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RUSSIAN AND CHINESE SOFT POWER IN NORTH MACEDONIA

INSTITUTIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE *CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE* AND *FOND RUSSKIY MIR*

ABSTRACT

The Balkans, in the past and in present times, has always been of interest to the great powers, aiming at expanding their influence and presence. With this in consideration, the region became a terrain in which the presence of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation was also felt. North Macedonia is no exception in this regard, as a country that occupies an important position in the Balkans. The aim of the article is to evaluate Russian and Chinese soft power in the North Macedonia, namely a comparative look at the institutional activities of *Confucius Institute* and *Russkiy Mir*, 'Ruski Centar', which have been operating in this country for many years as a means of spreading Chinese and Russian culture and language. During the preparation of this research the 'qualitative method' was used, i.e. secondary sources (relevant Russian government sources and documents), although the historical, descriptive, comparative, and other methods have not been left aside.

Keywords: Public Diplomacy, *Confucius Institute*, *Fond Russkiy Mir*, Ruski Centar

PROMOTION OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND RUSSIAN FEDERATION THROUGH PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In this era of cultural, commercial or all kinds of interdependence, whether in the field of media, political literature, or study centers, etc. we encounter the notion of 'public diplomacy' as a means of achieving a certain goal.

In fact, it is this type of diplomacy that aims at building relations and understanding other countries, cultures and peoples. Hence, it is about the communication that enables the exchange of different views and the correction of incorrect perception by looking for areas where a common cause can be found.¹ It is the process of communication by a government with the foreign public aiming at bringing understanding about the nation's ideas and ideals, the institutions, culture and the national policy of the state which promotes this type of communication.²

It is within this context that one may clearly notice the difference between 'public diplomacy' and 'traditional diplomacy', where the former focuses on dialogue between people, while the latter emphasizes relations between state representatives or other international actors.³

The significant economic development of the People's Republic of China and its position as the second largest economy on the planet has already brought this country into almost direct contact with every nation and state worldwide.

This international reality makes it almost impossible for the Chinese state to neglect the instrument of public diplomacy. To this end, during an interview given to *Xinhua* News Agency, Fu Ying, a Chinese diplomat and former ambassador to the United Kingdom, emphasized the need for China to: *take the initiative to develop public diplomacy in helping the outside world to get to know China*.⁴ So in the case of China, public diplomacy, in addition to serving the implementation of state goals, aims also at the acquaintance of China with the outside world (*foreign public*).

Within Chinese political discourse, the notions of public diplomacy and even that of soft power – in the sense of the state getting what it wants through attraction⁵ – have found application in official speeches and documents, thus making Chinese policy-makers aware of the possibilities of putting these notions into practice. The Chinese leadership even officially declared the *soft power* as a key national initiative at the Seventeenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party as early as 2007.⁶

¹ M. Leonard, C. Stead, C. Smewing, *Public Diplomacy*, London 2002, p. 9.

² J. Melissen (ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy Soft Power in International Relations*, Basingstoke–New York 2005, p. 12.

³ G. Sargsyan. "China's Public Diplomacy: Main Vectors," *Chinese Studies*, vol. 4, no. 01 (2015), pp. 10-14.

⁴ J. Wang, "Introduction: China's Search of Soft Power," in J. Wang (ed.), *Soft Power in China Public Diplomacy through Communication*, New York 2011, p. 9.

⁵ On the soft power and public diplomacy, see: S.J. Nye Jr, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 616, no. 1 (2008), pp. 94-109.

⁶ J. Wang, "Introduction: China's Search..." p. 8.

The *State Council Information Office* and the *Communist Party Office of Foreign Publications* are considered the two main institutions in the People's Republic of China which are responsible for developing public diplomacy's plans and guidelines (even of the *soft power* as well), monitoring the foreign media, censoring local media, including the Internet, etc.⁷

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is also considered a very important institution with regard to public diplomacy, to the extent that the latter is considered as one of the 'main responsibilities of the MFA'.⁸

However, in addition to the aforementioned institutions which are obliged to implement the promotion of public diplomacy, namely China's soft power, we see that in the literature dealing with this issue, the soft power was present in the teachings of ancient Chinese philosophers and of Chinese philosophy, although not with the same labeling as used today.

