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) from the early 1990s until the present day. She asks why there is little evidence of international activities by the BRYU although it is well positioned to engage in them. Indeed, after emerging in 2002 as a result of merger of the Belarusian Youth Union (former Komsomol) and the pro-presidential Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union, BRYU receives up to 98% of all the state’s youth policy funding. BRYU is a ubiquitous organization in all educational institutions and enjoys the membership of every fifth young person (15 to 30 years), making its

“THE FUTURE OF RUSSIAN ‘SOFT POWER’ IN CENTRAL ASIA DOES NOT LOOK SO ROSY.”

position dominant among youth associations. This position has strengthened even further after the wave of repressions against youth organizations in the wake of the mass protests against the fraudulent presidential elections in 2020. To address this gap, Silvan supplements primary data from her ethnographic field notes and semi-structured interviews with BRYU representatives with publicly available sources, mainly the BRYU’s official reports and media articles. The article starts with an overview of government-organized NGOs. Next the author analyzes the BRYU’s “inverted hierarchy” and mission among the youth, arguing that whereas officially the organization positions itself as representing “the young rank and file in the corridors of power”, in reality its leadership is completely subservient to the president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka. As a consequence, the argument that the BRYU’s international agenda is an extension of its domestic one does not come as a surprise. Cooperation with Russian actors represents the lion’s share of inter-

national cooperation, in stark contrast to that with European and other Western actors. Although the BRYU has been trying since 2006 to establish such cooperation to make itself more attractive to the Belarusian youth it claims to represent, most Western international organizations refused. Realizing that in reality BRYU represented Lukashenka’s regime, they instead opted for cooperation with the Belarusian National Youth Council (RADA), the umbrella organization of independent non-governmental youth organizations. The unprecedentedly brutal suppression of anti-presidential protests from August 2020 onwards put an end to any attempted cooperation. Moreover, that year also marked the end of BRYU even trying to increase its popularity among the rank and file and saw a new focus on the authoritarian top-down model of patriotic education instead, which makes cooperation with Western actors even less feasible. Finally, Silvan examines the BRYU’s cooperation with China. Considering its increased importance for Lukashenka’s foreign policy after the annexation of Crimea and China’s interest in establishing its presence in Eastern Europe, active cooperation can be expected. Nevertheless, it remains superficial, apart from the most visible cooperation, which is with Chinese youth groups in youth policy structures of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as enhanced cooperation between the Chinese government and Belarusian universities. All of this allows Silvan to conclude that the BRYU’s claimed “multi-vector international youth collaboration” is mostly exercised with Russian actors. Overall, its international activities remain shallow and limited to top officials and loyal members and not the rank and file that the organization is supposed to represent.

THE NEXT ARTICLE, *Making tomorrow’s leaders: Transnationalism of populist radical right youth organizations in the Baltic Sea area* by Peteris Timofejevs and Louis Wierenga, takes us to the Nordic region, more specifically to the Baltic States. It addresses a well identified gap in the literature on the little studied youth organizations associated with radical right parties, which

have been studied extensively recently. However, it is important to study such youth organizations as these parties are likely to be well represented in European politics going forward. Moreover, while the radical right parties are expected to restructure socio-economic values, specifically European integration, their youth organizations are predicted to be more radical – and it is they who will prepare future generations of leaders and elected representatives. In the study of the youth organizations of radical right parties, the authors focus on their less studied transnational relations with each other across the borders, paying attention in particular to diffusion and demonstration effects. Using an interview method and social media analysis, they conduct a paired comparison of two youth organizations of radical right parties in neighboring Baltic States: the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) and the National Alliance, in the Estonian and Latvian parliaments respectively; both parties have been parts of coalition governments and have made a transnational ideological alliance. Commonalities between the youth organizations have been identified, confirming the expectation that youth organizations that are close in their political goals, ideological profiles and values are more likely to engage in transnational interactions with each other. Likewise, two more expectations formulated in the paper – that the contacts and interactions are more intense when the youth organizations and their partners are geographically close and that youth organizations are more likely to adopt the ideas, strategies and other models from youth organizations perceived as successful – have been confirmed empirically. The article firmly places youth organizations of radical right parties on the research agenda and provides a roadmap for future studies on their transnational relations and activities in Baltic States and Central and Eastern Europe.

IN HER ESSAY entitled *Let the right one in: building relations of trust* Ekaterina Kalinina explores the topic of cooperation from the angle of the concept of trust. She considers the deficit of trust as one of the main obstacles to international

cooperation in the Nordic region, where Russia was one of the actors until 2022. Building on her own experience of work with the representatives of hip-hop subculture, she explains the difficulty of obtaining outgroup trust – that invested in the members of a different community. The author outlines the development of trust to donors coming from the non-commercial sector, such as international and foreign organizations and funds, as not being straightforward. This is due to the history of abuse by commercial companies and misunderstanding of their true motivations. However, in case of hip-hop and other youth subcultures in Russia, ultimately trust was built as their members saw such cooperation as both prestigious and financially profitable, as well as presenting opportunities for an international career. That was the case even though international cooperation was captured early on by state actors, in particular city administrations and youth organizations (“houses of youth”). Not surprisingly, they saw the opportunity to claim credit for the events they should but could not organize due to lack of funding, competences and international contacts, i.e. they used international cooperation to compensate for deficient state activity. The task was made even easier by the fact that the kind of international activities organized – youth festivals, summer camps, workshops, and conferences – were seen as socio-cultural and not political and therefore not threatening to existing youth policies. In particular, the author studies the case of breaking which was included on the list of the Olympic sports, thus increasing the state's interest in what was essentially an alternative youth culture.

Although the subculture members had an understandable mistrust of the state, a lot of them overcame it for the sake of benefits from international cooperation such as career development in sport education, professional sport and event management. However, as in Belarus as presented above, international cooperation decreased drastically with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Not only did ingroup trust between Russian and Ukrainian members

of the hip-hop community quickly corrode, but Russian members of the street culture community also became divided between shared responsibility and collective guilt. As a result some have left the country and some stayed for a variety of reasons, reflecting the choices of the population at large. As for outgroup trust, it was also shattered because international cooperation projects were stopped by their funders for reasons both of their effectiveness and ethics during the war, although some interpersonal trust built on both sides over the years has persevered. As the author concludes, time will tell whether it is possible to rebuild the lost trust.

IN CONCLUSION, the special issue provides a contribution on a broad comparison of national and international policies towards youth, in particular by China and Russia, in the region. These policies have particular relevance given the current backdrop of confrontation between the “East” – China and Russia – and the “West”, whereby they are being coopted by domestic authorities or regional (Russia) or global (China) powers. The papers and essays in the special issue cover the broad thematic, geographical, and interdisciplinary scope of such policies. We hope they will be of interest to both researchers and policy makers. ✖

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Acknowledgement: Antonov's and Podolian's contributions to this Special Issue have been supported by funding from the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (grant number 21-PR2-0020).

reference

- 1 Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).



Old City of Baku with the new modern Flame Towers in the background. May 11, 2015.

PHOTO: SOFIE BEDFORD

Ring out the old and ring in the young:

UPGRADING AUTHORITARIANISM IN AZERBAIJAN

by **Sofie Bedford**

abstract

Using Heydemann's concept 'authoritarian upgrading' as the theoretical point of departure, this article sheds light on the adaptation of the Azerbaijani authoritarian regime that is taking place in the political arena, civil society, media and information sector, and in relation to religious practices. It elaborates on how authoritarian upgrading is associated with the consolidation of the authoritarian regime and suggests that the core of these measures entails making authoritarian norms and values appear more attractive and acceptable. Notably, it illustrates the conscious attempts to engage the younger generation across multiple sectors in authoritarian upgrading making them both a target and a tool in this process.

KEYWORDS: Authoritarian upgrading, reforms, managed pluralism, Azerbaijan.

Although the authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan seems stable,¹ developments in recent years have indicated the regime is not static – or at least it does not want to be perceived as such. Most striking was a highly publicized change in cadre in 2019 that replaced older members of the presidential administration with representatives of a new generation. At the end of the same year, the Azerbaijan parliament was dispersed and the snap elections that followed saw an unusual range of candidates, some of them rather young, as well as a surprising amount of campaigning. Observers suggested this wind of change stemmed from falling energy prices that left the Azerbaijani economy vulnerable and in need of international backing. Thus, these “reform-looking measures” were a concession to the demanding political conditionality of Western partners in exchange for funding or support.² Azerbaijan is indeed often described as a ‘rentier state’ in which revenues from oil and gas provide a core of stability for the autocratic rule.³ This article proposes that these developments may also be interpreted as part of a broader ambition to strengthen the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime by giving it a ‘facelift’ in various sectors – a phenomenon described by Heydemann as *authoritarian upgrading*.⁴ Authoritarian upgrading is used by a regime to respond to external or internal pressure for change by establishing an image of their country as reforming, liberalizing and/or democratizing,⁵ without actually “modifying the nature of decision-making at the highest levels of government”.⁶ Heydemann’s research is focused on the Middle East, but the processes he describes can be observed across the world. Using authoritarian upgrading as a theoretical point of departure, my article sheds light on the adaptation of the Azerbaijani authoritarian regime that is taking place in the political arena, civil society, media and information sector, and in relation to religious practices. It elaborates on how authoritarian upgrading is associated with the consolidation of the authoritarian regime and suggests that the core of these measures entails making authoritarian norms and values appear more attractive and acceptable.

A greater understanding of the features and function of authoritarian upgrading in Azerbaijan is relevant to this special issue as it indicates that the main driver of authoritarian norms and values may be internal rather than external. Moreover, the involvement of youth is an intrinsic aspect of authoritarian upgrading. By adding young faces to the country's political arena, allowing young 'independent' voices in the media and civil society, and molding a new generation of religious officials, the regime shows it is changing. At the same time, it controls this change by establishing ownership of public discourse in these different fields.

Outline of the study

The study builds on my research in the Azerbaijani context, which has been conducted over the past six years, and specifically on observations and insights from four previous projects: research on the concept and phenomenon of *opposition* in authoritarian contexts, a study of *Traditional Islam* in Azerbaijan, an assessment of the country's *media and information sphere* commissioned by an international organization, and two feasibility studies conducted as part of preparations for the Swedish Institute Leader Lab for *young civil society leaders in the EU's Eastern Partnership*. The data collected in the framework of these projects include interviews with 'oppositional' actors, e.g., advocates for change such as political, civic and human rights activists, as well as critical journalists during field trips to Baku between 2015 and 2020; online interviews with Azerbaijani civil society actors working towards Goal 16 (promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies) and Goal 5 (gender equality) in Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development⁷, in the fall of 2020 and November 2021; interviews in Baku during the spring of 2018 with the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations, members of the religious elite, and a number of academics and experts; and interviews conducted online between November 2020 and January 2021 with a range of media and information actors working within or towards the Azerbaijani media and information sector. In addition, a wide range of secondary material has been consulted while working on both the previous and the current study, including academic and newspaper articles, reports, and the websites of relevant government institutions. Together, all these sources paint a comprehensive picture of how the process of authoritarian upgrading is interpreted and received by different categories of actors, such as specialist communities, those who support the state's ideas and arguments, those striving to change the political status quo, as well as those who describe themselves as 'truly independent' – treading between the regime and its challengers. In order to protect the respondents, their identity has not been disclosed, except in cases where they gave their explicit consent.

The first part of the article is dedicated to a theoretical discus-

sion about how to understand the consolidation of authoritarianism and authoritarian upgrading. The subsequent analysis sheds light on the functions and features of authoritarian upgrading in the Azerbaijani context, focusing on the regime's attempts to renew and adapt institutions, structures and policy related to political life, civil society, media, and religion to facilitate and control change. Finally, the concluding discussion focuses on the implications of this development.

Stability of authoritarian regimes: 'upgrading' and depoliticization

One major insight from the previous literature is that authoritarian leaders cannot only rely on repression to stay in power. Gerschewski concludes that the stability of authoritarian regimes instead rests on the "many interdependencies between the ruler and the ruled" manifested in three interconnected pillars: repression (coercion and threats), cooptation (benefits to certain groups to convince them not to question the system), and legitimation (getting people to justify, accept or at least tolerate the regime).⁸ Research increasingly points to the importance of the latter as being key to how autocratic regimes keep control of the political arena.⁹

CURRENT AUTHORITARIAN legitimation strategies are rarely used to mobilize ideological support for a regime but to shape its political agenda.¹⁰ More specifically, they aim to nurse "apolitical sentiments and apathy among the people" to ensure the status quo remains unchallenged.¹¹ Thus, politics has become a 'non-issue' in many authoritarian states – "reduced to relatively minor squabbles over interpretation, implementation, or the spoils of power".¹² As a result, most of the population seems to accept the political status quo despite being acutely aware that there is a lack of democratic standards

"WHEN PEOPLE PERCEIVE POLITICS AS UNINTERESTING AND IRRELEVANT, THEY DO NOT CARE ABOUT CHANGING THE GOVERNMENT."

in their society. When people perceive politics as uninteresting and irrelevant, they do not care about changing the government. This strengthens the authoritarian system as "the status quo regime will survive simply by default".¹³ However, if an economic crisis or a societal emergency were to trigger one apolitical person to cross their "revolutionary threshold" and start making their personal preferences known, this might inspire others to do the same. This puts pressure on autocratic leaders to adapt to new social, economic and political challenges – exploring more subtle ways to secure their legitimacy and stay in power.¹⁴ They sometimes achieve this by introducing "a state-sanctioned, approved diversity" – 'managed pluralism'¹⁵ – in various sectors of society. This has "changed many of the aspects of traditional authoritarianism and permitted a greater space for society without, however, modifying the nature of decision-making at the highest levels of government" and served to enforce the stability of authoritarian regimes¹⁶ in the Middle East,¹⁷ the post-Soviet space,¹⁸ and China.¹⁹

Heydemann describes this as *upgrading of authoritarianism*. Authoritarian upgrading provides more openness by implementing selected reforms and allowing a range of actors, such as political parties, entrepreneurs, labor unions, civil society, youth groups, religious figures and others, more room for maneuvering. At the same time, it is symptomatic that truly independent activities remain hindered by bureaucratic regulations and informal practices, and that accountability is non-existent.²⁰ He identifies five main features of the authoritarian upgrading process: managing political contestation; appropriating and containing civil societies; capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms; controlling new communications technologies; and diversifying international linkages. The regimes showcase their reform process to “minimize political constraints stemming from increased social participation and maximize their relative autonomy from society’s less supportive sectors”.²¹ The modernization that stems from authoritarian upgrading can be described as narrow – “a set of technical policy measures aimed to achieve successful socio-economic development” that does not touch the “broad aspects of political modernization.”²²

IT HAS BEEN SUGGESTED that authoritarian upgrading could in fact be a “phase within Western-style democratic development”²³ by creating “visible improvements for the country’s population, while also developing the prerequisites for successful future liberalization”, since economic or political reforms are often to some extent genuinely beneficial for the population.²⁴ Yet, the literature consistently argues that authoritarian upgrading strengthens the resilience of authoritarian regimes.²⁵ Implemented reforms aim to secure the legitimacy of the system and do not really provide the population with meaningful ways to engage in the political and social life of the country. This strengthens cynicism in society, especially among the youth, about the meaningfulness of political participation and the possibility of the status quo ever changing.²⁶ That being said, depoliticization stemming from authoritarian upgrading processes has been likened to ‘democratic downgrading’ in democracies in which ordinary citizen participation in institutional politics is declining.²⁷

Largely following Heydemann’s conceptualization, I now turn to an analysis of authoritarian upgrading in the Azerbaijani context by identifying the formal and informal strategies used to reform and renew institutions, structures and policy in the political arena, civil society, the media and information sector, and religious structures.



Flower Day celebration in Baku, May 10, 2015.

Upgrading Azerbaijani authoritarianism: Improving quality and perceptions

One common feature of authoritarian upgrading is the selective implementation of reforms in different sectors to prevent public dissatisfaction. By renewing institutions, structures and policy in, for example, the fields of anticorruption, economic liberalization and integration into global markets, the regime is both adhering to popular demand and expanding opportunities for the social and economic elites to preserve the existing bases of institutional and social support.²⁸ This section of the article starts with a general overview of some similar reforms undertaken in Azerbaijan in response to issues of popular concern, aimed at improving the quality and perception of government institutions and performance – albeit with a clear ambition not to change the country’s overall “authoritarian framework”.²⁹ The analysis then moves to the specific sectors.

Notably, there has been considerable effort on the part of the Azerbaijani government to make the regulation and implementation of public administration more transparent and efficient.³⁰ This includes a strong focus on the application of information

and communication technology (ICT) in governance, economy and the social sector, for example, by introducing ‘e-services’ in key sectors such as government agencies, business, education, health, agriculture, public sector management and public services.³¹ Both the DOST (Sustainable and Operational Social Security Agency) and the highly popular ASAN (Azerbaijani Service and Assessment Network) service centers are prominent examples of initiatives that facilitate quick and easy handling of matters that were previously often associated with tedious bureaucratic processes. DOST centers offer “154 services through a single window” in the fields of employment, labor and social protection.³² ASAN centers, similarly, provide citizens with access to a wide range of services in a single location, including birth, death and marriage registration, identity cards, passports, driver’s licenses, real estate records, immigrant status and other civic issues.³³ Not only have these centers simplified government procedures for the population, they have also helped reduce mid- and low-level bureaucratic corruption by bypassing corrupt officials.³⁴ Corruption remains a serious issue in Azerbaijan and is prevalent in almost every sphere of society.³⁵ President Aliyev’s October 2019 speech, which became the precursor to his latest wave of institutional restructuring and reforms, strongly emphasized the need for increased transparency and “a merciless fight against corruption.”³⁶ His speech was followed by a number of arrests of public officials accused of embezzlement, abuse of power, and bribery. Similarly, in 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, local officials across the country were punished for violating the country’s isolation rules and for abusing their power. However, just as in 2019, these measures were perceived as symbolic and were mainly targeted at lower-level officials who were already disliked by the regional population.³⁷

THE COLLAPSE OF global oil prices in 2014/2015 hit the oil-dependent economy of Azerbaijan hard. An unusual outburst of public protests in early 2016 across the country against the deteriorating economic situation put pressure on the government, resulting in a set of institutional and economic reforms to revive and guarantee the development of the non-oil sector of the economy.³⁸ The economic reforms, aimed at establishing monetary policy based on floating exchange rates, increasing efficiency and implementing privatization, development of human capital, and improvement of the business environment, were partly successful.³⁹ The ASAN centers, in combination with changes to the justice system, as well as a “shakeup of the notoriously corrupt customs services”,⁴⁰ made it easier to do business.⁴¹ Still, the economy remains dependent on oil and gas. Through the renovation of old institutions and the creation of new ones, the reforms resolved technical issues and led to increased efficiency in some government operations, but did not address the fundamental problems that prevent change, such as the centralized

nature of governance, dominance of the executive branch, as well as the lack of mechanisms for government accountability.⁴² Although the COVID-19 pandemic stalled the reform processes,⁴³ it seems they are back on track. After Azerbaijan’s victory in the second Karabakh war in 2020, major reforms have taken place, not least in the military sector, which has been re-modeled based on the Turkish example.⁴⁴ Additionally, through the decision to use the ‘smart city concept’⁴⁵ when restoring cities and villages in the previously occupied territories the Azerbaijani government shows commitment not only to regional development, but to continue reforming and modernizing the country.

The political arena: Rejuvenation and controlled pluralism

Azerbaijan has been under the rule of the Aliyev family since 1993. Heydar Aliyev ruled until his death in 2003, after which his son, Ilham Aliyev, came to power. In 2016, President Aliyev appointed his wife, Merhiban Aliyeva, Vice President after this position was created.⁴⁶ When Ilham Aliyev became president he underlined his ambition to uphold the policies of his father and reappointed all the ministers and advisers from his father’s administration.⁴⁷ It was not until 2019 that he conducted a substantial institutional restructuring, completely changing the face of the Presidential Administration by replacing the ‘old guard’ with a younger generation. This was prefaced by his October 2019 speech in which he noted that “some people in power” were against reforms, flagged for “personnel reforms” and the need to attract “qualified young people with a modern outlook and knowledge of the modern economy” to the government.⁴⁸

Under this banner of reform and renewal, some state agencies merged or were shut down, new institutions and positions were established and several influential senior-level officials lost their positions, most importantly: Ali Hasanov, presidential assistant for public and political affairs and Ramiz Mehdiyev, head of the presidential administration, often referred to as the ‘grey cardinal’ in Azerbaijani politics.⁴⁹ All of those who were removed are described as part of the ‘old guard’, both “for the age of its members and their longevity in office”.⁵⁰ The old guard comprises influential politicians who were allies of the current president’s father. In line with the new “policy of rejuvenation”⁵¹ they were replaced by well-known technocratic and reformist officials who represent a Western-educated younger generation.⁵² It has been suggested that the removal of the old guard’s frontrunners contributed to strengthening another influential group in Azerbaijani politics – the president’s extended family⁵³, the circle around the First Vice President (also First Lady) – the Pashayev family,⁵⁴ sometimes referred to as “the reformers”.⁵⁵

AFTER THE PRESIDENT’S public criticism of the government, he dissolved the existing National Parliament – *Milli Məclis* – in

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Azerbaijan's servicemen vote at a polling station during the parliamentary elections in Baku on February 9, 2020. PHOTO: TOFIK BABAYEV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

November 2019. In February 2020, snap parliamentary elections were held, nine months early. The election campaign saw an unusually wide range of candidates and political activity. In comparison to previous elections there were fewer obstacles to candidate registration. The OSCE even described the process as “generally inclusive” as most of those who wanted could run for office.⁵⁶ This indicated the authorities wanted to see a high number of candidates, which many interpreted as an opening. Another reason for the dynamic electoral campaigning is believed to be the removal of Mehdiyev and Hasanov. As the duo was seen to have been responsible for ‘managing’ previous elections, their dismissal gave the impression these elections would be more ‘real’.⁵⁷

Liberalizing political contestation by allowing, and sometimes even orchestrating, a certain amount of controlled political pluralism – often in the electoral arena, is a prevalent feature of authoritarian upgrading.⁵⁸ Traditionally, elections in Azerbaijan have been of little interest to the population at large, as they may appear democratic but lack credibility. The people who usually care about participating under these conditions are the political opposition parties – because the election campaign is their only opportunity to gain official access to the public.⁵⁹ As a result, elections are regarded as a well-cho-

reographed play or game with little relevance to most in the population. Against this background, the high number of first-time candidates who decided to take advantage of the opening provided by the snap elections and alleged ‘reform spirit’, as well as the intensity of their campaigns, was unexpected and interesting. A notable group of candidates was young people with a background in civic activism, for example, from civil society and/or social media. With the stated ambition to focus on ‘ideas and ideology’, these activists represented a wide range of perspectives: left-wing, libertarian, feminist, environmentalist, etc. Another interesting category of candidates had no previous experience, either of politics or activism. They entered the race with full force after receiving a ‘signal from above’ that the president had requested renewal of the parliament and subsequent reforms.⁶⁰

DESPITE CALLS FOR reform, the elections reflected the regime’s ambition to maintain a balance between making the elections superficially legitimate while also non-competitive, which is characteristic of electoral authoritarian regimes.⁶¹ Monitoring reports point to many shortcomings similar to those observed in previous elections, related to, for example, voter registration, media coverage, interference by local authorities and abuse of

administrative resources.⁶² Azerbaijan's party system has been described as non-competitive and hegemonic, dominated by the presidential New Azerbaijan Party (YAP).⁶³ This did not change after the 2020 election as YAP kept its absolute majority. Around two-thirds of previous MPs sought reelection and only four of them did not make it into the new parliament, which confirms that the increased participation did not translate into genuine competition.⁶⁴ Even more so, a list published on social media in January 2020 accurately predicted the identity of 120 of the 125 deputies.⁶⁵ The 42 MPs that are new to the parliament suggest that the renewal that took place was an entirely controlled top-down process to ensure the inclusion of regime loyalists hand-picked to embody change. A newly elected previously unknown 26-year-old representing YAP became the youngest MP.⁶⁶ The fact that she is the only one younger than 30 and one of only 12 who are younger than 40 years old also gives the impression that a major rejuvenation of the parliament did not take place.⁶⁷ In January 2023 the president approved a new law 'on political parties' that observers say will make the registration and functioning of political parties even more cumbersome and discriminatory. Many parties are expected either to stop existing or merge with YAP, which will further increase the dominance of the presidential party.⁶⁸

STILL, AZERBAIJANI authorities are aware that opposition is needed in a democratic society. The (s)election of Erkin Gadirli, outspoken member of the Republican Alternative (REAL), is particularly telling in this respect. The major opposition parties, Musavat and the Popular Front Party, are often officially referred to as 'radical opposition' accused of being 'stuck in the past', 'outdated' or 'old-minded'.⁶⁹ An 'ideal' opposition would, in contrast, need to understand and pursue the right political path.⁷⁰ The fact that REAL was finally registered in 2020 after years of rejection and that Gadirli became an MP in the same year indicates the regime decided that REAL is an 'acceptable' form of opposition. This was underlined by the President describing Gadirli's appointment as deputy chairman of the Parliament as an historical event. In the words of the President, it was "an important step aimed at improving the political system and building political relations on a sound footing" and "also a very important step as it, first of all, opens the way for a new configuration of the political system."⁷¹ The new working relationship between REAL and the government was further illustrated by the fact that REAL, as the only opposition party, adhered to the government's call for dialogue after the election.⁷²

Because its leaders were well educated, had successful careers in their respective professions and, importantly, had no formal links to the ill-reputed 'traditional opposition', when REAL was created in 2009, it was able to successfully position itself as a 'new force'. As a result, it was largely well received in society, especially among the young and highly educated. Today, many interpret Gadirli's acceptance of the post as treason and a blow to those fighting fraudulent elections. Others insist his presence in parliament will provide a voice of reason and a much-needed new perspective.

Civil society: Depoliticization, safe topics and successful feminists

One feature of authoritarian upgrading relates to civil society. In the Middle East, Heydemann observed a mix of "repression, regulation, cooptation and the appropriation of NGO functions by the state to contain the deepening of civil societies and to erode their capacity to challenge political authority."⁷³ Some research suggests that the activities of the promoters of Western democracy contributed to this process by the taming of aid programs in order to make them compatible with autocratic regimes⁷⁴ and limiting the ability of supported local organizations to act as agents of change.⁷⁵ In Azerbaijan, an unprecedented crackdown on political activists, civil society leaders, local NGOs and human rights activists that started in 2013 and culminated in 2014 left the sector paralyzed.⁷⁶ It came in the wake of public protests that rocked the country in early 2013⁷⁷ and the presidential election the same year, where the opposition, against all odds, managed to rally behind one oppositional candidate who was also supported by academics, representatives of civil society, religious figures, as well as the new 'Facebook generation' of democracy activists.⁷⁸ Repression, however, was not the only method used to counteract the potential impact of civil society. As in similar contexts, the authoritarian leaders used civil society to strengthen their legitimization narratives by appropriating human rights and democratization discourses and making them their own.⁷⁹ When youth activism was flourishing in Azerbaijan in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, facilitated by its use of social media to undermine the government monopoly on information and discussion, the regime "hijacked this trend"⁸⁰ and sponsored its own youth NGOs that followed the government line and supported its policies, albeit claiming to be independent. These included *Ireli (Forward)*, which has been compared to *Nashi* in Russia.⁸¹ Research by Pearce shows in great detail how during this era, pro-regime groups like *Ireli* were particularly active online, fighting pro-democracy activists using creative tools such as memes, 'Twitter shenanigans' and blocking.⁸² Tellingly, activists in regime-supporting organizations from this era later ended up in high government positions.⁸³

The crackdown resulted in a series of legal amendments that significantly decreased the space for civil society.⁸⁴ The opportunity to receive funding from abroad was virtually eliminated and particularly restricted the activities of NGOs working on issues such as democracy, rights, freedom of expression and information, and other social projects that had been dependent on donor support. Those organizations that survived kept a low profile. As a result, civil society became "only engaged in self-defense, and therefore detached from the people."⁸⁵ Although various national state bodies have since been providing grants to civil society organizations, these do not meet their needs. Moreover, the government is still treating organizations working on 'sensitive' issues, like democratization and human rights worse than, for example, youth organizations and social service providers.⁸⁶

EVEN THOUGH MOST of the harsh laws are still in place, recent years have seen some developments in the civil society sector.

