TÜRKİYE'S DIGITAL PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA: COMPETING WITH CHINA AND RUSSIA FOR SOFT POWER INFLUENCE

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Research Article

ABSTRACT

This study explores how Türkiye positions itself as a leading digital public diplomacy actor in Central Asia, competing with China and Russia for regional soft power influence. Drawing on a qualitative document analysis of official statements, institutional reports, media outputs and academic publications from 2020 to 2024, it examines the narratives, tools and engagement strategies shaping Türkiye's outreach. Türkiye leverages its cultural and linguistic proximity through agencies such as TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, Türkiye Scholarships, the Orhun Exchange Program and TRT Avaz to promote people-to-people connectivity and shared identity. In contrast, China combines economic leverage and cultural diplomacy under the Belt and Road Initiative, while Russia relies on language, historical memory, and media channels like RT and Sputnik to sustain influence. Digital platforms serve as both instruments and arenas of competition, where visibility, responsiveness, and cultural resonance determine impact. The findings highlight Türkiye's growing digital diplomacy capacity and its unique advantage of cultural affinity, suggesting that future research should assess audience perceptions and the long-term effectiveness of its regional strategies.

Keywords: Public Diplomacy, International Relations, Public Diplomacy Strategies, Soft Power, Strategic Communication

Legal Permissions: The study is among the studies that do not require ethical committee approval, since it only uses publicly available information, and no data is collected from humans.

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TÜRKİYE'NİN ORTA ASYA'DAKİ DİJİTAL KAMU DİPLOMASİSİ: YUMUŞAK GÜÇ ALANINDA ÇİN VE RUSYA İLE REKABET

Araştırma Makalesi

ÖZ

Bu çalışma Türkiye'nin Orta Asya'da önde gelen bir dijital kamu diplomasisi aktörü olarak kendisini nasıl konumlandırdığını ve Çin ile Rusya ile bölgesel yumuşak güç etkisi için nasıl rekabet ettiğini incelemektedir. 2020-2024 yılları arasına ait resmi açıklamalar, kurumsal raporlar, medya çıktıları ve akademik yayınların nitel belge analizi yoluyla Türkiye'nin bölgedeki etkileşim stratejilerini, kullandığı araçları ve benimsediği söylemleri ortaya koymaktadır. Türkiye, TİKA, Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, Türkiye Bursları, Orhun Değişim Programı ve TRT Avaz gibi kurumlar aracılığıyla kültürel ve dilsel yakınlığını kullanarak halklar arası bağları ve ortak kimlik duygusunu güçlendirmektedir. Buna karşılık Çin, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi çerçevesinde ekonomik etki gücünü ve kültürel diplomasiyi bir araya getirirken; Rusya, dil, tarihsel hafıza ve RT ile Sputnik gibi medya kanallarına dayanarak bölgedeki etkisini sürdürmektedir. Dijital platformlar hem birer araç hem de rekabetin yürütüldüğü alanlar olarak öne çıkmakta; görünürlük, tepki verebilirlik ve kültürel uyum başarının belirleyici unsurları haline gelmektedir. Bulgular, Türkiye'nin dijital diplomasi kapasitesinin artmakta olduğunu ve kültürel yakınlığın sağladığı özgün avantajı vurgulamakta; gelecekteki araştırmalar için hedef kitle algılarının ve bölgesel stratejilerin uzun vadeli etkilerinin değerlendirilmesini önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital Kamu Diplomasisi, Uluslararası İlişkiler, Kamu Diplomasisi Stratejileri, Yumuşak Güç, Stratejik İletişim

1. INTRODUCTION

Although recent literature has addressed the soft power and public diplomacy strategies of Türkiye, China, and Russia in Central Asia, comparative studies that systematically examine their digital public diplomacy approaches remain scarce. Furthermore, research in this area increasingly emphasizes how digitalization has reshaped cross-border engagement and accelerated international influence, yet most studies remain focused on either specific countries or particular digital platforms, leaving a gap in comparative, cross-national analyses that examine the multidimensional impact of digital public diplomacy (Autio et al., 2021; Birkinshaw, 2022; Brouthers et al., 2016; Feliciano-Cestero et al., 2023; Jean et al., 2020; Piqueras, 2020). For instance, while Mukhtarova & Paizova (2024) and Morgan (2025) have provided comparative analyses of soft power instruments, these studies have not fully explored the multidimensional dynamics of digital public diplomacy tools, narratives, and platforms. This study fills this gap by offering a systematic and comparative analysis of the digital public diplomacy strategies of Türkiye, China, and Russia, focusing not only on their tools such as TİKA, Yunus Emre Institute, Belt and Road Initiative, Russia Today (RT), and Sputnik but also on the narratives and modes of engagement shaped by these tools. Furthermore, the study conceptualizes digital platforms as both instruments and arenas of soft power competition, a perspective that has not been sufficiently emphasized in previous research. By proposing future research directions, including audience perception and the effectiveness of digital content, this work also paves the way for new research avenues in the field. In this study, the term Central Asia refers to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, which together constitute the geographical and political context of the analysis. Below, the conceptual background of digital public diplomacy is presented, followed by an overview of the comparative strategies employed by Türkiye, China, and Russia in Central Asia.

