

# **THE EFFECT OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE ON CHINA'S SOFT POWER IN KYRGYZSTAN**

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## **Abstract**

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is seen as one of its most ambitious projects to boost its international influence. This thesis explores the effect of BRI on the public perception of China. Kyrgyzstan, where the public opinion of China is worse than anywhere else in the Central Asian region, is chosen as a case study. The framework of the thesis relies on the conceptualization of soft power outlined by Joseph Nye and extended to also include economic resources. Using available survey results on public opinion on China and semi-structured expert interviews, this paper argues that China's application of soft power through BRI is negatively perceived by the general population in Kyrgyzstan. The reasons behind and the impact of the negative perception are further discussed in the thesis.

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# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>SECTION I: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 THE CONCEPT OF SOFT POWER .....	5
1.2 THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE .....	12
<b>SECTION II: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS .....</b>	<b>20</b>
2.1 CASE INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION .....	20
2.2 METHODOLOGY .....	22
2.3 LIMITATIONS.....	24
<b>SECTION III. CASE STUDY: KYRGYZSTAN.....</b>	<b>26</b>
3.1 BACKGROUND.....	26
3.1.1 BRI projects in Kyrgyzstan.....	27
3.1.2 Cultural diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan .....	28
3.2 ANALYSIS .....	29
3.2.1 Results from polls and surveys .....	29
3.2.2 Interview results .....	30
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>39</b>

## Introduction

For the past two decades, China has experienced tremendous economic growth and now asserts itself as a global power. The country has received increased attention regarding matters such as its economic expansion, global governance, trade policy, and military ambition, among others. As its economy has grown, China has simultaneously been trying to boost its international influence. In this regard, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is seen as one of its most ambitious projects to date. There continues to be considerable discussion about this megaproject and China's motives behind it. While some countries see BRI as an opportunity to obtain much needed investment in infrastructure without the conditionality required by Western investors, others warn of potential impacts such as political and economic dependence on China and rising debts. China has been criticized for "debt-trap diplomacy", or intentionally embroiling host countries with loans that they cannot repay.<sup>1</sup> Transparency, environmental damage, and the viability of BRI projects, are just a few among many major concerns, all the while China continues to promote and brand BRI as a "win-win cooperation".<sup>2</sup>

Many states rely on and employ various forms of soft power as mean of supporting the country's international image. A report from the British Council suggests that cultural and educational programs cultivate trust and strengthen the competitiveness of an economy.<sup>3</sup> Soft power has received acknowledgment for its benefits; for example, Andrew Rose finds that a country that is seen to be exerting a more positive influence in the world tends to have higher

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<sup>1</sup> "Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy Toward China," Trump White House Archives, October 4, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/>

<sup>2</sup> "Belt and Road--An Initiative for Win-win Cooperation --by H.E. Jiang Jiang, Chinese Ambassador to Malta," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, November 4, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbd\\_665378/t1549461.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/t1549461.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> British Council, "Trust Pays," May 2012, <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/policy-reports/trust-pays>

exports.<sup>4</sup> As he puts it, “countries receive a commercial return on their soft power.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, it is a key motivation for enhancing the international reputation of a country. In the world’s top global soft power index, which is based on a poll in 25 countries, China ranks at 27 out of 30 countries assessed.<sup>6</sup> To this extent, Chinese policymakers have also recognized the need to enhance the country’s international reputation. There are challenges in generating soft power, but China has recognized strengths in its rich culture and competitive educational system.

The effects of BRI on China’s soft power in participating states remain an interesting question, as there are few published studies assessing this connection. Jan Voon and Xinpeng Xu examine BRI and its effect on the perception of Chinese soft power globally using international survey data on soft power over the period of 2011 to 2016 with a focus on China’s overseas direct investment.<sup>7</sup> They find that investments, infrastructural buildings, and massive trade expansion have significantly positive impacts on China’s soft power. By separating BRI countries into the land route countries and the sea route maritime countries, they argue that China’s soft power had significantly increased in countries on the land route.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, according to this study, BRI projects enhance China’s international image and soft power, meaning BRI should improve the perception of China in the world.

However, this perception seems to be changing. China has significantly increased its presence in African infrastructure development, trade, and aid over the last years.<sup>9</sup> Findings from past Afrobarometer surveys show that Africans generally hold favorable views of Chinese

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew K. Rose, “Like Me, Buy Me: The Effect of Soft Power on Exports,” *Economics & Politics* 28, no. 2 (2016): pp. 216-232, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecpo.12077>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “2019 Overview,” The soft power 30, 2019, <https://softpower30.com/country/china/>

<sup>7</sup> Jan P. Voon and Xinpeng Xu, “Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on China’s Soft Power: Preliminary Evidence,” *Asia-Pacific Journal of Accounting & Economics* 27, no. 1 (2019): pp. 120-131, <https://doi.org/10.1080/16081625.2020.1686841>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Arkebe Oqubay and Justin Yifu Lin, *China-Africa and an Economic Transformation* (Oxford University Press, 2019)

economic and political activities on the continent; however, positive public perceptions have diminished compared to survey results from 2014/2015.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, citizens of African countries are concerned about being heavily indebted to China because of the long-term loans attached to BRI projects.<sup>11</sup> BRI may dampen China's soft power because of associated negative factors, such as the perceived influx of Chinese labor threatening to replace the local workforce, the loss of local autonomies and identities, potential mismanagement of individual BRI projects, and perceived pressure from China, among others.<sup>12</sup>

China's growing role in Africa has attracted the attention of many researchers and scholars. Most research has been conducted on South Asia and East Asia<sup>13</sup> and Africa,<sup>14</sup> and several studies have focused on Europe.<sup>15</sup> Central Asia, which is of particular interest to China because of its geographical location, has received little academic attention. This thesis makes an important contribution to the field of BRI in Central Asia, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, and the understanding of China's soft power. This research is limited to the case study of Kyrgyzstan due to the scope of the project, linguistic competencies, accessibility of the information, and availability of the people for interviews.

Therefore, this thesis aims to unravel the following research question: How does BRI affect China's soft power in Kyrgyzstan? More specifically, how does BRI affect the public's perception of China in Kyrgyzstan? To address the research question, I study China's soft power in Kyrgyzstan using the conceptualization of soft power outlined by Joseph Nye and

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<sup>10</sup> "Africans regard China's influence as significant and positive, but slipping," Afrobarometer, November 17, 2020, [https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ad407-chinas\\_perceived\\_influence\\_in\\_africa\\_decreases-afrobarometer\\_dispatch-14nov20.pdf](https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Dispatches/ad407-chinas_perceived_influence_in_africa_decreases-afrobarometer_dispatch-14nov20.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jan P. Voon and Xinpeng Xu, "Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on China's Soft Power"

<sup>13</sup> "The United States and the Rise of China and India Results of a 2006 Multination Survey of Public Opinion," The Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, 2006, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/2006-Chicago-Council-Survey-PDF-Report.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> "Africans regard China's influence as significant and positive, but slipping," Afrobarometer.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Turcsanyi and Eva Kachlikova, "The BRI and China's Soft Power in Europe: Why Chinese Narratives (Initially) Won." *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 49, no. 1 (April 2020): 58–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868102620963134>.

extended by other scholars to also include economic resources. The semi-structured expert interviews are used for the empirical analysis of this research. In the findings, it will be shown that BRI does not support China in improving its image in Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, China's application of soft power through BRI is negatively perceived by the general population in Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, the thesis elaborates on the impacts of this negative perception.

The thesis proceeds as follows: the first section provides the theoretical framework of the thesis and an overview of the existing literature on soft power and BRI. The second section describes the research design, justification of case selection and methodology. The third section provides an analysis of China's use of soft power and BRI projects in Kyrgyzstan based on the interviews and poll results. Finally, the conclusion of the thesis is provided.

## Section I: Theoretical framework and literature review

This part of the thesis establishes a theoretical framework for an analysis of soft power. For this purpose, it will use Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, which has been extended to include economic resources, in order to understand China's use of soft power in Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, an overview of the existing literature and research on soft power and the Belt and Road Initiative will be provided in this section.