The Agency for State Support to NGOs, replacing the Council of State Support to NGOs in 2021, will be implementing new grant-making regulations adopted by the Council of Ministers. The establishment of the Agency appears to be an instance of authoritarian upgrading as it seeks to improve the state's support of and relationship with civil society. Notably, its portfolio includes some new approaches, such as the development of cooperation mechanisms between the state, private sector, and NGOs. However, just like in the political arena, it is clear that the re-vitalization of the sector is expected to take place under strict control. All 11 advisory board members (eight NGO representatives and three public officials) are directly appointed by the President.⁸⁷

There are a growing number of initiatives that “enjoy protected status” and “benefit from privileged relations with powerful political actors”, but potentially “lack meaningful autonomy” similar to semi-official NGOs in the Middle East.⁸⁸ One well known example is Yarat (Create) Contemporary Art Space, a non-profit art organization creating “a hub for artistic practice, research and thinking in the Caucasus,”⁸⁹ that Goyushov and Huseynlu say “is directly connected to the ruling family,” and as such provides attractive opportunities in terms of career openings, “material incentives and glamour” for Azerbaijani youth with “elitist desires”.⁹⁰ Var Yox is a more recent example – an art and cultural platform founded by local artists in 2018, which describes its mission as displaying “the artworks of Azerbaijani artists both in national and international arenas, to archive the innovations in the art and culture spheres by combining social and art activism.” Var Yox is working with many international donors to this end, but the fact that at least one of its projects was funded by Pasha Holding and Pasha Travel – both connected to the ‘reformers’ (e.g., the Pashayevs) and that the Ministry of Culture has commissioned some of its work has led observers to doubt the group's independence. The link to the Pashayevs is another interesting parallel to the Middle East, as first ladies in this region are often the founders and sponsors of ‘semi-official’ organizations.⁹¹ Notably, the Azerbaijani First Lady is also head of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, a charitable organization that has become a huge donor, supporting projects in the fields of education, culture, education, science, technology, environment, and sports, both nationally and internationally.⁹²

As the new legislation made it even more difficult to register NGOs, this also led to an upswing in grassroots youth activism. Many of the young activists do not operate within a strict organizational structure which, according to one respondent, shows “a clear division between the civil society organizations, represented by ‘dinosaurs’ – who started their organizations in the 1990s/beginning of 2000, mainly relying on grants provided by international organizations” and these new informal initiatives that are more fluid and often organized around different causes.⁹³

The latter are operating largely without funding; their activities can be seen as value, or issue based rather than donor driven. One interesting example is the new generation of feminist activists who, since they emerged on the scene in 2016, are seen as the most active part of civil society,⁹⁴ having “a much bolder approach to advocacy in comparison to the previous generation of women's rights activists.”⁹⁵ In particular, they have focused their activities on gender-based violence as, according to one activist, this was an issue that “could engage a lot of people – even those who do not support LGBT rights.”⁹⁶ As a result, violence against women is now largely acknowledged as a problem, both by the public and the government, which even adopted the first ever “National Action Plan for Combating Domestic Violence” for 2020–2023.⁹⁷

THIS WAVE of grassroots activism was made possible by the authorities increasingly targeting those who were working on issues considered explicitly ‘political’, while topics such as culture, ecology and gender equality that the new activists focused on were considered more or less ‘unthreatening’.⁹⁸ Yet, if

activists organize unsanctioned public protests or try to mobilize a certain community for their cause, this is seen as crossing the “boundary between the social and the political, the ‘safe’ and the ‘dangerous’” and could have consequences.⁹⁹ As explained by one respondent: “these groups are trying to find ways to operate safely within the limits. It is still difficult to work, there is no guarantee that, for example, your finances will not be scrutinized. Because of this, people try not to officially register

their activity, because even if they do everything correctly and have no political agenda, they still might end up in trouble. Being transparent might cause problems”.¹⁰⁰

The media sector: Modernization, cooptation, and independents

The crackdown on civil society also became a major turning point for the independent media in Azerbaijan. Media actors lost most of their financial support and came under enormous pressure – many left the country or were forced to live in fear of persecution. The removal of Mehdiyev and Hasanov was seen as a positive sign and in the years that followed, many respondents described the approach towards independent media actors as ‘softer’. The pressure was not as intense, and most journalists arrested during the crackdown were released.¹⁰¹ However, the 2021 presidential decree ‘On the deepening of reforms in the field of media’ seemingly triggered a new phase. In February 2022, the President approved a controversial law drafted by the newly established Media Development Agency. Although, according to the government, the new legislation “intends to bring this area in line with international standards, modernize the country's media legislation as well as improve the professionalism of journalists”,

“THE CRACKDOWN RESULTED IN A SERIES OF LEGAL AMENDMENTS THAT SIGNIFICANTLY DECREASED THE SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY.”

many experts and journalists are concerned that the law will further impede freedom of expression and media freedom by adding even more regulation and restrictions to the field.¹⁰²

THE LAW IS LIKELY a reaction to the changing dynamics in the media landscape that has resulted from the merge of news media and social platforms over the past decade. These days, quite a wide range of digital information is produced that challenges or goes beyond the established Azerbaijani state narrative. It is difficult to officially register a newspaper or TV channel, but starting something online – a YouTube channel, Facebook page, TikTok or Instagram account – is easy, and some online actors have quite large audiences. Many of the new initiatives are started in and operated from abroad, but have staff in Azerbaijan, which perhaps explains the new law that requires media outlet owners and publishers to be residents in the country, and the increasingly strict requirements for registering as a journalist.¹⁰³

For some time, the authorities have already been walking a fine line between keeping the internet as open as possible and using it to strengthen their position, while controlling the content and users.¹⁰⁴ To this end, establishing online ‘media diversity’ has also become part of the authoritarian upgrading process. Many respondents from the media and information sector talked about the regime creating and supporting initiatives on social media to compete with independent actors in this arena. In this context, quite a few specifically mentioned the popular Facebook page ‘Bele bele ishler’ [roughly translated as ‘Just like that’],¹⁰⁵ which publishes short videos about interesting people and topics. One journalist said that the page was interesting “because it had access to many archives. In the beginning, it was difficult to say ‘who’ the people behind it were but then they started showing their true colors.”¹⁰⁶ Another journalist explained that pages like this may be producing high-quality content, but “when some sort of crisis occurs, they will broadcast the government’s perspective as needed.”¹⁰⁷

It was also noted that existing popular channels with many subscribers were increasingly being ‘bought’ in order to ensure they did not start spreading anti-regime material. One journalist even described how his team was approached by state actors who offered to buy their platforms for USD 1.00 per subscriber.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, a civil society activist described how pro-regime actors attempted to recruit him as a ‘young expert in the field’ to their ‘reform project’ by arguing that they needed him on their side “against the old guard, the Soviet people”.¹⁰⁹ Those who agree to join pretend to be independent but settle on not criticizing state policies. They are rewarded by receiving better access



Statue of a girl sitting on a bench applying lipstick, Fountain Square, Baku. PHOTO: SOFIE BEDFORD

to material and audiences, as well as more safety and stability for their initiatives, although sometimes this process is not so friendly and includes blackmailing and other types of pressure.¹¹⁰ In this environment, one journalist concluded that “it is difficult to understand what is real and what is not”.¹¹¹

The respondents described the print and broadcast media as being fully controlled by the regime and in dire need of modernization. Thus, authoritarian upgrading in this sector strives to provide the public with better quality information, while also developing strategies to control and manage public access to social media and other new communication technologies.¹¹² The modernization of the TV sector appears to be aimed at bringing the Azerbaijani media closer to the “Western concept of professional journalism” by introducing new technologies, state-of-the-art formats, a wide range of broadcasts and publications, attractive visuals, more professionally developed scripts, as well as seemingly diverse points of view, similar to what has taken place in Russia.¹¹³ ITV – Ictimai TV [Public Television]¹¹⁴ was cited as one example of a channel that became more professional with an outlook that resembles international news media. Its content also changed. New issues are now being discussed with people with ‘alternative views,’ who never used to be invited to appear

on mainstream TV programs.¹¹⁵ In this respect, the reform of the media is closely intertwined with the parallel process of reforming the political landscape as it is often representatives of REAL who are featured to show that ‘critical’ voices are in fact being heard.¹¹⁶

Still, as is common in this type of context, major media assets are controlled by patronage networks, characterized by their close links to the regime. Their lack of editorial independence from state control is quite obvious.¹¹⁷ “Pro-government outlets are producing good quality material but are deceiving the people. They make you miss the independent values. As a person who lived in the Soviet era I can say that this looks like the Soviet way of providing information,” one respondent sums up.¹¹⁸ There is also a general understanding that TV is still a powerful media, although people mainly like to watch ‘light’ content such as soap operas and talk shows. However, according to one journalist, it is the authorities that shape the ‘depoliticized’ audience. “They say that people like these nonsense shows and that is why we produce them. But that’s not true. ASN TV was a debate channel, and it was one of the most popular channels in the country before it was closed down,” she explained. The audience adjusts to what is available.¹¹⁹

IN SUM, THE REGIME is giving the media and information sector a facelift while also trying to ensure it is dominated by pro-regime views, or at least voices that are ‘under control.’ At the same time it is interesting to note how the dynamics in the field are changing. Previously independent media was not only characterized by being critical towards the authoritarian regime, but also by being pro-opposition, or linked to the political opposition. This is no longer the case. Even though on one level there is solidarity among all actors who want change, many actors in the new generation of independent online media see the ‘opposition’ as irrelevant and untrustworthy and do not want to be linked to them. Consequently, they are fighting the opposition label and seeking to be ‘truly’ independent.¹²⁰ But this is no easy task. “If you interview the opposition, the government says you *are* the opposition. If you interview the government, the opposition says you are ‘pro-government.’ All politicized groups, whether it is the ruling party or the opposition, have the same approach towards the independent media: you are either with us, or against us!” as one journalist complains.¹²¹

State-religion relations: ‘Upgrading’ old narratives to a new project

Religion is not included in Heydemann’s conceptualization per se, but developments in Azerbaijan do reflect an ongoing process to ‘upgrade’ the relations between state and society in this field. One historical factor that has shaped state-society relations in the country is the decision after independence that

Azerbaijan would, on the one hand, leave the atheist politics of the Soviet Union behind, and on the other, remain strictly secular, e.g., that religion would not influence either politics or social practices. Islam became a key part of the national ideology and integral to the new Azerbaijani identity.¹²² Since the early 2000s the perceived threat from foreign representatives of Islam with ‘political ambitions’ has been important in domestic politics. It has justified control of religious communities, education, and literature, as well as the harsh repression of certain groups and activities.¹²³ In recent years the regime has incorporated old narratives into a new project by developing and promoting ‘Traditional Islam’ [Ənənəvi İslam] – a national religious principle and practice to counteract the spread of ‘foreign’ Islam among the population. In the words of a representative of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), the author and main implementor of this project, “traditional Islam acts as a shield to protect against foreign powers and influences, like an antivirus.”¹²⁴

Traditional Islam (TI) is juxtaposed against non-traditional Islam – influenced by foreign actors and described as potentially dangerous and ‘political.’ TI is incorporating local traditions and customs and will therefore help to preserve the Azerbaijani national identity and protect the secular nature of the Azerbaijani state. It is also non-sectarian as it embraces the historically peaceful coexistence between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims in Azerbaijan. Under the banner of TI, secular authorities in Azerbaijan are actively striving to establish an alternative mainstream, moderate and dominant Islamic narrative, controlled and institutionalized by the state.¹²⁵ Unity Prayers, officially led by representatives of Shi’a and Sunni communities, are one example of what TI looks like in practice.¹²⁶

The fact that the new Heydar Mosque – named after the former president – where the first Unity Prayers were held, caters neither to the Shi’a nor the Sunni community exclusively, further illustrates how TI is institutionalized. Surprisingly, the Heydar Mosque is subordinate not to the highest religious authority in Azerbaijan, the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), as is customary, but to the Baku City Executive Committee.¹²⁷ Similarly, the fact that the SCWRA is taking over some of the responsibilities of the CMB highlights the regime’s intentions to re-establish ownership of religious issues.

Until 2018, the CMB ran the only official higher Islamic education facility with authority to educate imams for the country’s mosques – the Islamic University of Baku. Although the Law on Freedom of Religious Belief still stipulates that the CMB is responsible for all Islamic education, the state has clearly taken over responsibility for the training of religious cadres. The new Azerbaijan Institute of Theology (AIT)¹²⁸ was established by presidential decree in 2014. It is directly administered by the SCWRA which, after a change in law in March 2022, also took over re-

“THE RESPONDENTS DESCRIBED THE PRINT AND BROADCAST MEDIA AS BEING FULLY CONTROLLED BY THE REGIME AND IN DIRE NEED OF MODERNIZATION.”

sponsibility for appointing imams, a task previously conducted by the CMB.¹²⁹ As early as 2018, the imams' salaries have been paid through the Foundation for Propagation of National Values, allocated from the state budget, and administered by the SCWRA.¹³⁰ The Islamic University of Baku had long struggled with a poor reputation and is regarded as not being attractive enough to prospective students with good grades. Out of the University's four branches, only one still operates, in Zagatala in the north-western part of Azerbaijan. According to some sources, the approximately 300 students are being taught at the Sunni Hanafi school of Islam, thus leaving the Shia majority without access to higher education.¹³¹

THE INCREASING influence of the SCWRA demonstrates that the regime wants more control in order to ensure the quality of religious education and leadership. The CMB also was seen as struggling to appoint imams to all of the country's mosques.¹³² Overall, it has little authority and quite a bad reputation among the wider population,¹³³ as does the head of the CMB, *Sheikh-ül-Islam* Hajji Allahshukur Pashazade, who has held this position since 1980. All this makes the CMB a particularly suitable target for measures that symbolize renewal and modernization. That being said, the CMB leadership has always been loyal to the regime and, also in the case of TI, one representative agreed that "the best model [for state-religion relations] is when the process of increasing religiosity is controlled by the state. I used to think that religion needed to be free, but I later saw that there is a need for state interference, without it being exaggerated. The state must at least provide people with proper knowledge about religion; it must educate those who can teach religion".¹³⁴

The lack of a local and well-educated Islamic elite has been an issue in Azerbaijan since independence. After independence, most textbooks and the majority of the *ulama* came from abroad and young people went abroad to study religion.¹³⁵ TI is perceived as a way to finally end this. It is clear that the control of education is seen as highly important in this regard. Thus, the AIT is a distinctive feature of the TI project as it will regulate the content of education to avoid the negative impact of foreign influences on an increasingly religious population. The provision of high quality education locally is seen as 'vaccinating' the system against dangerous foreign ideology that is otherwise guaranteed to penetrate the ranks of believers. "Anyone who is educated abroad will work against this state. This is historically proven. We need to educate the people ourselves," the SCWRA representative explained.¹³⁶

Still, increasing the quality of religious education is not the only objective. As described by the SCWRA, TI as an ideology will reinforce a strong connection between the state and Islamic expression. The AIT will be breeding a new religious elite – a

local cadre that is "intellectual, Muslim and Azerbaijani at the same time." As imams "prepared by the state for the state" they are expected to understand the "concerns of the state and be ready to support it".¹³⁸ Their mission is to represent an alternative, mainstream, moderate and dominant Islamic narrative that does not question state policies or the regime. This embodiment of a perceived collective loyalty through the "creation of a religious person who takes the state's values as his own and who is loyal"¹³⁹ provides a significant representation of the 'normalization' of authoritarianism. As the new generation will spread TI wherever they are appointed, this will make Muslim believers more streamlined in Azerbaijan, more in line with the state image of TI.¹⁴⁰ "If the state manages to create the specialists it is planning to create, then yes, the religious society will be more homogenous," a CMB representative agrees.¹⁴¹

Concluding discussion

Developments in the political, civil, media, and religious sectors in Azerbaijan reflect an ongoing 'upgrade' of the authoritarian regime, showcasing its adaptability, willingness to embrace change and modernization, as well as its "user-friendliness."¹⁴²

Notably, this process is not taking place merely to 'upgrade,' but – especially in regards to more general reforms in the public sector – is also associated with the political economy of the regime – striving to optimize the state of affairs and reduce the cost of government operations.¹⁴³ Additionally, authoritarian upgrading measures should not simply be seen as attempts to create a democratic façade as they significantly impact the stabilization and preservation of authoritarian rule.¹⁴⁴ Allowing controlled diversity and promoting reforms, renewal and professionalism in the sectors

discussed (and others¹⁴⁵) aims to bring quality into authoritarianism, to illustrate to the public that even if it is not democratic, Azerbaijan can still be a modern society. These measures also strive to ensure that the principles and values of the regime permeate the public discourse which contributes to the 'normalization' of authoritarianism. This process has been enhanced by the second Karabakh war. Azerbaijan's victory greatly increased the popularity of the President, seen as the strong man who enabled the liberation of the occupied territories. As his regime gains legitimacy, the already marginalized opposition is losing further ground and its focus on the need for democracy is likely perceived as being even more redundant.

At the same time, as mentioned in the first part of the article, research suggests that authoritarian upgrading could actually push a country in the 'right direction' unintentionally, for example by 'accidentally' empowering sections of society.¹⁴⁶ The 2020 election provides some insights along this line of thinking. On the one hand, the outcome of the election clearly shows that any

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political change that did take place was still controlled from the top to serve a specific purpose. On the other hand, the increased political participation resulting from the reform agenda's 'controlled openness' provides a silver lining as it indicates that politics in Azerbaijan is not 'dead'. The campaign not only revealed the existence of a range of political ideas, it also highlighted the presence of a large body of volunteers committed to the political process and supporting their candidates. In light of this, one potential benefit of managed pluralism could be to decouple civic and political participation from the overarching pro-regime-anti-regime dichotomy.

While the authorities have a habit of labeling anyone criticizing the system as 'oppositional,' any journalist, politician or activist who publicly engages with someone regarded as a representative of the regime, or even abstaining from being politically active or openly critical of the government, is immediately suspected by the 'opposition-minded' of being 'pro-government' or 'being supported by' the authorities. This dichotomy forces anyone who wants to be active in society to 'pick a side'.¹⁴⁷ "In Azerbaijan it is always black or white – either you are with us or against us," as one respondent complained. "We were saying that methods [for change] need to be more flexible; that in a context such as Azerbaijan, vociferously complaining that the president is corrupt and that we need to change the system does not work. Yet, the radical [opposition] strategies prevailed".¹⁴⁸ If managed pluralism can make civic and political participation more attractive and accessible by providing room for maneuver, this is a step forward. Visible political participation is crucial for countering de-politicization by 'rehabilitating' politics and making it a natural part of life.

Nevertheless, one main feature of authoritarian upgrading is that it takes place within the framework imposed by the regime. If you want to work without obstacles or limitations in any of the sectors scrutinized in this article, you must follow certain (mainly unwritten) rules. Otherwise, you may be 'eliminated' and not allowed to exercise your profession at all. So, while authoritarian upgrading enables actors to operate somewhat more independently, there are clearly 'red lines' that cannot be crossed. In politics you stay clear of the 'radical opposition'; in civil society you do not take your activism to the street; in the media you avoid criticizing the presidential family; and in the religious sector you stick to the state-endorsed Islamic narrative. The dark side of this process is that it builds on the further marginalization and exclusion of critical voices, while those who play by the rules can lead a 'good' life. In this sense, the regime guides the perception of political opportunities and manages to normalize authoritarianism by making it not merely the most attractive, but the only imaginable vision for the future.

TO CONCLUDE, the conscious attempts to engage the younger generation across multiple sectors in authoritarian upgrading indicate that they are both a target and a tool in this process. Their inclusion in the presidential administration, the parliament, civil society, the media landscape, and religious institutions is an effective way to give the regime a facelift – to prove that the system

is no longer only represented by old men who refuse to change. The appointment of a female Vice President – a role model for many young women, could also be seen in this light. In this sense, authoritarian upgrading strives to make Azerbaijan more attractive to youth both inside and outside the country in order to prevent brain drain and dissent. It remains to be seen if it is working. ✖

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Acknowledgement: Part of the research that this article builds on was funded by the Swedish Research Council (grant numbers 2014-05974 and 2014-05970). My research has also benefited from two travel grants for Azerbaijan generously provided by the Swedish Institute (SI). Moreover, I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their useful feedback, my colleagues in the 'Opposition' and 'Traditional Islam' projects for all their hard work, and the research assistant who provided crucial support for the assessment of Azerbaijan's media and information sphere.

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What do Azerbaijani youth prefer: Silicon Valley, Pushkin, or Confucius?

by **Nurlan Aliyev**

The development of soft power need not be a zero-sum game. All countries can gain from finding each other attractive. But for China and Russia to succeed, they will need to match words and deeds in their policies, be self-critical, and unleash the full talents of their civil societies. Unfortunately, that is not about to happen soon.

Joseph S. Nye¹

The foreign policy preferences of the Southern Caucasus states – Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia – are based on national and elite interests, internal political processes, the geopolitical situation, and regional security problems. These facets are detrimental to the region's governments regarding the political, economic and even cultural relations with Russia and China. However, Moscow's established interest and Beijing's increasing interest in the region will be one of the major factors to define the political and economic future of the South Caucasus countries in the coming years. The influence of Russia and China may also affect democratic developments in the region to some extent.

In this respect, the attitudes and preferences of the younger generation in the region towards the West, Russia and China will play a critical role. Thus, besides economic and political influences, projects “to win hearts and minds” are and will be essential to strengthening the presence of any great power in the region.

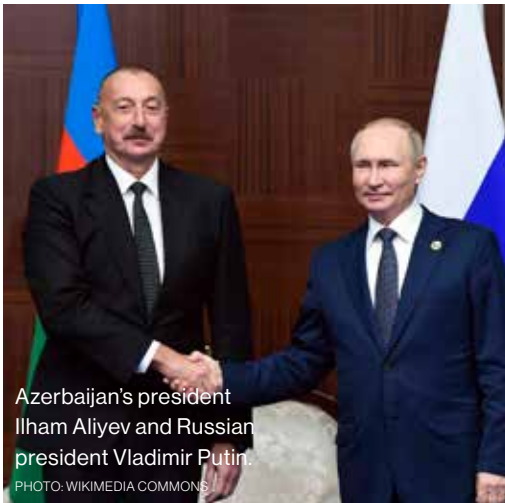
The aim of this essay is to explore the cultural, educational or so-called *soft power influence* of Russia and China in Azerbaijan. The essay analyzes the state and perspectives on the influence of Chinese and Russian soft power in the South Caucasus, focusing on Azerbaijan. It discusses the current situation and tries to put the soft power influence of Russia and China into perspective. It zooms in on the Azerbaijani case, because, contrary to other South Caucasus governments, the Azerbaijani leadership is trying to find a balance between the involvement of both the

regional powers and the great powers by maintaining a virtually equal political distance from the West and from Russia and China. Georgia has more close ties with the West rather than Russia, and Armenia participates in Moscow-led military and economic alliances, while Baku is reluctant to get involved in either Moscow-led or Western-led military and economic alliances. Based on the analysis, this essay argues that although both powers are actively promoting their soft power in Azerbaijan, the chances of them being successful are being challenged for several reasons, such as the country's historical background and also the policy of Baku to scrupulously control foreign influences in Azerbaijan. The future state of the soft power influence of Russia and China in Azerbaijan will partially depend on the country's economic situation and the official foreign policy preferences of Baku. However, it will mainly depend on the future balance of power between the West, Russia and China in the region in the coming years.

The limping soft power of Russia

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia has used soft power tools in the post-Soviet republics. During Putin's presidency, Russia has been increasingly using its soft power in the form of linguistic, educational, and cultural ties and in the Russian language media in order to retain its influence in the region, although this has not been without problems. Although the role of Russia's soft power is sometimes exaggerated, its shortcomings were strikingly observable even before the start of the invasion of Ukraine.²

To start, let us review how Russia's soft power influence has worked in Azerbaijan in recent years. Russia's main soft power tool is the Russian language. Three main factors support the relevance of the Russian language in Azerbaijan: economic ties with Russia and other post-Soviet countries in which many parts of the population are Russian-speaking, the cultural influence of Russia, and the re-emergence in recent years of the perception from the Soviet era that studying in Russian has more



Azerbaijan's president Ilham Aliyev and Russian president Vladimir Putin.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Azerbaijan and Russia.

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

prestige than studying in Azerbaijani. While this was perhaps understandable under the Soviet regime, given the poor quality of Azerbaijani textbooks and the fact that studying in Russian provided more opportunities for career advancement, these days, the quality and design of both languages are regulated by the Ministry of Education and maintain virtually the same standards. Despite the popularity of the Russian language, most Russian speakers in Azerbaijan do not actually support the Kremlin's policies. It is interesting to note that several Russian-speaking Azerbaijanis played a key role in the independence movements at the beginning and the end of the 20th century. In both periods, they were the core intellectuals of the freedom movements, and several of them supported the pro-Western path of the country. Since 1991, this group has been the main pool of recruitment for international companies and humanitarian organization projects in Azerbaijan.³

THERE ARE CURRENTLY around 300 Russian schools in Azerbaijan. Moreover, several schools also have “Russian sectors” where Russian is taught.⁴ In the South Caucasus, there are Russian Houses in Azerbaijan and Armenia.⁵ The closure of the scholarship programs of both national and international organizations in recent years has increased the interest of the younger generation in Azerbaijan in studying in Russia. For instance, in 2017, the studies of 208 Azerbaijani students in Russian universities were supported by “Rossotrudnichestvo”.⁶

Recently, several Russian cultural centers and language courses also started operating in the country and the establishment of Russian cultural centers and a number of foundations has been noted: these include the Caspian School for Young Experts, supported by the Gorchakov Fund, the Slavic-Turkic Union and a branch of Russia's Lev Gumilev Center. The latter promotes Eurasianist ideas with a dis-

tinctive focus on Turkic identity in the wider geopolitical context of Eurasia as the “home of civilization.”⁷ Another attempt to link Azerbaijan to Russia was made by Alexander Dugin, who tried to promote the building of bridges between Shia Muslims and Orthodox Christians.⁸ While this perspective might be more attractive to Azerbaijanis – especially Shia religious groups – than the Eurasianism amid the strategic partnership between Russia and Iran, thus far, Dugin's idea has had no tangible success.

Overall, opportunities for the Kremlin to meddle in the Azerbaijan NGO sector are limited due to the strict government regulations. However, Moscow is trying to use other means. Russian organizations arrange events such as summer schools, trainings, seminars, etc. in Russia and other countries. Azerbaijan's representatives also attend these events. It is therefore possible to observe both the striking effectiveness and the shortcomings of Russia's soft power influence in Azerbaijan.

Why is Russia's soft power in Azerbaijan in decline?

The occupation of Azerbaijan in the 19th century and the destruction of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1920 by Russia, repression in the 1930s, and finally, Moscow's support of Armenia during the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the 1990s – and the occupied regions of Azerbaijan – created a negative image of Russia in the minds of Azerbaijanis. Such a his-

torical image is a kind of psychological inoculation against Russia's soft power influence. Nowadays, there is a degree of cautiousness. Although Russia's soft power activities have increased in Azerbaijan in recent years, its invasion of Ukraine has created a situation whereby only the leadership of the local Communist party openly supports Russia in the war.⁹ Many other individuals who used to be recognized as pro-Russian now

“DESPITE THE POPULARITY OF THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE, MOST RUSSIAN SPEAKERS IN AZERBAIJAN DO NOT ACTUALLY SUPPORT THE KREMLIN'S POLICIES.”

try to keep a distance from the events at the Russian Embassy in Azerbaijan. They do not directly justify Russia's invasion or remain publicly silent.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also increased concerns on the part of the Azerbaijani government. Unofficially, Baku considers Moscow's involvement in the negotiation process with Armenia to be destructive; it also considers Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh, which Baku did not mandate, a threat to the same extent. Moreover, the invasion of Ukraine on the one hand has increased Baku's concerns that Russia could potentially also invade Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Russia's weakening positions creates opportunities for Baku to promote its own agenda in bilateral relations and to take even more control, or even to try eliminate Russia's influence in Azerbaijan.

AMID TREMENDOUS support for Ukraine in society at large and condemnation of Russia's invasion, government institutions are reconsidering their policies toward the Russian media in the country. Recently, access to the RIA Novosti website was blocked in Azerbaijan. The Ministry of Digital Development and Transport issued a statement on June 4, 2022 citing "the publication of slanderous materials against Azerbaijan" as the reason for blocking the website.¹⁰ Moreover, the Azerbaijani State Migration Service canceled the temporary residence permits for the Editor-in-Chief of the Sputnik Azerbaijan agency, and her husband.¹¹ All this indicates that the Azerbaijani government may further challenge the influence of Russia's soft power in the country, including educational projects for youth.

