





# A Central Asian Perspective on Russian Soft Power The View from Tashkent

Robert F. Baumann, PhD



During the past year, recurring headlines have raised American consciousness about the capability of foreign powers to conduct digital strikes against databases and websites, orchestrate large-scale trolling operations, and generally pollute the domestic dialog concerning crucial questions of national policy. Though not alone, Russia has become the country most associated with internet behavior ranging from merely mischievous to hostile. That observation provides context but is not the focus of this article. What is equally interesting from a strategic point of view, but much less apparent, is Russia's ability to influence others by means of "soft power," a phrase coined by Professor Joseph Nye.<sup>1</sup> The spheres in which soft power operates include economic activity, diplomacy, and the dissemination of information or disinformation, as well as the subtle influence of garden-variety entertainment, popular culture, and news channels.

American soft power brands, movie stars, and fashions have reached almost every corner of the world. Yet, in many places, American cultural influence is not uncontested. This analysis concentrates on Russian cultural influences transmitted through various media and institutions. While looking at some general patterns, it will spotlight Uzbekistan, where this author has spent much of the last two years acting as an academic adviser to the Armed Forces Academy (AFA) in Tashkent.

For the most part soft power falls within the range of normal interaction among states and is not overtly aggressive or even hostile in its intent. Americans in particular do not notice because Russian or other foreign films, television programs, books, and music have made very few inroads into our fairly parochial popular culture. In contrast, the manifestations of America's global impact are so numerous and pervasive that they drown out all other influences within our borders. This is not the case closer to Russia's geographical frontiers, particularly in those other fourteen now independent states that were once part of the Soviet Union. Even in the Baltic States and Ukraine, with whom relations range from chilly to hostile, Russia still exerts appreciable soft power

influence. Across other former Soviet republics, the extent varies depending upon historical associations, the politics of the moment, and the intensity of local nationalism, demographics, and other factors.

Russian influence in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan, arguably manifests itself in several ways. First, every former Soviet republic inherited a sizeable institutional legacy. Modes of political thinking, bureaucratic processes, a sense of place in the world, and shared historical experience to some degree incline leaders at a minimum to take into account Russian interests or viewpoints. Second, Russia's continuing outreach via various media shapes perceptions in many instances. If Uzbeks, for example, have been culturally conditioned to view Russia as a "normal" country, this affects both their gut feelings about Russian behavior and their expectations toward their own society. Thus, if Russian media sources unquestioningly support official positions of their own government, such an approach seems more reasonable and acceptable in an Uzbek context as well. Third, Russia's point of view concerning the rest of the world will often serve as a point of departure for making sense of international events, including wars and political conflict. If nothing else, this makes it easier for regional political leaders to align themselves with Russian foreign policy.

Before launching into an analysis of Russian soft power, a few observations are in order concerning the audiences in the former Soviet Union, and Central Asia in particular. In the March-April 2018 edition of *Military Review*, Öncel Sencerman wrote of the Russian diaspora across the territory of the former Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> During the final decades of the Russian Empire as well as the era of Soviet power from 1922 to 1992, ethnic Russia or Russian-speaking citizens from European Russia were encouraged to settle in the non-Russian borderlands to promote economic development and to strengthen the political integration of the country. When the Soviet Union dissolved, many Russians found themselves stranded in new countries as a distinct ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural minority. For this audience especially, the flow of cultural influences emanating from Russia provides an important connection to what might be thought of as an ethnic homeland. Russia has officially taken an interest in the welfare of its diaspora, a fact that its

**Previous page:** Russian President Vladimir Putin pays tribute to the memory of Islam Karimov, the first president of Uzbekistan, 6 September 2016 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. (Photo courtesy of the Office of the President of Russia)





neighbors cannot afford to ignore. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine stands as exhibit number one.

In sum, it stands to reason that Russia is sensitive to the concerns of Russians in the “near abroad,” and that they, in turn, are receptive to cultural influences from Russia. This does not, however, fully encompass the roles played by the Russian language as a medium of Russian soft power.

## The Role of the Russian Language and Ethnicity

During the Soviet period, virtually all non-Russians studied Russian as a second language in school. The residual effect of this policy is that today Russian is still widely understood in the former Soviet republics. To be sure, there is a pronounced generational distinction in the level of fluency. In Uzbekistan, for instance, young non-Russians—principally Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, and Kazakhs—often speak Russian with difficulty or not at all. After its independence, the government deemphasized study of Russian as part of a general campaign to elevate the use of Uzbek in public life. Also, given the influence of globalization and the opening of society to greater engagement

His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia (*left*) visits the Diocese of Tashkent of the Metropolia of Central Asia 2 October 2017 in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. Outreach by the Russian Orthodox Church, which staunchly supports the current Russian government, provides another venue through which Russia can wield soft-power influence. (Photo courtesy of the Russian Orthodox Church, Department for External Church Relations)

with the international economy, English has emerged as an attractive study option for many. However, fluency in English remains relatively uncommon.