Public diplomacy is defined as the strategic communication processes conducted by states to strengthen their image in the international arena, influence foreign public opinion, and generate support for their foreign policy objectives (Nye, 2004). Traditionally carried out through instruments such as cultural exchange programs, media broadcasts, and educational collaborations, public diplomacy has increasingly shifted toward online platforms due to the transformative impact of digitalization, bringing the concept of digital public diplomacy to the forefront (Cull, 2019). Digital diplomacy enhances the ability of states to shape international relations through social media, online media content, virtual education programs, and interactive digital tools (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). In recent years, Turkey has integrated its public diplomacy efforts into the evolving digital global order, developing various digital diplomacy strategies particularly aimed at strengthening its historical and cultural ties with Central Asia. Türkiye's digital public diplomacy activities are carried out through institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), the Yunus Emre Institute, the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) Avaz, and the Directorate of Communications of the Presidency. These institutions reach target audiences in Central Asia via social media platforms, digital media content, and interactive online initiatives (Niemiec, 2024). Turkey's public diplomacy in the region seeks not only to revive cultural ties but also to generate strategic influence from a global governance perspective (Kahveci & Kuşçu Bonnenfant, 2023). Central Asia holds a critical position in Türkiye's public diplomacy efforts due to its growing significance in the global balance of power. China's attempts to expand its economic and cultural influence in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Russia's efforts to maintain its dominance via the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the democracy and human rights-oriented policies of Western states have turned Central Asia into a highly competitive geopolitical space (Alperen, 2018). Türkiye's presence in the region is grounded in both its historical and cultural ties as well as its soft power instruments. Diplomatic

initiatives developed through multilateral platforms such as the Organization of Turkic States further strengthen Türkiye's public diplomacy strategy (Andrukhin, 2024).

Türkiye's digital public diplomacy strategies aim to reach broader audiences in Central Asia, particularly the youth, through social media and digital platforms. Media content produced by TRT World, the Yunus Emre Institute's online language education programs, and initiatives such as Türkiye Scholarships contribute to enhancing cultural engagement with Central Asian communities (Mercan, 2022). When analyzed within the context of global governance, these efforts illustrate the transformation of public diplomacy in the digitalized world order and represent a strategic opportunity for Türkiye to strengthen its relations and increase its global visibility (Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi, 2025).

Building on this framework, the present study systematically examines Türkiye's digital public diplomacy activities in Central Asia, focusing on the transition from traditional to digital diplomacy and evaluating the regional and global impacts of this transformation. The main actors, strategies, and intended outcomes of Türkiye's digital public diplomacy are analyzed, and the potential of Türkiye's digital diplomacy model is discussed within the broader context of international relations and global governance. This analysis also aims to reveal how Türkiye's efforts in Central Asia compare with those of other regional actors, particularly China and Russia. Having established the conceptual and contextual background, the following section examines the specific features of Türkiye's public diplomacy strategies in Central Asia before expanding to a comparative framework with China and Russia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Soft power, public diplomacy and digital diplomacy are closely linked ideas that explain how states build attraction and credibility without coercion. As Nye (2004) explains, soft power is grounded in culture, shared values and the credibility of a country's foreign policy. Digital diplomacy extends these practices to the online sphere, using official websites, social media and data-driven storytelling to reach an interact with foreign publics (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Manor, 2019). Digital public diplomacy, in turn, blends state-to-public communication with participatory, real-time engagement. This brief conceptual frame guides the analysis that follows and clarifies how Türkiye's evolving outreach in Central Asia should be read throughout the study.

2.1. Türkiye's Public Diplomacy Strategies in Central Asia

Soft power policies in Central Asia are shaped by historical ties, shared identity, and economic cooperation. Türkiye aligns its public diplomacy strategies with the digitalized world, engaging audiences through both traditional and digital media platforms (Zharkynbaeva & Baidavletov, 2018). Like many countries, Türkiye uses websites, blogs, and social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, Weibo, Flickr, and Google+ to advance foreign policy objectives and promote a positive national image (Adesina, 2017). Academic studies have examined this process, offering insights into the role of digital media in Türkiye's public diplomacy (Koçyiğit & Darı, 2024). Key institutions such as TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, the Organization of Turkic States, the Türk Maarif Vakfı (Maarif Foundation, TMV), and Türkiye Scholarships play central roles in these efforts, contributing to cultural, educational, and media-based initiatives that increase Türkiye's visibility and influence in the region (Demirkaya & Çelik, 2021).

Türkiye's digital public diplomacy in Central Asia operates through a multi-actor and multi-layered model that combines cultural promotion, educational cooperation, and humanitarian

visibility. TİKA functions as a development and humanitarian actor, creating local goodwill and reinforcing Türkiye's reliable partner image. The Yunus Emre Institute and the Maarif Foundation focus on language teaching and cultural engagement, fostering long-term people-to-people connections. TRT Avaz and Anadolu Agency amplify Türkiye's narratives in digital spaces, functioning both as amplifiers of cultural proximity and as interactive tools for engaging youth audiences. This systematic interplay of institutions and digital media forms a relational soft power model, which differentiates Türkiye's approach from China's economically driven strategy and Russia's legacy-based orientation.