Russian approaches, such as information attacks or economic influence, the use of Russian state affiliated media or Azerbaijani labor migrants as tools of pressure against official Baku, are sometimes mistakenly described as methods of soft power. Moreover, Russia's muscle flexing in recent years, and especially the invasion of Ukraine, further deteriorated its already weakening soft power influence in the former Soviet states, including the South Caucasus. It should be noted that, unlike other global powers, Russia actually has few soft power tools. For instance, the US has its high-ranking educational institutions, Silicon Valley, or even McDonalds; China, as will be further discussed below, is attractive from an economic perspective and offers educational opportunities for young persons.

Chinese soft power influence

The increased level of Chinese economic cooperation with the South Caucasus in recent years has turned Beijing into one of the most influential players in the region. A key component of this relationship are the economic interests on all sides. China has signed several official documents with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan on their participation in the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, in which Azerbaijan participates as a key actor, is regarded as one of the main facets of Beijing's global transportation project in the region. Another strategically significant project in the region, Azerbaijan's Baku International Sea Trade Port in Alat, was supported by China with equipment based on an intergovernmental grant agreement signed between Beijing and Baku. China also provided military assistance to Armenia and Azerbaijan and has engaged in high-level visits of military personnel to Georgia in recent years.

Like in the rest of the world, China's main soft power tools in the South Caucasus are the Confucius institutes. These institutes mainly provide Chinese language courses and a number of educational programs: they also promote Chinese culture. In addition, humanitarian, cultural and educational projects are organized in the Southern Caucasus countries. It should be noted that Sinophobe sentiments in the region are not so strong as, for instance, in Central Asia. This could be mainly attributable to the lack of immediate geographical proximity to China and the low level of Chinese labor migrants in the three republics.¹²

Chinese soft power can vary depending on the level of importance of a given country. However, Chinese approaches to soft power concerning the region's countries are no different from the general soft power strategy of Beijing. China's soft power manifests as cultural and educational projects, as well as technical assistance. The Confucius institutes started operating in the region at the end of the 2000s.

THE CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE in Azerbaijan was established in 2010 and opened

in 2011 at Baku State University. In 2012, the institute opened a center at the Public Administration Academy under the President. In 2016, the institute also opened a center at the Azerbaijan University of Languages. Besides language courses and cultural projects, the institute in Baku also conducts research on Azerbaijan's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. More than 70 students at bachelor level specializing in „regional studies“ are studying the Chinese language at the Azerbaijan University of Languages. Every year, more than 50 students complete their bachelor's and master's education in „Sinology and Chinese“. According to the interstate agreement, the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan sends up to 50 students every year to study in China. The Confucius institute sends language course students on a one-year educational program in China. Moreover, since 2003, Chinese students have been studying at the Azerbaijan State Oil and Industrial University in Baku.¹³

Currently, around 500 Azerbaijani students are studying in China. Also, through the Confucius institute, over ten students per year study Chinese at Chinese universities, and teachers of Chinese complete advanced training courses that are regularly organized by China. Azerbaijani students are increasingly sent

“THE INCREASED LEVEL OF CHINESE ECONOMIC COOPERATION WITH THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN RECENT YEARS HAS TURNED BEIJING INTO ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL PLAYERS IN THE REGION.”



Participants in a summer school for Azerbaijani youth studying Chinese language in Khuchzhou, China, with the organizational support of the Confucius Institute under the Azerbaijan University of Languages (AUL).

PHOTO: ADJUEUAZ

to study in China based on scholarships from the mayors of Chinese cities and renowned universities in China.¹⁴

Recently, the Chinese embassy in Baku provided technical support to the Azerbaijani Communist Party.¹⁵ The party also supports Russia and has an alliance with the Russian Communist Party. Based on information on the website of the Azerbaijani Communist Party, it supports the official policies of China.¹⁶ Although it sounds very interesting, given that China avoids getting involved in the internal politics of other states – at least officially – the current influence of the Azerbaijani Communist Party on Azerbaijani society, however, does not make it a tangible threat for official Baku, at least for the time being. Moreover, the Azerbaijani ruling party “Yeni Azerbaijan” and the Chinese Communist Party have been in partnership since 1999.¹⁷

Perspectives of Russian and Chinese soft powers in Azerbaijan

Even though Russia has controlled the region for around 200 years and has close cultural and social ties with the three states, its soft power has become less influential since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Its main competitors, the United States, the EU and recently China simply have more to offer than Russia. Education in the West and even in China is more attractive to young persons. Regarding investments and technology opportunities, Russia is not capable of offering these in the same way as the West and China. Moreover, given the invasion of Ukraine and the increasing sanctions as a result of the war, it is unlikely that the situation will change in the coming years. As it probably understands its own weaknesses, Moscow often uses its soft power influence to complement its hard power approach. In its foreign policy and its hard power strategies, China tries to tacitly increase its image in many regions. It has ongoing and prospective interests in the South Caucasus. It should be noted that Russia has currently retained its advanced position mainly due to historically established cultural and language influences. However, in recent years the influence of the Russian language in

the region has decreased as youth generally prefer to speak English. Also, in Azerbaijan, the Turkish language and culture have a stronger impact than Russian. While China offers both education and job prospects for the younger generation, it is the economic opportunities that mainly attract them, rather than Chinese culture, education or language.

Based on the analysis above, the state of the political process in Azerbaijan and the government’s policy, it is not possible to argue that the soft power involvement of China or Russia in Azerbaijan will be influential tools to promote their interests in the country or encourage their own versions of authoritarianism to any great extent. The key factor that supports this argument is that the government mainly controls the flow of information; legislation has been passed that controls activities, particularly the finances of political parties and NGOs. The other argument is that it is unrealistic to assert that the soft power involvement of China and Russia in the region would essentially strengthen authoritarian tendencies. The Western support for democratic changes, including youth education, which has existed since the 1990s, has not made much impact. Georgia has advanced its indicators of democracy but has also increased its economic relations with China since the 2000s. In Armenia, the current Pashinyan government maintains strong political, military and economic relations with Russia, even though it also supported democratic changes in the country. For China, at least for now, the main issue is most probably about promoting its economic interests in a given country and safeguarding them. In this respect, whether a country has a democratic or an authoritarian regime does not really matter to Beijing. As for Moscow, although democratic reforms and changes in post-Soviet regions are a concern, the main issue for the Kremlin is the prospect of the enlargement of NATO and the EU and how this will affect Russia’s vital interests in a given country in a post-Soviet region.

OVERALL, THE WESTERN education system is more attractive to the youth in Azerbaijan than both the Russian and the Chinese

education system. Also, the Turkish language and culture have a strong influence in the country. In fact, Turkey could be described as the leading soft power influence in Azerbaijan. However, the influence of Turkish soft power is not based on Turkey's successful soft power strategy in the country but on positive historical experiences and the cultural, ethnic and religious closeness of the two nations.

Overall, the way in which the soft power of Russia and China impacts Azerbaijan is linked to how the country's economic situation develops, as well as the foreign policy preferences of its political leaders. It will mainly depend on the future balance of power in the region between the West, Russia and China. To put it simply, it will depend on which of the great powers will be the most active and powerful player in the South Caucasus. ❌

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President Emomali Rahmon on a wall poster in Dushanbe, 2016.

PHOTO: LEIRIS202/Flickr

Governing extremism through communities in Tajikistan

by **Edward Lemon**

Since the country's civil war, which began with rival protests in the center of the capital city Dushanbe turning violent in May 1992, protests have been relatively rare in Tajikistan as the government of Emomali Rahmon has consolidated its control. Yet protests erupted across Tajikistan in late September 2016. Rather than being directed at the government, they targeted opposition groups, the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT) and Group 24, and their "foreign sympathizers." A silent protest by opposition members at the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw triggered the

counter-protests in Tajikistan. Students in Dushanbe burned a flag containing an effigy of Muhiddin Kabiri, leader of the IRPT.

State media highlighted the national scale of the protests, which took place in town centers and university campuses across the country. Villagers in the southern city of Bohtar marched through the streets with signs declaring "No to the Enemies of the Tajik People!" In a statement, teachers in the southern district of Panj affirmed that "We will never allow traitors (*hononi*) to live among us. We condemn them." A student from the Tajik Technical University told state media agency *Khovar* the following:



Students at the Tajik Technical University during the protests in September 2016.

PHOTO: KHOVAR.TJ

Young people are trying to keep the peace, stability and independence [of our country], and mobilize (*sarcham'ona*) people to work in this direction. We will not allow any foreign power (*nerui horiji*) to undermine the independence of our state.¹

These protests took on the appearance of being community initiated and led by young people in particular, targeting groups that the government has labelled “extremist.” This incorporation of young people points to an important, if understudied, aspect of counter-extremism in Central Asia: the involvement of young people in government attempts to counter extremism. Much of the literature on extremism in Central Asia has focused on the process by which individuals are radicalized, the threat posed by Islamic extremism and the (in)effectiveness of government responses.² A great deal of ink, for example, has been spilt on the 1,900 Tajik citizens who joined the Islamic State or on the handful of terrorist attacks that have occurred in the country.³

Yet they make up an estimated 0.02 percent of Tajikistan’s population. What about the remaining 99.98 percent of the Tajik population? How are they represented and shaped by state-led counter-extremism? In this article, I reverse the dominant approach to studying extremism and terrorism in Central Asia. Instead of looking at how the government frames those few citizens who join “extremist” groups, I examine the other subjects of this discourse, the vast majority of young people who do not join “extremist” groups. I look at how the government promotes resilience and loyalty, rather than how it disciplines deviant behavior and disloyalty.

PUT DIFFERENTLY, much of the analysis on counter-extremism has focused on what Michel Foucault calls sovereign power and disciplinary power.⁴ Sovereign power limits, bans and prevents certain behaviors, in this case, those individuals identified as “extremists,” claiming a monopoly on violence. It is a destructive form of power. Disciplinary power is based on the socially constructed distinction between normal and abnormal. Those who

are abnormal—the homosexual, the vagrant, the extremist—are subject to disciplinary measures to help them conform. But this chapter highlights how counter-extremism also involves the third type of power identified by Foucault: biopower. Whereas disciplinary power regulates the potentially “bad” practices of citizens, biopower promotes certain “good” ways of living to replace these practices. Biopower is “part of a new type of governing for which life is a reservoir that must be tapped into rather than subjected to legal or disciplinary structures.”⁵ It is a form of power which focuses on administering, developing, fostering, and securing life. Biopower is not purely enforced from the top down. Instead, it is a “pastoral” form of power. Elites promote certain forms of life, but it is up to subjects themselves to adopt practices which conform to this vision.

Countering extremism, then, is not merely about the destructive acts of banning groups, arresting their followers, and regulating religion with the aim of securing the region’s secular authoritarian regimes. It constitutes a *productive* set of policies that attempt to mold citizens to adopt a secular understanding of Islam, instill them with an appreciation of the “harmonious” and “peaceful” status quo, and encourage them to mobilize to defend the state against threats. Ultimately, the government is seeking to counter extremism through communities themselves, creating subjects who monitor themselves and others for signs of anti-government “extremism.”

Counter-extremism involves the use of the state media to offer guidelines for how citizens should behave in order to contribute to the state’s vision for the development of the secular state. As the above quote from the student from Tajik Technical University demonstrates, discourses on extremism are interlinked with narratives on the nation; they set the anti-Tajik, “foreign,” violent, extremist Other in opposition to the patriotic, loyal, peaceful, Tajik Self. Counter-extremism narratives contain the government’s vision of how politics *should* be: peaceful, harmonious, stable.

Regime protests in Tajikistan

Inheriting an understanding of the relationship between religion and security from the Soviet Union, the government of Tajikistan has created a dichotomy between “good,” state-controlled, safe, moderate Islam and “bad” unofficial, dangerous, extremist Islam. While Islam has been framed by the regime as a key component of national identity, through schools, the state media, and youth clubs, the Tajik state also promotes and builds a secular (*dunyavi*) national culture, training young people in the “spirit of patriotism” (*rirhiyai vatandirsti*).

Rather than securing itself purely through repressive means, the government is attempting to instill values in its citizens that will inhibit their critical thinking and make them less likely to resist the regime. While state institutions play a central role in this, citizens themselves also share responsibility. Officials repeatedly call on citizens to monitor other community members and to consciously work on themselves. President Emomali Rahmon argues that the responsibility for countering extremism does not solely lie with the government; it also lies with communities:

To raise children in the spirit of patriotism (*ruhiyi vatandusti*), respect for parents, respect national traditions and values, to learn science and knowledge, professions and crafts, to appreciate the independence and freedom of the Motherland and to hold national and religious rituals in accordance with the essence and principles of our democratic and secular state (*davlati demokrati va dunyaviamon*).⁶

Responsible and loyal citizens need to be vigilant (*zirak*) to what is going on around them and resilient to extremist messaging. As the Prosecutor General from Rudaki district states, “it is every citizen’s patriotic duty (*fardi vatandirsti*) to guide the young people toward a democratic society (*demokrativu huquqbunyod hidoyat*), so that they contribute to the stability of their national state.”⁷ The Tajik state is not a panopticon; it relies on horizontal surveillance between citizens.

The September 2016 protests highlight some of these dynamics. The protests targeted two opposition groups, both of which the government had labelled extremist. Group 24 was classified by the government as an extremist organization in October 2014 following calls for protests in Dushanbe. Following a long process of marginalization, the IRPT, part of the civil war-era opposition allocated 30 per cent of government posts in the 1997 Peace Accord, was outlawed in August 2015, and declared a terrorist organization after being accused of plotting a coup in September 2015. The state media portrayed the popular response to the September 2016 opposition protests as evidence that this effort to shape public consciousness was working. Protestors reaffirmed the hegemonic narrative, declaring their allegiance to the Tajik state, accusing the opposition of spreading lies and being supported by foreigners. Not only did they publicly conform to the government’s message, they also accepted responsibility for countering extremism. In a joint statement, students at the Tajik National University stated that “Strenuous efforts should be made to instill the values of ‘nation’ (*vatan*), ‘people’ (*millat*) and ‘reconciliation’ (*vahdat*) in every citizen.”⁸ And as a teacher stated in an opinion piece published in state newspaper *Jumhuriyat*, this is not only the responsibility of the government: “every citizen (*shahrivan*) is responsible for protecting (*hifzi*) national values and contributing to the strengthening of national unity.”⁹

Although the state media gave the impression that the September 2016 protests were community led, the group behind many of the actions, Avangard, has close links to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Founded in 2015, Avangard’s stated goal, to “prevent the creation of an alien culture, recruitment of young people to different groups of extremists, and to promote increasing respect for the national values of the Tajik people,” reflects the government’s own narrative on extremism.¹⁰ In the summer of 2015, the Ministry paid for the movement’s leaders to travel to Russia and establish links with the migrant community. Mem-

bers of the group meet frequently with officials and have been given electronic tablets as a reward for their work. Avangard’s position as officially non-governmental, yet unofficially governmental, points to the blurred boundary between state and civil society in Tajikistan. Counter-extremism in Tajikistan forms an important component of authoritarian governance; it is inter-linked with relations of power. Through its efforts to counter “extremists,” the regime attempts to secure itself.

Relations of power and community counter-extremism

To understand what this mobilization of the Tajik population to counter-extremism means for our understanding of governance in Central Asia, I draw on the thinking of French thinker Michel Foucault. Power lies at the core of Foucault’s approach. For Foucault, power “is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization.”¹¹ Rather than being something that actors possess and wield, according to Foucault, power is a relation between agents. Power, therefore, is decentered and polyvalent, rather than hierarchical. Power is not always destructive; it can be productive too. Foucault was concerned with uncovering how practices of power produce political subjects. In

“POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IS ONLY PERMISSIBLE INsofar AS IT IS DIRECTED AT SUPPORTING THE REGIME.”

his essay “The Subject and Power”, Foucault wrote that his objective in his later work was to examine the way in which human beings turn themselves into subjects.¹²

THROUGH STATE counter-extremism efforts, Tajiks are constituted as political subjects. Although such measures directly target the small minority of opposition activists who have been labelled “extremists,” the main audience of counter-extremism are those members of the population who are not political extremists. The regime attempts to mobilize these people based on the belief that “as patriotic young people (*javononu*), [they] must fight the false interests (*gumrohu manfiathoi*) that oppose (*ziddi*) the Republic of Tajikistan.”¹³ Government-led counter-extremism in Tajikistan involves the cultivation of political subjects who simultaneously remain resilient to the messages of opposition “extremists,” while mobilizing to actively support the government. The ideal subject is not totally docile; they are able to separate truth (what the government says) from falsehood (what the opposition says). Political engagement is only permissible insofar as it is directed at supporting the regime.

Interestingly, parallels exist with Soviet attempts to mold political subjects. As Oleg Kharkhordin concludes, the ultimate achievement of Soviet individualization was the creation of a subject who constantly readjusts themselves by holding mini-trials about their deeds.¹⁴ The ideal Tajik subject will uphold national values, condemning those who do not. During the Soviet era, newspapers were filled with stories which claimed to be written

by citizens extolling the benefits of life in the USSR and denouncing religious individuals. After the 1990 riots in Dushanbe, Soviet newspapers were filled with “positive” stories of ordinary citizens going on with their lives, with headlines such as “We will Live!” (Rus.: *Budem Zhit!*) and “No to Extremism!” (*Ekstremizmu Nyet!*).¹⁵ These articles called on people to remain “united” (Rus.: *edini*) and committed to the principles of organized Soviet life: the *kollektiv* and *druzhba narodov*. Although the language has changed, the form of the discourse in independent Tajikistan bears a striking resemblance to that which came before.

“Securing” the public

As shown above, countering extremism involves state repression, but it also involves the promotion of certain ways of living *appropriately*. Through counter-extremism, the government is attempting to create citizens who are loyal, who will monitor one another, and who will be unlikely to challenge the regime. Assessing the effectiveness of these measures remains difficult. Are citizens merely performing their loyalty publicly while privately disavowing the regime, or do many of them genuinely support the regime’s counter-extremist policies and participate willingly? Evidence from various studies indicates a mixture of responses from citizens in Tajikistan, ranging from support to acceptance and resistance.¹⁶ It is clear, however, that the state’s attempts to build docile secular subjects can never be fully realized. As Foucault argues, where there is power, there is resistance.¹⁷ ✖

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Note: The text is based on a keynote lecture held at the conference “Soft power: Co-opting post-Soviet youth: Russia, China and Transnational Authoritarianism” at CBEES, Södertörn University, October 28–29, 2021.

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Exhibition by the Russian House in Khujand, Tajikistan. Posted at Facebook.

PHOTO: RUSSIAN HOUSE FB

**The role of Russian soft power
in promoting authoritarianism.**

TARGETING YOUTH IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

by **Parviz Mullojonov & Oleg Antonov**

abstract

The paper aims to explore the practical application of “soft power” in “hybrid” countries. The analysis is based on the example of soft power-strategies developed and implemented by the Russian Federation in post-Soviet Central Asia throughout the last two decades. The overarching research questions of the paper are the following — what are the most interesting features of Russian soft power in the changing geopolitical conditions of the post-Soviet space? How does it address local youth to secure Russian domination in the region and ensure the sustainability of local political regimes? What is the future of Russian soft power and geopolitical influence in the region?

KEYWORDS: Soft power, authoritarianism, Central Asia, the youth movement.

Joseph Nye Jr. described soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment.”¹ In this regard, we can define the term in the framework of constructivist theory when a country purposefully cultivates its positive image to attract allies and raise its international prestige. According to Nye, this positive image includes a range of aspects – cultural, educational, ideological (moral and values), and political.

While pursuing the soft power policy, geopolitical actors pay particular attention to the younger generation, which is rightly considered one of the main driving forces in the contemporary world. Youth are often the primary driver of changes in developing and authoritarian countries where the younger generation commonly constitutes a considerable majority of the population. Young people have played a critical role in the color revolu-

tion and Arab Spring countries over the last two decades; they continue to play a crucial role in the current political events in many regions of the world such as the Near and Middle East, South Asia, and the post-Soviet space.

Many geopolitical actors are aware of the potentially destructive power of youth as a social and political factor. On the one hand, young people often fill the ranks of the most radical and extremist organizations that threaten political and social stability. On the other hand, some superpowers and geopolitical actors exert efforts to limit youth political participation in targeted countries to keep loyal governments in power. Moreover, to ensure and sustain their influence in a region or country, great powers often prefer to rely on authoritarian regimes assisting them in distorting youth political participation and creating pro-government youth movements and parties. Actors often direct their soft power to shut off local youth from constructive political participation and mobilize youth power to promote and support loyal authoritarian regimes.

SOFT POWER COULD ALSO be seen an integral part of “hybrid warfare” – a military and geopolitical strategy that combines military and non-military methods as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups, and use of regular forces.² Attraction is a part of the larger intervention strategy that also relies on the means of coercion and pressure. In many cases, attraction and propaganda mainly constitute the first phase of external intervention; if they fail, other tools can also be used, such as political and economic pressure and payment, special intelligence operations, and even direct military operations. Propaganda remains one of the important elements of hybrid warfare carried out by international stakeholders throughout the geopolitical or military intervention.

This article aims to explore the most interesting aspects of the practical application of soft power – in particular, while targeting youth in authoritarian and what are known as “hybrid” countries. The analysis is based on the example of soft power developed and implemented by the Russian Federation in post-Soviet Central Asia. In the last two decades, Russia has developed quite sophisticated and effective “soft power” mechanisms intended to attract young people and promote the sustainability of allied political regimes. Moreover, Russian soft power is successfully integrated into the country’s “hybrid war strategy”. In the current situation of intense confrontation with the West and scarcity of financial resources, the Russian government is forced to rely increasingly on propaganda (information used to promote a political cause or point of view), fake news (false information presented as news), and disinformation (false information deliberately spread to deceive audience).

The overarching research questions of the paper are the following. What are the features of Russian soft power in the changing geopolitical conditions of the post-Soviet space? How does it address local youth to secure Russian domination in the region and ensure the sustainability of local political regimes? What is the future of Russian soft-power and geopolitical influence in the region? To what degree can the current Russian approach be considered effective, sustainable, and competitive?

To answer these questions and measure the effectiveness of Russian soft power in post-Soviet Central Asia we examine the form of Russia’s soft power, the tools Russia uses and their reception in Central Asia. The methodology of our research includes interviews with local observers, representatives of local society, and target groups; besides, we used the data and information from open sources, academic and expert studies, and analytical reports.

Russia remains best placed to exercise soft power in Central Asia. We argue that the passage of time, as the generation that came of age during the Soviet Union dies out, coupled with nationalizing regimes and Russia’s disastrous invasion in Ukraine, have all undermined Russia’s soft power position in the longer term.

Russian soft power

The issue of Russian soft power has attracted considerable and growing attention from both Western and post-Soviet schol-

ars. The main academic discourse revolves around the assessment and analysis of the goals, features, and specifics of the ideological message and content, the tools and instruments and the effectiveness of Russian soft power in the short and long term.³ At the same time, there is still a shortage of studies devoted to the influence of Russian soft power particularly on the youth of the region, as well as on the other target groups of local populations.

Researchers have reached a consensus and agreement on the goals and a set of particular features of Russian soft power. Russia’s strategic goal in post-Soviet Central Asia is to maintain its dominant role in the region and preclude the rise of influence of other competing geopolitical actors, regional and global superpowers.⁴ In order to sustain its sphere of influence, Russia resorts to soft power strategy in a variety of forms (cultural diplomacy, economic aid, elite ties, military diplomacy).

Most scholars, among them Fyodor Lukyanov, Vera Avgeeva, Marlene Laruelle, and Sergey Karaganov, identify conservatism as one of the main ideological pillars of contemporary Russian soft power. Sergey Karaganov, a leading pro-Kremlin scholar, believes that “soft power is not only a positive attraction but also a negative one”; in his opinion, Russia attracts a considerable part of the audience due to its “desire for independence and sovereignty”, support of conservative values and provision

“ONE OF THE MAIN SPECIFICS OF RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IS THE EXCESSIVE AND DOMINANT ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT AND OFFICIAL PROPAGANDA.”

of another, alternative development option that appeals the majority of humanity”.⁵ According to Marlene Laruelle, “what Russia offers today in terms of ideology is incommensurably less structured doctrinally than communism, but it is better adapted to today’s postmodern conditions of ideological bricolage and fluidity”.⁶ In her opinion, Russia offers an ideological alternative to the West – conservatism today, in the same way as it offered socialist and communist ideologies a century ago. Marlene Laruelle argues that Russia’s use of soft power rests on four pillars: Its history and culture; the Soviet legacy; its political identity as an authoritarian state and its framing as a non-Western state; and its disruptive role in international relations.

Many scholars also point out the resemblance between Russian soft power and the Soviet propaganda machine.⁷ Russia is still practically unable to offer any viable alternative to the Western mass production of popular culture, which limits its effectiveness, but Russia (like the USSR) focuses more on its classical cultural heritage (high culture).

According to many scholars, Russia’s conservatism “for export” contains many shortages and internal contradictions such as “the opposition of democratic institutions and a strong state, the relationship between security and authoritarian practices, the secular nature of the state, and, finally, the mutual acceptability of Christian and Islamic “traditional values”.”⁸ As Lukyanov and Ageeva rightly noted, such a controversial reference to traditional values might attract “an “extremely specific assortment” of followers ranging from the radical far-right in Europe to religious fundamentalists in the Middle East.”⁹

One of the main specifics of Russian soft power is the excessive and dominant role of the government and official propaganda. This feature was especially noticed by Joseph Nye Jr. who shares an extremely critical opinion on the potential of Russia’s soft power. Thus, he stated that “China and Russia make the mistake of thinking that government is the main instrument of soft power.”¹⁰ In this regard, Russia’s soft power lacks civic involvement, which makes it borderline propaganda; it is state-controlled machinery creating a positive image of the country that could hardly be effective in societies with free access to alternative information. To fill the gap, Moscow established a set of “GONGOs” (Government organized non-governmental organizations) that have been created under the umbrella of state institutions but are presented as independent bodies (*Rossotrudnichestvo*, Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, or *Russkiy Mir* Foundation).¹¹

IN RESPONSE TO the increasing confrontation with the West, scholars disagree on the effectiveness and prospects of Russian soft power in the new geopolitical conditions. A significant number believe that Russia has limited soft power¹² but others¹³ argue that Russia’s soft power remains significant.

The relative success of Russia’s soft power in the Central Asian region is partially explained by local specifics: the focus on conservatism and anti-western sentiments is welcomed by the leaders of the Central Asian states that are seeking to consolidate their regimes. Thus, Paisova, Dadabaeva, and Wong Park¹⁴ argue also that the success of Russia’s soft power in the region



PHOTO: E-CIS.NFO

Rossotrudnichestvo arranges activities targeting youth in Tajikistan.



PHOTO: RUSSIAN HOUSE FB

Event posted at Facebook by the Russian House in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

primarily depends on inter-elite relations and joint interests with local authorities that actively supported and promoted integration models offered in the region by the Kremlin (such as Nazarbayev’s active support for the Eurasian Economic Union). Some local observers also explain this phenomenon by the sophisticated character of propaganda tools and approaches developed and used by Russian soft power; Central Asian journalists use the term “*deep fake*” to denote artificially generated audiovisual renderings which are easy to produce but increasingly hard to detect.¹⁵ According to them, the “*deep fake*” approach is one of the distinguishing and most effective features of Russian propaganda in the region.

Evolution of the Russian soft power

Just a decade ago, most Russian experts and politicians complained that Russia’s soft power remained undeveloped and that the Russian Federation was trailing behind its main geopolitical rivals – notably, the US and the European Union. Thus, in 2012, speaking at a meeting of Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives, President Putin said in particular:

“Russia’s image abroad is not formed by us and, as a result, it is often distorted and does not reflect the real situation in our country, or Russia’s contribution to global civilization, science, and culture. Our country’s policies often suffer from a biased portrayal these days [...] our fault lies in our failure to adequately explain our position.”¹⁶

It was repeatedly mentioned that compared to other superpowers Russia fails to formulate a clear, cohesive, and unified ideological message and to develop a network of effective soft power tools and institutions. This critical opinion was widely shared by international observers and experts: for instance, in the soft power rating compiled by the Institute for Democracy in 2010, Russia was ranked 26th – far behind its main geopolitical rivals.¹⁷

Since that time, Moscow has invested considerable efforts and finances to fill the gap and make its soft power more competitive. In this regard, Vera Ageeva¹⁸ defines three main consequent stages in which Russia’s soft power has evolved: the first stage is referred to as “informal or unofficial” (2000-2007/2008) when the term “soft power” was not pronounced inside Kremlin but was mainly pushed forward by local academic and think tank groups; the second stage, which began in 2014, was a period of institutionalization and “governmentalization” when the state started to play the dominant role in shaping and developing the soft power agenda, content, and approaches; and the third stage is defined as “tightening” when Russia’s soft power is assuming an increasingly confrontational, “defensive-offensive” character.