Overall, English may hold greater attraction than Russian for the young, but it is still not a significant medium of influence through news sources, movies, and so forth. By comparison, Russian programming abounds and requires only a passive understanding of the language rather than spoken fluency. According to one 2004 study, 20 percent of Uzbeks actively use Russian and 60 percent profess elementary competence.<sup>3</sup> Although these figures have almost certainly declined since then, it is this writer’s experience that Russian remains important as a medium of news, entertainment, and commerce in Tashkent and other Uzbek cities. It also remains



significant for another interesting reason. Russian is still the “go-to language” for communication between ethnic groups in many cases and for the conduct of relations among the former Soviet republics. Because Russian once served as the lingua franca for the Soviet Union, as scholar Aneta Pavlenko reports, it continues to serve that function today in much of Eurasia.<sup>4</sup>

The role of Russian in higher education remains significant, although it has lost ground to both Uzbek and English. Most professors are fluent in Russian and a considerable share of instructional materials in a variety of subjects are primarily accessible in Russian. Still, the generational divide is inescapably moving the country in the direction of Uzbek instruction. Ever more curricula are translated from Russian into Uzbek for classroom presentation; this is true in military education as well. By far the largest share of instruction is conducted in Uzbek at the Uzbekistan AFA, and younger officers are less likely to be proficient in Russian than their elders.

In the meantime, there is now an English-language university in Tashkent catering to the popular demand by local students looking for opportunities in international commerce. Likewise, the most prestigious private

Then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin speaking with Russia-1 deputy CEO Kirill Kleimyonov (*second from right*) and CEO Konstantin Ernst 3 February 2011 in a news studio at the Ostankino television station in Moscow. Prominent Russian-language news and information channels such as Russia-1 and Russia-24 air all-day programming in Uzbekistan. (Photo by Alexey Druzhinin, Government of the Russian Federation)

secondary school in Tashkent also operates in English, and English-language centers offering tutorial and small-group instruction are popping up all around. In short, English is gaining ground with select audiences but does not rival Russian as a medium to reach the masses.

Naturally, the Russian language has the greatest clout in countries where the Russian minority is large and there is a border with Russia. Neither of these factors applies to Uzbekistan. In contrast, the Russian population in Kazakhstan, as of 1989, was still 37.6 percent overall and heavily concentrated in major urban centers that drove the economy and cultural life. Although the Russian population shrank significantly as a percentage of the whole by 2004 Kazakhstan still had 477 Russian-language newspapers. Meanwhile, as of 2006, an estimated 75 percent



of ethnic Kazakhs were fluent in Russian and over 60 percent of the general population professed to use Russian actively in everyday life.<sup>5</sup> Logically, the long-term prognosis for Russian cultural influence in Kazakhstan is far healthier than in Uzbekistan.

Of course, economic relationships often reflect demographic trends. Russia has had a shortage of workers for years and has attracted many migrants from Central Asia to make up some of the deficit. Meanwhile, over half the population of Uzbekistan is under the age of thirty and the number of good jobs available cannot meet the current demand. Consequently, many Uzbeks travel to Russia, or just across their northern border to Kazakhstan, to find work. According to United Nations Development Programme data between 2010 and 2013 remittances from Uzbekistan citizens employed abroad accounted for 10 to 12 percent of the gross domestic product.<sup>6</sup> Over time, it appears the Uzbekistan economy is strengthening and its poverty rate is declining. For now, Russia serves as an important source of employment.

## Russian Impact on Information Flow

Given that Russia wields significant cultural influence in Central Asia, it is valuable to appreciate the informational mechanisms through which it operates. For the purposes of this article, several approaches stand out as warranting closer examination. The first might be described as institutional, encompassing political theater—that is, the use of presidential pronouncements, meetings of Russian leaders with their Central Asian counterparts, declarations of cooperation, and so forth. Outreach by the Russian Orthodox Church, a pillar of support for the current government, also plays a role. The second element would be Russia's role as a source of world news and general information. Russian media, particularly television, reach into all of the major Central Asian markets. Russian news programs generally reflect higher production quality than domestically produced programs, a factor that may help drawing appreciable viewership. Moreover, Russian news programs typically cover a wider range of topics that bring to light stories not reported by other regional media sources. Third, Russian entertainment programming, once an object of ridicule in the West, has made great strides since the fall of the Soviet Union. Again, relative superiority to locally produced programming in Central Asia inevitably draws significant viewership.

Russia's most prominent television channels are well financed and, driven by advertising revenues, have figured out what entertains and holds audiences.

To consider each of these elements in turn, political theater was an art form during the Soviet period and certain patterns still apply. Presidential-level meetings have long served as a staple for television and newspapers. The close attention paid to official actions by senior statesmen tends in the public mind to affirm the gravitas of government decisions and cast leaders as wise, judicious, and respected abroad. Presidential-level announcements or official statements serve the same intent and are dutifully transmitted in full in the print and online press. Also following the Russian pattern, most news media make little effort to dig beneath the surface to enlighten their viewers about underlying issues that might concern them.

