

Soft power.

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

by **Oleg Antonov & Olena Podolian**

**T**oday'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. Nye<sup>1</sup> 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

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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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## reference

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