The main reform of the Russian soft power took place starting approximately from 2014, in the following main directions:

First of all, in the last decade, Moscow’s political strategists tried to expand the soft power target group beyond its traditional social base made up mainly of representatives of older, Soviet-born generations. Nowadays, the main emphasis is on targeting a younger generation of Central Asians and working with leading representatives of local youth ranging from students to young scientists and politicians. Previously, the Russian soft power institutions were criticized for being excessively focused on working with “compatriots abroad” (meaning the remnants of the Russian-speaking population/diasporas), which limited their effectiveness and coverage in the region.¹⁹ Today, their approach looks much more balanced as many soft power programs and initiatives target Central Asians in particular.

Second, Russia has succeeded in establishing and developing a rather efficient and wide network of official and semi-official institutions and foundations abroad under the overall auspice of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education.

Third, during this period, the Russian authorities managed to form a more structured and coherent ideological basis. Previously, according to critics, Russia’s soft power was an incoherent combination of ill-fitting ideological concepts, which considerably diminished its impact. Today, it looks more coherent and better structured and formulated, although the general ideological content remains the same. Russia has invested mainly in improving its soft power format by making it more accessible,

understandable, and clear for the targeted audience; however, the ideological content and narratives were not significantly changed but only adjusted to the changing geopolitical environment. Due to these efforts, in 2020 Russia took 10th place in the Global Soft Power Index rating; it lost three positions and took 13th place in 2021 but after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it was excluded from the rating from 9th place.²⁰

Russian soft power: Ideological basis

There are several inter-related ideological blocs from which Russian political technologists have tried to build a coherent basis for Russian soft power. First, there is the so-called “Russian World,” which includes a range of geopolitical, religious, and cultural-civilizational aspects. Since the end of the 2000s, “Russian World” is de-facto accepted by Moscow as the country’s foreign affairs doctrine. Initially, the term “Russian World” was understood as an international, inter-state and intercontinental community united by the Russian language and a common cultural and historical background. Later, it started to be interpreted as a geopolitical concept where Russia is regarded as a civilizational center determined to unite under its umbrella a wide range of other countries, cultures, and societies that share similar perceptions, worldviews, and values. From this point of view, the “Russian World” is supposed to embrace not only the countries with a shared historical past (such as former Soviet republics, referred to as “Near Abroad”) but also many outlying states (Far Abroad) attracted by Russian political, and military might. Therefore, the “Russian World” is interpreted as a geopolitical and civilizational alternative to the West, as well as to the interpretation of democratic and human rights values accepted and recognized by most developed countries and international society in general.

The second element is the “Neo-Eurasianism” doctrine – a school of thought developed in the 1990s that insists on conformity between the Western democracies and what is referred to as “Eurasian civilization”. Their concepts are often described as an ideological foundation for the process of the political and economic integration of post-Soviet territories, pushed forward by Russia. The doctrine is based mainly on the ideas of Lev Gumilev (1912-1992), a well-known Russian/Soviet ethnologist who developed the “passionarity, ethnogenesis concept”, which had considerable impact on the formation of post-Soviet ideologies in particular. According to Gumilev, every ethnos is distinguished by a certain level of “passionarity” (пассионарность, from the French verb passionner – to enthuse), understood as an internal energy of “biochemical origin”, an inherited ability to expand, to create history typical for any nation and its national leaders; an “instinct of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation”. In his view, the nation with a higher level of passionarity may form a super-ethnos able to subordinate and draw in sub-ethnoses with a lower level of internal energy. A super-ethnos has more ability to survive while any sub-ethnos is vulnerable and doomed to assimilation and disappearance. Gumilev and his modern followers regard the Russian nation as a super-ethnos, kindred not to Europe but to Turkic-Mongol peoples of the inner Eurasian steppes. They

criticize classic historiography for “Eurocentrism” and reinterpret the historical past when Russia was a part of the Mongol empire as a positive period, which enabled Russians to oppose the destructive influence of Catholic Europe that threatened the integrity of the Russian people.

The third aspect is the denial of modern democratic and human rights values promoted by the West and international society – following Putin’s well-known definition, the propagandists of the “Russian World” describe Western values as “so-called tolerance, neutered and barren” and “a kind of Amoral International,” while “democratization” is portrayed as the destruction of traditional values from above and as an undemocratic process carried out against the will of the majority.²¹ It implies, therefore, the active promotion of anti-Western sentiments among the population both inside Russia, post-Soviet space, and on the international level. Russia’s official media and propaganda present Vladimir Putin and current authorities as the main and only defenders of traditional and family values in post-Soviet space. In September 2022, a Kremlin decree claimed that “Russia is increasingly seen abroad as a guardian of traditional moral, social and family values” against what it describes as “the aggressive imposition of neoliberal views by a number of states.”²²

RUSSIA IS PRESENTED as the only barrier to the spread of traditions, morals, and values that are alien to Muslim people and society. Such emphasis on traditional values is perceived positively by a rather considerable part of Central Asian society, especially in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which remain predominantly conservative compared to other post-Soviet countries, such as relatively more Westernized Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The high level of conservatism is caused by many factors – for example, the preservation and dominance of the patriarchal family model in society and the growth of religiosity among the population. Accordingly, this ideological aspect of Russian propaganda turns out to be effective in the region, promoting the popularity of the Russian leadership and Vladimir Putin, especially among local traditionally-minded and religious youth.

A flip side of the anti-Western sentiments (Westernophobia) is the idealization of the Soviet past and a specific kind of “post-Soviet conservatism”, promoted by the Russian government both inside the country and in the post-Soviet space. The ideologists of Putin’s regime consider the Soviet past through the lenses of common glorious history and as a solid basis for further geopolitical integration of former Soviet republics under Moscow’s auspices. Therefore, the Russian government rejects any attempts by post-Soviet countries to revise and criticize Soviet history, interpreting it as undermining the future re-integration of post-Soviet space. For the same reasons, Moscow has a negative view of the policy of de-communization of history implemented by nearby Baltic countries, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. The ideologization of the Soviet past implies the approval

and acceptance of the entire legacy – political, cultural, and moral – of the USSR. It implies the justification of the undemocratic methods of Soviet management, political repression, and suppression of dissidents.

Another important aspect of Moscow’s propaganda in Central Asia is to present Russia as the main guarantor of political and social stability in the region and to stress its peacemaking image. Correspondingly, the West and international organizations are regarded as the main trouble-makers eager to create uncontrolled chaos in the region. Thus, Timofei Bordachev, program director of the pro-Kremlin think-tank “Valdai Club” believes that stability in Central Asia “naturally, causes sincere distress to our partners in the West, especially in the USA or the UK. The United States considers Central Asia as a part of its diplomatic struggle against Moscow and Beijing.”²³ According to this logic, the West is interested in destroying political stability in the region in order to create a new flashpoint along the Southern borders of post-Soviet space, distract Russia’s attention and “prevent its victory in Ukraine.”²⁴

“RUSSIA IS PRESENTED AS THE ONLY BARRIER TO THE SPREAD OF TRADITIONS, MORALS, AND VALUES THAT ARE ALIEN TO MUSLIM PEOPLE AND SOCIETY.”

In Tajikistan, it especially stresses the allegedly decisive and positive role of the Russian Federation in ending the Tajik civil war and ensuring post-conflict stability in the country. Russian diplomacy and media present the Russian Federation as an exceptionally positive external force, which, on the one hand, protected Tajikistan from Islamist radicals, and on the other hand, played a key role in organizing the peace process and ending the civil

war. Beyond framing Russia as a security guarantor, Russian efforts also portray the country as an attractive destination for migrants. A positive image promoted by Russian media and soft power institutions includes a set of aspects that look extremely attractive to local youth – a more developed infrastructure, a real alternative for getting a job, education, and a future career.

Institutions, tools, and approaches

Moscow has developed a network of official and non-governmental institutions and organizations through which it implements its soft power in the region. These institutions are intended to implement various programs and initiatives in the field of education, culture, and science, to conduct joint seminars, conferences, and training in the targeted countries. Among them is the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, International Humanitarian Cooperation commonly known as “*Rossotrudnichestvo*”, the “Russian World” Foundation, and Gorchakov’s Foundation. There is also a range of unofficial institutions, “neo-Eurasianist” groups, expert and think-tank organizations such as Zinoviev’s Club, Eurasian Communication Center, etc., that often receive state funding to implement their programs in the post-Soviet space. This network of institutions implements their programs and initiatives in the following main domains:



On December 22, 2022, the Valdai Club launched its report *Central Asia and the Ukrainian Crisis*. Moderator, Fyodor Lukyanov (to the left) and programme director Timofei Bordachev (to the right).

1. Education, Science, and Employment

The main actor in the field is *Rossotrudnichestvo*, which has developed several effective platforms for its activities, such as “Russian Houses” which specialize in both educational and cultural programs. Thus, in Tajikistan the Russian House has two branches – in Dushanbe, the capital²⁵ and Khujand.²⁶ *Rossotrudnichestvo* is working in two directions. First it works to export education, distribute educational quotas and scholarships to study in Russian universities, and promote academic cooperation between Russia and countries of the region. Thus, in 2022, the Russian Federation allocated Tajikistan 750 educational quotas and 902 quotas in 2023²⁷ to study at Russian universities and gain academic degrees; the beneficiaries are local youth and compatriots (representatives of the Russian-speaking population).²⁸ *Rossotrudnichestvo* is also engaged in promoting and strengthening the position of the Russian language, popularizing Russian culture, and carrying out public actions and initiatives in the field of public diplomacy. There are events of so-called “military-patriotic” character aimed at celebrating historical events and commemorating Second WW victims (for example, the Immortal Regiment). As usual, the main target audience is local youth; they participate in seminars, conferences, round tables, and open lessons, ostensibly to combat the falsification of history.²⁹

In the field of “military-patriotic education”, *Rossotrudnichestvo* and Russian embassies actively cooperate with local pro-Russian and pro-Communist organizations. In Tajikistan, *Rossotrudnichestvo* successfully cooperates with the 201st Military Base of the Russian Federation deployed in the country.³⁰ For instance, in February 2023, they organized a conference “Tajikistanis – participants in the battle of Stalingrad” with the participation of high school students, students of the local Tajik-Slavonic University, the branch of Moscow State University, and Russian militaries. The organizers urged the participants “to explore history more deeply in order not to become victims of falsifications.”³¹ Another action widely implemented throughout the region is “Dictation of Victory” – in Tajikistan with the participation of several hundred students, Young Army cadets,³² high school students and veterans.³³

In addition, there is a network of branches of Russian universities throughout Central Asia. For instance, there are branches

of 14 Russian universities operating in Uzbekistan – the highest figure in the post-Soviet space. Besides, every year representatives of leading Russian universities visit partner institutions in the region to attract local youth and urge them to enroll.

2. Media and Internet

One of the most powerful instruments of Russian soft power is the media, starting from TV channels that remain extremely popular among the Central Asian population. One of the most significant factors in promoting Russian soft power, TV is a common informational, cultural, and linguistic space, which covers the entire territory of the former Soviet Union. Until now, Russian television and radio, printed publications, and the Russian-language Internet continue to dominate the informational space in post-Soviet countries. The overwhelming majority of educated and socially active citizens of Tajikistan speak Russian well. A significant part of the population also prefers to watch and trust the Russian media and the Russian-language internet, which are the main conduits of soft power outside of Russia. According to surveys in 2018, 45% of Tajiks prefer Russian television channels; in the rating of foreign TV channels, the top line of the rating remains with the Russian TV channel Russia – 26%, followed by News – 16%, NTV, ORT, RTR planet, TNT, Zvezda, MIR, and sports channels.³⁴ There is also a range of well-established and traditionally popular printed media such as *Kommersant*, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* with their online versions.

In the last decade, the Russian government has established a range of new media types specialized in the promotion of Russian soft power and ideology of the Russian Word, and anti-Western propaganda – such as the Informational Agency *Sputnik*, which provides information, news, and analyses in Russian and Central Asian languages. The agency’s head office is located in Moscow; *Sputnik* was created by the international department of the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti. The editor-in-chief of the publication is a leading Russian media manager and propagandist, Margarita Simonyan, who also simultaneously heads the RT TV channel and the international news agency Russia Today. The agency’s news sites operate in more than 30 languages and have more than 16 million online subscribers.

Another propagandist media is *Centrasia.Org* – an informational website, founded and edited by Vitaly Khlyupin, a former employee of the CIS Center of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Diplomatic Academy. In the past, Vitaly Khlyupin worked as a program manager for the information and analytical center “Eurasia”, which today is considered one of the far-right and conservative resources associated with Alexander Dugin, the leader of the Russian “Eurasianists.”

3. Public diplomacy

The main Russian soft-power institutions specializing in the field of public diplomacy are the following:

- **The A. Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Foundation** (founded on February 10, 2010, by decree of Dmitry Medvedev, then president of the Russian Federation) is the first example of a public-private partnership in the field of foreign policy. The Gorchakov

Foundation is a non-profit organization engaged in Russia's foreign policy, supporting research and expert and public initiatives in the field of public diplomacy. The Gorchakov Foundation holds an annual school for young specialists from Central Asia and the program "Security in Eurasia", including lectures on geopolitics, economics, security, and information technologies with the participation of Russian experts. It is no secret that lack of resources, including financial, attitude, infrastructure and comfort, and ideological propaganda profoundly distinguishes the Russian approach from similar projects of American and European counterparts who promote their "soft power" through education and research programs.

- **The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)**, a non-profit partnership, is another important soft power institution intended to target mainly expert and academic communities. It was founded by the RF's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Science. The RIAC's task is to promote non-profit partnerships and to stimulate international research, expert training on foreign policy and regional studies. It also facilitates interaction between Russian research organizations and foreign analytical centers on international relations. Thus, in 2015, the Russian International Affairs Council, in cooperation with the Eurasian Economic Commission, organized a Summer School titled "Eurasian Economic Integration: Priorities, Prospects, and Tools". During Summer Schools, young scientists, experts, and journalists from Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia come together in master classes, lectures, round tables, and training seminars on analytic skills.
- **Valdai Discussion Club**, founded by the RIAC, Higher School of Economics, MGIMO University, and the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy of Russia, is aimed at promoting a dialogue between Russian and international intellectual elites and conducting an independent objective scientific analysis of political, economic, and social development trends in Russia and abroad.

Main target groups, social base, and audience

The following main social strata and groups in the region are usually the principal target of the Russian soft-power machine. First, authoritarian governments, the political establishment, and a considerable part of local political, and intellectual elites are closely related to the Soviet past – in terms of their mentality, worldview, and experience. Many leading members of post-Soviet regimes received their professional education and started their careers in the Soviet administrative system. As a result, they are inherently related to the past, closely connected with the Russian elite, and share many of its ideological principles and methods of governance. Experts talk about an integral post-Soviet political and economic model typical of practically all the

CIS countries: governance by command and administration; institutions of power and property that have become a single whole; over-centralization of resources in the hands of a limited elite group; the high level of corruption, economies geared toward the export of raw materials, etc. The national elites prefer to preserve this type of system, as they would hardly survive under the pressure of democracy or in the case of large-scale reform. This explains why they accept the anti-Western rhetoric of the Russian leaders and put it into practice.

Due to this ideological and worldview proximity, the Russian government traditionally considers the post-Soviet Central Asian authoritarian regimes as geopolitical allies – especially in the light of its growing confrontation with the West. Of course, Moscow often expresses discontent and criticizes the local regimes for their multi-vector foreign policies and attempts to revise the Soviet past or language policy. In some cases, Moscow even uses means of political pressure or economic leverage to influence the government's domestic and foreign policies. However, in general, since the 1990s, Moscow has steadily supported the efforts of authoritarian Central Asian regimes in their confrontations with political opposition and protest movements – as, for instance, in Tajikistan throughout the civil war or in Kazakhstan during the January 2022 public riots.

One of the main targets and proponents of the Russian soft power in the region is the stratum of so-referred *siloviki* – employees of local law enforcement agencies whose mentality and outlook are as a rule heavily influenced by the Soviet past. As post-Soviet history shows, law enforcement agencies (in particular, security agencies descended from the Soviet KGB) have inherited the outlook, ideological perceptions, and working style of the Soviet law enforcement bodies. Second, several social strata and groups are especially susceptible to Russian propaganda, starting from the older population that shares a sense of nostalgia for the Soviet past.

The middle-aged and older segments of the population living in the CIS countries form the main social basis of Russia's soft power. They were born in the Soviet Union and have found it hard to adjust to the market economy. Nearly all of them are nostalgic and nearly all of them idealize the Soviet past. They associate democracy with the lawlessness and plundering of the 1990s, unbridled corruption, poverty, and instability; they withdrew their support for the democratic parties and movements in the post-Soviet countries that have found themselves in the backyard of local politics. The democratic project has failed across the post-Soviet region, while people are willing, to a greater extent than before, to embrace the idea of restoring the former empire. So far, a considerable number of Russian speakers find it hard to accept the new, post-Soviet conditions.³⁵

However, as mentioned above, in the last decade Russian soft power has paid increasing attention to the youth, which is under-

“[...] THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT TRADITIONALLY CONSIDERS THE POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIAN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES AS GEOPOLITICAL ALLIES.”

standable as this social stratum constitutes on average 65–70% of the region's population. However, regarding Central Asian youth, Russia implements its soft power with varying results – it seems to be more successful in Central Asian countries that have large diasporas in Russia or depend on labor migration to the Russian Federation. Thus, in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and partly Uzbekistan many young people link their future with Russia, regarding it as a place for employment or further emigration. Tajikistan has the largest number of migrant workers and emigrants to Russia; correspondingly, many ordinary Tajiks believe that they are obliged to support Russia and still feel themselves to be citizens of a single, non-existent state – the USSR.³⁶ In Kazakhstan the situation is different: approximately one-third of the population supports Russia's war on Ukraine, among them mainly representatives of the older and Russian-speaking generation; however, a considerable part of Kazakh youth link their future with Europe and the outer world and support Ukraine.³⁷ The majority of observers believe that Russian propaganda and in particular TV channels remain the most active tools and decisive factors in promoting public support for the invasion of Ukraine.

How effective is Russia's soft power?

First, it should be recognized that the impact of Russian soft power on the Central Asian region is greater than on the other CIS or more distant countries. Moscow has established a well-developed structure and instruments to increasingly target the younger generation, which constitutes at least two-thirds of the local population. In the last several years, the focus of Russian soft power has gradually transformed to embrace not only “compatriots” (the Russian-speaking population) but the local younger generation as well.

At the same time, it is worth mentioning that the relative effectiveness of Russia's soft power is predetermined not so much by its higher quality as by the favorable conditions of the region and the specifics of local post-Soviet societies. This phenomenon could be explained by several reasons – such as the common post-Soviet past, economic dependence on Russia, a large number of migrant workers in Russia, the traditional prevalence of Russian culture and language, and so on.

An additional factor in Russia's favor is a focus on conservatism, which today serves as a solid foundation of Russian soft power, allowing it to appeal to a rapidly growing conservative audience in Central Asia. The level of religiosity among the younger generation is rising steadily across the region, which predefines the success of Russian “conservative morality” propaganda among local Islamic society, especially the youth.³⁸ As a result, in Central Asia, the perception of Russian propaganda depends not so much on age as on other factors, such as level of education, religiosity, social background, etc.

One of the significant features of Russian soft power is excessive “governmentalization”. On the one hand, it has helped Moscow to develop a network of institutions responsible for designing and implementing soft power; in addition, it promoted the development of a unified approach, methodology, and content of soft power. However, on the other hand, the dominance of the

state also played a restrictive role. Such a soft power model is too bureaucratic and less flexible, which reduces its effectiveness in the long run.

Another significant aspect is the broader interpretation of the term soft power by the Russian leadership compared to Joseph Nye's classical definition. Pro-Kremlin political scientist Karaganov considers soft power as a secondary and forced option and defines it as a “power caused by the lack of power.”³⁹ Accordingly, Russia often considers propaganda as an instrument of coercion to put pressure on its partners to convince them to make concessions and agreements. One example is the June 2023 campaign of pressure on Tajik migrant workers in Russia – in the form of arrests and deportations. It is quite possible, according to some local observers, that the real reason for such pressure is to force Dushanbe to join the Eurasian Economic Union.⁴⁰

In particular one of the main social groups vulnerable to Russian soft power are labor migrants, the majority of whom also represent the younger generation. It is worth noting that countries and societies with a large proportion of labor migrants and young people (such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) tend to be more susceptible to Russian propaganda. For instance, Kyrgyzstan belongs to the countries with a dominant positive attitude towards the Russian Federation. According to the survey, 80% of respondents in the Kyrgyz Republic have a positive attitude towards Russia, while 15% are neutral and 5% negative.⁴¹

Some scholars, such as Sergey Abashin and Olga Brodnikova, explain the ideological vulnerability of labor migrants by the terms “transmigrants” or “transnationalism”, referring to a social stratum of people who reside in a recipient society but maintain close relations with their countries of origin.⁴² They are partly integrated into the recipient society but maintain connections, build institutions, manage transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated. Apparently, due to such a dual, rather unstable situation, labor migrants and new emigrants often become more subversive and vulnerable to state propaganda and narratives. Besides, the transmigrants can have considerable influence on public opinion in their societies and countries of origin.

Second, the role of local authoritarian regimes in supporting and promoting conservative and anti-Western narratives and elements of Russian soft power should be particularly noted. As a rule, this support is not demonstrative and openly manifested, as local authorities are trying to maintain a geopolitical balance between Russia and the West. However, on the other hand, local political elites have often copied Russian ideological narratives, undemocratic and restrictive legislative acts, and initiatives. The local governments also provide significant support to the development of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and other integration models promoted in the region by Moscow. To some degree, there is an interdependency between Russian and Central Asian political elites – in terms of shared ideological beliefs, shared values, worldviews, and political and economic models.

Today, Russia's soft power still dominates across the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), including the Central

Asian countries. At the same time, in the last couple of years, we have observed a gradual decrease of pro-Russian sentiments in Central Asian countries – in particular, after the beginning of the Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine. For example, in Kazakhstan, according to public surveys, a third of Kazakhstanis (32.6%) began to view Russia more negatively after the outbreak of the war: only half (51.5%) did not change their attitude towards Russia.⁴³

The Ukrainian events promoted a deep internal split within Central Asian society between the supporters and opponents of Russian propaganda and foreign policy. The most susceptible to Russia's soft power remains the older generation, which was mainly born in the Soviet Union. As for the younger generation, the situation looks more complicated: the higher the educational level, the lower the influence of Russian propaganda is – in particular, in regard to justifying the invasion of Ukraine. In general, the war on Ukraine can be considered a turning point for the Russian geopolitical presence in Central Asia. The longer the war lasts, the more victims there are, the more difficult it becomes for Russian propaganda to justify the war, and correspondingly, the lower Russia's support becomes.

The war in Ukraine has forced Russian political strategists to reconsider their attitude and approach to both conducting hybrid war and soft power policy. The lack of funds and opportunities limits Moscow's ability to use the methods and leverage of economic interest, payments, economic and military pressure, and cohesion. Therefore, in the new conditions, Russia is forced to place special emphasis on propaganda, expansion in social networks and the Internet, and production of fake news, data, and materials.

In future, the gap between generations regarding the perception of Russia and its image will increase -- both because of the consequences of the war in Ukraine and the prevailing trends within the young community. For example, representatives of the most educated and well-off strata of Central Asian societies increasingly prefer to receive education in the West, Turkey, or South Asia. Russian universities still attract a considerable number of young Central Asians from ordinary and lower-middle-class families, while political and intellectual elites prefer to send their children beyond post-Soviet space.

Besides, Russian soft power relies mainly on television, while its activities on the internet and social networks do not look equally successful or effective. At the same time, an increasing number of young people prefer to receive information about the world from alternative sources, primarily from social networks. Another factor is the ideological content of the Russian soft power. As mentioned above, Russia has invested heavily in developing informational infrastructure and soft power institutions – while the main ideological constructs remain relatively unchanged. The ideological message is still directed at the older generation, focusing on nostalgia for the Soviet past, rejection of the West, propaganda of the Russian world, restoration of the Soviet Union, and so on. In addition, the main emphasis is also placed on emotional perception, provoking negative emotions – such as resentment, outrage, hatred, and so on. The question is whether such a system of soft power will remain effective in a few years, as the older generation dies out.

Therefore, in the long term, the future of Russia's soft power in the CIS does not look that bright. The main problem of all Russian administrations is that they traditionally rely on a social basis that has essentially no future: the ruling kleptocracy, political elites, and leaders steeped in corruption and simulating reforms, communist parties living on the political margins, and labor migrants who dream of Russian pensions, visa-free regimes, and the abolition of licenses. These “support groups” belong to the post-Soviet model, which has outlived itself and should be modernized and reformed. Pro-Russian elites now in power either can or cannot start modernization; they either change or fail to change themselves and will disappear from the political scene. In either case, Russia will lose the social basis of its soft power, which will deprive Russian soft power of its future in the CA region. ✖

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Acknowledgment: The authors wish to extend their thanks to Prof. Edward Lemon and to the two anonymous peer-reviewers for their generous, thoughtful and perceptive comments on earlier drafts of the article.

Note: Dr. Oleg Antonov's contribution to this article has been supported by funding from the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (grant number 21-PR2-0020) and the Crafoord Foundation (grant number 20220653).

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Chinese youth: **Domestic issues and transnational developments**

by **Marina Svensson**



Young Pioneers of China standing
honour guard at the Monument to the
People's Heroes at Tiananmen Square.

PHOTO: UWE ARANAS/ CEPHOTO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

abstract

The increasing investment in and emphasis on ideological and political education at Chinese universities, and statements, including by Xi Jinping himself, and other policies related to youth and higher education, reveals a growing concern about youth. This article provides a brief overview of developments and policies affecting Chinese youth, including the emergence of new values among them.

KEYWORDS: Political education, Chinese Communist Party, Young Chinese.

It is often postulated in the literature that there is a positive correlation between liberal and democratic values and levels of education.¹ With more young Chinese getting higher education and exposure to liberal societies through study and work abroad, this trend would be expected to become stronger.² However, the picture is complex and authoritarian regimes such as China have many tools in their toolbox, including control over higher education, career advancement, and citizens abroad. The growing emphasis on ideological and political education in Chinese universities, and efforts to reach out to and control Chinese students abroad, indicate that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) feels it needs to boost its legitimacy and strengthen control over this important segment of the population. At the same time, Chinese students who may face discrimination and a precarious life situation, could also become more nationalistic and less attracted to liberal democratic values while abroad at a time when democracies themselves are undergoing profound challenges.

This article provides a brief overview of developments and policies affecting Chinese youth, including the emergence of new values among them. The article then goes on to address China's different ways of reaching out to and controlling the Chinese diaspora, including transnational students. There is a growing concern over Chinese "influence operations" abroad among many Western observers. However, they often tend to conflate different types of activities, as well as target groups, overestimate the impact on different groups and the heterogeneity of students, and also ignore the differences between host societies.³

Ideological and political education: Fostering the new socialist generation

Like other communist states, after 1949, the CCP established a range of youth organizations that serve to control, educate and socialize youth into state ideology and with the further aim of cultivating future party members and leaders. The Young Pioneers of China is the first organization that young children from 6 to 14 years of age can join. From the age of 14, students can then become members of the Communist Youth League, and almost all university students are members of this organization.⁴ In 2017, more than 81 million people, i.e. 6% of the population, were Youth League members. It is while they are attending university that young people are recruited into the CCP. In 2019,

more than a third of CCP members were said to be under 40 years of age, while in 2021 student party members accounted for 3% of the total number.⁵

Young Chinese are subject to ideological and political education from elementary school and throughout university. Their education combines Marxist ideology, which these days also includes Xi Jinping's thoughts, with nationalism and pride in Chinese history and culture, as well as a focus on the country's recent economic and geopolitical achievements.⁶ Although ideological and political education has always been a key part of the school and university curricula, for political reasons, it has been strengthened at various times, including after the democracy movement in 1989, in order to counteract the influence of so-called Western ideas on democracy among students and faculty.