Following the death of Uzbekistan's first and only (as of that time) president, Islam Karimov, in September 2016 expressions of condolence poured in from foreign leaders around the world. Just days after Karimov's death, Russian president Vladimir Putin visited Karimov's birthplace of Samarkand to place flowers at the gravesite and pay respects to the presidential widow. This visit was well covered by both Russian and Uzbek news sources, and strongly conveyed a reassuring message of continuity in Russian-Uzbekistan relations. In his official statement, Putin asserted, "We will do everything to maintain this path of joint development and to support the people of Uzbekistan and the Uzbek administration. You can fully count on us as your most reliable friend."<sup>7</sup> The moment served as a prime opportunity for Putin to highlight the importance of Russian presence in the region as well as the fact that it would not be Russia that would publicly take

**Robert F. Baumann, PhD**, is the director of the graduate degree program and professor of history at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He holds a BA in Russian from Dartmouth College, an MA in Russian and East European studies from Yale University, and a PhD in history from Yale University. He is the author of numerous books, book chapters, and scholarly articles, and is the writer and producer of a documentary film on the U.S. and multinational peacekeeping mission in Bosnia.

Uzbekistan to task over its opaque political system or curbs on the expression of dissent.

Just seven months later, in April 2017, the newly elected president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, returned the favor with a visit to Moscow. In his official remarks, Mirziyoyev emphasized the search for common ground with Russia on the most important regional question, stating, “Uzbekistan fully supports Russia’s efforts to advance the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan and will take part in the expanded meeting on the situation in Afghanistan on April 14 in Moscow.”<sup>8</sup> He also noted the increased import by Uzbekistan of Russian military equipment and other cooperative endeavors. Overall, this statement reflected a subtle warming of relations with Russia as well as a generally pragmatic and conciliatory approach by Mirziyoyev toward all of his neighbors in the region during the first year of his administration. Coverage blanketed the front pages of all the newspapers in Uzbekistan and led the television news coverage as well. Overall, whereas ritual state visits might pass almost unnoticed in the Western press, they receive a prominent place in media coverage among the less Westernized former republics of the Soviet Union. Moreover, thorough coverage of often mundane exchanges of official statements tends to obscure the widespread absence of hard news in the domestic press.

Again, Russian television news programming helps to fill the void. The channel Russia-24 offers nonstop news programming and is widely available. The format mirrors Western news shows, but the content generally

fits Putin’s prescription to the letter. Other prominent channels such as Russia-1 offer periodic informational programming through the day as well as discussion programs that seem to be a hybrid between panel discussion and game show. Discussants are seldom highly placed government officials or senior scholars, although most can claim some connection to politics

or the subject at hand. The discussion is free-wheeling and seemingly open. It is not necessarily focused or strictly oriented toward facts and evidence, however. The program rains opinions, whose very diversity mimics panel analysis in Western programs without intending the same result. The real purpose seems not to bring clarity to points of dispute but rather to encourage rhetorical fireworks and make viewers’ heads spin. Patriotic messages come through loud and clear, but the sum total is to leave audiences entertained yet unconvinced of much of anything.

According to a former Russian reality television producer Peter Pomerantsev, this may well be the intended effect. In his 2014 book *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible*, Pomerantsev describes the art form of news

obfuscation.<sup>9</sup> Information is torn loose from its traditional moorings to make sorting fact from fiction almost impossible for ordinary people. Following the 2014 shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH-17 in Ukraine, Russian media saturated the airwaves with a stunning variety of theories, all pinning the blame on Ukraine or the United States. The lack of consistency or congruence among the explanations



A copy of the DVD cover of *Dvizhenie Vverkh* (*Going Vertical*), a 2017 Russian-made movie about Russia's gold medal victory over the United States in men's basketball during the 1972 Munich Olympics. The movie demonstrates Russia's attempts to compete with the perceived dominance of Western media cultural influence by producing high-quality television and film products with mass popular appeal that promote Russian sociopolitical views. (Photo by author)





created a kind of white noise that, for a Russian domestic audience, muted charges from the West in which Russia's separatist allies in Ukraine were the culprits. Putin did not create this culture of incoherence but has certainly learned to thrive within it.

Meanwhile, in this writer's experience, Putin's reputation is solid in Central Asia. He is not adored, but he is generally perceived as a rational and responsible leader who looks after Russia's interests and seldom makes political waves in the region. Of special note are Putin's interviews with filmmaker Oliver Stone, which were conducted between 2015 and 2017 and released for television throughout the region. A Russian-language version circulated in the stores of Tashkent soon after the interviews first aired. The result was that Putin's image probably improved. Viewers, as far as I could determine, saw him as someone with whom they could have a conversation. He seemed reasonable and humble but also commanding and forceful. I did not encounter anyone who could reconcile this performance with assertions in the Western press that Putin

American-made movies advertised in 2017 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Some observers assert that the current worldwide dominance of the American entertainment industry provides the United States with a type of soft power that it uses to shape the popular culture of other countries such as Uzbekistan to its political and economic advantage. (Photo by author)

was rash, aggressive, and disrespectful of international norms. Almost anyone with an opinion also noted that the interviewer was an American, a detail that elevated the credibility of the encounter. Few realized that Stone was not actually a journalist or noticed that the questioning was not very tough. Fewer still connected Stone with some of his controversial films concerning topics such as the assassination of President John Kennedy.