Türkiye's initiatives aimed at enhancing academic and technical cooperation, such as scholarship programs, joint university projects, and the establishment of research centers, contribute to strengthening its long-term influence in the region. Institutions like the Union of Turkic Universities and Ahmet Yesevi University implement collaborative projects that deepen academic integration between Türkiye and regional countries. Digital platforms and dedicated television channels that promote the Turkish language and culture further reinforce Türkiye's communication with Central Asia. Within this framework, TMV launched its first educational institution in the region by opening the Maarif International School in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital. With a capacity of 1,200 students and equipped with modern infrastructure, the school currently educates 550 students and reached full capacity due to high demand. The Kyrgyz government has also expressed interest in establishing similar schools in other cities (Türk Maarif Vakfı, 2021). Meanwhile, the Organization of Turkic States initiated the Orhun Exchange Program, which promotes student and faculty mobility among member universities and supports the integration of shared educational methods. During its 2017–2018 pilot phase, 43 students from International Relations and Political Science departments participated in the program (Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı, 2024). Additionally, a memorandum of understanding between Gazi University and Uzbekali Janibekov South Kazakhstan Pedagogical University envisions the opening of a Gazi University branch in Kazakhstan and the launch of joint degree programs (Yükseköğretim Kurulu, 2024), further strengthening academic ties across the Turkic world.

Multilingual digital broadcasts also enhance Türkiye's outreach (Köksoy, 2021). TRT and Anadolu Agency produce region-specific content to consolidate Türkiye's strategic narrative, while social media and online cultural initiatives modernize traditional public diplomacy practices. Türkiye's multifaceted approach enables it to compete with China's infrastructure-focused efforts and Russia's historically rooted strategies, reshaping regional dynamics and fostering long-term cooperation (Göksu, 2023). Having detailed Türkiye's evolving digital public diplomacy, the next section situates these efforts within the broader comparative context of China and Russia in Central Asia.

2.2. Comparative Perspectives on Public Diplomacy in Central Asia

The three major actors in Central Asia, Türkiye, China and Russia, consolidate their influence in the region through distinct instruments. While Türkiye focuses on cultural diplomacy and educational cooperation, China utilizes economic investments and media tools, and Russia shapes its public diplomacy through historical ties and linguistic commonalities (Sak, 2014; Turkey's Central Asia Policy, 2021; Niemiec, 2024). The literature emphasizes that Türkiye's public diplomacy offers a unique approach when compared to other major actors in the region (Yusupov, 2020; Zharkynbaeva & Baidavletov, 2018). China conducts its public diplomacy through Confucius Institutes and state-sponsored media channels. These institutes operate in countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, offering Chinese language education and cultural programs (Supyaldiyarov et al., 2024). As of 2020, six Confucius

Institutes were actively operating in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, under the framework of the BRI, China's large-scale infrastructure projects in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have increased economic dependency in the region, thereby supporting its public diplomacy efforts (Omonkulov, 2020). The Confucius Institutes in Central Asia encourage the younger generation to learn Chinese and enhance Beijing's cultural influence. For instance, there are four institutes in Kazakhstan and three in Kyrgyzstan. In addition to language instruction, these institutes also organize cultural activities and academic collaborations (Eurasian Research Institute, 2023). Furthermore, state-controlled media outlets such as CGTN and Xinhua produce favorable narratives about China in the region and promote its economic development projects (Anadolu Ajansı, 2023). In addition, massive infrastructure investments made under the framework of the BRI constitute a significant component of China's soft power strategy. Since launching the BRI in 2013, China has invested in large-scale infrastructure projects across Central Asia, including highways, railways, ports, and energy transmission lines. For instance, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan International Highway Project contributes to the development of trade and transportation in the region (Sahakyan, 2023).

Russia, on the other hand, maintains its influence in Central Asia by leveraging historical ties and state-controlled media outlets (Özel Özcan & Sevindik, 2022). Through channels such as Sputnik and RT, Russia delivers news and analysis targeting Russian-speaking communities across the region. Additionally, the EAEU, supported by Russia, increases the economic dependency of member countries on Moscow and strengthens Russia's long-term diplomatic leverage. In the field of education, the Russian government enhances its cultural influence by establishing universities and schools offering instruction in Russian, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Due to the Soviet legacy, the Russian language remains a prominent means of communication in the region, and Moscow continues to invest in media and educational initiatives to reinforce these cultural ties. Through media outlets like RT and Sputnik, Russia seeks to shape public opinion by providing region-specific content (Batmaz, 2021; Mamatkulova, 2024). Moreover, by using platforms such as the EAEU, Russia aims to preserve its sphere of influence by fostering economic and political dependency. In contrast, Türkiye pursues a different strategy, focusing on cultural diplomacy and educational cooperation as key instruments of its soft power (Emre Sucu et al., 2021). In an effort to strengthen its educational and cultural cooperation in Central Asia, Türkiye organizes Turkish language education and academic collaborations through institutions such as the Maarif Foundation and the Yunus Emre Institute. For instance, Ahmet Yesevi University in Kazakhstan, funded by TİKA, stands out as one of Türkiye's most significant academic cooperation projects in the region. In addition, TRT Avaz's broadcasts targeting Central Asia help reinforce Türkiye's cultural and political narrative toward the region. Unlike China and Russia, Türkiye's public diplomacy in Central Asia is primarily shaped by shared historical, linguistic, and religious ties. Through TİKA, Türkiye supports development projects; through the Yunus Emre Institute, it offers cultural and language education programs; and through the Organization of Turkic States, it enhances multilateral cooperation. Furthermore, media outlets such as TRT Avaz and Anadolu Agency contribute to consolidating Türkiye's strategic narrative in the region. Compared to China and Russia, Türkiye's public diplomacy approach presents a model that is more focused on humanitarian aid and education, aiming to create a more organic and people-centered impact among the communities of the region (Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2018). Recent empirical research also provides insights into how regional audiences perceive these competing influences. For example, a youth survey in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan reports differentiated perceptions of Türkiye, China and Russia among young audiences reflecting how digital soft power competition also manifests in public attitudes (Can et al., 2021). In addition to Turkish and Western academic perspectives, recent regional and China-focused scholarship also clarifies how Beijing advances the Digital Silk Road (DSR) in Central Asia. For instance, Oreglia et al.