The new emphasis on ideological and political education since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013 should be seen as part of the re-ideologization of Chinese society, and the increasing control over higher education as related to the crackdown on civil society, public intellectuals, media and the internet.⁷ Xi Jinping has personally taken an interest in and spoken about the need to strengthen the ideological and political education of youth.⁸ Through various means, including compulsory ideological and political education at all stages of the education system, the CCP has attempted to revitalize its propaganda work in order to make it more attractive to young people, for example, by using social media, rap music and influencers, as well as reforming the existing youth organizations.

Chinese youth today: Diverging conditions, experiences and values

Chinese youth constitute a very diverse group, depending on their family situation and socio-economic circumstances, whether they are born and live in the countryside or in cities, as well as depending on their gender, age and ethnicity. However, young people's lives today differ significantly from previous generations due to the rapid economic growth in recent years, the one-child policy, the expansion of higher education, and the impact of the internet. Overall, the opportunities for young people to take part in global popular culture, learn about the world, make friendships, study, travel and work abroad, have significantly increased. Nationalistic expressions and activities among Chinese youth have received much attention over the years but the picture is complex and nationalistic sentiments quite volatile.⁹ Young people feel a lot of pressure to succeed, not only from the CCP but also from their own families, while they are also experiencing difficulties finding work, even after obtaining a university degree. Many young people have become engaged in various social causes and volunteer activities, and we can also detect a trend of more post-materialist values as for example reflected in the "lying-flat" phenomena where youth have turned the back on striving for material success.¹⁰ In recent years, some young people have also become quite active on women's rights and LGBTQ issues, including the #MeToo movement, although the space for such activism has shrunk considerably in China since 2015.¹¹ Another somewhat contra-



A group of Young Pioneers in Tiananmen Square in October 2007.

PHOTO: BROKENSPHERE

dictory development, increasingly gaining scholarly attention, is the spread of alt-right ideas and values on Chinese social media, which also testify to a degree of disillusionment with liberal and democratic values in the West among some segments of the Chinese society.¹² For the CCP leadership, young people are crucial for the task of national rejuvenation and expected to work hard and embrace socialism.¹³ This was also reflected in the State Council White Paper on youth published in 2022 on the occasion of the centenary of the Chinese Youth League.¹⁴ In other words, we see some divergence between the CCP's expectations on youth and young people's own diverse aspirations and experiences.

Chinese transnational activities: Targeting youth abroad

The CCP's main priority is to secure its own legitimacy and domestic stability, while also attempting to increase China's influence globally and among Chinese communities overseas. Since 2017, Chinese foreign policy has become more assertive and there have been concerned reports in different countries about its "influence operations", which not only target Chinese communities but also foreign citizens and institutions.¹⁵ Andrew Chubb

“XI JINPING HAS PERSONALLY TAKEN AN INTEREST IN AND SPOKEN ABOUT THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN THE IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL EDUCATION OF YOUTH.”

has tried to nuance the description of the CCP's political activities abroad as they encompass a range of different activities, some overt and legal, and others more covert, and also target different groups including both Chinese in the diaspora, as well as local political and business elites in different countries.¹⁶ The CCP has different ways of reaching out to the Chinese diaspora, using financial incentives, for example, favorable treatment regarding exit/entry regulations and investments, as well as cultural and educational programs that aim to create stronger bonds with China, in addition to political pressure and

repression.¹⁷ The work is administered by a number of institutions such as the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the united front system under the United Front Work Department (UFW). The latter has received more attention in recent years.¹⁸ It operates under the Central Committee of the CCP and works with all groups in Chinese society outside of the CCP to ensure support for its policies. It also reaches out to overseas Chinese communities in order to mobilize their "patriotic" feelings and prevent dissenting ideas from spreading among them. The most visible UFW organization is the Association for Promoting Peaceful Reunification of China, which operates in most countries and is led by the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National



PHOTO: SCREEN SHOT, WWW.USU.EDU

The Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), has sub-branches in different countries and at local universities, and gathers students and scholars abroad. Here at Utah State University.

Reunification. It has become more active in recent years and networks with local Chinese organizations, organizes demonstrations against pro-Tibetan or pro-Hong Kong demonstrations, as well as convenes study sessions on important speeches by the CCP leadership. Another important organization is the International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China, which manages official relations between the CCP and major political parties in other countries.¹⁹ Chinese diaspora organizations are one of the targets of the UFDW and some receive financial support but are also subjected to political pressure. The Chinese state thus also engages in what has been called transnational repression that targets ethnic minorities, including in particular Tibetans and Uighurs, political dissidents, human rights activists, journalists, and former government officials and others accused of corruption. The tactics used ranges from renditions, co-opting other countries to detain exiles, to digital threats and harassments, use of spyware, and coercion by proxy, for example threatening relatives in China.²⁰

China has been very active in sending students abroad since the reform period began in 1978 when it realized that there was a need to catch up in science and technology. In 2017, some 600 000 Chinese students went abroad to study, meaning a total of 1.4 million students enrolled abroad that year.²¹ In order to avoid a brain drain, in 2008 China started the Thousand Talents program to attract students and scholars back to the country. The official view is that overseas study benefits China, although there is also concern about students being exposed to different ideas and values, so that preparing students ideologically before they leave China, maintaining close contact with them while they are abroad, and encouraging them to return home are crucial. Thus, students are seen as ambassadors and are expected to propagate and defend Chinese interests.²² In 2015, Xi Jinping designated students abroad as a “new focus” of United Front Work as they play such a key role in China’s future.²³

Chinese students who travel abroad for their education are

quite a diverse group. They study a variety of topics ranging from the humanities and social sciences to natural sciences and medicine at BA, MA and PhD level and beyond. PhD students might be funded by the official China Scholarship Council (CSC), although currently, most Chinese students living abroad are privately funded or receive scholarships from foreign universities. The CSC scholarships come with expectations to return home after one’s studies, require financial guarantees from relatives in case a student does not finish her/his studies, as well as put demands on students to not do anything that would be harmful to the Chinese state or violate the host countries’ laws.²⁴

There is an official association, the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), with sub-branches in different countries and at local universities, which gathers students and scholars abroad.²⁵ At Chinese embassies, the Department of Overseas Chinese Affairs (*Qiaowu chu*) also maintains contact with this association and other overseas Chinese associations, whereas the embassy’s Education Section (*Jiaoyu chu*) oversees and provides funding to the CSSA. The education section supports cultural events, for example, during the Chinese New Year, and reaches out to or visits universities for other social events. While most activities seem to be of a more general, cultural and supportive nature, providing support during, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic, some activities are more political in nature. For example, the CSSA has welcomed visits by CCP leaders, including Xi Jinping himself, and also posts news from the embassy, including political information, in its social media groups on WeChat.²⁶ There have also been a number of reports of Chinese students setting up CCP branches since CCP members are expected to have groups in units and institutions when there are at least three members. This would appear to have mainly taken

“STUDENTS ARE SEEN AS AMBASSADORS AND ARE EXPECTED TO PROPAGATE AND DEFEND CHINESE INTERESTS.”

place when groups of exchange students or visiting scholars travel abroad together for brief visits and have been under the direction of their home institution’s party committee, as well as when their home institutions are able to control and check them when they return home.²⁷

IN THE LAST couple of years, warnings have been raised about China’s growing global influence, not only in the field of politics and economics but also in the

field of higher education and scientific collaboration.²⁸ Some of this concern is more about issues of intellectual property theft or espionage, such as when the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) sponsors Chinese students and scholars to study abroad.²⁹ However, there is also growing concern about the Chinese government’s control over Chinese students abroad and some accounts that they are being subjected to pressure and intimidation, being asked to inform on each other and to voice criticism if any teachers or universities address what the Chinese government regards as sensitive topics, such as developments in Xinjiang and in Hong Kong.³⁰ Thus, there have been clashes between mainland Chinese students and supporters of the Hong Kong protest



Protesters in Yau Ma Tei on November 18, 2019 as they attempted to breach the police's cordon line to break through to protesters trapped inside Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

PHOTO: STUDIO INCENDO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

movement, for example, in Australia, New Zealand, the US and the UK. These developments however also highlight the divergent views among Chinese students themselves and an increasingly vocal student body that criticizes universities, individual teachers, as well as fellow Chinese students.

The evidence of Chinese influence over students abroad or attempts to inform or interfere in events or teaching on campus is often more anecdotal in nature than based on any systematic studies. A survey of American higher education institutions published in 2018 identified ways in which Chinese diplomats and students infringed on academic freedom in the US. However, it emphasized that the negative examples that had been documented were very few in number.³¹ Likewise, a report by the Leiden Asia Center in 2018 found no evidence of concerted political influencing activities by the Chinese government toward Chinese overseas students and researchers in Europe.³² Nevertheless, other reports have found growing evidence of attempts by the Chinese embassy and consulates in the US to exert influence over students, as well as students turning against each other.³³

A recent 2021 study by Human Rights Watch found increased fear among Chinese students in Australia when they were critical of Chinese politics or took a stand in support of protesters in Hong Kong.³⁴ There was evidence of direct harassment and intimidation by classmates, including threats of physical violence and attacks online. Also, students' critical views and activities were reported to the Chinese authorities back home and in

some cases led to students' relatives being contacted as a way to pressure them into silence and compliance. The Human Rights Watch study also found that there had been a marked increase in expressions of nationalism among students since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, and more recently, due to developments in Hong Kong. However, other academic work has shown a much more complex picture, as Chinese students also might act without the blessing of the embassy, in fact, against its wishes, and thus be perceived as negatively impacting relations with the host country.³⁵

The foreign experience: New insights and conflicting views

Studies and surveys, including the Asian Barometer, reveal a high level of satisfaction and support of the CCP regime across the population,³⁶ although other studies show that wealthier and more educated Chinese are more likely to hold politically liberal, pro-market and non-nationalistic views.³⁷ However, a study of the four different rounds of the Asian Barometer showed that although younger Chinese – the post-1980s and 1990s generations – exhibited a higher level of individualistic values, were also less respectful of authority and had a lower level of trust in central government, they still had a low opinion of democracy.³⁸ Thus, the results from these kinds of studies are not conclusive. It might also be assumed that Chinese students who go abroad would pick up new ideas, including democratic values, which is something that is emphasized in work on the importance of

higher education for socialization into political beliefs.³⁹ It should be remembered that Chinese students exposure to different values and ideas, as well as their integration into foreign societies, vary quite a lot depending on their chosen topics and level of study, personalities and interests, as well as the situation in the host country and also may change over time. Some students have become more nationalistic during their studies abroad, as shown in the run-up to the Olympics in 2008, although some demonstrations were initiated and supported by Chinese embassies. It is also obvious that living in a foreign country exposes Chinese students to negative aspects such as discrimination and other forms of inequality. This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where Chinese students were victims of discrimination and suspicion due to the pandemic's origin in China. One recent study shows that discrimination may actually make Chinese students more supportive of the CCP.⁴⁰ In this context, it is also worth noting that many Chinese students continue to be exposed to the Chinese news media when they are abroad and many get most of their news from Chinese social media.⁴¹ Some students are also involved in setting up special WeChat groups and public accounts in order to provide and share information, and student associations also forward news from Chinese embassies.⁴² Also, some of the news and values that students may pick up abroad stem from the alt-right, which is also favorably depicted in Chinese social media.⁴³ Not surprisingly, one study showed that the more students were exposed to Chinese media, the lower their support for democracy in China.⁴⁴

There have been no comprehensive studies on Chinese students abroad and their values, or changes in their values over time. Their reasons for studying abroad also vary. One study found that the primary reason for studying abroad was to get a different perspective on their home country, whereas other reasons included the belief that they would get a better education abroad.⁴⁵ Many other studies suggest that career advancement through a foreign degree was the most important reason for studying abroad.⁴⁶ Some studies found that while Chinese students studying in the West gain a more positive attitude toward their host country, they also see themselves as representing their home country.⁴⁷ An early study of Chinese students from Dalian who did not attend the more prestigious universities abroad but often eked out a precarious living doing part-time jobs while studying in Australia, Ireland, the UK and the US, also reveal very mixed views of the host societies and their political systems; in fact, most students were quite apolitical and focused on making money and developing their own professional careers.⁴⁸ A study comprising 186 people, conducted by *Foreign Policy* in 2015, found that 60% of respondents became more positive toward the US after studying in the country. However, at the same time, 53% of respondents reported a more positive view of

China and only 22% said they had become more negative toward their own country.⁴⁹ In 2020, MERICS published a survey of Chinese students in Germany; out of the approx. 37 000 students in Germany in 2018, 367 students responded.⁵⁰ The study found that there were conflicting attitudes about China's political system. Even though most of the students approved of the political status quo as being the best for China, a small minority said they were proud of China's political system as a whole. The majority of students actually became more positive toward China during their stay in Germany, while their views about the West became more diverse and complex. For example, the students were critical of the handling of the 2015 refugee crisis and the Brexit debacle, although they also appreciated the more liberal society in Germany, the social welfare system, and the rule of law.

A STUDY BY Han and Chen showed quite mixed results among Chinese students and scholars in the US.⁵¹ They found that although some 67% of them felt that democracy was positive for China in the long term, the longer they stayed in the US, the less they supported rapid democratization as they also became increasingly aware of problems in the American society. A more recent study from 2020 found that although Chinese students in the US were less nationalistic and more politically liberal than a comparative cohort in China, as well as more likely to have a higher socioeconomic status, discrimination and racism not only led to distress and anger, but also to more support for the CCP.⁵² This shift in views was also much stronger among those students who had been less nationalistic from the start.

Over the years Chinese students and scholars living abroad have been very active in various democratic movements. Some of them fled China after the crackdown on the 1989 democracy movement, and then established different kinds of organizations and media.⁵³ Many of this group have however been marginalized over the years as they have been unable to reach out to more recent diaspora and become out of touch with developments in China. A new generation of Chinese students and scholars have a better education and many have received positions in foreign universities. Many of them are also engaged in different topics and contribute to various debates in both the diaspora and in China. Although it is rare for Chinese students and scholars to speak out about more direct political

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issues, this does occasionally happen. When it was announced that the presidential term limit would be removed, enabling Xi Jinping to remain in power indefinitely, some Chinese students created a Twitter hashtag, #stopxijinning, and some of them also put up posters on American campuses criticizing this development.⁵⁴ The #MeToo movement in China was strongly linked with the global movement and Chinese students and scholars living abroad were heavily involved and influenced the domestic debates.⁵⁵ When protests against the zero-Covid policy took

place in China in November 2022, spurred by a deadly fire in Urumqi, university students also became involved on campuses across the country, the first time students became involved in any large-scale protests since 1989, and Chinese students abroad also organised several vigils in different countries. While most of these demonstrations focused on the immediate issues at hand such as ending the lockdown and releasing protesters in China, others also called for Xi Jinping's resignation.⁵⁶ Some people in the diaspora have become involved in different NGOs and have created new networks, thereby finding new opportunities for civic engagement abroad when the opportunities in China are shrinking. Young Chinese scholars have also been active in providing reliable news and information about both global events and developments in China through translations, academic debates and podcasts for people living in both China and abroad.⁵⁷ However, some studies have found varied and conflicting views among young Chinese who want to continue their civic engagement and activism while they are abroad, including within the feminist and Black Lives Matter movements. In some cases, they appear to have become disillusioned with these movements and their ability to influence politics in democracies, which may also reflect new challenges in the democracies themselves.⁵⁸

Conclusion

How capable is the CCP of influencing Chinese students abroad and fostering support among them for its authoritarian system? First of all, it is obvious that the CCP feels that Chinese students abroad, and their return to China, are important for both the party's survival and China's future prosperity. The increasing investment in and emphasis on ideological and political education at Chinese universities, as well as official statements, including statements by Xi Jinping himself, and policies related to youth and higher education, reveal a growing concern to ensure that young people contribute both to the CCP's future and to the national rejuvenation. However, it is also obvious that young Chinese people both at home and abroad are quite a heterogeneous group and exhibit changing and different values, ideas and identities, which may make such education and policies less effective. Some of the CCP's recent policies, for example, targeting celebrity culture and gaming, might also serve to alienate (some of) the youth. Young middle-class Chinese who have the opportunity to travel and study abroad are also influenced by other more individualistic and civic-minded values. It is obvious that although the Chinese government engages in transnational repression, most keenly felt by the Uighur community abroad, there are less opportunities for the CCP to actually control young people abroad and their views.⁵⁹ Its ability to control or impact Chinese students abroad also seems to vary depending on their circumstances, such as level of study and whether or not the students are self-funded or receive an official scholarship, as well as the host country in question. The general perception is however that attempts by the CCP to control the Chinese diaspora, be it students or other groups, as well as influence foreign institutions, have increased in recent years. China is more powerful and also stands out in comparison with many other authoritar-

ian states due to its economic influence and the number of organizations involved. This development requires some vigilance and more in-depth studies, but it is equally important not to panic, and suspect or discriminate against all Chinese citizens and students and scholars abroad. Mikael Wigell has argued for democracies to develop stronger mechanisms of democratic "deterrence" and strengthen democratic values and institutions through transparency, accountability, inclusiveness and reliance on civil society.⁶⁰ The problem today might partially be that democracies and their values are not only, or exclusively, under foreign authoritarian threat but also threatened from within, leading to less open and welcoming societies that themselves undermine democratic values. The pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine, and China's position, have fueled increased polarization, disinformation, and hostility, at the same time as the space for public debates and different kinds of exchanges has shrunk. It is very much up to the democracies and their institutions, including universities, to prove to Chinese students and others that democratic values and human rights are respected and upheld as well as provide safe spaces for them during their time abroad, and thus at the same time also strengthen their democratic "deterrence" capabilities. ✖

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International activities of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union:

EAST VERSUS WEST

by **Kristiina Silvan**

abstract

The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) is an administered mass organization for youth in contemporary Belarus and has been supported by the Lukashenka government for decades. It is therefore well positioned to engage in international activities. What's more, it claims to develop "multi-vector international youth collaboration" by participating in international programs and projects. This article aims to map and explain the international activities of the BRYU from the early 1990s until the present day. It asks how the association's international activities look in practice and what explains these patterns. It finds there is a qualitative difference between the BRYU's international activities with actors in Russia, the European Union and China. The article suggests that in comparison to the BRYU's domestic activities, which have been the primary focus of previous research, the youth league's participation in international affairs is limited. It argues that this state of affairs can be explained by its structural subservience to President Lukashenka, for whom the BRYU's international activities are of secondary importance.

KEYWORDS: youth policy, authoritarianism, Belarus.

The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) is an administered mass organization¹ for youth in contemporary Belarus. It has been systematically supported by Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government for decades,² and, according to the calculations of Andriy Pavlovich and Ma-teush Yezhovskii, receives up to 98% of the state youth policy funding.³ According to official statistics, about half a million Belarusians, or every fifth 15–30-year-old, is a member of the youth league. Although the majority of members are passive and membership is often not a voluntary choice but a semi-compulsory necessity, the repression faced by other youth groups – especially after the wave of mass protests in 2020 – means that the BRYU enjoys a dominant position in the sphere of youth associations.⁴

Due to its dominant and heavily state-supported presence in the Belarusian youth sphere, the BRYU is well positioned to engage in international activities. Indeed, the association is involved in an array of international programs and projects. These activities, framed as "multi-vector international youth collaboration", are reportedly aimed at strengthening the BRYU's position in the global arena and at promoting a positive image of the Republic of Belarus.⁵ The BRYU's international activities are sporadically reported in the media, especially the state-owned national news agency BelTa. For example, in 2017, the BRYU



Concert arranged near airport Minsk-1 by the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) celebrating “Independent Belarus” in 2007.

PHOTO: HANNA ZELENKO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

sent dozens of its “delegates” to represent Belarus at the World Festival of Youth and Students, a Soviet legacy youth festival organized in Sochi, Russia, and announced that it was planning to finalize collaboration agreements with Kazakhstan, Polish and Russian student labor brigades,⁶ thus offering new opportunities for young Belarusians to work abroad during the summer. In 2019, the BRYU sent a delegation to a Chinese youth innovation event,⁷ while 2021 witnessed the revitalization of the BRYU’s activities with its fellow Komsomol legacy organization in Russia, the Russian Youth Union.⁸

Despite the empirical evidence of the BRYU’s international agenda, scholarly literature pertaining to the activities of the BRYU and its predecessors is limited to the study of the association’s role in the domestic politics of authoritarian rule.⁹ The aim of this article is to address this gap by mapping and explaining the international dimension of the BRYU’s activities. It asks how the association’s international activities are framed in official documents, how they look in practice and what explains these patterns. The study is primarily based on the BRYU’s international activities during the period of “soft Belarusianization” (2014–2020),¹⁰ since it is primarily based on the qualitative data from the author’s previous research on the BRYU.¹¹ However, when relevant, the article also points to developments in the

1990s, after the wave of mass protests in 2020, and since the launch of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, in which Belarus has acted as a co-aggressor. Primary data from the author’s ethnographic field notes and semi-structured interviews with BRYU representatives¹² are complemented with publicly available sources, mainly the BRYU’s official reports and media articles.

THE ARTICLE FINDS that cooperation with Russia covers the lion’s share of the BRYU’s work abroad. Collaborative activities with Russian youth groups have long traditions and they have been further strengthened in the aftermath of the 2020 political crisis, at least in principle. In contrast, the BRYU’s attempts to forge links with European youth organizations, especially during the period of a thaw in Belarusian-Western relations, have been systematically blocked by the Belarusian National Youth Council “RADA”, even before 2020. Even though it was formally closed by the Lukashenka government in 2006, RADA continued to act as the primary representative of Belarusian youth for Europeans in the 2000s and 2010s. Meanwhile, the BRYU’s collaboration with the Communist Youth League of China and the multilateral Youth Council of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization remain limited. This is somewhat surprising, given that Lukashenka’s strengthening collaboration with Asia’s non-democratic govern-

ments could well have been reflected in new partnerships in the youth sphere, monopolized by the BRYU.

THIS ARTICLE SUGGESTS that in comparison to the BRYU's domestic activities, covered in the secondary literature, the youth league's participation in international affairs is limited. This contrast is puzzling since a growing number of young people are internationally connected¹³ and there is evidence of students' interest in various forms of international activities¹⁴ and receiving education abroad in general.¹⁵ According to one survey conducted in the six largest cities of Belarus in 2018, almost 80% of young people had already been abroad, while 59% hoped to leave Belarus altogether. Every fifth respondent mentioned the higher quality of education as their motivation for moving abroad.¹⁶ Another survey from 2019 found that out of those young Belarusians who had been abroad in the last year ("less than half" of all respondents), over 20% had been to Russia and/or the EU, while 18% had visited Ukraine.¹⁷ There is evidence that suggests that the number of young Belarusians hoping to emigrate has only grown since the "Revolution without a Name" in 2020 and the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022.¹⁸

Given its hegemonic status in the youth sphere, the BRYU is in a good position to cater for young people's desire to participate in various projects that connect them with the outside world, which it also claims to do, arguably in an attempt to improve the image of the organization among both its members and non-members and thus increase the level of both active and passive membership.¹⁹ However, the organization's international activities appear to be very underdeveloped. To explain this controversy, the article points to the BRYU's structural subservience to President Lukashenka. It argues that the organization's vertical accountability structure and the prevalence of domestic political challenges is not compatible with an outward-looking agenda. While this was the case even before the 2020 crisis, the mass protests that year and Belarus' participation in Russia's aggression against Ukraine from 2022 onward has contributed to a further inward turning of the youth league.

Youth GONGOs in authoritarian states

Scholars of youth policy have argued that in principle, policymakers around the world have a vested interest in furthering young people's acceptance and reproduction of the existing or desired political order.²⁰ This is because throughout history, young people have mobilized to challenge the political status quo.²¹ As McGlinchey notes, youth movements are typically portrayed in both the media and in social science literature as drivers of *liberal* political reform.²² The assumption of young people "naturally" attuned to liberalism is perhaps why authoritarian regimes around the world are particularly preoccupied with

young people and their political potential. Although there has been a significant rise in the number of authoritarian states in the last decade or so, liberal democracy remains the norm of legitimate governance in the 21st century.²³ The celebration of independent NGOs has been countered by authoritarian regimes by both clamping down on international activism and by establishing associations that look like NGOs but are in fact established and/or administered by authoritarian policymakers.²⁴

If government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) are a phenomenon of the 21st century, administered mass organizations (AMOs) are rooted in the 20th century. In his study of AMOs, "mass civilian organization[s] created and managed by a political regime to implement public policy"²⁵, Gregory Kasza notes that such organizations can organize people by age, gender, workplace, industry, place of residence, or some combination of these criteria.²⁶ He argues that AMOs organized by age – like the contemporary BRYU – were truly prevalent in the 20th century, listing *thirty* youth AMOs that have existed around the world between 1918 and 1991.²⁷ In the Soviet Union, the task of implementing the state's youth policy was given to the

**"IN AUGUST 2021,
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LUKASHENKA."**

All-Union Leninist Communist Youth League, also known as the *Komsomol*. In the Belarusian Soviet Republic, youth policy was administered by the local *Komsomol* branch.

WORKS ON YOUTH AMOS and youth GONGOs primarily focus on the organizations' role in domestic politics. According to Kasza, the Soviet youth AMO, the *Komsomol*, was used to mobilize labor for public projects.²⁸ Sokolov notes that physical labor was but one aspect of the "communist upbringing" that the *Komsomol* was tasked with instilling in the youth.²⁹ The tasks of the contemporary Communist Youth League of China, on the other hand, have been summarized as indoctrination, mobilization and preparing to join the Party.³⁰ The aim of Uzbekistan's now restructured pro-presidential youth movement *Kamalot* was arguably to ensure youth support for President Islam Karimov.³¹ Writing about the BRYU, Stephen G. Hall argued that the association had two purposes, both linked to the strengthening of the Lukashenka government: "to instill a sense of a regime-approved Belarusian patriotism into young people" and to support the regime in its attempt to undermine democratic influences.³²

The only strand of literature in which the international agenda of youth GONGOs is explicitly elaborated is in works about the infamous Russian pro-regime youth movement *Nashi* (2000–2012). Writing in hindsight, Yapici argues that *Nashi* had four functions.³³ Three of its functions were domestic ones, linked to ensuring regime survival and reproduction. First, it aimed to counter liberal youth mobilization; second, it sought to diminish the socio-economic repercussions of the 2004 neoliberal reforms; and third, it functioned as a "platform of nepotistic practices to guarantee the loyalty of the youth". As well as these



Official BRYU posters targeting young Belarusians, featuring logos of the association's prominent projects and its slogan "Youth Will Build the Motherland's Future!".

three domestic factors, *Nashi* was designed to be a "dynamic foreign policy actor implementing the decisions taken by Kremlin". Indeed, the role of *Nashi* in the Estonian Bronze statue Crisis of 2007–2008 was perhaps the most significant example of the movement's foreign policy agenda.³⁴ In contrast, the non-conflictual and rather more mundane international activities of *Nashi* – or any other youth GONGO to my knowledge – have not yet been subject to scholarly analysis. This is the gap that this article aims to address with the example of the contemporary Belarusian youth GONGO, which also happens to be an AMO, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union.