## The Power of Entertainment

Fittingly, the border between news and reality television in Russia has blurred. One remarkable instance this writer witnessed was in the fall of 2016. A reality



show called *The Team* (*komanda*) featured Putin ally, President Ramzan Kadyrov of Chechnya, who staged a competition among sixteen contestants to become his “assistant.”<sup>10</sup> Chechnya, of course, was the scene of two Russian wars intended to prevent its secession from the Russian Federation. The current Kadyrov rose to power following the assassination of his father. Reputed to run his semiautonomous state with an iron fist, Kadyrov has a frightening reputation for extreme methods in dealing with his opponents as well as those of his boss. During this serialized program, Kadyrov comes across as a regular guy, revealing a sense of humor as well as a new set of personal values reflecting his recent conversion to Islam. Interspersed with conversational asides about everything from his own early days fighting Russian troops in the mountains to the role of women in the home, the show featured a sequence of weird events entailing ice cream sales, boxing, coordinating surgical procedures, and offering a “vision statement” for Chechnya’s future.<sup>11</sup> If the intent was to humanize Kadyrov, it probably succeeded.

Meanwhile, in the entertainment sphere, Russia has learned to compete to a limited degree with America’s soft power juggernaut—Hollywood. In fact, in mid-April 2018, during a visit to Tashkent, Russia’s deputy telecom and communications minister Alexei Volin proposed the collaborative development of movies and programs, and even the possibility of a joint television channel.<sup>12</sup> For decades, the unparalleled ability of American studios to crank out hugely popular blockbuster movies has provided a formidable platform for the unsystematic transmission of perceptions, opinions, and behavioral norms. These days, American movies are typically released in Moscow or Tashkent within a few weeks after their debut in U.S. theaters. Take a look at any marquee in Tashkent and titles of American movies predominate. So pervasive is the American cinematic presence in most of the former Soviet Union that Russia recently made it a bit more expensive for its own theaters to show American movies. Nothing of the sort has happened in Uzbekistan, although authorities do control public entertainment to keep it within the bounds of conventional morality. For example, the government recently announced that a popular historical soap opera produced in Turkey would no longer air on domestic television due to its inappropriate content. Similarly,

guidelines recently appeared placing some restrictions on the costumes of musical groups.<sup>13</sup>

Actually, when it comes to selecting movies for public viewing, Russia exerts considerable influence on what plays in Uzbekistan and elsewhere. A primary reason is that the production of Russian-language versions of American films takes place in Russia. Thus, Russia, in effect, chooses what films will be disseminated around the region. Only after this initial step does the host country get a vote. Uzbekkino, the official Uzbek governmental film agency, can determine on its own that any particular foreign-made film is unsuitable for local release.<sup>14</sup> Even then, there is occasional latitude for individual theaters to exercise discretion. In a curious recent instance, the trendy Ilkhom Theatre in Tashkent elected to present *The Death of Stalin*, a British-produced dark comedy, on the sixty-fifth anniversary of the Soviet leader’s death. The film was initially scheduled for showing in Russia but was ultimately banned for its disrespectful tone.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps a few years ago, Uzbekistan might have followed suit. This incident appears to reflect yet another subtle change introduced by the new presidential administration in Uzbekistan.

One way to crowd out Western-produced material from Russia’s point of view is to create more of its own. What is more interesting than the role of censors is the way that the Russian television and film industries have “raised their game” in recent years. Perhaps realizing the cultural impact of a robust film industry, the Russian government has encouraged television and film to take on more ambitious projects. A case in point would be the serialized biography of Catherine the Great, which aired on Russia-1 in 2016 and 2017. The acting and production quality were relatively high, and perhaps more to the point was the entertainment value. In fact, this marks one of those rare instances when a Russian-produced program is so good that an English-language version is sold in the West. This is not some dull hagiography to a past Russian ruler. Rather, it is a complex story that, for the most part, adheres to historical fact, and aptly reflects Catherine’s multifaceted life and personality. Her difficult marriage to the quirky Peter III, her string of love affairs, her immersion in politics, and her embrace of the role of empress who would do much to enlarge the expanse and prestige of Russia all receive serious treatment.

The program was perhaps significant in another respect as well. In the Central Asian region that still reflects a male-dominated view of societal roles, a popular serial about a great female leader could not fail to attract notice. From a Russian viewpoint, the program also fits well within Putin's agenda to arouse the love of country. The narrative reinforces the perception that Russia is besieged by treacherous foreign adversaries

field a team of young but talented collegians who would train together for only a few months before the competition. In turn, the state-subsidized Soviet players were far more seasoned, physically mature, and had played together for years in the top Soviet league. In short, the contest had the makings of a highly competitive game. However, in the Russian movie, which also gets in a few pokes at the Soviet bureaucracy, their team is somehow



Meanwhile, in the entertainment sphere, Russia has learned to compete to a limited degree with America's soft power juggernaut—Hollywood.



and that sometimes great leaders must make morally problematic decisions for the good of the state. An intellectual after his own fashion, Putin is a fan of military history and a booster of the Russian Military History Society for its work to inspire patriotism.

Another, even more current, domestic box office Russian hit, *Dvizhenie Vverkh* (*Going Vertical*), concerns the unexpected and dramatic Russian capture of the gold medal at the men's basketball competition during the 1972 Munich Olympics. The best way to describe this movie is to see it as the mirror image of the American movie *Miracle*, which depicts the U.S. "miracle on ice" victory in ice hockey at the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York.