### 1.1 The concept of soft power

Joseph Nye first coined the concept of soft power in 1990 in the book *Bound to Lead*.<sup>16</sup> He divided power into two types, hard and soft power with each having specific patterns and characteristics. While the focus of hard power is on traditional means such as military, technological strengths, or armed attacks to achieve the desirable outcomes, soft power stresses “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.”<sup>17</sup> This form of power relies on the ability to model the desires of others without the use of violence, threats, and force: “You can coerce them with the threats, you can induce them with payments, or you can attract and co-opt them to want what you want.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, soft power is demonstrated in attraction, co-optation, or even admiration, meaning “a country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries - admiring values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness - want to follow it.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the perception of legitimacy is central to soft power. Nye states: “If you believe that my objectives are

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: the Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft power: the means to success in world politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, x

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

legitimate, I may be able to persuade you do something for me without using threats or inducements.”<sup>20</sup> In such a way, legitimacy plays a very important role in enhancing soft power.

### *Soft power sources*

According to Nye, there are three sources of soft power: an attractive culture, political values and institutions, and foreign policies that are perceived as legitimate or having moral authority.<sup>21</sup>

In regard to culture, Nye states that when a country’s culture has global values that are shared by others, it increases the likelihood of getting preferable results, while confined ideas, values, and culture are averse to creating soft power.<sup>22</sup> There are various ways to spread a country’s culture, such as through the use of cultural products, but also through education and business exchanges.<sup>23</sup> In this way, culture and education are powerful sources of attraction. For example, foreign students studying in the U.S. are often cited as an example of successful soft power implementation, as American values and ideas are exported and spread by these students.<sup>24</sup>

Political values and policies also may produce significant soft power.<sup>25</sup> Government policies and values can strongly affect soft power both in positive and negative ways.<sup>26</sup> Some values and ideas may be appealing to one group of people, while others perceive them as repulsive.<sup>27</sup> Nye explains this dilemma with an example: “American feminism, open sexuality,

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>21</sup> Nye, *Soft power*, 11

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 55

and individual choices are profoundly subversive in patriarchal societies.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, some political values may increase, but also diminish the attractiveness of a country.

A country’s foreign policy may also greatly affect the preferences of others similarly.<sup>29</sup> It may be the reason for attraction, but it also may squander such positive views. This was evident, for instance, in the sharp decline in the attractiveness of the United States after the Iraq War in 2003.<sup>30</sup> This war was costly to the country’s soft power and put the legitimacy of the actions of the Bush administration in doubt. Thus, government policies, both domestic and foreign, are another potential source of soft power.

Furthermore, one of the most important aspects of soft power is that it does not belong to the government as hard power does.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, this means that the government is not always able to control it. The above examples illustrate that sometimes the means of soft power may work in the opposite way and actually harm the image of the country. Nye provides an example from the Vietnam era, when “American popular culture often worked at cross-purposes to official government policy.”<sup>32</sup> This is a crucial difference between the two forms of power because hard power instruments are governmental and under its control.

Nye’s original definition is limited as he does not include trade or investments under soft power. Other scholars have extended the principles of soft power and economic resources as an additional source of attraction are now included in the body of literature. In more recent work, Erin Jenne, Milos Popovic, and Jurai Medzihorskyc have identified four conditions under which countries are most likely to succeed in enhancing their appeal in foreign

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 56

<sup>30</sup> Nye, *Soft power*, 12

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 15

countries.<sup>33</sup> First, to have well-performing cultural institutes there should be a foundation in the form of a similar, cultural, religious, or ethnic set of identities and values between host and sponsor states.<sup>34</sup> Second, similar political views and political intentions between the two states can facilitate cultural outreach.<sup>35</sup> Third, strong economic relations and ties are important factors, and finally, open intercultural dialogue with the host country must be developed to boost its own attractiveness.<sup>36</sup>

Including economic ties in the examination of soft power is an important development furthered by many other scholars. Joshua Kurlantzick argues that Chinese soft power includes anything outside of security or military activities, meaning it includes public diplomacy, popular culture, and economic activities, such as investments or aid.<sup>37</sup> This view is supported by Shaun Breslin, who includes economic relations and material sources in our understanding of soft power.<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Page and Tao Xie state that the economic part in the form of trade, investments, or aid can constitute and effectively promote soft power, but it also can have negative impacts if the economic might of a country is perceived as a threat.<sup>39</sup> Daniele Carminati also believes that assessing soft power based only on cultural aspects significantly limits the understanding of the impact and value of soft power in practice.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Nye's original definition of soft power is limited, as it is crucial to include economics-based soft power when researching the attractiveness and influence of a country.

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<sup>33</sup> Milos Popovic, Erin K. Jenne, and Juraj Medzihorsky, "Charm Offensive or Offensive Charm? An Analysis of Russian and Chinese Cultural Institutes Abroad," *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 9 (2020): pp. 1445-1467, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2020.1785397>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>38</sup> Shaun Breslin, "The Soft Notion of China's 'Soft Power'," Chatham House, February 2011, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0211pp\\_breslin.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0211pp_breslin.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin I. Page and Tao Xie, "The Complexities of Economic Soft Power: The U.S.-China Case," in *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in East Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 223-246.

<sup>40</sup> Daniele Carminati, "The Economics of Soft Power: Reliance on Economic Resources and Instrumentality in Economic Gains," *Economic and Political Studies*, 2021, pp. 1-24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20954816.2020.1865620>.

*China's soft power*

In Chinese political strategy, soft power gained increased attention coinciding with the country's unprecedented economic growth. In 2007, former President Hu Jintao remarked that China needs to enhance its soft power.<sup>41</sup> In 2014, President Xi Jinping delivered a speech, in which he stressed that China needs to focus on soft power and promote China's appeal in foreign countries: "We will improve our capacity for engaging in international communication to tell China's stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country's soft power."<sup>42</sup> The country has been investing a large number of resources in improving its image abroad through people-to-people exchanges, cultural activities, education, media, trade, and investments.

Promotion of the use of the Chinese language as a part of public diplomacy is one of the tools of China's soft power agenda. The government has initiated different projects in regard to this goal. Confucius Institutes are the most prominent and popular, resembling Goethe Institut, Alliance Française, British Councils, or Spanish Instituto Cervantes. Chinese national lawmakers have encouraged efforts to promote the Chinese language as a means of developing China's soft power.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, promoting education in China is another major instrument used by China. The government has set a number of scholarship opportunities for international students in at least 289 Chinese universities offering a wide variety of bachelor, master, doctoral and general non-degree programs.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Full text of Hu Jintao's report at 17th Party Congress (7)," People's Daily Online, <http://en.people.cn/90001/90776/90785/6290144.html>

<sup>42</sup> "Xi calls for enhancement of China's cultural soft power," China Global Television Network, October 18, 2017, [https://news.cgtn.com/news/306b7a4e30597a6333566d54/share\\_p.html](https://news.cgtn.com/news/306b7a4e30597a6333566d54/share_p.html)

<sup>43</sup> Xing Zhigang, "NPC deputy calls for promoting Chinese," China Daily, March 10, 2006, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2006-03/10/content\\_530648.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2006-03/10/content_530648.htm)

<sup>44</sup> "Guidance of Applying for the Chinese Government Scholarship Bilateral Program," Embassy of PRC in Azerbaijan, December 18, 2020, <http://az.china-embassy.org/eng/xwdt/t1841151.htm>

As was previously noted, Joshua Kurlantzick has examined China's soft power, its tools, usage, and goals, as well as the reactions of the international community, in his book *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World?*<sup>45</sup> This is a pivotal work in the literature on China's use of soft power, as it coined the now frequently referenced term 'charm offensive'. He argues that the growing unpopularity of America gave China opportunities to strengthen its own position.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Kurlantzick finds that there are some negative impacts of China's rising soft power, such as support for authoritarian regimes.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, he predicts that China may actually be in a position to rival the U.S.'s role in the world order.<sup>48</sup>

In the debate, another key term is called "sharp power", which was coined by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig.<sup>49</sup> According to the authors, authoritarian states such as China and Russia use techniques that are neither 'hard' nor 'soft', they use 'sharp power', an approach to project their influence internationally by means of limiting free expression, censorship, and manipulation.<sup>50</sup> As they put it, "this authoritarian influence is not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centers on distraction and manipulation."<sup>51</sup> This is an attempt to reconceptualize soft power; however, most scholars still refer to Nye's concept, even in discussions on authoritarian involvement.

### *Current obstacles and limitations on China's soft power*

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<sup>45</sup> Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, "China's Charm Offensive in Southeast Asia," *Current History* 105, no. 692 (January 2006): pp. 270-276, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2006.105.692.270>.