(2021) analyze DSR logics with an emphasis on infrastructure and communication and Zhang and Shaw (2023) show how CGTN frames BRI/DSR in outward-facing media narratives among foreign audiences.

Overall, this comparative framework highlights that each country mobilizes digital soft power through distinct logics and produces different types of influence in the region. Türkiye relies on cultural proximity and relational legitimacy, building long-term people-to-people connections and a humanitarian-oriented image. China combines economic leverage with state-controlled narratives, creating structural influence and transactional engagement through the Belt and Road Initiative and Confucius Institutes. Russia sustains its presence through language, nostalgia, and security cooperation, yet its digital appeal shows signs of decline among younger, tech-oriented audiences. Evaluating these strategies side by side demonstrates that Türkiye achieves high cultural resonance, China secures tangible economic and infrastructural impact, and Russia depends on historical familiarity while facing challenges in digital adaptation. Situating Türkiye within this spectrum not only clarifies its strategic position but also strengthens the originality and analytical depth of the comparative assessment.

2.3. The Regional Impact of Türkiye's Digital Public Diplomacy

Türkiye effectively employs digital platforms, media tools, and international collaborations to strengthen its influence in Central Asia through digital public diplomacy (Merkouraki, 2024). Beyond cultural promotion, its digital diplomacy aims to reinforce political, economic, and societal ties. This multifaceted strategy includes the involvement of state institutions, media outlets, and civil society organizations (Arpacıoğlu, 2021), enhancing Türkiye's visibility and engagement across both academic and diplomatic domains (Türkoğlu & Çağlar, 2021).

Within this framework, Türkiye shares content related to Turkish culture, language, and history through domestic digital platforms and implements cultural diplomacy programs aimed at reinforcing historical ties with Central Asian communities. To enhance communication with the regional public, it produces content in local languages and promotes interaction through digital tools. Engagement with Turkic-speaking communities holds a central place in Türkiye's public diplomacy (Altincik & Koçak, 2022). Social media platforms, digital media outlets, and online cultural initiatives form the core of Türkiye's strategy. By developing both national and international digital media projects, Türkiye seeks to expand the regional effectiveness of its diplomacy. Türkiye-based news platforms collaborate with Central Asian media broadcasting in Turkish and local languages to produce joint content and foster regional cooperation (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2021). Moreover, Türkiye's digital diplomacy supports educational and cultural engagement. Online education programs developed with universities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan offer students opportunities to explore Turkish language and history. Through virtual museums, digital exhibitions, and cultural documentaries, Türkiye's heritage becomes increasingly accessible across the region. Thus, public diplomacy extends beyond media outreach, fostering academic and cultural interaction as well.

In the process of digital diplomacy, Türkiye's public diplomacy institutions have adapted to the digitalized world, increasing their effectiveness at both regional and international levels. In 2021, TİKA initiated online education projects in collaboration with academic institutions in Kazakhstan and provided digital educational materials to strengthen academic integration between Türkiye and the region (TİKA, 2021). In 2022, Türkiye expanded its online scholarship programs for students in Kyrgyzstan and increased the number of students studying in Türkiye (TİKA, 2022). Public diplomacy actors produce digital content to reinforce cultural and academic cooperation and to enhance Türkiye's international visibility. The Yunus Emre Institute's online Turkish language courses have reached thousands of participants from various

countries, contributing to the strengthening of regional cultural ties (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2025). Additionally, through TİKA's digital reports and online platforms, Türkiye's development assistance, cooperation, and support projects in the region have become more transparent and accessible.

Türkiye's digital public diplomacy extends beyond cultural and academic activities, serving as an effective tool during crises as well (Yusupov, 2020). In natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies, it quickly mobilizes digital platforms to promote regional solidarity. In response to the 2021 floods in Tajikistan, Türkiye launched aid campaigns via social media, facilitating humanitarian assistance through TİKA and the Turkish Red Crescent (TİKA, 2019). These efforts included distributing food, essential supplies, and infrastructure support. Similarly, during Kyrgyzstan's political crisis, Türkiye used digital channels to share messages of peace and offered diplomatic support (Yürük, 2020). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Türkiye communicated medical assistance and solidarity messages via social media. These actions have strengthened its crisis response capacity and enhanced the impact of its public diplomacy. Additionally, digital diplomacy plays a key role in countering disinformation, with agencies like Anadolu Agency and TRT World producing alternative narratives to defend Türkiye's image.