In this regard, it can be mentioned that Confucian philosophers generally preferred the use of socio-cultural means which they considered to be the most appropriate way for restoring the peace and harmony in the world, while *mohism* appealed to the 'universal love' of human life.⁹ Even in various media and cultural circles, the famous Chinese philosopher and strategist Sun Tzu and his well-known work *The Art of War* are mentioned in the context of the soft power.¹⁰ Therefore, one may say that this type of activity aimed at presenting China and Chinese culture to others is not a novelty in the Chinese circles, but rather a centuries-old tradition.

On the other hand, this means of communication and attraction *to others* and to the external audience also emerged in the political decision-making circles of the Russian Federation, as a country which along with China in the 21st century participates in various multilateral forums and organizations aiming at increasing their political, economic, but also military importance in the international arena.

If we go back to the official Russian documents that deal with the vision which the Russian Federation should follow during a certain period, such as the Concept of Foreign Policy, we see that special importance is already assigned to the soft power. Thus, the 2013 Concept approved by the Russian President states, among others, that: *The Soft Power... is becoming an indispensable component of modern international relations.*¹¹ This has been also reconfirmed in the context of the 2016 Concept, which expressly notes that: *...the soft power has become an integral part of the efforts for achieving foreign policy objectives....*¹²

⁷ I. d'Hooghe, "The Expansion of China's Public Diplomacy System", in J. Wang (ed.), *Soft Power in China Public Diplomacy through Communication*, New York 2011, p. 21.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ G. Sargsyan, "China's Public Diplomacy...", p. 11.

¹⁰ "Sun Tzu and the Art of Soft Power?," *The Economist*, 17 December 2011, at <https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/2011/12/17/sun-tzu-and-the-art-of-soft-power>, 3 May 2024.

¹¹ *Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 20 February 2013, at <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/70218094/>, 14 May 2024.

¹² *Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, no. 640, 30 November 2016, at <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41451>, 14 May 2024.

To our research it is of interest that in 2022 the Russian political elite, or rather the country's president, Vladimir Putin, approved the official document entitled: *The Concept of the Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation for the outside world*, which aims at the promotion of Russian history, culture, literature and language abroad.¹³ It is precisely this document that we can read under the lens of the public diplomacy, namely the soft power, through which the Russian state aims to implement its national interests and thus position itself in the 21st century.

Undoubtedly, its goal (*the Concept of Humanitarian Policy*) is to strengthen Russia's international position and *neutralize anti-Russian tendencies of a political-cultural nature*, while Russian media sources, such as TV, radio, and the Internet, are mentioned as particularly useful instruments in this regard.¹⁴

Indeed, this important document of Russian policy shows that the main interest of official Moscow is to revive the concept of *Russkiy Mir*, which starts from the idea that Moscow has a sacred duty to protect Russian culture, language, etc.¹⁵

Whether in the case of China or Russia, the framing of these techniques of diplomacy under the guise of official state policy is proof that People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation already intend to compete with Western countries in every sphere and geographical region, including the Balkan context.

CHINESE AND RUSSIAN SOFT PRESENCE IN NORTH MACEDONIA

In the introduction to the article, we stated that the Balkans is an area in which various actors have expressed interest throughout history. The People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, whose presence in public diplomacy and soft power is evident, are no exception in this regard. Beijing, in the Balkan context, cultivates the image of itself as a great power and a reliable economic partner that seeks opportunities to invest in strategically important sectors.¹⁶

The Republic of North Macedonia, as well as other Western Balkan countries, supported the Chinese 'Belt and Road'¹⁷ initiative, for which in 2014 it signed

¹³ *Concept for Russia's Humanitarian Policy Abroad*, 5 September 2022, at <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/69285>, 14 May 2024.

¹⁴ Ibid. See also: M. Kragh, "Russia's Concept for a 'Humanitarian' Policy Abroad," in *Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies. Commentary*, no. 11 (2022), pp. 1-3, at <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeu/sussias-concept-for-a-humanitarian-policy-abroad.pdf>, 14 May 2024.

¹⁵ M. Bergmann, T. Dolbaia, N. Fenton, "Russia's Adaptation Game: Deciphering the Kremlin's 'Humanitarian Policy,'" *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 14 December 2022, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-adaptation-game-deciphering-kremlins-humanitarian-policy>, 14 May 2024.

¹⁶ V. Zeneli, "Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans and Its Impact on the Region's European Union Integration Process", *Institute for Human Sciences*, 23 June 2023, at <https://www.iwm.at/blog/chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-its-impact-on-the-regions-european-union>, 5 May 2024.