<sup>48</sup> Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive*.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power," *Foreign Affairs*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>

<sup>50</sup> "Sharp power, Rising Authoritarian Influence," National Democratic Institute, December 2017, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-Full-Report.pdf>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Nye's view on China's soft power is that the country's attempts to enhance its reputation and attraction through its traditional culture, such as the Beijing Olympics or Confucius Institutes are dampened by domestic policies such as the crackdowns in Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>52</sup> He believes that for China to succeed in soft power development and gain from its investment in projects such as the Shanghai Expo, it needs to "unleash the talents of its civil society" instead of cracking down on human rights activists and shutting down the Internet.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, Jenne, Popovic, and Medzihorsky argue that China operates its institutes in ways that go against or collide with the principles of cultural diplomacy or, in other words, there is a decoupling between institutional design and practice.<sup>54</sup> As the authors state, this may be an explanation for the hostile reactions or backlash against the Confucius Institutes in the Western host countries.<sup>55</sup> One of the major criticisms of Chinese cultural institutes is that they are not separate from politics, but instead are controlled by the government through micromanagement and interference into their day-to-day activities. This goes against Nye's principles of not mixing politics with cultural outreach and that the government is not always in the position to be able to control soft power.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, China has established its institutes in countries with dissimilar cultural and political values, and the activities have not always reflected the principle of maintaining an open intercultural dialogue.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the attempts of China to improve its international reputation via cultural diplomacy face challenges in the form of decoupling.

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<sup>52</sup> Joseph S. Nye, "Why China Is Weak on Soft Power," *The New York Times*, January 17, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/18/opinion/why-china-is-weak-on-soft-power.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Popovic, Jenne, and Medzihorsky, "Charm Offensive or Offensive Charm?"

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

## 1.2 The Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an interesting case to research in relation to China's soft power. It provides an opportunity to improve the soft power of China, but there are significant challenges as well. BRI was first announced in 2013 in the capital of Kazakhstan, and is considered the signature foreign policy project of Chinese President Xi Jinping.<sup>58</sup> This trillion-dollar infrastructure and investment strategy involves projects in more than 100 countries globally.<sup>59</sup> BRI is also known as the "New Silk Road", referring to the trade routes of the ancient Silk Road where Central Asia was the epicenter.<sup>60</sup> The aim of BRI is to improve the connectivity of China with the rest of the world via new continental and maritime infrastructure, as well as to promote economic cooperation.<sup>61</sup> Although this ambitious initiative is enlarging and there are new parts to it such as the Digital Silk Road or Health Silk Road, the strategy is most prominent in its infrastructure connectivity. This includes building a vast network of railways and highways, energy pipelines, airports, and port facilities, among other similar initiatives.

There are numerous debates and questions regarding the sustainability and success of BRI. While BRI has the potential to make positive contributions by enhancing economic growth and filling the infrastructure gap in developing countries, there are significant risks related to lending, such as the extremely high likelihood of debt distress because of the unsustainability of these projects. Sri Lanka offers several highly cited and discussed examples

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<sup>58</sup> "President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, September 7, 2013, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh\\_665686/t1076334.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml).

<sup>59</sup> David Sacks, "Countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative: Who's In And Who's Out," Council on Foreign Relations, March 24, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/countries-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-whos-and-whos-out>

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, January 28, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>

<sup>61</sup> Fan Zhai, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Preliminary Quantitative Assessment," *Journal of Asian Economics* 55 (2018): pp. 84-92, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asieco.2017.12.006>.

of such unsustainable infrastructure initiatives. First, in 2017, the Sri Lankan government was essentially forced to hand over its strategic Hambantota port to China on a 99-year lease, after incurring heavy losses and struggling to pay its debts.<sup>62</sup> Second, Sri Lanka's Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport was designed with the aim of handling a million passengers per year; however, it is now referred to as the "world's emptiest international airport", as it receives only about a dozen passengers per day.<sup>63</sup> The airport is registering losses of around \$18 million per year.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the country is at high risk of sovereign debt default.<sup>65</sup>

The economic and geopolitical motivations of China under BRI are raising concerns in many countries around the world, particularly in the United States, which warns recipient countries of the risks of these initiatives and expresses worries about the standards of projects and the erosion of democratic norms. In a report from the U.S. Department of Defense, it is explained that BRI "serves a greater strategic purpose" and that through it China aims to "develop strong economic ties with other countries, shape their interests to align with China's, and deter confrontation or criticism."<sup>66</sup> Scholars and experts have been calling on U.S. policymakers to adopt an American strategy to respond to BRI. Recently, U.S. President Joe Biden suggested to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson the creation of a more appealing

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<sup>62</sup> Kai Schultz, "Sri Lanka, Struggling With Debt, Hands a Major Port to China," *The New York Times*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/world/asia/sri-lanka-china-port.html>

<sup>63</sup> "What the World's Emptiest International Airport Says About China's Influence," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/magazine/what-the-worlds-emptiest-international-airport-says-about-chinas-influence.html?searchResultPosition=1>

<sup>64</sup> Wade Shepard, "The Story Behind The World's Emptiest International Airport," *Forbes*, May 28, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2016/05/28/the-story-behind-the-worlds-emptiest-international-airport-sri-lankas-mattala-rajapaksa/?sh=efcf87cea2>

<sup>65</sup> Kemel Toktomushev, "The Belt and Road Initiative: The March of White Elephants?" *China-US Focus*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/the-belt-and-road-initiative-the-march-of-white-elephants>

<sup>66</sup> "Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access," Department of Defense, December 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/14/2002079292/-1/-1/1/EXPANDING-GLOBAL-ACCESS-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>

economic plan to rival Chinese BRI.<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately, it is still too early to make any predictions in this regard.

There is a large number of published studies that describe and assess the incentives and motives behind China's BRI. Some analysts believe these projects are used for the extension of China's rising power both in the economic and political realms; for example, Weifeng Zhou and Mario Esteban state that the motivation is part of a grand strategy of rising power, a way to confront the U.S. as well as to influence and reshape the international order.<sup>68</sup> In the same manner, Daniel Markey believes that BRI is designed as a tool for global political influence by analyzing the implications of the project in Eurasia.<sup>69</sup>

Jeremy Garlick examines BRI by using 'complex eclecticism', meaning the use of a range of theoretical and methodological frameworks. To explain and assess the potential effects of this large-scale policy, he combines elements from three theoretical approaches: specifically, Tang Shiping's social evolution paradigm, Robert Cox's neo-Gramscianism, and Jonathan Holslag's offensive mercantilism.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, he dedicates a chapter to analyzing the various regions with BRI projects and the related impacts, where Central Asia is described as "a transit zone from Asia to Europe" with its rich natural resources of high interest and importance, particularly those in the energy sector. Due to the scale of BRI, the analysis of the regions does not aim to provide a full picture of each region.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Jarrett Renshaw, "Biden says he suggested to UK's Johnson a plan to rival China's Belt and Road," Reuters, March 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-britain-biden-china-idUSKBN2BI32M>

<sup>68</sup> Weifeng Zhou and Mario Esteban, "Beyond Balancing: China's Approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 112 (December 2018): pp. 487-501, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1433476>.

<sup>69</sup> Daniel Markey, *China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>70</sup> Jeremy Garlick, *The Impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative From Asia to Europe* (1st ed.: Routledge, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351182768>

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Although the literature on the impacts and effects of BRI has been growing, it is important to study the perception of BRI in host countries for the future development strategies. In this regards, Central Asia has been largely neglected in academic scholarship. Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse made a major contribution by discussing China in the region from the point of view of Central Asians, while most other studies at that time were Western-centered and focused on the geopolitical competition between Moscow, Washington, and Beijing.

Their book does not only examine the formal relations between China and Central Asian governments on such issues as border management or security problems, but also discusses China's representations within the society based on interviews with scholars, students, and Chinese teachers at Confucius Institutes.<sup>72</sup> Laruelle and Peyrouse note the concerns and anxiety about China, as well as Sinophobia in Central Asian societies.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, they highlight the asymmetric nature of these relationships, specifically that the Central Asian region cannot match China in any aspects, including economic or military power. However, the book was published in 2012 before the launch of BRI, and the situation has been changing constantly since then. Thus, a more updated examination is highly needed, in particular one including the effects of this grand initiative.