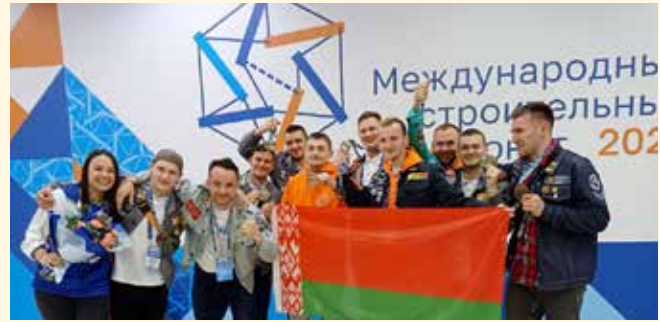
The BRYU's inverted hierarchy and mission among youth

The Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU, sometimes abbreviated as *BRSM* from the Russian *Belorusskii soiuz molo-dezhi* or Belarusian *Belaruskii respublikanski saizuz moladzhi*) is a government-supported and government-supporting mass membership youth league, not just a GONGO (officially, the BRYU is a "public association", *hramadskaie ab'iadnennie* in Belarusian), but also a classic AMO, according to Kasza's definition.³⁵ It was established in 2002 through a merger between the Belarusian Komsomol legacy organization, the Belarusian Youth Union, and the pro-presidential mass membership "public" association, the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union. In the early 2000s, it became a ubiquitous organization, present in every school

and institute of higher education, and structured according to a Leninist style territorial-industrial hierarchy.³⁶ The association is headed by the First Secretary of the Central Committee, who manages its activities and has the right to hire and fire BRYU employees.³⁷ The first secretary – and the BRYU leadership collectively – are subject to the supervision and evaluation of the Lukashenka administration. The BRYU's support of Lukashenka is downplayed at the grassroots level, arguably in order to attract more members to the league's activities,³⁸ but it has never been explicitly challenged. In August 2021, the BRYU's newly elected leader Alyaksandr Luk'ianov declared that the association would remain loyal to Lukashenka.³⁹ This loyalty is guaranteed by the association's financial dependence on the state, which pays for its 500 employees.

THE SUBSERVIENCE OF the BRYU leadership to Lukashenka is in contrast to its official role as the representatives of the young rank and file in the corridors of power. What's more, the political affiliation of the BRYU to Lukashenka complicates the organization's quest for enrolling the majority of young Belarusians to its ranks⁴⁰ which, in turn, is instrumental for the "formation of a young generation that would form the core of [Belarus's] work-loving, educated and healthy nation"⁴¹. As a result, enrolment in the BRYU takes place in a "voluntary-obligatory" manner, with the vast majority of members joining the organization at school (sometimes unconsciously) having been encouraged by their teachers. The level of BRYU membership is also high at universities, given that its members have a greater chance to be accepted to studies and receive a room in the university dormitory.⁴² This characterizes youth AMOs across the world.⁴³

The dubious enrolment practices of the BRYU create a number of challenges. Members who did not join of their own free will are reluctant to pay their membership fees and are unwilling to participate in the youth league's activities.⁴⁴ In order to improve the organization's tarnished image among its rank and file, Lukashenka has repeatedly ordered the youth league to engage in "real acts". Under the leadership of the BRYU's former first secretary, Dmitrii Voroniuk (2018–2021), there was



Participants and organizers of BRYU events at the Russian-Belarusian University in Mahileu, Eastern Belarus.

indeed a genuine attempt to give young BRYU members more freedom to establish their agenda.⁴⁵ After all, most contemporary authoritarian states have shifted from the unitary mass membership AMO model to a more pluralistic model comprising various government-affiliated youth groups that target different sub-groups of children and young adults.⁴⁶ Such an evolution has not formally taken place in Belarus, but within a unitary and centralized BRYU there was an attempt to create various “movements” or “projects” in the association during the period of “soft Belarusianization”.⁴⁷

IN THIS ARTICLE, I suggest that the BRYU’s international agenda is actually an extension of its domestic agenda. Strengthening its international activities was presumably one of its methods of achieving a larger and more active pool of members (which would keep the Lukashenka administration satisfied), given that offering opportunities for international youth exchange would improve the BRYU’s attractiveness to students and youth at large. Of course, for some young people, the stigma associated with the BRYU would be so great that they would not be attracted to its work, even if it could offer them something they were interested in. However, in my previous research I have argued that the thinking in the BRYU seemed to be that its bad reputation was only based on prejudice, not reality.⁴⁸

What’s more, given that there is reason to believe that reaping the benefits of the “voluntary-obligatory” BRYU membership was less stigmatized in the period of the “soft Belarusianization” than since the summer of 2020,⁴⁹ it seems plausible that the BRYU could indeed have increased its attractiveness to young people by offering its members a chance to engage in some kind

of international activity. In one electoral conference of a BRYU university committee, one of the few questions from the attending members was whether the committee secretary was planning to strengthen the international activities of the branch, suggesting that it would be favorably viewed by the rank and file.⁵⁰

In the next sections, I will address the research questions posed in the beginning of the article by analyzing whether the BRYU seeks to offer opportunities for international travel, work and study for its members and how its proclaimed “multi-vector international youth collaboration” works in practice. One of the findings of the study on which this article is based was that there were major differences in the BRYU’s international collaboration with actors in different parts of the world. Thus, the analytical part of the article is divided into three sections that discuss the different geographical vectors of the BRYU’s “multi-vector” collaboration.

Cooperation with actors in Russia

Out of the many “vectors” of the BRYU’s alleged cooperation, Russia has the overwhelmingly strongest role. Based on the diverse data analyzed in the framework of this article, most of the BRYU’s international activities are directed towards cooperation with actors in Russia. What’s more, these activities also seem to involve the greatest number of BRYU members.⁵¹ The acceleration of Belarus’ integration with Russia after the mass protests in 2020 has also been reflected in the youth sphere by the reinvigoration of the Russian-Belarusian Youth Union (Rus. *Rossiiskobelorusskii soyuz molodezhi*). The association, established in 2000 in an attempt to save the Belarusian Youth Union from a forced merger with the Belarusian Patriotic Youth Union, was to

be “rebooted and activated” to develop the interactions of young people in the Belarusian-Russian union state and beyond.⁵² At present, it is still too early to tell whether the organization’s reinvigoration has brought about any real change.

The BRYU’s close connections with Russian youth groups are rooted in both the shared Soviet past and Lukashenka’s political orientation towards Russia. Some collaborative activities, such as the summer camp “Be-La-Rus” on the border of Belarus, Latvia and Russia, have been organized annually since 1992. The summer camp is held in a symbolic location: the Kurgan of Friendship memorial site, which was built in 1959 to commemorate the cooperation of Soviet partisans of the three countries. According to the official plans for the 2021 camp, 500 people were expected to participate in the event. 120 of them would be sent by the BRYU, 120 by the Russian Union of Youth, 60 by the Latvian Komsomol legacy organization “Union of Progressive Youth of Latvia”, while 50 places were reserved for guests, such as former youth activists.⁵³

SINCE THE COLLAPSE of the Soviet Union, a similar youth camp called “Friendship” has also been organized on the Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian border by the three Komsomol legacy organizations. According to the BRYU, the event aims to “develop friendly relations among the youth of the Slavic republics, promote a healthy lifestyle, develop young people’s leadership and management skills, popularize national cultures and improve the work carried out by youth associations”⁵⁴. In 2013, the last year in which the Ukrainians participated, up to 2000 people attended the event. Based on publicly available sources, it was the largest Friendship camp ever organized. The number of participants had reportedly dropped to 250 in 2015 and 300 in 2018.⁵⁵

At the same time, the bilateral Russian-Belarusian Youth Forum, organized annually since 2013 by the BRYU and the government-affiliated National Council of Youth and Children’s associations in Russia has been institutionalized. While the forum has a limited scope since it is only attended by a few dozen individuals working in leadership positions in youth organizations in the two countries, it is possible that interaction between the government-affiliated youth group leaders in the two countries would result in bilateral cooperation among the organizations’ rank and file. Moreover, some bilateral youth events, such as the high-brow Belarusian-Russian culture festival “Youth for the Union State”, is not organized by the BRYU but by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union State.

As well as the bilateral collaboration, the BRYU participates, without exception, in all Russia-led international youth initiatives. In 2017, the Belarusian “delegation” to the World Festival of Youth and Students, organized in Sochi, comprised 300 representatives, many of whom were BRYU officials. The BRYU has also signed official partnership agreements with Russian

state and non-state actors in the youth sphere. In addition to the Russian Youth Union, the list includes actors such as the Youth Affairs Committee of the Astrakhan region and the government-affiliated association “Russian Student Labor Brigade.”⁵⁶ The agreement with the Russian Student Labor Brigade is noteworthy since it has practical implications at the grassroots level. As a result of Lukashenka’s orders, the Soviet tradition of summer labor brigades has been resurrected in Belarus quite successfully, with over 20 000 young people working in jobs organized by the BRYU every summer. In 2018, it was reported that 428 young people, making up 18 brigades, worked in the BRYU’s student labor brigades abroad, “mostly in Russia”.⁵⁷ Even though the BRYU’s labor brigades have been subject to a lot of criticism because of the poor working conditions and corruption, it is one of the few activities organized by the BRYU in which young people participate on a truly voluntary basis since it gives young people the opportunity to spend some time away from home and earn some money.⁵⁸

Cooperation with actors in Europe and the West at large

In the 1990s, when government repression towards Belarus’s nascent civil society had not yet reached its zenith, the Belarusian National Youth Council “RADA”, the umbrella organization of independent non-governmental organizations working in the youth sphere, was working hard to establish formal collaboration with Western youth associations, such as the European Youth Forum. RADA was established in 1992 and registered in 1997. As it had criticized the Lukashenka administration, in 2006 it was shut down by a court ruling. Its government-organized replacement, the Belarusian Committee of Youth Organizations (BCYO), was established in 2003. According to Anna Dapshevichyute, RADA’s current General Secretary, the BCYO was founded due to a conflict between RADA and the BRYU. In a recent interview, she argues that the BRYU was supposed to join RADA, but its membership application was declined “because it did not meet the criteria for transparency and democratic internal processes”⁵⁹.

The BCYO – currently an umbrella association for 20 government-affiliated youth organizations – failed to replace RADA as the official representative organ of Belarusian youth in the West. However, it seems to have only ever existed on paper, while its biggest member – the BRYU – sought to establish ties with youth associations in the West. According to Dapshevichyute, from 2006 onwards, the BRYU was repeatedly trying to present itself as the representative of Belarusian youth. However, she maintains that these attempts were futile: “International organizations are well aware of who really represents the youth of Belarus. We [RADA] have never had any problems showing the real picture of the Belarusian youth sector on the global level”.⁶⁰ It is likely that once Western youth associa-

“THE BRYU HAS ALSO SIGNED OFFICIAL PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS WITH RUSSIAN STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS IN THE YOUTH SPHERE.”

tions became aware of the BRYU's dubious "voluntary-compulsory" membership recruitment practices and its subservience to the Lukashenka administration, a decision was made to not include the BRYU in projects administered in the West.

The BRYU's attempt to engage with Western actors has therefore been effectively blocked by RADA. For example, in 2013, the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, Androulla Vassiliou, declared that funds from the European Commission for transnational cooperation projects in Belarus will not be allocated "to structures like the Belarusian Republican Youth Union."⁶¹ The statement came after the BRYU had claimed to have launched a collaboration with the Council of Europe and the European Youth Forum. A few months later, the then leader of the BRYU, Igor' Buzovskii, declared that it would be desirable for Belarusian labor brigades to have the chance to work in the European Union. He lamented that due to the EU's visa and labor regulations, young people could not "see Europe and earn some money in Poland picking strawberries".⁶² Buzovskii's statement suggests an awareness of young people's preference to work and travel in the West rather than the East.

While the BRYU has been eager to establish some cooperation with Western actors, the ties to the West seem to have remained weak even during the latest period of rapprochement between the Lukashenka government and the European Union from 2014 onwards. The plan to send BRYU members to work in Poland did materialize in 2017, when over 80 Belarusians were reportedly working in the Polish agriculture and construction sector.⁶³ In 2018, the BRYU reported that some 500 young people would work in a total of six regions of Poland, mainly in the agriculture sector. What's more, the BRYU's PR team reported that not only did the labor brigades pick fruit, they also got to know Polish youth by playing volleyball and football and organizing quizzes.⁶⁴ While it is hard to say what these organized leisure activities looked like in practice, the way the BRYU described them suggests an attempt to demonstrate the association's benefits to its members.

APART FROM THE LABOR BRIGADES, there is evidence that the BRYU has participated in some European events from 2018 onwards, but this participation has been limited in that that it only involved a few dozen BRYU members, primarily those in the association's leading positions. For example, in 2019, the BRYU was involved in *Enter! Youth Week*, organized by the Youth Department of the Council of Europe. Furthermore, in early 2020 the BRYU was authorized to issue the European Youth Card in Belarus. Had there been no mass protests and subsequent intensification of regime repression in the late summer of 2020, it is likely that the BRYU's cooperation with the West would only have strengthened. Nonetheless, the BRYU's role in supporting Lukashenka during the crisis effectively halted all forms of collaboration.

China and beyond

Given that Belarus shares a border with both Russia and the European Union and, until recently, Lukashenka's administration has sought to create an image of balance between these two powers, it is natural that the Belarusian Republican Youth Union has sought to develop "multi-vector international youth collaboration" primarily in the direction of Europe and Russia. However, given the growing importance of China for Lukashenka's foreign policy following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Beijing's desire to mark its presence in (Eastern) Europe,⁶⁵ it could be assumed that the BRYU would like to deepen its cooperation with the All-China Youth Federation, the national umbrella organization for Chinese youth groups, as well as with the party-led Communist Youth League of China.

THE BRYU DOES INDEED have a cooperation agreement with the All-China Youth Federation, which was signed in 2011. According to the BRYU, the aim of the cooperation agreement is to expand collaboration by exchanging know-how in the spheres of youth entrepreneurship, ideological education and patriotic upbringing.⁶⁶

Based on available media accounts and my interviews with BRYU officials⁶⁷, cooperation primarily takes place on the level of organizational leadership, with the BRYU and the Lukashenka administration inviting Chinese youth policy officials to visit Belarus and the BRYU leadership in turn paying visits to China. Based on the data analyzed in this article, a deeper cooperation between the organizations would appear to be missing,

although in 2018, the Belarusian news agency BelTA reported on the preparations of a planned new annual event called the Forum of Belarusian and Chinese Youth.⁶⁸

To an extent, the BRYU's cooperation with Chinese youth groups seems to take place through the youth policy structures of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Since Belarus is not (yet) a member of the SCO, the BRYU is not eligible to join the SCO Youth Council. Yet it has a partner status, which enables it to participate in the SCO's youth policy activities, such as the SCO Young Leaders' Forum.⁶⁹ The SCO is a comfortable partner for the BRYU, given that the organization is not committed to democratic principles. The BRYU's engagement with the SCO Youth Council and its national member organizations, some of with whom the BRYU also has bilateral collaboration agreements⁷⁰, is limited in the sense that it only involves the BRYU's leadership, not the rank and file.

In contrast to the superficial level of interaction between the BRYU and its Chinese counterparts, the cooperation between the Chinese government and Belarusian universities has been deepening at an accelerating pace. At present, six Belarusian institutes of higher education host Confucius Institutes.⁷¹ In May 2022, Ol'ga Kreinina, Head of the International Marketing and Ranking Office at the International Relations Directorate of the Belarusian State University, boasted that over the last

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decade, collaboration with Chinese institutions had enabled 500 students to travel to China to participate in various kinds of programs and projects.⁷² In one academic article that cites impressive figures, Valerii Matsel' from the Academy of Public Administration under the aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus argues that Belarusian-Chinese cooperation in the field has intensified considerably since 2014.⁷³

Conclusions

This article has explored the international activities of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, Belarus' omnipresent government-organized youth organization, and identified differences in the quality of BRYU's collaboration with Russian, European and Chinese youth policy actors. Although no verifiable quantitative data is available that would allow a systematic comparison to be made between these three spaces, the article argues that the BRYU's "multi-vector international youth collaboration" is mostly exercised with Russian actors. The forging of ties with Western actors has been complicated, not by the BRYU's lack of interest, but rather by the organization's affiliation to the Lukashenka government, while the superficial nature of the BRYU's cooperation with Chinese and other Asian youth groups seems to be the result of a lack of genuine interest, at least on the BRYU's side. Before 2020, BRYU's officials would often voice their interest in strengthening multi-level collaboration with Western actors, whereas the cooperation with Chinese actors has remained at the level of abstraction. In contrast, as this article has demonstrated with its examples of joint events, collaboration with actors in Russia seems to come "naturally" to the BRYU.

In the introduction to this Special Issue, the editors suggest that both China and Russia promote student mobility and academic exchange in order to spread illiberal and authoritarian values and norms to the young generation. While the BRYU could arguably be seen as one potential channel for such authoritarian promotion in Belarus, the analysis of the BRYU's international activities from the period when Belarus was the most open to Russia, the West and China (i.e., 2014–2020), suggests that the omnipresent Belarusian youth league did not serve such a function. In general, the article has found that its activities abroad have been both limited and shallow. Apart from the labor brigades, all BRYU international activities have only involved top officials and individuals that have proved themselves in the BRYU's projects at home.

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE to make sense of the lack of development of the BRYU's international activities? The answer lies in the organization's subservience to Alyaksandr Lukashenka. From the very beginning of its existence, the BRYU's leadership has been accountable to Belarus' authoritarian leader rather than its rank and file. For Lukashenka, the BRYU's core mission has always been to strengthen authoritarianism at home. The task of strengthening transnational links, even with Russia, has never been a priority. Even though the BRYU's leadership has demonstrated a level of interest in developing its transnational ties with Western youth associations (in order to make it seem more at-

tractive to the Belarusian youth), its subservience to Lukashenka has prevented such collaboration from being established.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are no signs that the development of international activities is likely to occur in the near future. In the aftermath of the mass protest movement of 2020, the BRYU has only become more insular. Its new leadership has rejected the post-2014 policy of improving the league's popularity among the rank and file and has refocused on the authoritarian top-down model of patriotic education.⁷⁴ The BRYU's only reported project targeting the West since this time has been to advocate against the sanctions imposed on Lukashenka's regime.⁷⁵ Indeed, the room for collaboration with Western actors seems to have vanished, given the many international organizations that have stopped funding the projects of such state-supported organizations. ✖

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The youth leaders are carrying the Latvian flags in a procession on March 16, 2023, the Remembrance Day of the Latvian Legionnaires. The Latvian Legion was part of the Waffen SS.

PHOTO: JAUNIEŠI/LATVIJAI

Making tomorrow's leaders

by **Pēteris F Timofejevs**
& **Louis John Wierenga**

The transnationalism of radical right youth organizations in the Baltic Sea area, 2015–2019

abstract

Radical right parties (RRPs) have been extensively studied throughout the past two decades. One neglected aspect is the youth organizations (YOs) of RRP and their transnational networks. This article analyzes the transnational links between the YOs of RRP in Estonia and Latvia. The article contributes to the literature by arguing for four findings relating to the transnational links between the YOs of RRP, which provide a window into the future of the parties being analyzed.

KEYWORDS: EKRE; The National Alliance; radical right parties; youth wings; transnational networks.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, the literature on political parties with a radical right or nationalist conservative agenda and ideology has evolved into a well-established field of political science. Knowledge about far-right parties has greatly advanced, covering such aspects as their organization, electoral performance and participation in coalition governments. Yet very little is known about the youth organizations associated with these parties, apart from the literature on more extremist groups, such as skinheads, neo-Nazis and the alt-right.

As radical right parties (RRPs) have substantially increased in popularity throughout most of Europe since 2015, gaining an average of between 12–15% of the national vote, and in some cases more, the likelihood of their longevity is high. As Cynthia Miller-Idriss notes, there is a consensus in scholarship that political attitudes that are developed and formed in adolescence and early adulthood usually persist over time,¹ thereby increasing the likelihood that many people involved in the youth organizations (YOs) of RRP will become future leaders and elected representatives.

This highlights the dual importance of research on the YOs in RRP. First, that parties which have become permanently embedded in the national electorate of their countries are pushing to restructure socio-cultural values, as well as taking a stance towards Euroscepticism and European integration.² Second, as the Overton window³ has expanded – both for radical right *parties* and in radical right *politics* – the nature of discourse and, in some cases, ideology, is changing. We expect that in most cases, the YOs in RRP will hold more right-wing views on socio-cultural issues than the mother party. Michael Minkenberg highlights an important difference between RRP in Eastern and Western Europe.⁴ His central argument is that the post-communist transition and unfinished nation-building has led to radical right parties in the region being both ideologically more extreme and more organizationally fluid than their Western counterparts.⁵ There is a small and continuously growing body of literature on the radical right in Central and Eastern Europe, yet the Baltic States remain understudied. This study intends to fill this gap.

Acknowledging that scholarship on the youth organizations of far-right parties, their relationship with the mother party and each other (i.e., transnational links) is still in its infancy, we present a comparative case study of two youth organizations of radical right parties that are and have been represented in both the Estonian and Latvian parliaments. Using a paired comparison, we explore the transnational linkages of the youth organization of the National Alliance (*Nacionālās apvienības jaunatnes organizācija*, henceforth referred to as NAJO)⁶ in Latvia, Blue Awakening (*Sinine Āratus* henceforth referred to as SĀ) and the youth organization of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond*, henceforth referred to as the EKRE). As much as this paper is about presenting preliminary findings, its hypotheses aim to explain the transnationalism of the youth organizations of RRP.

Research questions

The paper analyzes the transnational dimension of two youth organizations of RRP in the Baltic Sea region. In particular, we map and describe the transnational interactions of two Baltic

cases, namely, SĀ and NAJO, specifically between 2015 until late 2019. We ask whether a transnational RR youth elite is emerging, mapping the transnational networks of both case studies.

The overarching research question that this paper examines is as follows: to what extent do youth organizations of RRP engage in transnational activities? There are also two sub-questions: First, what type of transnational interactions do youth organizations engage in? Second, how can their patterns of interactions be explained?

Transnationalism

In this section, we define the transnationalism of political parties, and especially what we understand by the transnational dimension of the youth organizations of RRP. What we call “transnationalism” is the phenomenon of ideas, people and capital moving across borders. One of the earlier attempts to conceptualize transnationalism argues that one of the characteristics of “complex interdependence” between nations is the existence of multiple channels connecting societies, among them, transnational channels employed by such non-governmental actors as multinational corporations, banks and trade unions.⁷ In an earlier article, “transnational relations” are defined as “contacts, coalitions, and interactions across state boundaries that are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of governments”, and “transnational interactions” are, in essence, the “movement of tangible or intangible items across state boundaries when at least one actor is not an agent of a government or an intergovernmental organization”.⁸ Thomas Risse-Kappen fine-tuned the definition stating that transnational relations are “regular

interactions across national boundaries when at least one actor is a non-state agent or does not operate on behalf of a national government or an international organization”.⁹ In this paper we understand “transnationalism”, “transnational dimension” and “transnational relations” synonymously as interactions of YOs and their representatives across national borders. These interactions need not always be in person, they can take place through digital channels of communication, for instance, various social media outlets, especially Facebook and Twitter.¹⁰

WE UNDERSTAND transnational interactions rather broadly as being not “just” contacts between youth organizations, but also a more permanent form of cooperation that entails a certain level of intensity and regularity of cross-national interaction. Transnational interactions can be conceptualized as both institutionalized (for instance, an international association comprising several youth organizations) and non-institutionalized. The latter may include cross-national contacts and interactions, either bilaterally or multilaterally (including several youth organiza-

“THERE IS A SMALL AND CONTINUOUSLY GROWING BODY OF LITERATURE ON THE RADICAL RIGHT IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE, YET THE BALTIC STATES REMAIN UNDERSTUDIED.”

tions). As we demonstrate below, there is literature that addresses the efforts of RRP to institutionalize multilateral cooperation at the European level, similar to the way in which mainstream political parties institutionalize their cooperation in the form of European political parties and political party groups at the European Parliament. Below we summarize the main findings of the literature that addresses the transnational interactions of far-right parties.

Bilateral links

However, while the transnational dimension of political parties is a well-established field of research, there has been relatively little research on the transnational activities of RRP, and even less has been written about the transnationalism of their youth organizations.

A unique contribution is that of Graham Macklin, who examined the transnational networking between the British National Party (BNP) and the National Democrat Party (NDP) of Germany, even though these parties tend to be classified as belonging to the extreme right. As he noted, there have been “cordial relations between the Young BNP and the *Junge Nationaldemokraten*” ever since the BNP youth wing was established¹¹.

Multilateral institutionalized cooperation

Most of the focus of the literature has been on the efforts to establish multilateral transnational cooperation between RRP at the European level. In an early work that reviewed the international contacts and efforts to establish a more structured cooperation at the European level (particularly in the European Parliament), Cas Mudde cautioned against engaging in “quasi-paranoid conspiracy theories” about an emerging or existing “Nationalist International”.¹² Indeed, European RRP engage in international cooperation with other like-minded parties, but such cooperation has been far from successful, as indicated by several failed attempts to establish something more structured.¹³

Nicholas Startin examined one such unsuccessful attempt, namely, the establishment and short-lived existence of “Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty” (ITS), a far-right party group in the European Parliament that lasted from January to November 2007.¹⁴ In Startin’s assessment, the potential emergence of transnational cooperation in Europe in the future was “unlikely”.¹⁵ However, in 2009, several far-right parties established the Alliance of European National Movements, a Europarty with the aim of forming a common parliamentary group in the European Parliament.¹⁶

While focusing on the role perceptions of individual Eurosceptic Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from what she called the “untidy right” (i.e. the far right), Nathalie Brack pointed to the role of ideological heterogeneity among radical right MEPs,

their role perceptions and institutional context as the main reasons for their lack of closer cooperation and joint impact.¹⁷ In contrast, Petra Vejvodová argued that nationalism, which is at the center of the RRP, as well as a charismatic leadership style, which contributes to bitter personal conflicts among party leaders, are in themselves obstacles to creating a lasting cooperation.¹⁸

Diffusion of ideas

The diffusion of ideas has been the focus of another strand of research. While Macklin explored how the BNP and the NDP made an effort to find a “master frame” that would allow for a closer relationship and common activities,¹⁹ Farid Hafez examined the transnational contacts of European far-right activists and RRP, including exchange of ideas, and found an ideational shift in their political rhetoric from anti-Semitism to Islamophobia.²⁰ Also, he pointed to Islamophobia as a shared common ideological ground for building a more cohesive European cooperation, and as the potential for building bridges with both the Israeli and US far right.²¹ Tamir Bar-On focused on the intellectual and ideological influence of the French *Nouvelle Droite*, especially Alain de Benoist, and their pan-Europeanist, anti-liberal democracy, anti-capitalist and anti-West project on the ideological underpinnings of the European New

“THE MAIN EFFECTS OF TRANSNATIONAL INTERACTIONS CAN BE CATEGORIZED AS FALLING INTO ONE OF THE FOLLOWING THREE CATEGORIES: CONTAGION, DIFFUSION AND DEMONSTRATION EFFECTS.”

Right.²² Marina Peunova mapped the influence of the European New Right on the work of Russian intellectual Aleksandr Panarin, whose version of Eurasianism (and that of Aleksandr Dugin) has been especially influential in Russia’s foreign policy discussions.²³ In the context of the diffusion of ideas in the transnational radical right websphere, the importance of Twitter has been highlighted.²⁴

Effects of transnational interactions:

diffusion, contagion and demonstration effects

The main effects of transnational interactions can be categorized as falling into one of the following three categories: contagion, diffusion and demonstration effects. When networking and interacting, it is possible that youth organizations may find some of their partners’ experiences (organizational or campaign strategies, ideological frameworks, etc.) valuable or worthwhile to emulate or adapt to the particular national context. At its core, this dynamic of social learning or lesson drawing constitutes the effects of diffusion. While it is reasonable to expect a certain degree of diffusion after regularized contacts, it should, however, not be presumed or taken for granted. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect that such diffusion can take place through different channels. First, diffusion can take place through formal *direct* channels of communication when leaders of youth organizations make contact with each other and establish formal ties. Second, it is likely that informal indirect channels of communication can facilitate transnational diffusion, for instance, when



There were pagan and esoteric activities at the Blue Awakening (Sinine Äratuse, SÄ) summer camp of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE) 2016.

PHOTO: SININE ÄRATUS

members of a youth organization meet or interact with members of another youth organization across national boundaries, or when they read each other's written work posted on various websites. This distinction between formal and direct and informal and indirect channels of diffusion was first described by Jens Rydgren who focused on what he called "extreme right-wing populist" parties,²⁵ but can also be used for our purposes.

Second, transnational interactions can lead to demonstration effects, which were theorized by Kitschelt who, focusing on the populist variant of RRP, noted that "in terms of geographical space, a radical right-wing party's electoral success in one country may produce a demonstration effect that helps equivalent parties even in countries where demand- and supply-side conditions are less favorable for the rise of such parties".²⁶ Translating this statement from a party context into a statement that is meaningful for the context of youth organizations – if one youth organization has had substantial success and has established reputational capital, noticed across national boundaries, this can help another youth organization – in another national context – which is also striving to emulate the success story.