¹⁷ The *Belt and Road* Initiative is a major Chinese infrastructure project launched by the Chinese government in 2013 to promote China's economic and trade connectivity with Asia, Africa and Europe.

a Memorandum of Cooperation. However, according to sinologist Ana Krstinovska, until the present day the country has not implemented any important activities, nor has it participated in relevant high-level events.¹⁸

With regard to the field of media, it must be said that People's Republic of China has expanded its news broadcasting activities in English and local languages.¹⁹ In this context, *China Radio International* (CRI), which is part of the *Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party*, though not broadcasting in the Macedonian language, its network is still usable for North Macedonia's public, since it also offers services in the Albanian language (*Radio Ejani* in the Republic of Albania) and the Serbian language (*Kineski Radio Internacional* in the Republic of Serbia).

It seems that the use of social networks such as Facebook is considered the most adequate place where the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in North Macedonia, in addition to covering the activities it carries in the country, surprisingly distributes to a large extent the news and posts of various Chinese media that have nothing to do with Macedonian-Chinese relations. Although this platform is banned in China, its use by Chinese diplomatic missions is seen as a genuine tool for targeting the public's attention of the host country.

This can be seen in the context of the campaign: 'Tell China's story well', a campaign undertaken by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, where it was proclaimed that China should *increase its soft power, give good Chinese narrative and communicate better China's messages to the world*.²⁰

Such a practice is noticeable²¹ even in view of the official profile of the Russian Federation's Embassy on Facebook, where, in addition to news about the Embassy's activities, geographical views of various Russian regions are offered, and the speeches

See: World Economic Forum, "China's Belt and Road Initiative Turns 10. Here's What to Know," 20 November 2023, at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/11/china-belt-road-initiative-trade-bri-silk-road/>, 16 May 2024. In the context of countries of the Western Balkans, related to this project, is the 17+1 platform, which aims at the economic and development cooperation of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe with China. For more information on this platform see: at <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/>, 16 May 2024.

¹⁸ A. Krstinovska. "Mestoto na Severna Makedonija vo strategijata na Kina za Zapaden Balkan", *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, Skopje, (n.d.). p. 5.

¹⁹ A. Krstinovska, "Understanding the Tools, Narratives and Impact of China's 'Soft Power' in North Macedonia," *Estima Knowledge Excellence, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Skopje*, p. 6, at <https://www.kas.de/en/web/nordmazedonien/single-title/-/content/understanding-the-tools-narratives-and-impact-of-china-s-soft-power-in-north-macedonia-1>, 17 May 2024.

²⁰ D.N. An Luong, "Comparing Vietnamese Responses to Chinese and American Public Diplomacy Efforts on Social Media," *FULCRUM Analyses on South East Asia*, 25 August 2021, at <https://fulcrum.sg/comparing-vietnamese-responses-to-chinese-and-american-public-diplomacy-efforts-on-social-media/>, 17 May 2024.

²¹ In the context of this paper, we have reviewed the posts of the official profile of the Chinese and Russian embassies in North Macedonia, including the period from the beginning of January up to the end of May 2024.

of Russian leaders, either of the President, the head of diplomacy, announcements of the Russian MFA, etc. are continuously posted.²²

What catches the eye regarding the posts of the Russian or Chinese embassies' profiles on Facebook, is the fact that apart from the Macedonian language, there is no post in Albanian language, which is spoken by about 25% of the country's population.²³

Regarding the Chinese cultural presence, it is worth emphasizing that, in the case of North Macedonia, works translated from Chinese into the Macedonian language have also been added, plus the broadcasts of the television show *Ni Hao* on Telma TV, which talks about Chinese art, culture and traditions.²⁴

With regard to the field of publications and translations from Chinese into Macedonian language or vice versa, it's worth mentioning that in 2018 at the International Book Fair in Beijing, representatives from Macedonia participated in the founding of the publishers' association '16+1', which aims at promoting the cooperation in the field of publishing and cultural exchange between China and Central and Eastern Europe.²⁵

Activities in the fields of cultural and media have most likely contributed to the perception of the image of China in a positive sense among the citizens of North Macedonia. Hence, based on research carried out by the National Democratic Institute in 2018, 25% of the country's population had a positive opinion on China, while this figure reached 38% in 2021.²⁶

However, based on the survey carried out by the *Center for Insights in Survey Research* of the *International Republican Institute – IRI*, which included the countries of the Western Balkans during the period February-March 2024, the findings show that 41% of the respondents in North Macedonia have a *somewhat favorable* and 15% *very favorable* opinion about China.²⁷ This attitude of the citizens of these parts towards

²² Posol'stvo Rossii v Severnoy Makedonii/Ambasada na Rusija vo Sev. Makedonija, 2024, at <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD>, 21 May 2024.