Continuing the discussion and examination of BRI, Fabio Indeo argues that there is increasing worry in Central Asian societies about the growing activities of China through BRI.<sup>74</sup> According to the author, the initiative in this region is focused on economic aspects, but Beijing has geopolitical goals as well. Therefore, despite being a strategic partner of the region,

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<sup>72</sup> Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change and the Chinese Factor* (London: Hurst, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Fabio Indeo, "A comprehensive strategy to strengthening China's relations with Central Asia." in Alessia Amighini, *China's Belt and Road: a Game Changer?* (Milano: ISPI, 2017)

the Chinese government's hidden long-term intentions may limit the promotion of this cooperation.<sup>75</sup>

Unlike Indeo, Daniel Markey argues that Chinese engagement plays into the hands of local actors, who aim to promote their own interests.<sup>76</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse agrees with this point of view, arguing that Central Asian elites are interested in good relations with China, so they support the governments' pro-Chinese policies.<sup>77</sup> Based on his field research during the period between 2008 and 2015, he states that both Sinophile and Sinophobe evolve in the region and the latter increases to a greater extent.<sup>78</sup> Thus, he concludes that Central Asian states are fearful of China; however, at the same time they want to take economic advantages from the situation.<sup>79</sup>

This view is supported by Catherine Owen in her discourse analysis of perceptions of foreign states in media in Kyrgyzstan. According to her work, China receives a greater percentage of positive media coverage compared to Russia.<sup>80</sup> She further reports higher levels of mistrust of China among the local population – a rather contradicting finding in the survey results. Owen explains the analyzed media is favored by government officials and the middle-class urban elites, who are most likely to benefit from positive Kyrgyz - Chinese relations. Thus, there is somewhat positive coverage, which benefit the elites.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Markey, *China's Western Horizon*.

<sup>77</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse, "Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016): pp. 14-23, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2015.10.003>

<sup>78</sup> Peyrouse, "Discussing China"

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Catherine Owen, "Making Friends with Neighbors?: Local Perceptions of Russia and China in Kyrgyzstan," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 04, no. 03 (2018): pp. 457-480, <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2377740018500185>.

In a similar vein, Aziz Burkhanov and Yu-Wen Chen conducted research based on the discourse analysis of newspapers revealing local views towards China in Kazakhstan.<sup>81</sup> They argue that Sinophobia and stereotypes of China are more commonly expressed in local languages and through social media, rather than in the Russian language or formal news outlets. Although the unit of analysis of the research is Kazakhstan, it could be inferred that Kyrgyzstan is very likely to report similar trends, because of the cultural, historical similarities, and geographical proximity.

Furthermore, a more recent publication edited by Laurel brings together brings a collection of papers analyzing BRI's aims, the challenges, and its reception in Central Asia.<sup>82</sup> In the part related to issues of perception, Yelena Sadovskaya and Leah Utyasheva highlight that promotion of people-to-people bonds is a main goal of BRI projects, which is often overlooked.<sup>83</sup> They argue China needs to invest more in promoting its cultural appeal, human interaction and exchanges, and thus increase its soft power. In addition, Gaukhar Nursha examines the Confucius Institutes and finds that one of the difficulties in building a positive image is poor communication with the central Confucius administration.<sup>84</sup> According to her, there seem to be a competition among Confucius Institutes and no clear understanding that they all have the same goal to develop China's soft power. Survey results show that students are interested in learning the Chinese language, but the participation in non-language courses with the aim to learn about China itself is much lower. Additionally, Azad Garibov argues that there are numerous reasons for negative perceptions of China, in particular with respect to

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<sup>81</sup> Aziz Burkhanov and Yu-Wen Chen, "Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese Migration," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 12 (August 2016): pp. 2129-2148, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1139155>.

<sup>82</sup> Marlène Laruelle, *China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact in Central Asia* (Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, Central Asia Program, 2018).

<sup>83</sup> Yelena Sadovskaya and Leah Utyasheva, "Human Silk Road": The People-to-People Aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative," in Laruelle, *China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact in Central Asia*

<sup>84</sup> Gaukhar Nursha, "Chinese Soft Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: A Confucius Institutes Case Study," in Laruelle, *China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact in Central Asia*

Chinese migrants: the competition between the local population and Chinese migrants for limited job places, general fear of “China’s demographic expansion”, and the poor reputation of Chinese firms.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the authors agree that Chinese soft power in Kyrgyzstan has not been very effective in promoting China’s appeal.

According to Julie Yu-Wen Chen and Soledad Jiménez-Tovar, the general population in Kyrgyzstan believes that Russia’s status of the dominant power in the region will be taken over by China.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, they argue that while people have an understanding of China’s influence in the region, they do not know much about BRI itself. However, the study has many limitations, as BRI was not studied as a separate unit of analysis and the findings are based on the small-scale surveys among students, representing only one particular age group. Still, it is interesting that there is a significant increase in the negative perception of respondents comparing results of 2014 and 2016. In 2016, about 47% of people responded that China brought more harm than benefit to the region, while in 2014, no one chose this option and a majority of respondents (60%) decided not to respond.<sup>87</sup>

In contrast to this, Roman Vakulchuk and Indra Overland find that in Kyrgyzstan “soft power catch-up shows some positive dynamics.”<sup>88</sup> They studied the perception of people in Central Asia towards China after the launch of BRI, examining the view that “BRI should in theory improve the perception of China in the region.” However, they found that “BRI has not yet become a game changer for local attitudes towards the big neighbor.”<sup>89</sup> The authors relied

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<sup>85</sup> Azad Garibov. “Contemporary Chinese Labor Migration and Its Public Perception in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan,” in Laruelle, *China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact in Central Asia*

<sup>86</sup> Julie Yu-Wen Chen and Soledad Jiménez-Tovar, “China in Central Asia: Local Perceptions from Future Elites,” *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 03, no. 03 (2017): pp. 429-445, <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2377740017500178>.

<sup>87</sup> Chen and Jiménez-Tovar, “China in Central Asia”

<sup>88</sup> Roman Vakulchuk and Indra Overland, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative through the lens of Central Asia,” in Fanny M. Cheung and Ying-yi Hong, *Regional Connection under the Belt and Road Initiative the Prospects for Economic and Financial Cooperation* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

on survey results by Gallup from 2016 and 2017 and examined the whole region. Since then, the picture has been changing and more detailed analysis is needed, as each country has its own specific characteristics that would be significant in the analysis.

This literature review shows that the concept of soft power has been expanded because economic activities are an important facilitator of promoting a country's image. In this regard, BRI can be viewed as a major project with the potential to boost the economies of host countries; however, to date, there has been little agreement on whether China's increased involvement through BRI leads to improvement of its image in the recipient countries or soft power.

## Section II: Research Design and Methods

This section aims to present and justify the case selection and the methods chosen to investigate the research question. It also addresses aspects regarding the interviews such as selection criteria, the list of final interviewees, and how they were conducted, and considers any ethical implications.

### 2.1 Case introduction and justification

In academic literature the perception of BRI in host countries has not been studied largely and, thus, this thesis aims to fill this gap. The thesis focuses on the Central Asian region and in particular Kyrgyzstan to understand how BRI affects the public's perception of China. Central Asian countries are interested in cooperating with China on BRI projects, each with their own reasons behind. In the following paragraphs the motivations of both parties are explained.

China's interest in the promotion of BRI is connected with the geographical location of Central Asia. It is at the center of the Eurasian continent and links China with the rest of the proposed Belt and Road network, which aims to reduce the country's dependence on the seas for maritime trade. Moreover, China's involvement in Central Asia is also designed to address and manage separatist concerns in Xinjiang, officially known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Central Asia has close historical, ethnic, cultural, and religious ties with Xinjiang, and some experts believe that "Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia is an extension of its policy over Xinjiang."<sup>90</sup> This policy is about promoting economic development and boosting global economic links to its laggard western region and it is one of the priorities

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<sup>90</sup> Malika Tukmadiyeva, "Xinjiang in China's Foreign Policy toward Central Asia" *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 12, no. 3 (2013): pp. 87-108, <https://doi.org/10.11610/connections.12.3.05>.

of China.<sup>91</sup> As former President Hu Jintao said following deadly ethnic riots in July 2009, “the fundamental way to resolve the Xinjiang problem is to expedite development in Xinjiang.”<sup>92</sup> Therefore, the geographical location of Central Asia plays an important role in China’s strategy of BRI.