Türkiye's digital diplomacy strategy also aims to enhance regional engagement, develop joint projects, and strengthen multilateral cooperation through digital technologies. Diplomatic missions in the region use digital media to promote shared cultural events and reinforce public diplomacy efforts (Yağmurlu, 2019). In 2023, under Türkiye's leadership, the Organization of Turkic States launched initiatives to foster digital cooperation, including shared databases for information exchange and media content-sharing agreements (Çınar & Uzun, 2023). The diversification of TRT Avaz's regional broadcasts and expanded digital outreach are key strategies for deepening cultural engagement. Beyond media collaborations, Türkiye also conducts public diplomacy campaigns through social media and interactive platforms. The Organization of Turkic States' online platforms have facilitated regional integration via digital forums and virtual conferences focused on strengthening political and economic ties. Türkiye's social media diplomacy has likewise become an effective tool for advancing academic and commercial cooperation in the region. As digitalization continues to grow in importance, Türkiye's public diplomacy is expected to become more integrated and comprehensive in the years ahead.

2.4. Scope and Methodological Framework of the Study

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze Türkiye's digital public diplomacy strategies in Central Asia. The document analysis method was used to examine publicly available data, official reports, institutional publications, media content, and academic sources (Morgan, 2022). This approach enables the study of social phenomena through existing documents (Bengtsson, 2016; Dalglish et al., 2020).

To ensure depth and reliability, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on primary and secondary documents produced between 2020 and 2024. Thematic coding was applied, and the findings were cross-validated using triangulation, which compared state narratives, academic interpretations, and independent media perspectives (Komor & Grzyb, 2023). This design allows for a robust comparative framework for analyzing the digital public diplomacy strategies of Türkiye, China, and Russia, selected as case studies due to their prominent and competitive roles in the region (Mukhtarova & Paizova, 2024; Omonkulov, 2020). Although this study compares Türkiye, China and Russia as the main actors of digital public diplomacy in Central Asia, the empirical focus is placed on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, where the

actors' digital activities are most visible and accessible. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were excluded from the comparative analysis due to limited availability of official and digital data during the research period.

The key research questions guiding this study are:

- What are the digital public diplomacy tools employed by Türkiye, and how do these tools shape its influence in Central Asia?

- How do the public diplomacy strategies of China and Russia differ from Türkiye's approach?

- What are the long-term regional impacts of Türkiye's public diplomacy practices?

Within this scope, the documents analyzed include reports and digital content from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, and TRT Avaz. For China, activity reports of the Confucius Institutes and broadcasts from CGTN and Xinhua are examined, while Russia's strategies are assessed through materials from Sputnik, RT, and the EAEU. The study thus provides a systematic and comparative evaluation of digital public diplomacy activities conducted between 2020 and 2024.

3. METHOD

This research is based on a qualitative research design and is conducted using the document analysis method. Qualitative research offers a flexible and explanatory approach that allows for an in-depth examination of social phenomena (Creswell, 2018). Document analysis is a method that enables the systematic evaluation of existing data on a particular topic and aims to answer research questions through the examination of written documents (Bowen, 2009). The study specifically focuses on digital public diplomacy activities and official sources produced between 2020 and 2024, allowing for the assessment of the most recent strategies and practices of Türkiye, China, and Russia in Central Asia. Triangulation has been applied by cross-referencing governmental statements, media coverage, and scholarly assessments to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

3.1. Data Collection Process

In this study, various data sources have been utilized to analyze the digital public diplomacy strategies of Türkiye, China, and Russia in Central Asia. In this context, official reports, government policies, news content published by media organizations, academic articles, and public diplomacy reports issued by international institutions were examined. Data related to Türkiye have been obtained from reports and digital publications of official institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, and TRT Avaz. The public diplomacy activities of China and Russia have been analyzed through publications of state-supported media outlets such as CGTN, Xinhua, Sputnik, and RT, as well as documents from the Confucius Institutes and the EAEU.

3.2. Data Analysis Process

The documents used in the study have been systematically evaluated through content analysis. Content analysis enables the examination of texts within the framework of specific themes and categories, thereby revealing the differences and similarities among public diplomacy strategies (Krippendorff, 2019). Initially, publications related to each country's digital public diplomacy have been classified into thematic categories, and these categories have been then

comparatively analyzed to identify commonalities and divergences. During the coding process, main themes such as the use of digital media, public diplomacy tools, crisis management, and regional engagement have been identified, and how each country utilized these elements has been examined in detail.

3.3. Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability of this research, data obtained from different sources have been evaluated comparatively, and their accuracy has been examined through cross-verification with multiple references. The triangulation method has been applied, incorporating academic studies, government reports, and media publications to validate the findings across various sources (Noble & Heale, 2019). To enhance the study's validity, data sets have been carefully selected, and the documents analyzed have been drawn from credible sources and assessed systematically. Within this methodological framework, the research comparatively examines the public diplomacy strategies of Türkiye, China, and Russia in Central Asia and reveals the role of digitalization in shaping these processes.