²³ This is not the case with the posts of the embassies of countries such as the US, Great Britain, France or Germany, which also have posts in Albanian language, especially the latter two, where almost every post is also offered in Albanian.

²⁴ Only in 2018 and onwards some 50 books for young age have been published. See: A. Krstinovska, "Understanding the Tools...", p. 7.

²⁵ K. Bogoeva, "Kineskata literatura da bide popprisutna kaj nas – i našata tamu," *Nova Makedonija*, 12 September 2018, at <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/prilozi/lik/%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%83/>, 28 May 2024.

²⁶ V. Kalinski, "Uspehot na 'mekata mok' na Kina vo Makedonija," *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 5 December 2022, at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/amp/32161177.html>, 22 May 2024.

²⁷ As for the Russian Federation, the findings show that 19% of the citizens of North Macedonia have a very favorable and 31% somewhat favorable opinion. International Republican Institute, "Western Balkans Regional Poll | February –March 2024 | Full-Deck," 14 May 2024, at <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/>, 22 May 2024.

China meets the goals of Chinese diplomacy in creating the most positive possible image among the foreign public.

It should be added that recently (2024) the Chinese Embassy has also showed interest in familiarizing with the titles of books by various local authors. All this can be read within the context of the aforementioned, ...*understanding of countries... and communication by a government with the foreign public.*

The use of social networks as a tool for attracting the attention of the public – that of the citizens of North Macedonia – is not lacking when it comes to the presentation of Russian culture and various information in the country.

In this regard, the *Russian Beyond* portal that operates within *TV Novosti* and although self-styled as autonomous non-profit organization, and which according to the US State Department belongs to the media chain financed by the Russian state,²⁸ offers services in the Macedonian language as well. This portal, as specified within it, has a mission to introduce Russia to users around the world about its overall culture, history, cuisine, geographical landscapes, etc.²⁹

The aforementioned portal is aimed at foreign audiences and at improving the image of Russia abroad... while offering 'alternative news' and promoting Russian culture in the widest possible sense.³⁰

In the media context, it should not be forgotten that *RT Balkan* has started broadcasting in Serbian, which is aimed at the Serbian-speaking audience, while according to RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan: ...*despite our voice being suppressed wherever possible, we will nevertheless broadcast here, in Serbia, in Europe.*³¹ This can be seen as a kind of spreading of the Kremlin's voice and Russian worldview in this part of Europe.³² Undoubtedly, by using such broadcasting and communication tools and channels, the primary aim is the dialogue with foreign public opinion and the promotion of Russian values and interests.³³

The propagation and promotion of Chinese, i.e. Russian, language, culture, various educational issues, as well as tradition, are institutionalized within the *Confucius Institute* and *Ruskiy Mir / Ruski Centar*, which are discussed further in this article.

²⁸ U.S. Department of State. Global Engagement Center, "GEC Special Report Kremlin-Funded Media: RT and Sputnik's Role in Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem", January 2022, p. 19.

²⁹ For more information, see: *Russian Beyond* Makedonija, at <https://mk.rbth.com>, 22 May 2024.

³⁰ J.P. Singh, S. MacDonald, "Soft Power Today Measuring the Influences and Effects," p. 75, at https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/3418_bc_edinburgh_university_soft_power_report_03b.pdf, 3 February 2025.

³¹ RT, "RT Begins Broadcasting in Serbian- RT Balkan is Live On-Air from Belgrade," 27 December 2024, at <https://www.rt.com/news/610099-rt-balkans-serbian-premiere/>, 3 February 2025.

³² Reporter without Borders, "From Russia to Serbia: How RT Spreads the Kremlin's Propaganda in the Balkans Despite EU Sanctions," 7 October 2024, at <https://rsf.org/en/russia-serbia-how-rt-spreads-kremlin-s-propaganda-balkans-despite-eu-sanctions>, 3 February 2025.

³³ M. Laruelle, "Russia's Niche Soft Power Sources, Targets and Channels of Influence", *Russie. Nei. Visions*, no. 122, 8 April 2021, p. 12, at <https://www.ifri.org/en/papers/russias-niche-soft-power-sources-targets-and-channels-influence>, 3 February 2025.