Furthermore, looking from the perspective of Central Asia, China is the single largest investor in the region and its most important economic partner. Central Asia is in dire need of investment, which could give economies a critical boost enhancing economic growth, but it is not attractive to Western investors due to the high levels of corruption, political instability, comparatively small domestic markets, all of which create an overall unfavorable investment climate. For the landlocked and isolated region, BRI offers an opportunity to connect to global value chains, contribute to industrialization and upgrade Soviet-era infrastructure.

Despite all the opportunities BRI can provide, there are risks and concerns as well. BRI could lead to further debt distress in the region, in particular in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have become particularly vulnerable and increasingly dependent on China due to high external debts. While Kazakhstan, with its rich oil, gas, and coal resources, can rely on export revenues of petroleum products for debt service, the indebtedness of Central Asia’s poorest countries, with fewer resources and high dependence on remittance from labor migrants, is a cause for great concern.<sup>93</sup> In research by the Center for Global Development assessing the debt implications of 68 countries that fall under the scope of BRI, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were identified as being in the highest risk category.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, “China’s Massive Belt and Road Initiative.”

<sup>92</sup> Wei Shan and Cuifen Weng, “China’s ‘New Deal’ in Xinjiang and Its Challenges,” *China*, 2012, pp. 71-79, [https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814425858\\_0009](https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814425858_0009), 61

<sup>93</sup> Sam Bhutia, “Unpacking debt in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan,” Eurasianet, August 1, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/unpacking-debt-in-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan>

<sup>94</sup> John Hurley, Scott Morris, and Gailyn Portelance, “Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective,” *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development* 3, no. 1 (2019): p. 139, <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v3i1.1123>.

Kyrgyzstan's high indebtedness to China has been one of the major concerns in society. Moreover, the opinion of China is worse in Kyrgyzstan than anywhere else in Central Asia, based on various public surveys.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, Kyrgyzstan enjoys more freedoms compared to its neighbors, and, thus, data is more accessible and reliable.

## 2.2 Methodology

The thesis relies on survey results conducted by pollsters in the region, namely the Gallup Organization and the Central Asia Barometer. On behalf of the International Republican Institute (IRI), Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization has conducted surveys in Kyrgyzstan since 2006 and questions on China have been included in national polls since 2011.<sup>96</sup> The survey results are publicly accessible on the IRI website. The Central Asia Barometer is a regional, independent, non-profit institution for applied social research.<sup>97</sup> In autumn 2019 and summer 2020, it sampled public attitudes toward foreign direct investment from China.<sup>98</sup>

The results of these surveys illustrate the general perception of people in the region; however, it does not provide additional details such as reasons, motives and related factors. Thus, semi-structured expert interviews were chosen as the main method of analysis in this thesis. The purpose of the interviews was to learn more about China's soft power in Kyrgyzstan, the implementation of BRI and public perception of China. This method allows for the opportunity to collect more detailed information from people with profound knowledge

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<sup>95</sup> Marlène Laruelle and Dylan Royce, "No Great Game: Central Asia's Public Opinions on Russia, China, and the U.S.," Wilson Center, August 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-56-no-great-game-central-asias-public-opinions-russia-china-and-us>

<sup>96</sup> IRI, "IRI Releases Survey of Kyrgyzstan Public Opinion," October 17, 2011, <https://www.iri.org/resource/iri-releases-survey-kyrgyzstan-public-opinion>.

<sup>97</sup> "About," Central Asia Barometer, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://ca-barometer.org/en/about>.

<sup>98</sup> The results are not freely available for the public, but the survey data were provided to an independent news organization Eurasianet, so the thesis will rely on their published infographics

on the topic. In an effort to obtain a balanced view as the interviewer, attempts were made to contact and consult different actors, including experts from academia, think tanks, and government, via emails and private messages. Unfortunately, these requests were ignored by some contacts and one state official explicitly refused to give an interview or comments. As a result, five people were selected for the interview. The interviewees are specialists in Central Asian studies or Sino-Central Asia relations, with academic or research backgrounds and degrees in political science and economics.

List of interviewees:

- Respondent 1 is an expert on China and Central Asia;
- Respondent 2 is a fellow at a research institute, whose work focuses on China;
- Respondent 3 is professor in political science;
- Respondent 4 is a senior lecturer at a regional university; and
- Respondent 5 is a senior researcher at a European academic institute.

Interviews were conducted in English and Russian, and those in Russian were then translated to English. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation, the interviews were conducted online through different platforms such as Zoom or Signal. This eased the interview arrangement process, as the respondents live in different countries.

The questions centred on overall Sino-Kyrgyz relations, China's soft power influence in Kyrgyzstan, and public perception of Chinese activities in the country, specifically BRI.

Interview Questions:

1. How would you describe current Kyrgyz-Chinese relations?
2. Chinese soft power in Kyrgyzstan:

How do you understand the use of China's soft power in Kyrgyzstan?

What are the potential impacts of China's soft power influence in Kyrgyzstan?

3. What is the general attitude of the Kyrgyz people towards China? What factors do you believe have led to this? What are the effects of this?
4. BRI in Kyrgyzstan:
  - How does BRI affect the Kyrgyz perception of China?
  - What is the relationship between BRI and Chinese soft power?
5. What conditions/changes are necessary to improve the Kyrgyz perception of China/Kyrgyz-Chinese relations?

## 2.3 Limitations

One of the major challenges and limitations in this research is that BRI is a very vague concept. It has been eight years since the announcement of the initiative; however, it remains a broad and ambiguous policy. There is a variety of narratives around BRI, which poses challenges for research. Some bilateral projects have been announced as part of BRI; however, it is sometimes a matter of interpretation if a project truly falls under this initiative.<sup>99</sup> To address this limitation the thesis will analyse the changes in public perception of China since 2013, when BRI was announced. Additionally, other studies also include all Chinese-Kyrgyz economic relationships under BRI umbrella, as all projects contribute to the goal of BRI in improving connectivity in the region.<sup>100</sup> Other limitation might be that all of the respondents work in academia or think tanks, and there is no representation from other fields. Although the selected interviewees provide a balanced analysis considering the nature of their work, it still limits the representativeness of the sample. Finally, the more recent national poll results were

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<sup>99</sup> Indra Overland and Roman Vakulchuk, “Not all Chinese projects are BRI-linked,” *Central Asia & South Caucasus Bulletin*, July 5, 2019,

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334289621\\_Not\\_all\\_Chinese\\_projects\\_are\\_BRI-linked](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334289621_Not_all_Chinese_projects_are_BRI-linked)

<sup>100</sup> Roman Mogilevskii, “Kyrgyzstan and the Belt and Road Initiative,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3807754>.

not available free of charge, although attempts were made to obtain the valuable data for the purposes of this research.

## Section III. Case study: Kyrgyzstan

### 3.1 Background

The rising debt of Kyrgyzstan to China is a growing concern. As of January 2021, total public debt amounted to 4.9 billion USD, where 4.2 billion USD or 85.2% is external debt.<sup>101</sup> This means that the public debt of Kyrgyzstan accounts for 68% of GDP. The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the strain on the economy, and in 2020, GDP decreased by a historical 8.6% and further worsened the country's already serious debt situation.<sup>102</sup> Even the financial crises of 1998 and 2008 did not result in such drastic changes in GDP.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, the country remains vulnerable to external shocks and the weakening national currency, as the exchange rate of the Kyrgyz *som* depreciated by about 20% in 2020.<sup>104</sup> Since more than 80% of the external debt is received in US dollars, such a sharp depreciation of the Kyrgyz *som* leads to a significant increase of external debt in national currency.