The parallels are obvious, but only viewers with some recollection of history will discern a bit of creative license in the Russian basketball version. In 1980, the U.S. men's hockey team competed in an era when professionals were still banned from Olympic participation. This particular rule heavily favored the Soviet Union, whose players were not considered professional despite the fact that they were in every realistic sense full-time, paid athletes while nominally in military service or other professions. The Soviet team was a magnificent hockey machine, and the American triumph of hustle and grit was about as close to a sports miracle as you can get.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, while it is true that the U.S. men's basketball team was favored in the 1972 games, it was not a lead-pipe cinch to win, even though America had never lost in Olympic basketball competition to that point. As the rules stipulated, the United States had to

a huge underdog against a bunch of ugly Americans who will go to any lengths to win. In the end, the Soviets prevailed, assisted by confusion at the scorer's table and by intervention from the head of the Fédération Internationale de Basketball Amateur, who left the stands and overruled game officials to direct the addition of two seconds on the game clock at the very end. This resulted in the Soviets having a second and then third attempt at a game-winning bucket. A subsequent U.S. appeal was denied 3-2 by a panel of five judges, three of whom were from communist states. That said, the final play was remarkable and falls within the domain of amazing athletic finishes.<sup>17</sup> In any case, the point is clear for Russians in the current hyperpatriotic atmosphere. Furthermore, the movie will no doubt entertain Russian-speaking audiences across much of Eurasia.

Moreover, it is a reminder that sport was a Soviet and now-Russian medium of influence as well. Success in the international arena elevated domestic pride and reflected favorably on the internal order. At the same time, it indicated to the outside world that Russians could be highly successful in competitive endeavors. A great feature of sports success was that it generated lots of positive press coverage.<sup>18</sup>

Book publishing is another realm where Russia has outsized influence. Bookstores do not abound in Central Asia and local publishers are modest operations with limited editions. Especially for coverage of contemporary affairs, readers must turn to works printed in Russia. Among the works recently available in a Tashkent bookstore, two examples can illustrate the point. The first,



*Russia, Crimea, History*, outlines Russia's historical claim to the region and why justice was served by its "return."<sup>19</sup> A second has the provocative title *Evil Myths about Russia: What Do They Say about Us in the West?* This work is a rapid historical excursion about negative impressions

"information ecosystem" but also aspects of human psychology that make us susceptible to certain kinds of appeals. Thus, there are two points of focus, according to Brendan Nyhan, a Dartmouth professor of government. One is, "How can we create a news eco-

“ The old Soviet approach to population control entailed shielding them from outside information. Today, Russian citizens have far more access to foreign information sources, even foreign educations. ”

of Russia harbored in the West right up to the curious claim that today the West wants to transform Russia into a colony.<sup>20</sup> (In my informal explorations, I found a broader ideological spectrum of works in Kazakhstan, including a couple that were critical of the Russian government.) Tashkent newsstands also display a handful of Russian-language newspapers that are simply local editions of the same published in Moscow. In brief, Russia's take on the world is represented in just about every niche of the information marketplace.

So, why does this matter? One emergent point in the context of the global competition for influence is that appeals to emotions are frequently more effective than those that resort to fact-based argumentation. This is especially true in a digitally-enhanced environment where facts seem ever more suspect. The entire planet is now connected by a virtual infrastructure in which the appeals of a group such as the Islamic State can compete on equal footing with sources that, from a Western rationalist point of view, are far more authoritative and trustworthy. Put another way still, facts only matter to those who believe they are important or can distinguish plausible reporting from propaganda. A recent study published in *Science*, using data from Twitter for the period 2006 to 2017, reported that falsehoods circulate far more quickly than truth.<sup>21</sup> In the future, the information high ground may belong to those who have studied how the transmission of ideas operates across the cloudscape of digitally networked human brains.

Actually, America's own experience with apparent disinformation efforts has prompted the creation of an interdisciplinary group of scholars to study not only ways to constrain the flow of false news into our

system and culture that values and promotes truth?"<sup>22</sup> There are other concerns in the ways that people make individual decisions to share information online.

Author Kurt Andersen, in an article titled "How America Lost its Mind," traces the current American information environment back to the 1960s and suggests that parallel pathologies emerged both on the left and on the right in American politics. He argues that in the early 1960s, American public life was still grounded in "the great Enlightenment idea of intellectual freedom" tethered to the notion that consensus could form around a thoughtful review of evidence and respect for facts.<sup>23</sup> This recollection may be a bit idealized, but there is a point nonetheless. This brings to mind the assertion of John Stuart Mill in chapter 2 of *On Liberty* that free and open inquiry is the only and surest way to figure out the truth.<sup>24</sup> Even the forthright examination and rejection of bad ideas can benefit the full understanding of better ideas.