4. FINDINGS

In this section, the digital public diplomacy strategies of Türkiye, China, and Russia in Central Asia are analyzed under thematic headings and presented from a comparative perspective. The study offers a detailed evaluation of key components of public diplomacy, including the use of digital media, public diplomacy tools, crisis management, and regional engagement. The findings are shaped by the systematic examination of data obtained through qualitative content analysis and the triangulation method (Noble & Heale, 2019). As part of the triangulation approach, data have been collected and analyzed systematically from official institutional websites, media content, and academic publications (Malysheva, 2021; Niemiec, 2024; Shaikhutdinov, 2021; Supyaldiyarov et al., 2024; Yermekbaev et al., 2024). The data drawn from these three different types of sources have been comparatively evaluated according to thematic categories, and cross-checked for consistency and coherence. In this way, a multi-layered analysis has been conducted, supported not only by official discourses but also by media representations and academic interpretations. The findings obtained through this approach are presented below.

Table 1. Comparison of Digital Public Diplomacy Components

Country	Use of Digital Media	Public Diplomacy Tools	Crisis Management	Regional Engagement
Türkiye	TRT Avaz, Anadolu Agency, social media platforms	TİKA, Yunus Emre Institute, Maarif Foundation	Humanitarian-based diplomacy during crises	Organization of Turkic States, academic collaborations
China	CGTN, Xinhua, Weibo	Confucius Institutes, state-sponsored media projects	Infrastructure aid and economic diplomacy	Belt and Road Initiative, economic partnerships

Russia	RT, Sputnik, VK	Projects focused on Russian language and culture	Regional political interventions	Eurasian Economic Union, promotion of Russian language

Note. Source: Author's own compilation based on the findings of this study

4.1. Use of Digital Media

As shown in Table 1, the digital media usage strategies of Türkiye, China, and Russia differ significantly in terms of both tools and target audiences. Türkiye shapes its digital media strategy primarily through social media platforms and public broadcasting institutions, aiming to reach Turkic-speaking communities in Central Asia via media outlets such as TRT Avaz and Anadolu Agency. Through these institutions, Türkiye not only delivers up-to-date news but also produces content that emphasizes historical ties and shared cultural identity. Furthermore, within the scope of social media diplomacy, key actors such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye, TİKA, and the Yunus Emre Institute are actively present on platforms like X, Instagram, and YouTube, intensifying efforts to shape public opinion through digital engagement. A recent example is the Yunus Emre Institute's 2023 "Turkish Language Digital Learning Platform," launched for Central Asian users. This initiative attracted over 15,000 participants in its first three months, featuring interactive video lessons, live discussion forums, and gamified language tests showcasing Türkiye's blend of cultural diplomacy and digital innovation (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2025).

China's use of digital media is based on a centralized, state-controlled strategy that primarily focuses on producing global narratives. Media outlets such as CGTN and Xinhua generate content that portrays China's economic achievements and diplomatic missions in a positive light, not only in Central Asia but around the world. These narratives are developed in alignment with official government policies and serve to reinforce China's growing global position. Moreover, China's digital media strategy is supported by cultural content disseminated through Confucius Institutes, transforming digital cultural diplomacy into a two-way platform. A recent example is CGTN's 2023 "Silk Road Stories" YouTube series, which featured documentaries highlighting the Belt and Road Initiative's impact on Central Asian infrastructure, economic development, and cultural exchanges. The series included episodes in Kazakh, Uzbek, and Russian, reached over 2 million views, and was actively promoted on local Telegram and Weibo channels demonstrating China's adaptation to regional languages and digital environments (CGTN, 2025).

Russia's digital media strategy primarily targets Russian-speaking communities and is carried out through state-sponsored outlets such as Sputnik and RT. These media channels are used to legitimize Russian narratives during regional events and crises, emphasizing historical ties and security ultimately reinforcing a sphere of influence rooted in the Soviet legacy. According to EUvsDisinfo, Russia "continues to assert its colonial mindset in Central Asia, using disinformation and imperial narratives to maintain control," including orchestrated campaigns around high-level visits and political events (EUvsDisinfo, 2024). This suggests a sustained and multifaceted digital engagement across platforms such as Telegram, VK, and YouTube, aimed at shaping public opinion and mobilizing regional audiences.

When evaluated through the triangulation method, the digital media strategies of the three countries were analyzed and verified using various sources such as official websites, media content, and academic publications. In this way, a comparative assessment was conducted not only at the discursive level but also in terms of content and target audiences. This multi-layered analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of the impact of digital media tools on public

diplomacy. Building upon this assessment of digital media, the next section focuses on the distinctive public diplomacy tools each country employs to support its influence in Central Asia.

4.2. Public Diplomacy Tools

The public diplomacy tools employed by the three countries differ significantly depending on their strategic priorities and historical contexts. Türkiye largely shapes its public diplomacy instruments through cultural and academic collaborations, humanitarian aid programs, and multilateral cooperation platforms. As summarized in Table 1, projects carried out by institutions such as TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, and the Maarif Foundation help reinforce Türkiye's regional influence at the institutional level and aim to build a shared identity through the promotion of Turkish language and culture. Joint academic initiatives, particularly Ahmet Yesevi University, stand as concrete examples of Türkiye's long-term and sustainable diplomatic approach. For example, the Yunus Emre Institute conducts Turkish language teaching, proficiency exams, and diverse cultural activities in Uzbekistan, reaching a wide audience through both in-person and online programs (Yunus Emre Institute, 2024a; Yunus Emre Institute, 2024b). These efforts strengthen Türkiye's cultural presence and facilitate long-term people-to-people connections across Central Asia.