THE *CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE*: A TOOL FOR THE PROPAGATION OF CHINESE CULTURE AND LANGUAGE IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Being a country with such an ancient and rich cultural tradition as China does, enables China to consider culture a key instrument in the sphere of soft power. For the Chinese leadership, culture should also serve in its promotion at the international level, and the opening of about 500 *Confucius Institutes* (since 2004) in approximately 80 countries is considered contribution in this regard.³⁴

Under the guise of the cultural values promoted by the Communist Party of China, the *Confucius Institute* strengthens the Chinese state's capacity to establish soft power and project a peaceful national identity in the world, while also helping China manage the uncertainty of the international public opinion *vis-à-vis* its rise in a changing world.³⁵

The aspect of cultural and educational cooperation between the Republic of North Macedonia and the People's Republic of China is also emphasized within the framework of bilateral relations. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that as a result of the agreement between the two governments signed a few years ago, the 'House of Chinese Culture' was opened (2010), as a first step towards the opening of what we currently call the *Confucius Institute*.³⁶

In the Republic of North Macedonia, this Institute was established in 2013 within the St. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, and as it is noted on its official website, it represents a platform for academic and intercultural cooperation between China and North Macedonia for all citizens.³⁷

The *Confucius Institute* in North Macedonia offers free Chinese language courses and since its establishment has a significant number of followers, including different age groups ranging from the youngest to the oldest. In this Institute until a few years ago (2022) – *we do not have data for the current period* – a total of 1,600 students attended the course, while in various centers and private schools up to that period, around 1,000 students attended them annually.³⁸

The Chinese state also offers scholarships for students from North Macedonia to continue their studies in Chinese universities, and currently the number of scholarships reaches about 10 per year, and they have been regularly utilized.³⁹

The *Confucius Institute* is also active on its *Facebook* profile and, unlike the Embassy of the People's Republic of China, which posts news from the Chinese media, the

³⁴ I. d'Hooghe, "The Expansion of China's Public Diplomacy System...", p. 25.

³⁵ Z.A. Huang, "The Confucius Institute and Relationship Management: Uncertainty Management of Chinese Public Diplomacy in Africa," in P. Surowiec, I. Manor (eds), *Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Uncertainty*, Cham 2021, pp. 200-201.

³⁶ Vlada na Republika Severna Makedonija, *Odnosi Republika Makedonija–Narodna Republika Kina*, at <https://vlada.mk/node/3101>, 23 May 2024.

³⁷ For more information on this Institute, see: at <https://konfucij.ukim.edu.mk/?lang=en>, 23 May 2024.

³⁸ Nezavisen, *Učenje kineski – od egzotika, preku potreba do porta za vlijanje*, 12 May 2022, at <https://nezavisen.mk/uchenje-kineski-od-egzotika-preku-potreba-do-porta-za-vlijanje/>, 28 May 2024.

³⁹ A. Krstinovska. "Understanding the Tools..." fq. 7.

Institute posts various activities carried out in the country. In the spirit of cooperation with various educational institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia, the *Confucius Institute* carries out activities with primary and secondary schools, where Chinese food, traditions, architecture, calligraphy, sports skills, etc. are presented.⁴⁰

It should be mentioned that this *Institute* also has cooperation with different municipalities in the country, such as the Municipality of Prilep,⁴¹ Probistip, etc. where, among other things, students who gravitate to these municipalities are offered the opportunity to attend Chinese language courses, seminars, and various workshops.⁴²

While observing the activities of the Chinese Embassy, namely the *Confucius Institute* in North Macedonia one may notice that, apart from the Municipality of Struga,⁴³ there has been no cooperation or activity with other municipalities led by Albanian political parties and where Albanian citizens make up the majority. This low level of cooperation probably corresponds to the findings of the survey carried out by IRI, where 36% of Albanian respondents in North Macedonia have a *very unfavorable* opinion and 21% *somewhat unfavorable* opinion of China.⁴⁴

In general, the *Confucius Institute*, which extends its activities in North Macedonia, just like in other countries of the world, is a product of self-perception and official Chinese policy to become known to other peoples and cultures, and of course to create pro-Chinese tendencies around the world.