Somewhere along the way, American dialogue began to lose sight of this principle. Andersen notes, for example, that the term "mainstream" back then had not yet acquired its pejorative implication associated with the views of undemocratic elites in government, science, or the corporate world.<sup>25</sup> During the course of the decade, as America lurched toward a kind of hyperindividualism in which everyone could subscribe to their own reality, there was the invention of the "fantasy-industrial" complex, which exalted subjectivity and dismissed objectivity as unattainable or simply unimportant. As Andersen put it, "After the 60s, the truth was relative, criticizing was equal to victimizing, individual liberty became absolute, and everyone was permitted to believe or disbelieve whatever they wished."<sup>26</sup>



In some ways, regard for fact might have been higher in both the United States and the Soviet Union fifty years ago. The old Soviet approach to population control entailed shielding them from outside information. Today, Russian citizens have far more access to foreign information sources, even foreign educations. However, with the explosion of domestic tabloids, fact-free speculation on television, and bewildering internet chatter, Russians are more cynical about information in general. The way things are evolving, America's information culture may be trending in the same direction. Especially disturbing is an increasing tendency to disparage the motives of those who disagree with us. As we have become more tribal in our thinking, we seem more inclined to view philosophical adversaries as enemies, menacing and somehow morally unfit. Good faith attempts to bridge the gap with intelligent dialog are losing out to rhetorical sleight of hand and ad hominem character assassination.

Without morally equating various extreme groups inhabiting polar positions on the American or global political spectrum, it is nonetheless possible

A Russian military delegation headed by Lt. Gen. Alexander Lapin, commander of the Russian Central Military District (*seated third from right*), meets with an Uzbek delegation led by Maj. Gen. Pavel Ergashev, first deputy defense minister and chief of the Army Staff of Uzbekistan (*seated third from left*), 16 February 2018 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to discuss military cooperation between the two countries. The sides exchanged views on a wide range of topics including the situations in the Central Asia and in the Middle East, plans to share organizational experience in combat training and in daily service, and a counterterrorism exercise that took place at the Forish field training ground in Uzbekistan's Dzhizak region. (Photo courtesy of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation)

to notice a symbiotic relationship, each group using its adversaries to galvanize anger and mobilize followers to action. Timur Kuran, a professor of Islamic studies at Duke University, explains that "intolerant communities compete for members. ... Like the propaganda departments of parties, they promote ideologies that focus attention on particular grievances, interpretations of history, and policy instruments. They also provide social status to their members and treat nonmembers with contempt. Finally, they claim to speak for entire categories of people."<sup>27</sup>





Not since the Vietnam era has American political dialog so readily called to mind the grave warning about rhetorical excess penned by Thucydides about civil strife over two thousand years ago. Describing revolution in ancient Greece, Thucydides wrote, Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal supporter; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question incapacity to act on any. ... The advocate of extreme measures was always trustworthy; his opponent a man to be suspected.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, we are not there yet, but social media has proven especially inviting to demagogic banter and virtual vigilantism.

A statue of Amir Temur, Tamerlane the Great, occupies a square once graced by Karl Marx's statue 24 October 2013 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan associates its history with the empire of Tamerlane the Great, who ruled from Samarkand in the fourteenth century. (Photo by LoggaWiggler, Pixabay)



This brings the discussion back around to Russia. Using the writings of Russian General Valery Gerasimov as a point of departure, long-time Russia analyst Timothy Thomas argues that, given its limited means for exerting influence, Russia emphasizes social media and the internet as a means to shape or disrupt information ecosystems in various places. He explains, for example, that websites such as the “International Russian Conservative Forum” attempt to insert themselves into political discussion abroad with the intent to “amplify” those voices that might be most extreme and distorting.<sup>29</sup> Lynn Ellen Patyk, a Dartmouth assistant professor, described the phenomenon this way: “Provocation—an act that is intended to produce a reaction from its target that serves the provocateur’s ends and is damaging to his opponent.”<sup>30</sup> In the past, the Soviet Union typically attempted to insinuate its influence through the manipulation of voices on the left end of the political spectrum. Today, freed from the imperative to push a single ideological perspective, Russia has learned that it can wield information war across the spectrum and inflame opinion on multiple sides at once.

Not surprisingly, states that impose limitations on electoral debate or on internet activity might actually enjoy a degree of insulation from this kind of interference. Also, because they keep a close eye on websites and social media, the robust security services of the Central Asian states would probably spot some types of foreign interference early and curb their activity.

## **Uzbekistan’s Security Posture in Cultural Context**

Though consistently friendly to Russia, Uzbekistan has long kept its neighbor at arm’s length, avoiding binding military alliances or other relationships that might cede some aspect of its sovereignty. This does not mean there is no military cooperation with Russia. On the contrary, in late 2017, Uzbekistan reportedly decided to purchase twelve Mi-35 Russian attack helicopters during a visit by Russia’s Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev. Also, in October 2017, Russia and Uzbekistan participated in a joint military exercise for the first time since 2005.<sup>31</sup>

A short glimpse at the Uzbekistan Armed Forces offers some insight into the national approach to security issues. Inevitably, the legacy of the Soviet army has had a strong influence. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Uzbek army not only inherited equipment, training philosophy, and doctrine but also an institutional

outlook encompassing modes of thought and education. The organizational culture, such as the absence of a capable, empowered noncommissioned officers corps, strongly reflected inheritance from the Russian and Soviet armies. In education, this legacy manifested itself in heavy dependence on lectures and memorization of content, mastery of which would be confirmed by quizzes and tests—a formula once prevalent in American education as well.