China's public diplomacy tools are largely shaped around cultural activities integrated into its broader framework of economic diplomacy. Confucius Institutes not only provide language instruction but also organize exhibitions, seminars, and cultural events. The 2022 Confucius Institute Annual Development Report highlights that digital teaching and "cloud classrooms" have become widespread, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, to reach students remotely. For example, in 2022, the Confucius Institute at Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH) offered hybrid and online Chinese language courses, as well as cultural activities such as "Cloud Spring Festival" and "online Chinese Bridge" competitions, engaging hundreds of students across Russia and Central Asia. In parallel, state-sponsored media projects such as CGTN and Xinhua produce and disseminate digital content across the region, supporting China's narrative and enhancing the effectiveness of its public diplomacy efforts. The report notes that such digital platforms have been crucial in maintaining and expanding China's public diplomacy outreach in the region (Chinese International Education Foundation, 2023, p. 62–63).

Russia's public diplomacy tools are shaped by historical ties, shared language, and the legacy of Soviet influence, and are primarily implemented through educational scholarships, cultural exchange programs, and media content. Key institutions such as Rossotrudnichestvo, Russian universities, and cultural centers organize Russian language courses, literature contests, joint educational projects, and cultural festivals throughout Central Asia. In recent years, Rossotrudnichestvo has increasingly focused on digital platforms and hybrid events to reach youth audiences and expand the presence of the Russian language and culture, especially in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. According to a 2025 report, the agency's efforts include not only cultural diplomacy, but also educational partnerships, alumni networks, and coordinated information campaigns aimed at strengthening Russia's soft power and promoting a positive image in the region (SpecialEurasia, 2025).

The analysis of these tools goes beyond a mere comparison of institutional structures and also considers how these institutions engage with local communities in the region and what values they promote. Within the framework of the triangulation method, official institutional statements, media content, and independent academic assessments were examined comparatively. This approach revealed the practical interaction capacity of the public diplomacy tools employed by each country in the field. Crisis management represents another

critical dimension in shaping public perceptions and diplomatic prestige, which will be explored in the next section.

4.3. Crisis Management

Public diplomacy activities carried out during times of crisis play a crucial role in enhancing both a country's humanitarian image and its prestige in the region. The crisis management approaches of Türkiye, China, and Russia in Central Asia reveal the strategic priorities and diplomatic styles of each country. As illustrated in Table 1, Türkiye frames its public diplomacy strategy around humanitarian aid and rapid crisis response, particularly in Central Asia, through institutions such as TİKA, the Turkish Red Crescent, and AFAD. For instance, in 2024, TİKA organized an "International Disaster Management Training Program" in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, with the participation of 30 experts from various governmental and non-governmental institutions. The program, realized in partnership with the Tajikistan Committee of Emergency Situations and Civil Defense, aims to enhance local capacity in disaster preparedness and response, as well as to foster bilateral cooperation in humanitarian crisis management. Such initiatives not only strengthen Türkiye's reputation as a reliable partner in times of need, but also support the development of local expertise and institutional networks in the region (TİKA, 2025).

In crisis management processes, China primarily exerts influence through economic assistance, infrastructure investments, and high-profile humanitarian aid. Projects aimed at improving energy infrastructure in countries like Tajikistan are designed not only to address economic needs but also to generate diplomatic impact. A prominent example was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Chinese government provided large quantities of medical supplies and vaccine support to Central Asian countries. In July 2020, China donated 50,000 surgical masks, 10,000 N95 masks, 5,000 protective suits, and 1,000 pairs of goggles to Kazakhstan's medical institutions (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2020). These initiatives were systematically publicized through media outlets such as CGTN, reinforcing China's image as a responsible regional partner and making crisis management an integral component of its digital public diplomacy.

Russia's crisis management and security provision approach in Central Asia is defined by its leading role within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and by its ability to project power as a regional security guarantor. As Vishnevskaya-Mann (2018) notes, Russia positions itself as the primary "gendarme" of the region, maintaining military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and routinely engaging in bilateral and multilateral security cooperation to address challenges such as border control, terrorism, and regional instability. Although the effectiveness of the CSTO as an active defense alliance has been debated, especially given its limited intervention during the 2010 Kyrgyzstan unrest, Russia continues to utilize both military presence and diplomatic channels to assert its influence. Moreover, through regular joint military exercises, arms agreements, and the strategic use of preferential migration and economic ties, Russia sustains its image as an indispensable security actor in Central Asia. This dual approach of military engagement and public diplomacy enables Russia to reinforce its soft power and secure its interests amid shifting regional dynamics (Vishnevskaya-Mann, 2018).

These findings reveal that the forms of diplomacy implemented during times of crisis are directly related to the overall foreign policy visions of the respective countries. Through the triangulation method, the diplomatic responses to crises were comprehensively analyzed in light of official statements, media sources, and academic assessments. Beyond crisis response,

regional engagement strategies define the sustained presence and cooperation modalities of Türkiye, China, and Russia in Central Asia, as examined in the next subsection.