Furthermore, the largest creditor in Kyrgyzstan is China's Export-Import Bank, which accounts for 42.2% of the total external debt, or 1.7 billion USD. In 2010, this debt accounted for 6%, meaning that, in the last 10 years alone, this debt has grown almost 12 times. Economic experts warn against such a dangerous path of borrowing, as the current debt must be paid in

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<sup>101</sup> “Структура государственного долга Кыргызской Республики на 31.01.2021 года [The structure of the public debt of the Kyrgyz Republic as of January 31, 2021],” Ministry of Finance of the Kyrgyz Republic, March 15, 2021, <http://www.minfin.kg/ru/novosti/novosti/struktura-gosudarstvennogo-dolga-kyrgyzskoy-respub7096>

<sup>102</sup> IMF, “Кыргызская Республика: заключительное заявление персонала по итогам консультаций 2021 года в соответствии со Статьей IV [Kyrgyz Republic: Staff Concluding Statement from the 2021 Article IV Consultations],” March 15, 2021, <https://www.imf.org/ru/News/Articles/2021/03/29/mcs033021-kyrgyz-republic-staff-concluding-statement-of-the-2021-article-iv-mission>

<sup>103</sup> “Экономика Кыргызстана пережила худший год [Kyrgyzstan's economy has had its worst year],” Azattyk, December 18, 2020, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31007031.html>

<sup>104</sup> EDB, “Что ждет экономику Кыргызстана в 2021 году? Сценарий от ЕАБР [What awaits the Kyrgyz economy in 2021? EDB script],” November 26, 2020, <https://eabr.org/press/news/chto-zhdet-ekonomiku-kyrgyzstana-v-2021-godu-stsenariy-ot-eabr/>

20-25 years, which is on average \$350 million of the annual budget.<sup>105</sup> This is a tremendous burden with which the weak economy of Kyrgyzstan must cope. Increasing debt servicing may require diverting resources from essential services, such as education and health, and placing constraints on the government's ability to conduct productive development programs.

### 3.1.1 BRI projects in Kyrgyzstan

For every single one of the infrastructure projects that are associated with BRI in Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz government took out a loan from China. Several examples follow: the Chinese Exim Bank allocated 208 million USD for the construction of the Datka substation; the Datka Kemin electricity transmission line required 389 million USD; the modernization of a heating and power plant in Bishkek necessitated 386 million USD; the construction of major roads, such as North-South highway, required 400 million USD in loans.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, key Chinese FDI sectors include natural resource extraction, the mining industry, and the production of refined petroleum products. Among these investments, the largest ones are the Junda oil refinery and the Altyn-Ken gold mining company.<sup>107</sup> Chinese companies are implementing all of these infrastructure projects and most of them use mainly Chinese labor force. Moreover, the machinery, equipment and materials are imported from China as well.<sup>108</sup>

One of the biggest projects under discussion and a major opportunity for Kyrgyzstan is the construction of the railroad connecting China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan. Experts agree that the construction of this railway is in the interest of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>109</sup> It will boost the economic

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<sup>105</sup> “Госдолг Кыргызстана приблизился к 5 млрд долларов США [National debt of Kyrgyzstan approaches \$ 5 billion],” Azattyk, February 12, 2021, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31098980.html>

<sup>106</sup> Mogilevskii, “Kyrgyzstan and the Belt and Road Initiative,” 2019, p.7

<sup>107</sup> “Вице-премьер-министр: Кому-то выгодно раскачивать ситуацию с Китаем,[ Vice Prime Minister: Someone benefits from rocking the situation with China],” Kaktus, January 9, 2019, [https://kaktus.media/doc/384957\\_vice\\_premier\\_ministr\\_komy\\_to\\_vygodno\\_raskachivat\\_sityaciu\\_s\\_kitaem.html](https://kaktus.media/doc/384957_vice_premier_ministr_komy_to_vygodno_raskachivat_sityaciu_s_kitaem.html)

<sup>108</sup> Mogilevskii, “Kyrgyzstan and the Belt and Road Initiative,” 2019, p.7

<sup>109</sup> “Искендер Шаршеев: Железная дорога Китай-Кыргызстан-Узбекистан даст мощнейший импульс экономике Кыргызстана [Iskender Sharshiev: China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway will boost to the

growth and budget revenues, promote regional economic integration, and increase trade, among other benefits.<sup>110</sup> There is significant interest in promoting this project on the highest levels of the Kyrgyz government.<sup>111</sup> Despite all the economic opportunities and the promises of the officials, there are many challenges in its realization; most importantly is the lack of financial resources, especially on the Kyrgyz side, which is seeking external financing for this project.<sup>112</sup>

### 3.1.2 Cultural diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan

Apart from these investments, China has been employing its soft power through higher education and Confucianism. More than 5,000 students from Kyrgyzstan are studying in China and about 100 scholarship quotas are available to Kyrgyz students through bilateral channels and within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, in Kyrgyzstan, there are four Confucius Institutes and 21 Confucius classes, in which over ten thousand Kyrgyz people learn the Chinese language and Chinese culture.<sup>114</sup>

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economy of Kyrgyzstan],” Azattyk, September 4, 2017, <https://cabar.asia/ru/iskender-sharsheev-zheleznaya-doroga-kitaj-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-dast-moshhnejshij-impuls-ekonomike-kyrgyzstana>

<sup>110</sup> Azamat Akeneev, “Аналитическое исследование ЦППИ [Analytical study of the CPLS],” Center for Political and Legal Studies, July 28, 2019, <https://center.kg/article/269>

<sup>111</sup> Official Website of President of Kyrgyzstan, “Фоторепортаж — Сооронбай Жээнбеков добровольно сложил с себя полномочия Президента [Photo report - Sooronbai Jeenbekov voluntarily resigned as President],” October 16, 2020, [http://www.president.kg/ru/sobytiya/18040\\_fotoreportagh\\_sooronbay\\_gheenbekov\\_dobrovolno\\_sloghil\\_ssebya\\_polnomochiya\\_prezidenta](http://www.president.kg/ru/sobytiya/18040_fotoreportagh_sooronbay_gheenbekov_dobrovolno_sloghil_ssebya_polnomochiya_prezidenta); Marat Tagaev and Kubat Kasymbekov, “‘Не только в экономическом плане...’ Амбиции Китая в Центральной Азии [‘Not only economically ...’ China's ambitions in Central Asia],” Azattyk, May 14, 2021, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31254979.html>

<sup>112</sup> Chris Rickleton, “China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway: Who is going to pay?” Eurasianet, May 17, 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway-who-is-going-to-pay>

<sup>113</sup> Embassy of PRC in Kyrgyzstan, “Выступление посла Ду Дэвэнь в конференции на тему ‘Китай-Кыргызстан: история и современность’ [Speech by Ambassador Du Dewen at the conference ‘China-Kyrgyzstan: history and modernity’],” December 25, 2019, <http://kg.china-embassy.org/rus/ggwj/t1790710.htm>

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

## 3.2 Analysis

### 3.2.1 Results from polls and surveys

Despite the fact that China brings highly needed investment to the country and makes efforts in promoting its image, the opinion of China is worse in Kyrgyzstan than anywhere else in Central Asia, based on surveys conducted in recent years.<sup>115</sup> The latest survey results from 2020 show that half of the respondents in Kyrgyzstan (51%) are concerned that Chinese projects will lead to an increase of debt with China.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, 72% are very concerned that China would purchase land in Kyrgyzstan. 25% of respondents are somewhat confident that Chinese investments will create job places for local people, while 33% are not very confident and 31% are not confident at all that investments will generate jobs.<sup>117</sup>

Moreover, according to a recent Gallup poll, the image of China in Kyrgyzstan has diminished significantly over the past decade, with an especially significant drop in 2019 compared to previous years. Specifically, 57% of respondents view China as an economic threat compared to 35% in 2017, 29% in 2015, and 23% in 2012. Similarly, only 39% express a positive view of China, compared to 60% in 2017, 68% in 2015, and 65% in 2012.<sup>118</sup> Unfortunately, questions related to Chinese involvement in Kyrgyzstan were not included in

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<sup>115</sup> Marlène Laruelle and Dylan Royce, “No Great Game,” Wilson Center, August 2020,

<sup>116</sup> David Trilling, “Poll shows Uzbeks, like neighbors, growing leery of Chinese investments,” Eurasianet, October 22, 2020 <https://eurasianet.org/poll-shows-uzbeks-like-neighbors-growing-leery-of-chinese-investments>

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> IRI, “Kyrgyzstan National Poll,” February 2012,

<https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2012%20April%2011%20Survey%20of%20Kyrgyzstan%20Public%20Opinion%2C%20February%204-27%2C%202012.pdf>; IRI, “Public Opinion Survey Residents of Kyrgyzstan,” February 2015, [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-04-21\\_public\\_opinion\\_survey\\_residents\\_of\\_kyrgyzstan\\_february\\_10-march\\_5\\_2015.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-04-21_public_opinion_survey_residents_of_kyrgyzstan_february_10-march_5_2015.pdf); IRI, “Public Opinion Survey Residents of Kyrgyzstan,” April 2017, [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/kyrgyzstan\\_february-march\\_2017\\_-\\_public.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/kyrgyzstan_february-march_2017_-_public.pdf); IRI, “Public Opinion Survey Residents of Kyrgyzstan,” February 2019, <https://www.iri.org/resource/new-kyrgyzstan-poll-february-2019>

the survey prior to 2011. These results suggest that the image of China has been declining over the past years. In the following section, the experts' opinion on this will be discussed.