FOND RUSSKIY MIR – SUPPORTER OF ‘RUSKI CENTAR’ IN NORTH MACEDONIA

The institutionalization of soft power, apart from being evident in official Russian political documents as stated above, also finds expression in the establishment of various foundations that have support from the Russian state. The *Russkiy Mir* (*Russian World*) functions thanks to the goal to become familiar with Russian culture, tradition and language.

⁴⁰ Institut „Konfucij” Skopje/Confucius Institute Skopje, 2024, at <https://www.facebook.com/institut-konfucij.mk>, 28 May 2024.

⁴¹ Opština Prilep, *Edukativna sorabotka za izučuvanje na kineskata kultura i jazik*, 25 September 2023, at <https://www.prilep.gov.mk/edukativna-sorabotka-za-izuchuvanje-na-kineskata-kultura-i-jazik/>, 28 May 2024. Moreover, this municipality has been twinned with the Chinese city of Dejang in the Chinese province of Si Chuan.

⁴² Nova Makedonija, “Možnost za decata da učat kineski jazik,” 1 June 2021, at <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/republika/%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D1%83%D1%87%D0%B0%D1%82-%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D1%98%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B8/>, 28 May 2024.

⁴³ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in North Macedonia, 6 March 2024, at <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=799353342235885&set=pcb.799353622235857>, 28 May 2024.

⁴⁴ As for the respondents of Macedonian ethnicity, the findings show that 19% of them have a very favorable opinion, while 47% somewhat favorable opinion about China. For more information, see: International Republican Institute, “Western Balkans Regional Poll...,” 28 May 2024.

The notion of *Russkiy Mir*, which during the '90s was re-actualized within Russian intellectual and cultural circles, appeared for building a *new system of relations between Russians in the context of global cultural politics*.⁴⁵

At the beginning of the 21st century and the transformations within the Russian Federation, *Russkiy Mir* serves as soft power's capital used for determining Russia's agenda (image) and stability.⁴⁶ In 2006, the Russian president Vladimir Putin mentioned the aforementioned concept, where he proclaimed that the coming year 2007 would be the year of the Russian language.⁴⁷ Finally, this institution, which plays an important role in the field of public diplomacy and Russian soft power, was established by presidential decree in 2007.

Meanwhile, based on the ideology followed by *Russkiy Mir*, we read that: *The Russian world are not only Russians, ... or our compatriots ... there are also foreign citizens who speak the Russian language, study it or learn it... all those who are sincerely interested in Russia...*⁴⁸

The founding of the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, as well as of the *Confucius Institute*, in close periods of time is an indicator that such initiatives were considered increasingly important for the Russian, i.e. Chinese, establishments at the beginning of the third millennium and thus for pushing forward their state agendas.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, the institution which was established on the initiative of the Russian embassy in Skopje, and with the support of the *Fond Russkiy Mir*, is *Ruski Centar – Russian Center*, which, like the *Confucius Institute*, was established within the St. Cyril and Methodius University in 2015, but which actively started its work in 2016. This institution, apart from having as its duty the inter-university cooperation between the two countries, offers to the citizens of North Macedonia free courses for studying Russian language, getting familiar with the Russian culture and traditions, various information on Russia, etc.⁴⁹

The language course is followed by different age groups, and since its establishment until now, there have been 4,500 attendants, and this year alone, about 500 course participants were registered.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ O. Bondarenko, "Russkiy Mir, between Diaspora and Public Diplomacy. Russia's Foothold in Central Asia," *Il Politico*, vol. 81, no. 3 (243) (2016), p. 89.

⁴⁶ A. Sergunin, L. Karabeshkin, "Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy," *Politics*, vol. 35, no. 3-4 (2015), p. 355.

⁴⁷ M. Laruelle, "The 'Russian World, Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination", 27 May 2015, p. 13, at <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-russian-world-russia-s-soft-power-and-geopolitical-imagination>, 14 May 2024.

⁴⁸ Fond "Russkiy Mir", at <https://russkiymir.ru/fund/>, 30 May 2024.

⁴⁹ For more information, see: Ruski centar Skopje. at <https://ruskicentar.mk/>, 30 May 2024.

⁵⁰ "Intervju so Darko Nestorov – nastavnik po ruski jazik na Ruskiot centar pri Univerzitetot, *Sv. Kiril i Metodij*, 9 April 2024, at <https://antropol.mk/2024/04/09/%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B2%D1%98%D1%83-%D1%81%D0%BE-%D0%B4%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BA%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA/>, 31 May 2024.