In 2017, Mirziyoyev declared in a January address that military reform in Uzbekistan would embrace the system of military education as well. At the AFA, which recently relocated to a more modern campus in Tashkent, engagement with educators from the United States and some NATO partners has contributed to the adoption of a variety of instructional methods and greater emphasis on the role of seminars as forums for substantive discussion. The academic year 2016-2017 marked the first year during which a so-called Ministry of Defense Advisor, working under the auspices of the Defense and Security Cooperation Agency, served in a resident advisory capacity at the AFA.

Working along converging lines, a string of military educators (including a number from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, or CGSC) have visited the AFA in recent years under the umbrella of the Defense Education Enhancement Program. The focus in both instances has been to encourage the use of what are known as adult learning methods employed at CGSC and elsewhere. Stress on developing critical thinking has been a singular feature of this effort. Critical thinking, in turn, requires looking at problems from multiple perspectives and allowing latitude for various approaches. In other words, it marks a break from the transmission of received wisdom as determined by figures in authority. This is not in any way a descent into relativism. Classroom rigor demands that opinions be well-informed and that students can cogently articulate the reasons for their views. In the meantime, several visits by delegations from the AFA to the CGSC at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, over the past five years further prompted the AFA to build classrooms based on a similar design. Such is the prestige of the CGSC brand that the AFA now desires to emulate many of the features that highlight a CGSC education.

## **Inventing Uzbekistan**

Of course, the AFA is perfectly willing to accept good ideas from Russia or China as well and will



certainly continue to do so. A model of prudent caution, Uzbekistan has generally taken a multilateral approach to military questions, engaging all without becoming unduly dependent on any single source. Avoiding entanglements, Uzbekistan has abstained from participation in operations, even peacekeeping, outside its borders. This has worked satisfactorily as an element of foreign policy but has left a void regarding operational experience. For this reason, the AFA takes a special interest in the study of foreign military experience, which constitutes one of the major subjects of instruction.

Overall, the outlook and approach of Uzbekistan is shaped by its youth as an independent state. The same holds true for other former Soviet republics. Nevertheless, for the Central Asian states above all, independence has entailed a high degree of self-invention. Some of the other republics, such as those in the Caucasus or the Baltic region, had past histories as independent states to which they could turn for a sense of national identity and a usable past. Even Ukraine had begun to develop national consciousness before its 1917 revolution and subsequently had a fleeting experience with statehood. The experience in Central Asia differed. Empires and khanates came and went but were not based on a national principle or closely identified with a titular nationality. Islam served as the main organizing concept. Consequently, the process of sorting people into nations began under the Soviet Union, which in a way provided an incubation period for emergent national states in the post-Soviet era.

This means that their experience as part of the Soviet Union is inordinately significant as a shared and

remembered journey to the present. However, to foster a stronger sense of historical identity, these states must reach back into a deeper past without clearly identifiable signposts. Therefore, some creative license has proved necessary as part of constructing national histories or, some would say, national myths. Uzbekistan has chosen to associate its history with the empire of Tamerlane the Great, who ruled from Samarkand in the fourteenth century. Tamerlane's statue occupies a prominent square in downtown Tashkent once graced by Karl Marx's statue. Tamerlane's grandson, Ulugh Beg, has also earned his place among the local greats. Both a ruler and accomplished astronomer of the early fifteenth century, whose amazing observatory can still be visited in Samarkand, Ulugh Beg reminds citizens of Uzbekistan of a rich intellectual tradition to which they can lay claim.

One point to draw from all of this is that Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states are learning to engage the world in the same way that they are engaging their own pasts. In a substantive way, foreign influences have become part of the mix of factors shaping the development of these young states. Russia in the twenty-first century has figured out perhaps more quickly than any other state how to pursue its foreign policy objectives through all available media. Still, geography alone will ensure that Russian influence in Central Asia will persist. Even so, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states are not so easily influenced. After a quarter century of independence, they have a clearer sense of their identity and interests and will insist upon foreign engagement on equal terms. ■

## Notes

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

2. Öncel Sencerman, "Russian Diaspora as a Means of Russian Foreign Policy," *Military Review* 98, no. 2 (March–April 2018): 40–49.

3. Aneta Pavlenko, "Russian in Post-Soviet Countries," *Russian Linguistics* 32 (2008): 73

4. *Ibid.*, 76.

5. *Ibid.*, 72–75.

6. "About Uzbekistan," United Nations Development Programme, accessed 16 May 2018, <http://www.uz.undp.org/content/uzbekistan/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

7. "Putin Visits Karimov's Grave, Meets Uzbek PM," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 6 September 2016, accessed 16 May 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-russia-putin-visits-karimov-grave/27969685.html>.

8. Catherine Putz, "Uzbek President Mirziyoyev Makes State Visit to Russia," *The Diplomat*, 7 April 2017, accessed 16 May 2018, [\[thedi.com/2017/04/uzbek-president-mirziyoyev-makes-state-visit-to-russia/\]\(https://thedi.com/2017/04/uzbek-president-mirziyoyev-makes-state-visit-to-russia/\).](https://thedi</a></p>
</div>
<div data-bbox=)

9. Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014).