4.4. Regional Engagement

The regional engagement strategies of Türkiye, China, and Russia in Central Asia are shaped by a mix of diplomatic relations and multilateral cooperation platforms. While all three countries pursue active engagement in the region, as shown in Table 1, Türkiye in particular institutionalizes its approach through initiatives such as the Organization of Turkic States, leveraging shared history, language, and culture to strengthen both intergovernmental and people-to-people ties. Summits, cultural events, and political forums organized under this platform foster a sense of unity among Turkic-speaking communities and promote deeper regional integration. As previously discussed, TİKA and the Yunus Emre Institute serve as central actors in Türkiye's digital public diplomacy strategy, reinforcing engagement through diverse educational, cultural, and development projects, and highlighting the country's multi-channel diplomacy in Central Asia (Organization of Turkic States, 2025.; Türkçe Yeterlik Sınavı, 2025).

China's regional engagement is largely structured around economic relations and large-scale infrastructure projects under the BRI. These efforts not only enhance China's economic footprint but also foster strategic partnerships through regular high-level forums, trade corridors, and investment agreements. Through projects such as the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway and joint economic zones, China deepens its political and economic ties with Central Asian countries, using both bilateral and multilateral formats to shape the regional order (Belt and Road Portal, 2025; CGTN, 2025).

Russia's engagement in Central Asia is driven by historical ties, security cooperation, and energy policies, with the EAEU serving as a primary platform for economic and political integration. Moscow also relies on the CSTO for regional security arrangements, while promoting Russian language and culture through educational and cultural programs. These efforts maintain both economic dependency and socio-cultural influence, reinforcing Russia's long-term presence in the region (Eurasian Economic Union, 2025; SpecialEurasia, 2025).

The analysis conducted within the framework of the triangulation method reveals that the regional engagement strategies of the three countries are based not only on formal agreements but also on practical activities and societal interactions. Each country's strategy is shaped by its broader foreign policy vision, which demonstrates that the modes of engagement in the region are guided by distinct diplomatic paradigms.

This analysis, based on four core themes, comprehensively highlights not only the discursive but also the practical dimensions of Türkiye's, China's, and Russia's digital public diplomacy strategies in Central Asia. The findings indicate that while the three countries pursue similar goals, they adopt different tools and approaches, and that digitalization presents both an opportunity and a competitive space for each actor. The comparative analysis based on the collected data shows that digital public diplomacy is shaped not only by communication technologies but also by historical, cultural, and economic contexts thus providing a strong transition to the conclusion of the study. The conclusion section now synthesizes these core themes and discusses their broader implications for digital public diplomacy in Central Asia.

5. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

By integrating a multi-actor analysis of Türkiye's institutions with a cross-national comparison of China and Russia, this study provides an original perspective on how digital soft power operates in Central Asia. The findings demonstrate that all three countries actively employ digital tools to expand their influence and reinforce regional ties, yet they differ significantly in focus, methods, and expected outcomes. Türkiye builds its digital soft power primarily on historical and cultural proximity, engaging audiences through institutions such as TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, TRT Avaz, and Türkiye Scholarships. Digital campaigns, online educational initiatives, and social media interactions strengthen Türkiye's cultural narrative, particularly among younger audiences, and reinforce its image as a reliable partner through humanitarian-oriented initiatives. Concrete examples illustrate this approach: the Maarif International School in Bishkek, with a capacity of 1,200 students, serves as a symbol of Türkiye's educational and cultural presence in Kyrgyzstan; the Orhun Exchange Program fosters academic mobility and long-term people-to-people ties; and joint initiatives such as Gazi University's planned branch in Kazakhstan deepen Türkiye's multi-actor model of engagement in the region.

China, in contrast, follows a centralized and economically driven model that combines cultural diplomacy with large-scale structural influence. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Confucius Institutes, and state-sponsored media such as CGTN and Xinhua provide China with both material leverage and discursive power. Infrastructure investments, such as the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan International Highway Project, create economic dependency and reinforce Beijing's development-oriented image. Language and cultural programs conducted through Confucius Institutes target younger generations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, expanding China's long-term cultural footprint, though its engagement often remains transactional and less rooted in shared historical or cultural values.

Russia sustains a legacy-based presence, relying on language, historical memory, and security cooperation to maintain its influence. Media outlets like RT and Sputnik, as well as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), reinforce Russia's regional narrative and economic ties. Educational initiatives, including Russian-language schools and scholarships in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, continue to leverage the Soviet-era cultural infrastructure. Yet, Russia's appeal among younger, digitally active generations is gradually declining as they turn to alternative global media and interactive online platforms.

A comparative evaluation of these strategies shows that Türkiye generates strong cultural resonance and relational legitimacy, China secures structural and economic influence, and Russia maintains historical familiarity but struggles with digital adaptation. The future of digital soft power in Central Asia will likely favor actors that can combine cultural relevance with interactive, youth-oriented content and long-term development initiatives. Türkiye's cultural and linguistic proximity offers a unique foundation, but transforming this advantage into sustainable influence requires more integrated digital storytelling, enhanced multilingual content, and visible humanitarian engagement in online spheres.

Future research can advance this field by examining how Central Asian publics perceive and respond to these strategies, conducting comparative analyses in other geographies such as the Balkans or Africa, and applying quantitative assessments of social media performance to evaluate the tangible outcomes of digital engagement. Overall, this study highlights that digital public diplomacy in Central Asia is a dynamic, competitive, and multi-layered process, where cultural legitimacy, economic leverage, and historical narratives converge to shape regional influence.

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