If we compare this figure with the number of attendants of the Chinese language course at the *Confucius Institute*, it is significantly larger, and probably the linguistic similarities between the Macedonian language – as the language of the South Slavs – and the Russian language make the interest in the Russian language somewhat higher.

Within the *Ruski Centar* in Skopje, the lack of interest in Russian language among ethnic Albanians is evident. That the ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia have a negative attitude towards Russia is also confirmed by the IRI survey, where it was observed that 50% of Albanians have a *very unfavorable* opinion and 22% a *somewhat unfavorable* opinion towards the Russian Federation.⁵¹

Activities of the *Ruski Centar* are also present on the Facebook social network, and it must be said that compared to the *Confucius Institute*, where only events related to the Chinese presence in the country are posted, on the profile of the *Ruski Centar*, data, information, and as stated in it, interesting facts about either Russia's historical or geographical character are continuously posted.⁵² One may read this in the context of the efforts of the diplomacy and institutions supported by Russia to influence the neutralization of anti-Russian feelings among the country's citizens.

Another very important institution is *Russotrudnichestvo* – which was established in 2008 by Presidential decree – and which, like *Russkiy Mir*, has as its mission, as noted on its official website, *...strengthening the humanitarian influence of Russia in the world...*⁵³

In the Republic of North Macedonia, *Russotrudnichestvo* was opened in 2016, but was closed a few years ago; however, we see that its Facebook profile under the name *Ruski dom vo Skopje* – ‘*The Russian Home in Skopje*’, (*Russotrudnichestvo* from 2021 works under the name of *Russian Home*) is still active and disseminates various activities, news, announcements of educational character, etc.⁵⁴

Whether in the case of the *Russkiy Mir* – *Ruski Centar* foundation or *Russotrudnichestvo* – *Ruski dom*, their presence and activities in North Macedonia over a period of several years are a genuine indicator that the country is part of the network of public diplomacy activity and soft power of the Russian Federation.

CONCLUSION

In the context of international society, various regional and global actors are always seeking the advancement and maximization of their interests. In order to achieve these goals, states not only follow the traditional means of diplomacy, but also contemporary

⁵¹ Among the Macedonian ethnicity, 24% of respondents have a *very favorable* opinion and 39% a *somewhat favorable* opinion towards the Russian Federation. International Republican Institute, “Western Balkans Regional Poll...”, 3 June 2024.

⁵² Ruski centar Skopje, 2024, at <https://www.facebook.com/ruskicentarmk>, 3 June 2024.

⁵³ Russotrudnichestvo, at <https://rs.gov.ru/en/about-foiv/>, 4 June 2024.

⁵⁴ Responsible for the representation of *Ruski Dom* in Skopje is the “Russian Home in Belgrade”. See: Ruski dom vo Skopje, 2024, at https://www.facebook.com/rossotrudnichestvo.skopje/about_details, 4 June 2024.

forms such as soft power as an important component of public diplomacy. Relations between countries in the cultural or educational field have become quite important parts of state practice.

This form of communication of a state with the outside world is aimed at improving or creating the most positive image among the citizens of a certain country.

This article dealt with the importance of soft power and public diplomacy in the case of Chinese and Russian policy and their presence in North Macedonia. In this regard, special focus was given to the comparison of the two institutions, the *Confucius Institute* and the *Russian Center – Ruski Centar*, which have been operating for several years in the country.

In the 21st century the Russian Federation and China have shown tendencies to compete the West all over the world, including within the Balkan context, and this has become evident even when soft power has been in question. In fact, soft power and public diplomacy have been framed in their national policies and strategies that they would have to follow in the coming period.

Their presence in North Macedonia is not necessarily directly related to their influence in the country, but there is no doubt that Russian and Chinese soft power plays an important role in the perception of the citizens of this country towards the aforementioned states.

The opening of educational and cultural institutions in the country can be understood either in the bilateral (*Russo-Macedonian or Chinese Macedonian*) context, but it came at a time when the Russian and Chinese governments intensified their activities to be recognized positively by the foreign public. The presence of such institutions in North Macedonia should also be seen in this context.

Through the various activities offered by these institutions, the promotion of cultural, historical or educational values, the aim is to improve the image and perception of citizens towards Russia and China.

In fact, various activities are considered an important tool in eliminating or neutralizing anti-Russian and anti-Chinese tendencies, especially in those sensitive geographical regions such as the Western Balkans.

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