10. "Chechen Leader Kadyrov Hosts 'The Apprentice'-Style TV Show," Voice of America, 6 October 2016, accessed 16 May 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/chechen-leader-kadyrov-hosts-the-apprentice-style-tv-show/3539353.html>.

11. Will Worley, "Chechnya Picks Leader Ramzan Kadyrov's Aide with Apprentice-Style Reality Show, Only with More Boxing and Horse Riding," Independent, 26 November 2016, accessed 16 May 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/chechnya-ramzan-kadyrov-aide-the-apprentice-style-reality-tv-show-a7440651.html>.

12. "Uzbekistan, Russia to Jointly Create TV Channel," Eurasianet, 17 April 2018, accessed 16 May 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/s/uzbekistan-russia-to-jointly-create-tv-channel>.

13. Ron Synowitz, "Ban On Turkish Soap Opera Reflects Uzbek President's New Approach to Islam," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 23 February 2018, accessed 16 May 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-islam-soap-opera-banned-new-approach/29058684.html>.

14. "Uzbekistan Filmgoers Get to See Death of Stalin. For Free," Eurasianet, 1 March 2018, accessed May 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/s/uzbekistan-filmgoers-get-to-see-death-of-stalin-for-free>.

15. Ibid.; Marc Bennetts, "Russia Pulls 'Despicable' Death of Stalin from Cinemas," *The Guardian* (website), 23 January 2018, accessed 16 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/23/russia-urged-to-delay-death-of-stalin-release-until-summer>.

16. Robert F. Baumann, "The Central Army Sports Club (TsSKA): Forging a Military Tradition in Soviet Ice Hockey," *Journal of Sports History* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 151–66.

17. See account by Frank Saraceno, "Classic USA vs. USSR Basketball Game," ESPN Classic, 6 August 2004, accessed 16 May 2018, [http://www.espn.com/classic/s/Classic\\_1972\\_usa\\_ussr\\_gold\\_medal\\_hoop.html](http://www.espn.com/classic/s/Classic_1972_usa_ussr_gold_medal_hoop.html); see also Kevin Wiutherspoon, "'Fuzz Kids' and 'Musclemen': The US-Soviet Basketball Rivalry 1958-1975," in *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations Since 1945*, ed. Heather Dichter and Andrew Johns (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 297–326.

18. See John Soares, "'Our Way of Life against Theirs': Ice Hockey and the Cold War," in *Diplomatic Games*, 251–96.

19. Nikolai Starikov and Dmitri Beliaev, *Rossia. Krym. Istoriia* [Russia, Crimea, History] (Moscow: Piter, 2016).

20. Igor Prokopenko, *Zlye mify o Rossii. Chto o nas govoriat na Zapade?* [Evil Myths about Russia: What Do They Say about Us in the West?] (Moscow: Eksmo, 2016), 185.

21. Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (9 March 2018): 1146–51.

22. Bill Platt, "Nyhan Joins Call for a New Field of Study to Fight Fake News," Dartmouth News, 21 March 2018, accessed 16 May 2018, [http://news.dartmouth.edu/news/2018/03/nyhan-joins-call-new-field-study-fight-fake-news?utm\\_source=dhome&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_campaign=dhome\\_carousel1](http://news.dartmouth.edu/news/2018/03/nyhan-joins-call-new-field-study-fight-fake-news?utm_source=dhome&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=dhome_carousel1).

23. Kurt Andersen, "How America Lost Its Mind," *The Atlantic* (website), September 2017, accessed 25 May 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/how-america-lost-its-mind/534231/>.

24. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859; repr., Kitchener, ON: Batoche Books, 2001), 18–30. Mill's highly influential book was first published in 1859. For additional discussion by Mill, see also *System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive* (London: Longman, 1884), 631–32.

25. Andersen, "How America Lost Its Mind."

26. Ibid.

27. Timur Kuran, "Another Road to Serfdom: Cascading Intolerance," in *Can it Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America*, ed. Cass Sunstein (New York: Dey Street Books, 2018), 238.

28. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Free Press, 1996), 199–200.

29. Timothy Thomas, *Kremlin Kontrol: Russia's Political-Military Reality* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2017), 58.

30. Lynn Ellen Patyk, "The Real Reason Russia Blames Britain for the Skripal Poisonings," *The Washington Post* (website), 2 April 2018, accessed 16 May 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/04/02/the-real-reason-russia-blames-britain-for-the-skripal-poisonings>.

31. Joshua Kucera, "Uzbekistan Restoring Closer Military Ties with Russia," Eurasianet, 12 December 2017, accessed 16 May 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/s/uzbekistan-restoring-closer-military-ties-with-russia>.



## NCO JOURNAL

The official journal of Noncommissioned Officer professional development

Attention noncommissioned officers (NCOs), soldiers, family, and friends! We are looking for written submissions from all viewpoints. Take advantage of this opportunity to be heard, to share your experience, and to make a contribution to the Army and the NCO Corps.

The *NCO Journal* is the official journal for NCO professional development. It provides a forum for the open exchange of ideas and information relevant to the NCO Corps.

Visit us at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/> or on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal/>.