The fact that a party or youth organization has experienced considerable success does not in itself lead to automatic diffusion or demonstration effects. Rather, it is reasonable to assume that, precisely like political parties, youth organizations will establish transnational contact and interact with such youth organizations that fulfill certain (pre-)conditions. First, a necessary but not sufficient in itself condition for establishing transnational links and adopting a certain practice, ideological framework or organizational innovation through diffusion is that it is deemed as being successful in achieving certain political goals.²⁷ Based on sociological research, it is barely plausible that an agent would want to emulate an unsuccessful kind of behavior, while notable examples of successful behavior may lead to "contagion effects" when an increasing number of agents may want to emulate the kind of behavior that is "rewarded".²⁸ Second, it is likely that transnational

interactions and diffusion will be established among youth organizations that are similar in terms of their goals, ideological profile and values.²⁹ The third condition concerns the geographical proximity between youth organizations that may engage in diffusion. It goes without saying that those youth organizations that are closer to each other geographically are more likely to interact and cooperate than youth organizations from far-away countries.

FINALLY, THERE ARE parties and youth organizations which, despite their success and high profile, are deemed as being a threat to a person's own legitimacy and reputation. Elisabeth Ivarsson has shown that parties that have a "reputational shield" can fend off accusations of being extremists. However, we reason that these reputational assets can be endangered if one youth organization associates (interacts and formally cooperates) with another youth organization that does not have such a reputational shield and (or) has a particularly negative reputation.³⁰ Association with such actors may have detrimental effects on a youth organization, which will therefore avoid publicly associating itself with or contacting such a contagious counterpart. In short, we posit that youth organizations engage in a certain cost-benefit calculation about potential transnational interactions and cooperation and that they are keen to avoid incurring domestic-political or reputational costs in the domestic political arena, either for themselves or their mother parties. Such calculations have influenced how radical right parties make choices about their parliamentary party group membership in the European Parliament, and sometimes such concerns for domestic respectability have been more important than ideological considerations.³¹

Based on the literature on the transnationalization of far-right parties and adapting this literature to the purpose of this article on youth organization, the following four expectations can be formulated:

- 1 Youth organizations that are similar in terms of their politi-

- cal goals, ideological profiles and values are more likely to engage in transnational interactions with each other.
- 2 Youth organizations that are in geographical proximity are more likely to engage in transnational interactions with each other.
 - 3 Youth organizations are more likely to adopt the ideas, strategies and other models from those youth organizations that are perceived as successful.
 - 4 Youth organizations are more likely to cooperate with other youth organizations if the benefits of such cooperation outweigh the costs.

Data, methods and research design

In assessing both cases, the tip of the iceberg metaphor seems particularly apt. Our partial impression is that researching transnational interactions between YOs using an interview method did not reveal the whole truth.³² As the questions about the transnational activities of YOs covered one of several themes, it could be that the interviewees felt that they did not want to delve too deeply into their transnational relations with their partners in other countries. The data from social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook and other websites offer a valuable addition, and we studied the photographic evidence and links to other websites. Moreover, the photographic evidence only indicates that a particular representative from one of the YOs we studied has been at the same meeting or on the same march as some other representative of another YO. We are unsure as to whether the people from different organizations actually interacted meaningfully at such events, and we know even less about the nature of such interactions. Thus, the interviews and social media analysis³³ will complement each other in informing our conclusions regarding the extent of the transnational international interactions and activities of the YOs under study.

We proceed with a paired comparison in order to present a thorough and in-depth analysis of both cases. Despite the geographical proximity of Estonia and Latvia, this does not serve as the sole justification of our case selection. We move beyond geographic proximity and focus on neighboring cases because a transnational ideological alliance was made between the mother parties, along with the Lithuanian Nationalist Union (LTS), which presents several existing similarities. Further, as the RR is largely limited to Europe, case selection is already limited. We follow Michael Minkenberg's research as our point of departure in that the radical right in Central and Eastern Europe has noticeable differences, being ideologically more extreme and organizationally more fluid than their West European counterparts.³⁴ Additionally, as will be explained below, another reason why we limited our cases to Baltic YOs whose mother parties are in government is due to the duality of "others", national minorities *and* migrants, present or potential, originating from outside Europe.

OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEWS were conducted with board members of NAJO and SÄ. The data retrieved from these interviews inform us about the structure of each YO, why the participants decided to become involved in politics, as well as the nature of their activi-

ties in the YO, which, in both cases, included transnational contacts and activity. Social media analysis was our secondary methodological approach. We mapped the transnational links based on data collected from official YO Facebook pages, as well as the accounts of board members, Twitter accounts and the website The New Nationalism (later called New Prometheus), which was managed by a member of NAJO and served as a nationalist think tank and news site for Central and Eastern Europe.³⁵ We should also mention that this research strategy of employing on-line resources presents its own risks. As early observers noted: "On the Web everything is in a state of flux and is subject to continuous change."³⁶ For instance, Twitter accounts can be deleted or suspended, or websites can cease to exist, or their content can be transferred to another domain. For this reason, we have worked with the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, and in cases when we have identified broken links, websites that have ceased to exist and similar, we have reported this.

Finally, we need to justify the time frame in which the research was conducted. It could be reasonable to expect that at least two events in recent history have fueled or at least contributed to increased transnationalism among RRP and their YOs – the surge of RRP in the 2014 European Parliament election and the 2015 migration crisis. Our "fieldwork" (data collection) stopped in late 2019, even though we also refer to events after 2019. This was due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine, which triggered a further dynamic resulting in the re-alignment of some European RRP (especially vis-à-vis Russia). Thus, this inter-crises period provides an opportunity to test our expectations in "normal" conditions, which are not overly influenced by extraordinary events, even though the Brexit referendum in the UK and the 2016 US presidential election arguably are two extraordinary events that created favorable conditions (or at least expectations) for intensified transnational cooperation among RRP in Europe.

The Baltic region

Two primary factors influence the radical right in the Baltic region. The first factor is a shared history, which includes Soviet occupation and the policies of Russification. As noted by Daunis Auers and Andres Kasekamp, a distinct brand of nativism has been evident in the Baltics, directed towards the Russian-speaking population.³⁷ This is in line with other researchers who assert that national minorities have been a key focus for the radical right in the broader region of Central and Eastern Europe in the absence of large-scale migration from outside Europe.³⁸

While migrants from outside Europe remain rare, as do the numbers of refugees resettled by the European Commission after the 2015 crisis, the arrival of very low numbers of refugees and the potential for future refugees has brought this to the forefront of the radical right agenda in Estonia and Latvia. Given that YOs comprise young people, they have come of age during in an era in which issues beyond the presence of Russian speakers have entered the agenda of the radical right, including refugees/migrants, foreign students, and gender politics. This is likely to influence the radical right in the region for years to come.

The second factor is the unity between the two parties under study and the Lithuanian Nationalist Union, which can be found in the Bauska Declaration. This declaration outlines a nationalist worldview specific to nationalists from the Baltic states. While Euroscepticism is a component of all parties in the RRP family, and it is quite common for RRP to regard Putin and the Russian Federation as allies, this is understandably not the case for the EKRE and the National Alliance. However, the Bauska Declaration (2013) makes it abundantly clear that both parties are against a European superstate and advocate for control of their borders.³⁹ Also, all the signatories are opposed to mass migration. A notable difference from many other RRP is their vocal opposition to Russia – in terms of both a resurgent Russia threatening the territorial sovereignty of the Baltic States and the former USSR.⁴⁰

The Lithuanian Nationalist Union (*Lietuvių tautininkų ir respublikonų sąjunga*, LTS in Lithuanian) was excluded from our sample as it does not wield any significant political power and is not represented at the national level. Both the EKRE and the National Alliance have been part of coalition governments in Estonia and Latvia, respectively, and have well-functioning youth organizations.

The Baltic cases

The Baltic Sea region is by no means an exception when it comes to the new wave of far-right political parties. In this section we will review the main youth organizations of RRP in the region.

In Latvia, the far-right niche is filled by the National Alliance (*Nacionālā apvienība*, NA), which is a merger between two previously independent parties – For Fatherland and Freedom/ Latvia's National Independence Movement (*Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/ Latvijas Nacionālās Neatkarības Kustība*, TB/LNNK), and All for Latvia (*Visu Latvijai*, VL). Concerning the NA, questions have been raised as to whether the NA is an RRP⁴¹. It seems that the classification of TB/LNNK attracts the most controversy as it has been described as a “nationalist right-wing” party,⁴² and previously a radical party, although non-radical from the mid-1990s onwards.⁴³ Others have classified TB/LNNK as a “radical right party”⁴⁴. The TB/LNNK's ideology has been described as a form of “romantic ultranationalism”⁴⁵. In short, it is possible that TB/LNNK's ideological focus had shifted over time, but it is argued here that until its merger with VL, it fulfilled the criteria of being classified as an RRP.

The classification of VL has been less contentious. Although VL did not exist as a political party in 2005, it (as an independent youth organization) was described as “racist”.⁴⁶ After VL was registered as a political party in 2006, it was classified as an “extreme-right” party,⁴⁷ or “right-wing nationalist”.⁴⁸ All in all, according to the definitions provided in the section describing the main features of RRP, this paper follows the more up-to-date contributions that regard the NA as a populist variant of RRP.⁴⁹

AFTER VL AND TB/LNNK joined in an electoral alliance “National Alliance VL/TB-LNNK” in 2010, over a period of one year, the mainstream parties imposed a *cordon sanitaire* against the then two parties VL and TB/LNNK. However, after the snap elections in 2011, the balance of power in Latvia's parliament changed and the previously doubt-ridden coalition partners asked the then newly formed NA to join in a coalition government. It seems that the presence of the “old guard” from TB/LNNK – which had been a coalition partner in almost all governments since the late 1990s – in the NA, provided a “reputational shield” to the younger politicians, with a background in VL. TB/LNNK had a presence in the European Parliament as a member of the Euro-

pean political party “Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists” (since 2018, European Conservatives and Reformists Party, ECRP) and its political party group in the European Parliament European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). Moreover, it had previously held ministerial positions in numerous Latvian cabinets. Having such a reputational shield meant that the NA could lean on it when their more radical political positions were called into question.

NAJO was established in 2013, and while its beginnings were rather informal – as a youth group in the mother party – with various activities aimed at engaging party youth, it was established as a more formal organization in 2015 when the Statutes of NAJO were adopted by the board of NA. Ideologically, NAJO and the NA seem to be united in support of “Latvian values”, and the Statutes of NAJO set out the organization's aims as follows:

1.4.1 Implementation of VL-TB/LNNK's policy, popularization of [its] positions and ideas, actualization of national, social, educational and cultural issues in a wider society, defense of the interests of the Latvian people, support for the Latvian value system and morality, cultivation of Latvian traditions and understanding of the Latvian way of life.⁵⁰

NAJO's vision is summed up in Section 1.4.2:

The safe future of a national, democratic and economically thriving State of Latvia in the community of European states as a guarantee for the existence, development and human welfare of the Latvian nation.⁵¹

The ideological congruence was probably reinforced by the fact that one of the founders of NAJO, Raivis Zeltīts, was appointed Secretary General of the NA in November 2014.⁵² This position gave him the opportunity to serve as an informal link between NAJO and the mother party. Zeltīts was the key figure behind a transnational nationalist website, *The New Nationalism* (later *The New Prometheism*). The other primary contributor to this site is

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another NAJO member, Dace Kalnina. This site existed for nationalists in the Intermarium Region, which is Central and Eastern Europe from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Given that Zeltīts was Secretary General of the mother party until early 2020, it is likely that this was accepted by other party leaders, as well as NAJO.

The case of the youth organization of the National Alliance

Being an integrated part of its mother party, the NA, NAJO could be expected to have formal links with other like-minded parties in the European Parliament and their youth organizations. The NA is part of the parliamentary party group European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and its Europarty ECR Party which unites, among its 42 members, such parties as the British Conservative Party, the Polish governing party Law and Justice, Spanish Vox, the Dutch Forum for Democracy and the Sweden Democrats. NAJO has been a member of European Young Conservatives (EYC), a group comprising the youth organizations of European conservative parties,⁵³ which has had a non-exclusive relation with the ECR Party. Its current membership status is not clear, however. Although it was listed as one of the members as late as 2017,⁵⁴ NAJO is no longer an active member but has not notified the EYC of its withdrawal from the EYC⁵⁵. Although it is not clear why this has happened, it may be to do with the withdrawal of the Finns Party Youth (*Perussuomalaiset Nuoret*, PSN) from the EYC and the expulsion of SÄ in 2017. Both organizations criticized the actions of the government of Turkey, especially its human rights abuses.⁵⁶ As will be later shown, NAJO has relatively close ties with Blue Awakening, and it is possible that the inaction of NAJO may be a coordinated response to the exclusion of SÄ from the EYC.

BASED ON AN ANALYSIS of the interview data and photographs published on the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook in October and November 2019, it seems that NAJO had three primary transnational contacts: the SÄ in Estonia, the Lithuanian National Youth Union (*Lietuvių tautinio jaunimo sąjunga*, LTJS) and various Ukrainian right-wing youth politicians from both the All-Ukrainian Union “Freedom” (*Всеукраїнське об’єднання «Свобода»*, Svoboda) and the National Corps (Національний корпус, NC). In 2018, NAJO made contact with the Finnish PSN, which would appear to be the fourth organizational partner.

In general, it seems that the forging and maintaining of transnational contacts are not a major part of NAJO’s activities. As Raivis Zeltīts, the then chair of NAJO⁵⁷, admitted:

[We] have some type of acquaintance, [we] have contacts, but, well, we may not have time for such a systematic [cooperation]. In general, everyone is busy with the current matters of their own country, thus it happens, well, in such a natural way, that we have the closest contact with the countries that are the closest [to us geographically]. The Baltics, the Baltic Sea region.⁵⁸

In this segment, Zeltīts not only describes NAJO’s contacts with

its partners in other countries as unsystematic, he also touches on the theme of geographical proximity as being an important criterion for cooperation. This theme was also raised by Ginta Vilcāne, the former chair of NAJO:

We certainly cooperate more with our neighbors [laughs] the Estonians and Lithuanians [...] And [we] also have contacts with Ukrainians [...] with the representatives of Svoboda, there we have a regular information exchange, and they have attended our major events, the torchlight procession on November 18. We, in turn, try to visit Estonia and Lithuania every year.⁵⁹

When she was asked to specify the Lithuanian party to which its partner youth organization is affiliated, Vilcāne declined to answer. Instead, she seemed to indicate that NAJO has a closer relationship with SÄ in Estonia than with the LTJS in Lithuania.

Asked to characterize the transnational contacts regarding the type of contacts (visits, participation in various events, etc.), Vilcāne described them as follows:

Well, yes, there are common events, visits to events, conferences. They invite us, we invite them, they attend our major congresses, and then we invite [them] to different types of events that happen in our country or attend events in their country. We also communicate online.⁶⁰

Zeltīts also confirmed that the transnational contacts are primarily about visits and communication with each other. However, Zeltīts noted that NAJO tries to follow its partners’ performances in electoral campaigns and to “draw some conclusions” and “communicate” with its partners.⁶¹ Asked about whether transnational contacts are important to NAJO and whether he thinks it is important to work on them in the future, he stated:

It’s important [to have transnational contacts], yes, definitely, because [...] [it’s] always important [inaudible] a larger context to what is happening and... [it] is always useful to obtain information and learn from others [...] in order to develop [our organization]. So yes, we definitely consider this to be [an] important [matter] and [...] we move in that direction, we make an effort to broaden these contacts.⁶²

In addition, when prompted, Zeltīts answered that he does not have “private” relations with his transnational contacts. However, he noted that, in his view, it is not important to formally belong to a certain community or group. The aim of transnational contacts is to establish “friendly relations” that are based on the “understanding about a type of common values” and “common interests”⁶³.

Ukraine

The events in Kyiv and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 sent shock waves throughout Latvia, and the NA, as an integral part of

the Latvian coalition government, took a sympathetic approach to the post-Maidan Ukrainian government. The official account of NAJO (Twitter handle: @NA_Jaunatne; this account is suspended) retweeted tweets related to Ukraine on at least three occasions. On one occasion, NAJO retweeted a tweet by Ritvars Eglājs⁶⁴ who had retweeted UNHCR's (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) tweet on internal refugees in Ukraine, which included a map of Ukraine. Eglājs' response to comment on this tweet was: "Real refugees do not flee miles and miles away." (*Īsti bēgļi nebēg pāri trejdeviņām zemēm.*)⁶⁵ On January 4, 2016, NAJO retweeted a tweet by Dace Kalniņa (Twitter handle: @DaceKalnina; this account has been deleted), a NAJO activist, who had posted four photos from what seemed to be three demonstrations of solidarity with Ukraine organized in the three Baltic capitals (the photos were followed by the text: "This evening in Rīga, Vilnius, Tallinn. #don't_forget_ukraine"), and, as one of the demonstrations was organized outside the Ukrainian embassy in Riga, it attracted the attention of Yevhen Perebynis, the then Ambassador of Ukraine in Latvia, who retweeted photos from the event with the following text: "Latvian youth stand in solidarity with Ukraine today at the Embassy in its fight against Russian aggression" (Латвійська молодь сьогодні провела біля Посольства акцію солідарності з Україною в її боротьбі проти агресії Росії).⁶⁶ The ambassador's tweet was subsequently retweeted in the official account of NAJO.

THE SOLIDARITY WITH Ukraine was demonstrated in other ways, too.

For instance, on August 23, 2015 and 2016, some female activists of NAJO were photographed posing at the Statue of Independence in Riga, clad in the traditional costumes of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine, as part of events by the NA and NAJO to commemorate the "Baltic Way", an iconic event in 1989 when thousands of Baltic people formed a human chain in protest at the Soviet regime and in commemoration of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact⁶⁷. In the 2015 event a tweet by the user "Впертий Націоналіст" [The Stubborn Nationalist] shows a photo of four female activists in Ukrainian, Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian ethnic costumes posing with Egīls Levits, the then Member of the European Court of Justice (now – the President of State) with the Statue of Liberty in the background; the caption reads: "Україна, Латвія, Литва, Естонія – цьогорічний День "Балтійського шляху" у Латвії" [Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia – this year's Baltic Way Day in Latvia].⁶⁸ While it is not clear from the textual and photographic evidence that these female activists were Ukrainian, it is still a clear demonstration of solidarity with Ukraine.

Although Vilcāne claimed that NAJO had cooperated with Svoboda youth politicians, no photographic or textual evidence could be found to support this claim. Some photographic and textual evidence shows that NAJO had been in touch with Olga

Semenyaka, representative of the Ukrainian far-right party the "National Corps". In Bauska, in September 2018, Semenyaka gave a speech "The 3rd millennium Intermarium as a key to the Greater Europe of Free Nations" on the idea of Intermarium, thanking the Latvian team behind the *The New Nationalism* website – Dace Kalniņa and Raivis Zeltīts – for providing a platform for discussions about Intermarium.⁶⁹

Lithuania

There is some evidence to suggest that NAJO has been in contact with the Lithuanian National Youth Union (LTJS). For instance, Raivis Zeltīts participated with Lithuanian nationalist activists in the march celebrating Lithuania's Independence Day on February 16, 2015. Although his Twitter message did not specify either who Zeltīts had met or the identity of the people in the photographs, Zeltīts explained in the tweet that he had met with "Lithuania's nationalists" to celebrate Lithuania's independence⁷⁰. A similar tweet was posted by the official account of NAJO a year later, on February 17, 2016, and this time the tweet contained a link to a Facebook photo album, which included the identity of the organizers of the march – LTJS.⁷¹

On September 21, 2015, the official account of NAJO retweeted a tweet by the then NAJO activist, later the chair, Ginta Vilcāne, who posted a photo, showing a fire, flags and people, with the following text (translated into Latvian by PT): "The Day of Baltic Unity was spent with brother Lithuanians, observing the

traditions of ancestors. @NA_jaunatne."⁷²

The leader of the LTJS, Mindaugas Sidaravičius, is listed as following Raivis Zeltīts on Twitter, but little is known about their interactions.⁷³

Estonia

Most evidence, both textual and photographic, indicates that NAJO's main international partner is the Blue Awakening (SÄ). Not only has the evidence shown that NAJO activists have visited the congress of the EKRE, the mother party of SÄ, or an NA MP tweeting about the electoral success of EKRE,⁷⁴ there is photographic evidence that also shows that NAJO activists visited SÄ's torchlight processions, for instance, in 2018, when SÄ organized a torchlight procession to celebrate Estonia's Centennial Jubilee.⁷⁵

Participation in these large "memorial events" seems to bring together different youth activists from different countries. At least one of the photos taken at the Centennial Jubilee torchlight procession shows not only Estonian flags, but also the flags of Latvia, Lithuania and Sweden. In another photo, Christian Mattsson from the Swedish extreme right-wing youth organization Nordic Youth (*Nordisk ungdom*, NU) stands shoulder to shoulder with Dace Kalniņa, a NAJO activist.

However, there are also other types of transnational interac-

"[...] THE NA, AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE LATVIAN COALITION GOVERNMENT, TOOK A SYMPATHETIC APPROACH TO THE POST-MAIDAN UKRAINIAN GOVERNMENT."

tions between NAJO activists and their Estonian counterparts. On June 11, 2015, Dace Kalniņa, a NAJO activist, tweeted a photo from an Estonian anti-immigration demonstration, seemingly organized by the EKRE (at least two EKRE flags were discernible in the photo): “Yesterday, many thousands of Estonians protested against the government’s decision to agree on a ‘voluntary’ refugee quota”.⁷⁶ On February 24, 2016, NAJO posted a comment on its Facebook page congratulating SÄ on the Independence Day of Estonia.⁷⁷

The Finns Party Youth

In December 2018, NAJO made formal contact with the Finns Party Youth (PSN), which led to the PSN visiting Latvia. While the interviews only touched upon this theme, the photographic evidence posted on Twitter and Facebook suggests that it was a high level visit. From the PSN, the first vice-chair of the board (also responsible for international relations) Liina Veronica Isto, the third vice-chair Toni Jalonen, and Henri Hautamäki, a member of the board and responsible for national defense and security policy, were present. Another photo makes it evident that Antti Eskelinen (board member of the youth wing of the Finns Party) was also present at this meeting. From NAJO’s side, both the chair and members of the board were present at the meeting.⁷⁸

In July 2019, NAJO reciprocated the visit and sent a delegation to Finland. Both the chair and the members of the board posed at the monument of Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim and the twitter message reads as follows: “Visiting @PS_Nuoret, NA youth became acquainted with both the past and present Finland. A valuable and impressive weekend.”⁷⁹

Other transnational interactions

It seems that NAJO has no transnational interactions with other actors than those discussed above, at least, none of the interactions that were found were of a regular nature. They are looser in nature, because in most cases they were retweets of messages penned by other actors. Thematically, most of the transnational interactions described below revolved around immigration (the consequences of it and the resistance to it) and only one of the retweets had an anti-abortion theme, while another tweet had a historical theme. I also describe an article about Baltic history in a conservative news site run by a French-Hungarian far-right activist.

First, while NAJO seems to position itself as conservative with regards to family and reproductive issues, we found only one example of retweeting a message penned by a foreign actor. In June 2015, the official account of NAJO retweeted a tweet by the National Right to Life Committee, which is described as the oldest and largest anti-abortion organization in the USA. The tweet contained the following message: “Woman rejects abor-

tion after she sees her baby on ultrasound <http://nrlc.cc/1f2MRly#prolife>”.⁸⁰ The tweet contains a link to the story and a photo of what appears to be an ultrasound of a fetus.

Second, most transnational interactions about the issue of immigration took place in the fall of 2015 at the height of the migration crisis. It seems that some of the interactions were initiated by NAJO itself, by expressing its support of the Hungarian migration policy in 2015. On October 1, 2015, Ēriks Eriksons published a YouTube video entitled “Tavaszi szél vizet áraszt” [The spring wind makes the waters rise], which depicted nine members of NAJO holding a sign saying “Kösz” [Thank you] and singing the Hungarian folk song “Tavaszi szél vizet áraszt”.⁸¹ The description field of the YouTube video described it as follows: “Latvian National Alliance Party supports Hungary in adopting a responsible immigration policy.”⁸² The text was provided in Latvian, Hungarian and English. The official account of NAJO spread on Twitter, receiving 15 retweets and 11 likes⁸³. On October 5, 2019, the Hungarian pro-government media outlet *Hungary Today* published a news article on the video “Latvian Youths Pay Tribute To

Hungary’s ‘Responsible’ Immigration Policy By Singing Famous Folk Song – Video!” recounting that this event was staged in front of the Hungarian embassy in Riga and that the video had, in just a matter of days, attracted around 13,000 views.⁸⁴

THIS INTEREST IN Hungarian immigration policy continued throughout 2015, even if it did not involve any direct transnational interactions on the part of NAJO. On October 30, 2015, the official account of NAJO retweeted a

tweet by Ritvars Eglājs, who had retweeted Breitbart London’s tweet with the comment “Who would have thought of it – fences do work!” [Kas to būtu domājis – žogi darbojas!].⁸⁵ The original tweet of Breitbart London reported that “Hungarian Border Fence So Effective Illegal Immigrants Are Now At Pre Migrant-Crisis Levels”, providing a link to its news story.

Also, later that year, the official account of NAJO retweeted another tweet by R. Eglājs who had retweeted a tweet penned by the user “The Real Goat Says” with the comment: “Racist French authorities seize the Muslim prayer objects” [*Rasistiskās Francijas varas iestādes konfiscē musulmaņu lūgšanu piederumus*].⁸⁶ The original tweet by “The Real Goat Says” contained the following text: “look what the French found in the mosques”, linking to two other tweets and a news article by *France 24*. None of the links worked when the data were collected.

In October 2015, the official account of NAJO retweeted a tweet by signature “Fjordman” (pseudonym of Norwegian far-right blogger Peder Are Nøstvold Jensen): “Europe: Desperate Muslim ‘refugees’ complain about slow Internet connection and lack of money to buy cigarettes”.⁸⁷ The tweet linked to a YouTube video, which was not available when the data were collected in 2019.

“THE EDITORIAL LINE IS ‘UNAPOLOGETICALLY NATIONALIST’ AND IS BASED ON OPPOSITION TO THE ‘AGGRESSION OF THE KREMLIN’ AND ‘LEFTIST MULTICULTURALISM.’”

In late 2015, the official account of NAJO retweeted a tweet by the signature “Norse Vår” stating: “More than 40,000 hear various anti-Islam speakers at biggest anti-Islam rally held in Europe to date. #edl #pegida”.⁸⁸ The tweet contains a picture of a crowd, with some people holding flags of Germany and other countries, gathered around what seems to be a fire. The hashtags (#edl and #pegida) are also significant and comprise the acronyms EDL – meaning English Defence League – and PEGIDA – meaning Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident [*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*]. The two organizations, with their origins in the United Kingdom and Germany respectively, have been described as being anti-Muslim and far right.

Third, although NAJO regularly tweets about various historical events, only one example of a transnational interaction on a historical theme was found. In October 2015, the official account of NAJO retweeted a tweet by user “Régi Képek|Old Pics”: October 23, 1956. #Hungary stands up to Soviet Oppressors. #hungarianrevolution #1956 @AmerikaiMagyar @otmarianna”,⁸⁹ which also contained four apparently historical pictures from the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

Finally, there is at least one example of an NAJO member interacting with French-Hungarian media outlet *Visegrad Post*. In 2016, Dace Kalnina published an article called “The Baltic Way” on the historical theme of the 1989 demonstration when a human chain was formed in solidarity for Baltic independence from the Soviet Union.⁹⁰ The *Visegrad Post* states that it is funded by donations, that its editorial line is “conservative and Christian” and that it represents the “view point of Central Europeans”.⁹¹ The *Visegrad Post*’s editor-in-chief Ferenc Almásy has been described as a European identitarian who is waging a struggle against mainstream media outlets.⁹² In an interview, Ferenc Almásy listed the French far-right media outlet *TV Libertés* as one of its collaborating partners and stated that the *Visegrad Post* has received government support from Hungary.⁹³

Indirect transnational interactions: *The New Nationalism*

In 2016, the then former chair of NAJO, by now the Secretary General of the NA, Raivis Zeltīts, established the *The New Nationalism* website to serve as a “platform for national conservatives in Europe, with the focus on the Intermarium Region”.⁹⁴ More specifically, the website defines its main function as being a “national-conservative news site for the promotion of new forms of nationalist theory and practice, and for a new geopolitical concept of Intermarium”.⁹⁵ The editorial line is “unapologetically nationalist” and is based on opposition to the “aggression of the Kremlin” and “leftist multiculturalism”.⁹⁶ This is an expansion of the Bauska Declaration in an attempt to move beyond the Baltics to create a site for all nationalists in the region.