### 3.2.2 Interview results

#### *Chinese-Kyrgyz relations*

Overall, interviewees assess Chinese-Kyrgyz relations as being on a good level: "They regularly even conduct military exercises together; this suggests that the relationship of trust is at a high level."<sup>119</sup> Respondents note Kyrgyzstan's multi-vector foreign policy, which means that "Kyrgyzstan would work with any major power in the region and China is one of them."<sup>120</sup> On the highest level, there are no signs of willingness to change the course of relations with the new president in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, different aspects of the partnership between China and Kyrgyzstan are highlighted:

Economically, China is the main partner for Kyrgyzstan. If you look at trade, you will see it. In terms of investments, China is also an important factor. Politically, some influence is also present, but it is too early to talk about this.<sup>122</sup>

This confirms earlier findings on the economic domination and rising political influence of China.

Nevertheless, all of the interviewees point at many challenges of this relationship. China's role is more crucial for the whole region than what Central Asia represents for Beijing, and the power asymmetries is important factor to consider:

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<sup>119</sup> Respondent 1, Thesis interview, May 2021.

<sup>120</sup> Respondent 2, Thesis interview, May 2021.

<sup>121</sup> Respondent 3, Thesis interview, May 2021.

<sup>122</sup> Respondent 1

It's hard to say that Kyrgyzstan is a priority for Beijing, and it is related to other countries in Central Asia. The region represents a small economy that depends on relations with neighboring countries rather than the other way around.<sup>123</sup>

Respondent 3 echoes this point of view: “Those relations are unequal. Kyrgyzstan depends on China in many ways and the dependency is growing more as China is opening its economy, and I don’t see how Kyrgyzstan is going to leverage.”<sup>124</sup>

Continuing this discussion, the interlocutors note that there are numerous obstacles for Kyrgyzstan in promoting and increasing its partnership with China. “First of all, this is due to the fact that the investment climate is unfavorable, the situation in the country is too unstable, with political crises.”<sup>125</sup> Since independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan has had two revolutions and in October 2021, it experienced a violent power grab during which local people took control of Chinese mines.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, there are many cases of “business harassment by the state”, the most recent and major one involved Kumtor gold mine, when the state took over the company to remedy any alleged environmental and safety violations.<sup>127</sup> As a result, the majority owner Canadian Centerra Gold initiated arbitration proceedings against the Kyrgyz government.<sup>128</sup> This is another setback in attempts to attract investors, including those from China, which decreases the flow of government-to-government loans.<sup>129</sup>

This pushes China away from any investment, like any other country. In addition, in the trade sphere, Kyrgyzstan has little to offer the PRC. For instance, in the field of agriculture, the main competitors are Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and other

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<sup>123</sup> Respondent 1

<sup>124</sup> Respondent 3

<sup>125</sup> Respondent 1

<sup>126</sup> Niva Yau, “China business briefing: Not happy with Kyrgyzstan,” November 3, 2020,

<https://eurasianet.org/china-business-briefing-not-happy-with-kyrgyzstan>

<sup>127</sup> “What next for Kyrgyzstan and Kumtor?” Eurasianet, May 18, 2021,

<https://eurasianet.org/what-next-for-kyrgyzstan-and-kumtor>

<sup>128</sup> “Centerra Gold Inc. начала арбитражное разбирательство против правительства Кыргызстана [Centerra Gold Inc. commenced arbitration proceedings against the government of Kyrgyzstan],” Azattyk, May 17, 2021, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/centerra-gold-inc-nachala-arbitrazhnoe-razbiratelstvo-protiv-pravitelstva-kyrgyzstana/31258434.html>

<sup>129</sup> “China diversifies in Central Asia,” Eurasianet, November 23, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/china-diversifies-in-central-asia>

countries of Southeast Asia, which are also close to China and produce everything that Kyrgyzstan produces.<sup>130</sup>

This observation provides further support for the literature on the unfavourable investment climate in Kyrgyzstan that hampers the partnership between countries.

Another important point made is that many elites in Kyrgyzstan benefit from doing business with China. As the second respondent notes: “Kyrgyz side sees China as an easy income in terms of corruption.”<sup>131</sup> This view is shared by other scholars and experts. For instance, Temur Umarov from Carnegie Moscow Center states:

Ties with China are becoming an increasingly important means of self-enrichment for many of the region’s ruling families and groups, and Beijing has fostered this reliance on China to bolster its regional influence.<sup>132</sup>

In addition, the prominent scholar Alexander Cooley notes that the potential of Chinese-funded projects to facilitate corruption has a much broader transnational or regional context.<sup>133</sup>

### *Cultural diplomacy*

In regard to the education and cultural aspects, the respondents’ comments are in accordance with the view that scholarships offered by China are attractive to students in Kyrgyzstan; nonetheless, it is not a very powerful promotion of China’s image on a larger scale. However, it is noted that “China is also a good destination for Kyrgyz youth, I see interest in China and an increasing number of people who want to go to China and learn Chinese.”<sup>134</sup> Moreover, one of respondents explains the reasons behind:

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<sup>130</sup> Respondent 1

<sup>131</sup> Respondent 2

<sup>132</sup> Temur Umarov, “Dangerous Liaisons: How China Is Taming Central Asia’s Elites,” Carnegie Moscow Center, January 29, 2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83756>

<sup>133</sup> Alexander Cooley, “Beyond Governance: Understanding Corruption Opportunities and Networks in China’s BRI Projects in Central Asia,” Belt & Road in Global Perspective at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, February 12, 2021, <https://munkschool.utoronto.ca/beltandroad/article/beyond-governance-understanding-corruption-opportunities-and-networks-in-chinas-bri-projects-in-central-asia/>

<sup>134</sup> Respondent 1

When it comes to rural young people, they don't have many opportunities in terms of finding a job and most of the time they either go to Russia or go to other places to work. And China has become a very important destination for them because there are scholarship opportunities and after there are opportunities to work. As a student, it is not as difficult to get into these universities compared to Western or Turkish institutions. So, China is a very appealing option.<sup>135</sup>

These results reflect those of Nursha, who also found that students seem to be motivated in learning the Chinese language with the goal of applying to Chinese universities and securing employment in China.<sup>136</sup>

Despite this, one respondent notes, despite the efforts from the Chinese side, there is no “boom” about China and interest in the country is minimal in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>137</sup> Many respondents note that cultural part of China's soft power is limited and mainly the financial resources go to support economic-based soft power.<sup>138</sup> As interviewee puts it:

Many say that there are Confucius Institutes with the mission to promote Chinese power, but those institutes have quite limited outreach...Comparing that to the U.S. efforts, it is obvious that the U.S is on a different level. Looking at different BRI pillars and investments, most of the financial resources go to energy, transport and infrastructure, while investments to cultural diplomacy is really limited.<sup>139</sup>

### *Perception of China in Kyrgyzstan*

Most interlocutors note that there is a growing negative perception of China in Kyrgyzstan and describe several reasons for this. One interviewee thinks that it is important to divide society into older and younger generations when analyzing the perception of people. Soviet anti-China thinking is still present, especially among the older population, while the youth are exposed to social media, such as TikTok.<sup>140</sup> “This Chinese-owned social media company is a popular and a powerful tool, especially among younger generations.”<sup>141</sup> There is research that supports this view and highlights the connection between Tik Tok and the central

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<sup>135</sup> Respondent 2

<sup>136</sup> Nursha, “Chinese Soft Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: A Confucius Institutes Case Study”

<sup>137</sup> Respondent 1

<sup>138</sup> Respondent 4, Thesis interview, May 2021.

<sup>139</sup> Respondent 5, Thesis interview, May 2021.

<sup>140</sup> Respondent 2

<sup>141</sup> Respondent 2

government of China, and the employment of this social media platform in its propaganda.<sup>142</sup>

In addition, the platform has been accused of censoring videos related to topics such as minority Muslims in China, Tiananmen Square, and Tibetan independence.<sup>143</sup> It can thus be suggested that the youth might have more positive perception of China than the elderly population.

Furthermore, according to another respondent, the older generation uses other channels of social media, including WhatsApp chats, YouTube channels, and Facebook groups, that are filled with fake news and conspiracy theories.<sup>144</sup> Social media has contributed to the spread of negative and/or inaccurate information about China, which affects the perception of China in Kyrgyz society.<sup>145</sup>

Another issue that dampens China's soft power is the situation in XUAR, as many families in Kyrgyzstan have relatives in Xinjiang and there is large Uyghur minority present: "Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are in the same boat, there are relatives in these camps and that is why they protest quite often."<sup>146</sup> At the same time, the fifth interlocutor believes this is a natural response: "The reaction is normal - not good not bad. Naturally, people who have ethnic, religious or family ties with people in Xinjiang will be concerned and empathize with what is happening."<sup>147</sup>

Furthermore, one of the main reasons for the fear and the associated negative perception mentioned by most of the interviewees is Kyrgyzstan's rising debt: "The government has to

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<sup>142</sup> Zongyi Zhang, "Infrastructuralization of Tik Tok: Transformation, Power Relationships, and Platformization of Video Entertainment in China," *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 2 (2020): pp. 219-236, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720939452>.

<sup>143</sup> "Revealed: How TikTok Censors Videos That Do Not Please Beijing," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/sep/25/revealed-how-tiktok-censors-videos-that-do-not-please-beijing>; Raymond Zhong, "TikTok Blocks Teen Who Posted About China's Detention Camps," *The New York Times*, November 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/26/technology/tiktok-muslims-censorship.html>.

<sup>144</sup> Respondent 1

<sup>145</sup> Respondent 1

<sup>146</sup> Respondent 1

<sup>147</sup> Respondent 4

slowly repay the debts, which is very difficult and generates resentment with ideas circulating on why does Kyrgyzstan take Chinese money in the first place.”<sup>148</sup>

### *The Belt and Road Initiative*

As previously noted, rising debt is associated with the various investment projects under BRI. Similarly, this initiative has complex implications in the perceptions of people. As one interlocutor mentions, BRI aims to develop the economies of other countries and this suggests an effort by China to improve its image globally:

China’s one of the main tools of soft power usage was the introduction of the BRI project, which came as a nice construct of China’s growing expansion. At the macro level there is a soft power element: China has a mission to help develop other countries as China’s infrastructure investments can be helpful.<sup>149</sup>

However, there are challenges in the implementation of BRI projects, and one of the main challenged is a poor communication strategy on the part of China:

One of the main weaknesses of BRI is lack of communication ... If China communicated with the broader public and translated information on local languages showing all impacts, like ‘this is a factory, we will build a road to this factory, this will create this number of jobs by 2030, develop local economies etc..’ there would be less uncertainty and negativity.<sup>150</sup>

As a result, people do not understand BRI, as most interviewees report. “The majority of the population in Kyrgyzstan do not separate China’s economic investments with general BRI.”<sup>151</sup>

One respondent notes that “BRI is a very large-scale initiative and it incorporated absolutely everything that was in China's relations with the Central Asian countries.”<sup>152</sup>

Moreover, some people believe that there is a negative association with BRI: “Common people see it as something from what Kyrgyz officials can benefit from and average people

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<sup>148</sup> Respondent 2

<sup>149</sup> Respondent 5

<sup>150</sup> Respondent 5

<sup>151</sup> Respondent 3

<sup>152</sup> Respondent 1

cannot see [any benefit].”<sup>153</sup> These results reflect those of Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, and Daniel Markey, who found that there is a difference in perceptions of elites and the general public because power holders benefit from supporting pro-China policies.

Furthermore, others support the view that people are not benefitting because of Chinese regulations:

“Perception of China is negative because the projects are not benefiting local citizens. They employ Chinese workers, Chinese materials, and machinery. If most projects benefited locals, there would not be such a backlash against China although not possible to prove.”<sup>154</sup>

There is element of using Chinese work force instead of local labor and this can cause negativity from Kyrgyz population. Because Kyrgyz migrant workers have to go to Russia while they could be employed at home. There is such a disbalance.<sup>155</sup>

Moreover, people pay attention to projects implemented by Chinese companies, as they are often related to corruption scandals. A major recent example is the failure of a newly modernized thermal power plant in Kyrgyzstan, where China provided loans on the condition that Chinese companies will implement the project.<sup>156</sup> Beijing chose the company TBEA, which independently bought equipment in China and chose its subcontractors for the project.<sup>157</sup> The investigation of the incident revealed many violations, mainly corruption issues, such as the overestimation of the costs. As a result, for the renovations worth 250-260 million USD, a loan of 386 million USD was spent, which with interest over the next 20 years will total 500 million USD that Bishkek has to pay back to China.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Respondent 2

<sup>154</sup> Respondent 4

<sup>155</sup> Respondent 5

<sup>156</sup> “Kyrgyzstan: Power Plant Blame Game Threatens Political Showdown,” Eurasianet, May 18, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-power-plant-blame-game-threatens-political-showdown>

<sup>157</sup> “Модернизация Тэц Бишка: как тратили \$ 386 млн кредита, и что Сейчас Известно [Modernization of CHP Bishkek: How \$ 386 million loans spent, and what is known now],” Kloop, March 19, 2018, <https://kloop.kg/blog/2018/03/19/modernizatsiya-tets-bishkeka-kak-tratili-386-mln-kredita-i-cto-sejchas-izvestno/>

<sup>158</sup> Ibid

Because of the negative perception of China, some projects are canceled; for example, the logistics center in the Naryn region near the Chinese border was to become a major stage-post in the Belt and Road network.<sup>159</sup> After a series of protests where people opposed the new infrastructure facility based on fears that the land will be sold to Chinese companies or that it will lead to environmental damage, the 275 million USD investment project was turned down.<sup>160</sup>

For the successful implementation of BRI projects in the future, experts also highlight problems with the Kyrgyzstan government:

All problems with China are resolved in domestic policy, not in foreign policy. There are many problems that Kyrgyz officials have to deal with – such as the lack of trust of citizens, corruption, and an unattractive investment climate, dependence of the Kyrgyz elite on China.<sup>161</sup>

Furthermore, Chinese companies should make important changes in their policies to improve the image of China in Kyrgyzstan:

First of all, Chinese companies should be more transparent with what they do in Kyrgyzstan, it is very important in terms of disclosing financial documents and who they do work with in government. And second is to hire more locals in a transparent way.<sup>162</sup>

These important changes from both sides are required to ensure that all parties can benefit from BRI, and as a result improve public perception of these projects. As this analysis has shown, the increasingly negative attitude associated with BRI, China, and the Kyrgyz government's implementation of these projects, has the potential to impact future partnership.

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<sup>159</sup> “Kyrgyzstan Cancels China Logistics Super-Hub Investment After At-Bashy Protests,” Silk Road Briefing, February 28, 2020, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/02/28/kyrgyzstan-cancels-china-logistics-super-hub-investment-at-bashy-protests/>

<sup>160</sup> “Митингующие в Ат-Башы выдвинули властям 5 требований — список [Protesters in At-Bashi put forward 5 demands to the authorities - list],” Sputnik, February 17, 2020, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/society/20200217/1047096293/miting-at-bashy-logisticheskij-centr.html>

<sup>161</sup> Respondent 1

<sup>162</sup> Respondent 2

## Conclusion

The aim of the present research was to examine the effect of the Belt and Road Initiative on China's soft power. The thesis has shown that while BRI has the potential to boost the economies of countries implementing BRI projects, Chinese involvement in Kyrgyzstan has been negatively perceived by the general population. Based on the interviews with experts, reasons for this negative perception, such as Kyrgyzstan's rising debt to China and serious corruption issues associated with the projects, are well established. Furthermore, poor communication about BRI, the spread of false information, and crackdowns in Xinjiang further exacerbate the fears of local populations, which according to national polls are increasing. China's soft power through cultural diplomacy is limited, although this has the potential to build trust and improve China's image. Thus, the thesis provides an important contribution to the literature on public perceptions of China's involvement through BRI, specifically through the case study on Kyrgyzstan.

As China is becoming more assertive and increasing its activities and projects through the Belt and Road Initiative, further research is needed on how people in host countries perceive BRI. In Central Asia, future research might examine the media, including social media, coverage of China and BRI to better understand how the consumption of different media sources influences the perception of different population groups. Finally, more extended research on specific regions, where resentment has been especially strong, would be valuable for a deeper understanding of the reasons for the negative perceptions and fears of China.

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