The website is organized along six tabs with their respective content (i.e. articles), which fall into one of (or into several of) the following categories (tabs): home, news, nationalism, Intermarium, videos and “members’ area” (which is only accessible to registered members). Registered members can leave a comment

below the articles. The website is run by an editor – who also publishes articles – and who would appear to be Kristaps Gulbis (as his articles carry the tag “editor”), who served as Deputy Chair of NAJO in 2019 when data were collected and went on to become the Chair of NAJO in 2020. While we do not have any data on the readership numbers for *The New Nationalism*, 2621 people were following the website’s Facebook page in 2019.⁹⁷

AMONG OTHER ITEMS, the website publishes interviews with various nationalist and far-right activists. For instance, on July 15, 2019, *The New Nationalism* published Raivis Zeltīts’ interview with Olga Semenyaka,⁹⁸ the international secretary of the Ukrainian political party National Corps, which has its origins in the Azov Battalion of the Ukrainian National Guard.⁹⁹ On July 17, 2019, Dace Kalniņa’s interview with Gustav Kasselstrand, chair of Alternative for Sweden (*Alternativet för Sverige*, AfS) was published.¹⁰⁰ The same author published an interview with Alexander Schleyer, one of the leaders of the initiative “Defend Europe” targeted at the activities of the humanitarian NGOs in the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁰¹ On August 1, 2019, Zeltīts published his interview with Liina Veronica Isto, First Vice-Chair of the Finns Party Youth.¹⁰² Also, an interview was published on the website with Alvaro Peñas, activist in the Spanish party Vox.¹⁰³ While Vox and the Finns Party (consequently its youth wing, too) are the NA’s partner parties in the ECR, the political party group in the European Parliament, the AfS, does not have such links with the ECR. Moreover, until 2017, Schleyer served as an assistant to an Austrian MP from the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*) – which, at the European level, is part of the European political party “Identity and Democracy Party” – and more recently he has been linked with the far-right Austrian Identitarian Movement (*Identitare Bewegung Österreich*, IB).¹⁰⁴

In short, some of the articles on *The New Nationalism* showed that, at the very least, NAJO members (if not NAJO as an organization) had a higher number of transnational interactions with various nationalist and far-right activists and leaders than was revealed by the interviews with the two leaders of NAJO and other sources of data. While some of NAJO’s contacts are from a similar ideological background as the NA (Isto from the PNS and Peñas from Vox), others are from a more radical, even identitarian background (e.g., Kasselstrand from the AfS and Schleyer from the IB).

The case of Blue Awakening

Blue Awakening was established in 2012 by its former chair and current EKRE MP, Ruuben Kaalep. SÄ elects a board comprising four board members and a chair, who is elected by the board.¹⁰⁵ The position of chair is largely a representative position and the board functions as a collective leadership.¹⁰⁶ However, it was evident in the interviews that Ruuben Kaalep was the driving force behind SÄ.¹⁰⁷ Tasks are divided among members and there are no titular positions such as secretary, or treasurer, aside from the chair. There are around 127 active members, and the group is continuously growing.

Transnational relations with other nationalist youth organiza-

tions and various types of political and metapolitical actors is an important component of SÄ. Two members of SÄ specifically handled this, Kaalep and Fedor Stomakhin, with Kaalep being replaced by Rantanen in this capacity. Transnational networks are a high priority for SÄ as it regards transnational contacts as being necessary because it views nationalism and issues important to nationalists such as protecting culture and borders as a pan-European problem that is better addressed in unity. Both interviewees mentioned that individual parties would not be successful in achieving their goals if they did not work together. SÄ board member Fedor Stomakhin sees transnational links as national, international or meta-national and mentions that when members of youth transnational networks come to power it will be geopolitically and diplomatically advantageous for their existing networks to also be in power.¹⁰⁸ Further, it was emphasized that online right-wing communities were a source of strength for their members and that some of them are from such online communities.¹⁰⁹

The functioning of transnational relations and associated groups

In keeping with our second expectation, the YOs with which SÄ has had the most contact, as well as the longest standing, are NAJO, LTJS and PSN. However, it is of significance that our first expectation – that youth organizations that are similar in terms of their political goals, ideological profiles and values are more likely to engage in transnational interactions with each other – is very obvious in the case of SÄ and to a greater extent than with NAJO. SÄ also has connections with the Conservative Political Action Coalition (CPAC), USA. This is a growing trend for much of the radical right, which points to its mainstreaming.¹¹⁰

The group that was described as being the closest friend of SÄ is Kryptis, a Lithuanian youth organization not currently linked to any established political party. The other groups that have transnational linkages are the Azov Battalion, the National Corps, the All-Polish Youth, as well as some other smaller groups in Poland which were not mentioned by name, Jobbik and Our Homeland Movement in Hungary,¹¹¹ Lega Subelpena from Italy, several figures from the American alt-right, the London Forum, as well as groups in Germany, France, Croatia and “all over Europe”.¹¹²

The main transnational activities involve attending nationalist events in other countries, as well as hosting transnational contacts for Estonian Independence Day and the ensuing torchlight procession, as well as conferences. SÄ has attended Independence Day marches in Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Finland. SÄ got the idea to hold a torchlight procession on the eve of Estonian independence from its Latvian contacts, and, in turn, the Lithuanian contacts started to hold the same event because of SÄ, thereby constituting an important aspect of transnationalism.¹¹³

The other primary activity for transnational networks is conferences. SÄ members speak at conferences abroad, as well as holding the Etnofutur conference in Estonia on the day before the Independence Day march. This particular conference attracts speakers from numerous far-right organizations, as well as the alt-right. The issues discussed all revolve around identity and ethnonationalism.

Discussion: Preliminary comparison of NAJO and SÄ

It seems that the commonalities of NAJO and SÄ can be easily identified. Both of the YOs have had transnational interactions with other YOs of RRP or YOs that are not affiliated with a specific political party. It seems that none of the two organizations have functioning relations with the European Young Conservatives (EYC), the affiliated YO of the ECR Party at the European level. While SÄ was excluded from the EYC in 2017, NAJO is formally a member of the EYC, but does not interact with it. Instead, the two YOs have forged their own (at least) partially overlapping bilateral networks of transnational contacts. Both SÄ and NAJO cooperate with each other, and both have established cooperation with the Finnish PSN, Lithuanian LTJS and Ukrainian National Corps. The bilateral transnational contacts comprise various visits to each organization to participate in commemorative events, congresses or specific seminars/conferences. There also seems to be a certain – but not very distinct – affective dimension to these events, for instance, demonstrating solidarity with Ukrainian activists fighting against Russia’s aggression, but also more private visits.

There would also appear to be certain differences between the organizations. NAJO activists have established – most likely with explicit or implicit consent from the mother party – an online platform for nationalist activists in the region. *The New Nationalism* website (later *The New Prometheism*) can be also seen as a record of their joint activities and transnational interactions. Both Zeltīts and Kalniņa interviewed a diverse group of politicians from various youth groups and political parties, which extended from more accepted political parties such as the Finns Party and Vox to more extremist parties such as the AfS and the National Corps. It also highlights the use of the tip of the iceberg metaphor because none of the more extremist parties were mentioned as partners in the interviews with the NAJO activists. Equally, SÄ does not seem to shy away from being open about its partners.

Taking into account the four expectations that we formulated at the beginning of this paper, it seems that both YOs seem to comply with the first and second expectation. They interacted with representatives of YOs or party politicians that were close to them in their political goals and ideological profiles and values. As outlined above, this was particularly emphasized in the interview with the chair of NAJO. The contacts and interactions seem to be more intense when the YOs and their partners are in geographical proximity. However, it is not clear how much learning has taken place as a result of transnational interactions. While *The New Nationalism* website was set up by NAJO activists to provide a platform for the exchange of ideas, it is difficult to measure how and to what extent learning has taken place and which models or strategies were adopted.

For our first three expectations, we found that they all held. Much like the Bauska Declaration, which called for the unification of Baltic nationalists, NAJO and SÄ have similar ideological profiles, values and goals, though they appear to be more on the individual level for NAJO. Our second expectation also holds,

especially for SA, as its closest contacts, as disclosed in the interviews, were from Lithuania, Latvia and Finland. Azov/National Corps is also very close to both groups and can be considered in the region, which is a key component of the Intermarium transnational network.

Our third expectation also held. The torchlight processions on the evenings of national independence days began in Latvia, were brought to Estonia by SÄ and to Lithuania by Lithuanian nationalists after witnessing the continuously growing numbers of attendees in Riga and Tallinn. Finally, in terms of the costs and benefits, our findings indicate that there are no strikingly negative costs of cooperation for SÄ and no apparent costs for NAJO,¹⁴ although this organization appears to be the more cautious about the two cases we analyzed.

Conclusion

We support our previous statement that likens our research to the tip of an iceberg. Despite the breadth of sub-topics in the literature on RRP in Europe, YOs remain an anomaly, despite the important role they play in producing future leaders of mother parties. With some exceptions,¹⁵ YOs maintain a relatively low profile compared to the media and other kinds of public exposure that RRP enjoy. It could be argued that RRP in smaller countries that are in close geographical proximity have more reason to engage in transnational activity as they are smaller in number than their counterparts in larger countries, with larger parties, such as the FPO and the RN. It was emphasized that common issues of importance, seen through the guise of a common threat or problem, gave greater grounds to engage in transnational cooperation. Data from SÄ place this emphasis in an ethnonationalist framework. Finally, it seems that SÄ is more open about the positions they hold and the groups they associate with. Further research that addresses the structure of YOs and internal ideological coherence would complement the literature. A large-N research design which included the YOs of every RRP in Europe might address the transnational aspect of this party phenomenon at large, arriving at important inferences and empirical generalizations.

However, due to the very aspect that for so long has kept RRP from forging concrete and enduring alliances with each other, a small-N, comparative case study provides a roadmap for future studies to generate studies that have a larger case selection, and which examine the transnational connections made and maintained by YOs in the RRP family. While concrete conclusions for the transnational contacts and activities of the RR throughout Europe cannot be drawn from this study, it has provided an in-depth analysis of two RRP, shedding light on the nature and extent of transnational networks of the radical right in the Baltics. These contacts are not limited to the Baltic countries and extend

outside of Central and Eastern Europe. However, most YOs and groups with which NAJO and SÄ are in contact would arguably be outside the comfort zone of many mother parties in Western Europe. As the Overton window increased in the aftermath of the 2015 migrant crisis and the ongoing culture wars, it is highly likely that “tomorrow’s leaders” who are current members of YOs will have more of an incentive to engage in transnational cooperation and will be less cautious about the company they keep. However, we found a certain degree of variance between our two cases.

Finally, although this paper is restricted to the period from 2015 to 2019, we should also mention the two organizations in the present context of Russia’s war against Ukraine. Both NAJO and SÄ – as well as their mother parties – had no ideological dissonance in condemning Russia’s war effort. In fact, NAJO and SÄ have been some of the most active supporters of Ukraine and have organized both support demonstrations for Ukraine, as well as protest demonstrations against Russia since February 24, 2022. This is in sharp contrast to sev-

eral European RRP in Western Europe, which experienced a period of soul-searching regarding how to accommodate their previously pro-Russian sympathies with the rapidly changing global environment. All in all, the two cases examined in this paper show that the two YOs were not only consistently pro-Ukraine, but they had also established at least a rudimentary network and personal ties with Ukrainian politicians. In future, it could be expected that Baltic youth leaders are well placed to serve as East European nodes in a wider pan-European network of RRP, especially if they decide to continue their political careers in the mother parties. ❌

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Note: This research paper is part of the “Making Tomorrow’s Leaders” project (funded by the Swedish Research Council, Vetenskapsrådet, decision dnr. 2016-01877), led by Ann-Cathrine Jungar, Södertörn University, Sweden.

“TRANSNATIONAL RELATIONS WITH OTHER NATIONALIST YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS AND VARIOUS TYPES OF POLITICAL AND METAPOLITICAL ACTORS IS AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF SÄ.”

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Let the right one in.

Building relations of trust

by **Ekaterina Kalinina**

Trust can be seen as a mechanism that reduces uncertainty and allows for expectations about other social actors' future behavior.¹ Hence the existence of trust between different actors in society is “the precondition of the possibility” for cooperation² among different actors both within and between communities.

Building mutual trust was for years one of the desired aims of international cooperation in the Nordic region; the existence of trust was intended to contribute to the reduction of political tensions and lead to more sustainable and peaceful region. In practice, working with international cooperation in the Nordic region, where Russia was one of the actors until 2022, has never been easy. One of the main obstacles on the way was the deficit of trust.

Building trust in international cooperation

In the beginning of my work as international hip-hop events organizer it was difficult to establish relations of trust with representatives of the hip-hop subculture as subcultures are usually closed communities with their own hierarchies, authorities and rules of conduct, which are seldom open and transparent to the outsiders. *Out-group trust*, understood as the trust individuals and communities have in members of a different community,³ was rather low in the particular case of the members of youth and subculture groups described here.

Having experienced a past relationship of abuse by commercial companies who appropriated subcultural capital for maximizing their own profits, the representatives of subcultures often had a utilitarian attitude towards anyone who approached them from outside, be it a commercial company or international organization, trying in their turn to manipulate the outsider in order to maximize their benefits from such collaborations.

Attitudes towards outsiders coming from the non-commercial

sector were also characterized by distrust of international institutions and neighboring countries, with the representatives of the subcultures finding it difficult to understand the motivations and intentions of international funds and non-commercial actors working with youth in Russia. For them it was not always easy to grasp why international agencies and neighboring countries are willing to invest time and money in the youth cultures in Russia. Despite this suspicion, the members of youth cultures often entered international cooperations under the lead of international NGOs as such cooperations were often seen as a possibility to earn some extra money and gain respect from the subcultural community. Young people also saw international cooperation as an opportunity for a dialogue and skill-exchange that might give them international career opportunities in the future. Therefore they would gladly joined any international project involving either international actors travelling to Russia or/and Russian youth travelling abroad if they had an opportunity to communicate with others, show their own skills and even earn some extra money.

MOREOVER, INTERNATIONAL cooperation and the organization of events of international significance were seen as an achievement and something desired not only by young people but also by the state. State actors, such as Houses of Youth and city administrations, saw in international cooperation a possibility to report on the activities that they were supposed to organize but had not done so for various reasons (such as lack of funding, and lack of competence and contacts with international organizations). International festivals and events were among the planned activities in regional and local Houses of Youth in 2015–2021, which were obliged to deliver such cooperation with minimal or almost no state funding. That is why Houses of Youth would agree to host an international event financed and organized by a foreign actor if they had an opportunity to report these activities as initi-



Sergei Chernyshev RUS (a.k.a Bumblebee) battles against Shigeyuki Nakarai JPN (a.k.a Shigekix) in the B-Boys Semifinal in the Playground at the Parque Mujeres Argentinas, Urban Park, during the Summer Youth Olympics in 2018.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

“THE DANCERS PRACTICING BREAKING [...] DURING THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS HAVE MANAGED TO WIN SEVERAL WELL-KNOWN AND GLOBALLY RECOGNIZED COMPETITIONS.”

ated by the members of their own House. They would also be ready to turn a blind eye on the fact that the event in question was sponsored by a foreign NGO if the name of the NGO was nowhere to be seen on the promotional materials.

When it comes to commercial actors, I can say that festival venues or large festival organizers, would gladly host an international event, seeing a certain prestige in that, on condition that the international actor satisfied their commercial demands, which at times were outrageously high. A myth that an international actor had large budgets easy to milk was difficult to dispel, to say the least. Such attitudes of commercial actors, of course, did not make their international partners happy. But in the situation when the goal was to reach out to the largest possible public, a compromise that would satisfy all parties was

usually found. However, there were many both commercial and non-commercial actors in Russia that were very dedicated to the social cause and entered collaborations with no demands just to improve the position of the young people in Russia and broadened the horizon for cooperation.

MEANWHILE, THE RUSSIAN state turned a blind eye to international activities such as youth festivals, summer camps, workshops and conferences as long as they did not take any active steps towards changing the existing youth politics and fell under the umbrella of socio-cultural activities, aimed at filling the gaps in youth politics that state actors were unable to find solutions for. As the state actors had the goal of organizing youth leisure, it allowed international activities serving this purpose. Similarly,

it also allowed for activities where youth cultures in Russia were presented in a positive light as something progressive, rapidly developing, and beneficial for society.

This last part was not that difficult, as there had been many initiatives where young people from Russia managed to achieve quite a lot in terms of artistic performance. For example, the dancers practicing breaking (street style dance, which was officially included into the list of the Olympic sports) during the last several years have managed to win several well-known and globally recognized competitions such as Red Bull BC in Austria in 2020 and India in 2019, and the Summer Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires 2018. Such outstanding performance of the dancers in the international arena has resulted in the state showing a heightened interest in breaking which led to an interesting situation during the Covid-19 pandemic, when state organized competitions became almost the only events where dancers from the hip-hop subculture could show their skills. Such a situation is even more interesting from the point of relations of trust.

AS SOON AS BREAKING was announced as a part of the Olympic movement, many members of the Russian hip-hop community saw the ambiguity of this development. On the one hand, the members of the subculture, which originated in the Civil Rights Movement in the USA in the 1970s and had established a somewhat parallel or alternative culture in the USSR and Russia in the late 1980s, saw a dangerous maneuver of the state in trying to take over the subcultural agenda in Russia, using it to its own benefit. On the other hand, the members, who by 2018 were already working in Houses of Youth teaching youth and children breaking, DJ-ing, rapping and graffiti, saw many opportunities for career development in professional sport and event management. Hence, while some voiced their distrust of the state in matters that concern the community's future, others who had already chosen to trust state institutions by joining Houses of Youth as teachers and instructors had more trust towards the state "doing good" to the community.

After the Russian B-boys' victory at the Youth Olympics in 2018 and the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the rapid takeover of breaking by the state has resulted in continuous debates among the members of subculture about the role of the community in how and by whom the breaking events are to be organized and how breaking as a dance style will look, given that it is now classified as an Olympic sport. After a year of continuous criticism from the hip-hop community, the state organizers of the largest breaking event in Russia, Russian Open Breaking Com-

petitions (ROBC), have learnt from their mistakes and a number of prominent leaders of the breaking community have been given the opportunity to have their say on some issues. After some time, it became obvious that the large budgets for organization of the events stayed in Moscow, while organization of smaller regional events and selections remained solely on the shoulders of regional organizers who had to secure funding from other sources and even use international funding to cover their costs.

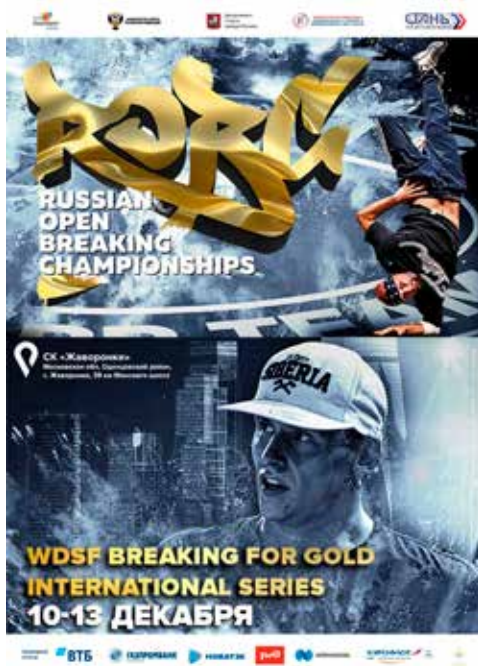
Despite some criticism from regional actors, the initial distrust of the state in the matter of managing events and breaking as a dance sport had been overcome. During the Covid-19 pandemic, state-organized events which were listed and announced as sport events dominated among events allowed by the local city administrations, due to strict Covid-19 disease preventive measures. Smaller subcultural actors had more difficulties in securing funding during the pandemic, while international actors had difficulty organizing events due to the Covid-19 restrictions. At the same time, young dancers saw many benefits in taking part in the official sport events as they promised not only financial gains, but winners were also granted sports category, which attracted more youth and children to breaking.

The game changer and corrosion of trust

The reactivation in 2022 of the Russian military offensives in Ukraine (which the Russian state calls a special military operation) has put an end to many international cooperation projects in Russia. The military aggression by the Russian state and the response of international organizations and funders has resulted

in the corrosion of the relations of trust that different actors tried to build during the previous years. Several international institutions such as the Finnish Institute in St. Petersburg or the Danish Institute of Culture in St. Petersburg evacuated their staff in the weeks following the start of the invasion. Meanwhile international funders have announced force majeure and enforced an immediate end to all cooperation with Russian actors.

In-group trust, i.e. trust which is placed in members of one's own group,⁴ was also shaken within the hip-hop community. If social media accounts of Russian hip-hop members in the very first days were full of anti-war statements, after the introduction of de-facto war time censorship⁵ they became practically silent. At the same time, while in the first months all planned street culture events were cancelled in Russia, after several months of war, announcements of events started to pop up in social



Poster Russian Open Breaking Competitions (ROBC).



B-girl ART at the Nordance/Face&Laces, 2018, Moscow.

PHOTO: DMITRY TIBEKIN/@EKATERINA KALININA

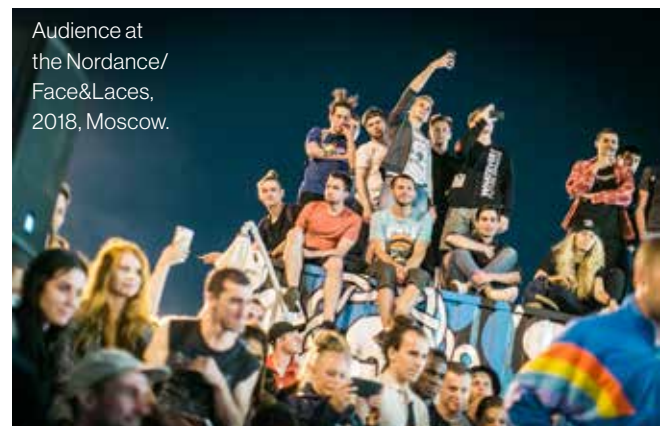
media. In-group trust, in this case trust within the hip-hop community between its Ukrainian and Russian members continued to corrode, with the Ukrainian members starting to question the ethical principles of the hip-hop community, which are summarized in the phrase *love, peace and having fun*, which were difficult to imagine during the ongoing shelling of Ukrainian cities. The more days and months passed, the more criticism was directed towards the Russian hip-hop community regarding its passivity. Social media posts of the Ukrainian hip-hop community revealed that having lost trust in Russians as neighbors, the Ukrainian dancers and hip-hop community members nevertheless still hoped for support from the Russian hip-hop community, with whom they have shared years of experiences, organized festivals and dance camps. After a year and a half of ongoing military actions and the silence from the Russian hip-hop community, the Ukrainian dancers demanded international organizers to ban any Russian participants at breaking events until the end of the war.

MEANWHILE, RUSSIAN MEMBERS of the community became divided along the axis of shared responsibility and collective guilt for the action of its own government. While some street culture members have left the country for political reasons or out of fear of military draft, others have stayed, arguing that someone has to remain in the country in order to teach young generations of dancers and support the remaining hip-hop community.



DJ Kroute in action at the Nordance/Face&Laces, 2018, Moscow.

PHOTO: DMITRY TIBEKIN/@EKATERINA KALININA



Audience at the Nordance/Face&Laces, 2018, Moscow.

PHOTO: DMITRY TIBEKIN/@EKATERINA KALININA

“IF SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS OF RUSSIAN HIP-HOP MEMBERS IN THE VERY FIRST DAYS WERE FULL OF ANTI-WAR STATEMENTS, AFTER THE INTRODUCTION OF DE-FACTO WAR TIME CENSORSHIP THEY BECAME PRACTICALLY SILENT.”

Besides these, the reasons for staying among the street culture community correspond to those of the overall Russian population -- some had nowhere to go, some had family and work they could not leave behind, some saw an opportunity for development given that the state is currently investing in youth sports, and some argued that this is their civic position to keep on doing something that brings happiness to others.

AT THE SAME TIME with the start of the full-scale invasion, international organizations have questioned both the effectiveness of supporting cultural and youth projects in Russia and the ethical side of running projects in Russia and with Russian actors. In some cases, the distrust towards institutionalized actors in Russia outweighed the interpersonal and generalized trust that actors from both sides had tried to build over the decades. This abrupt stop of any cooperation has also resulted in the corrosion of trust the Russian actors had towards their international partners and funders. Left alone with their internal problems and with no funding, the Russian organizations had to either curtail their activities (with many employees leaving the country) or to seek help from the state and survive on crowdfunding. One should also keep in mind that one of the goals of many international civil society and cultural projects was to increase the capacity of civil society actors to promote its interests and make their voices heard among state officials, as well as to increase the representation of civil society actors in decision-making bodies. With the start of the war, as any cooperation with state actors was seen as toxic, the actors who had by that time managed to build cooperations with local administrations found themselves in a Catch 22 situation: they believed that they had previously been encouraged to collaborate with the state and now they are being punished for doing exactly what they had been taught. However, the interpersonal trust built during these years between Russian and international organizations has persevered, allowing for dialogue and even some action allowed within certain frames.

Even though for years this tactic of acting within the allowed frames was seen as a safe one, which allowed organizations to do good, it could now be seen as one of the main evils of international cooperation with Russia. Starting from 2012 when the federal law Ф3 N 121-ФЗ introduced the term “foreign agent” into everyday language, the frames for permitted action have been narrowed down, allowing for apolitical action or action where the political was carefully hidden. In a private conversation in 2019, I asked a leader of such project financed by one of the international funds how it is even possible to run a project on trust and discuss trust with young people without mentioning institu-

tional trust. She told me, “You know, we do what we usually do. We avoid sensitive topics and just run a few conversations about trust in general. Then we are done”. This avoidance of sensitive topics, the conscious avoidance of the role of politics in everyday life and making projects looking good on paper, has most probably led to the even deeper normalization of depoliticization of civil society. In order to survive in the pre-2022 conditions, some tried to stay apolitical, to work with culture for the sake of culture instead of using it as an opportunity to take up important topics. As one of the employees of a diplomatic mission once told me in a private conversation: “How tired we are of this constant pressure to include politics into the projects! Can’t we simply do art projects for the sake of the art projects?” At the same time, this avoidance of sensitive topics and conscious attempts to stay within the framework permitted by the current law often was, and still is, the only strategy of survival, as some would say. Whether this strategy will help to rebuilt trust today is, however, hard to say. ❌

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The EU-funded “Europast” project’s first summer school

June 19–23, 2023, a summer school of the international project “Europast” took place at Lund university. “Europast” is short for the project’s title “Facing the Past: Public History for a stronger Europe” and is an international project financed by the EU within Horizon Europe program that started in December 2022 and will end in November 2025. This project connects four partners: the Institute of international relations and political science at Vilnius university (TSPMI) in Lithuania, the leader of the project, the Leibniz Center of contemporary History (ZZF) in Potsdam (Germany), the Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology at the university at Lund university (Sweden) and the Center for contemporary and Digital History at the University of Luxembourg. As formulated in the program of the event, the project “aims to explore the theory and practice of engaging citizens in the co-production and communication of the past in digital age”. The overall goal of this cooperation is to establish an interdisciplinary research network by combining training, networking, research, and communication activities.

The summer school has been co-organized by Luxemburg University and Lund University representatives. As an especially experienced partner within the field of public and digital history, Luxemburg university is responsible for training activities in the framework of the project, including those during the summer school. The Lund team mobilized local research seniors and early career scholars for participation in the event took care of the venue, digital service, catering.

AS THIS EVENT was the first summer school of the project, its topic was public history in the most general sense. The event combined different structural parts: Workshops were meant for learning about public history, “conversations” were a sort of keynote speeches given by the seniors that had dialogue character and presentations of early career scholars (PhD-Candidates and postdocs) were meant to provide them with feedback on their current work. Even though the event was meant to be an internal event directed to the members of the project, it

also welcomed some interested scholars from other universities such as University of Saragossa (Spain) and Copenhagen University (Denmark). ✕

Odeta Rudling

Project administrator at the Horizon project “Europast” at the University of Lund.

The full report is published online: <https://balticworlds.com/category/conference-reports/>

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