Migration and Soft Power
How Kyrgyz Labor Migrants View Russia

ABSTRACT  This article explores how Kyrgyz labor migrants in Russia view their host country’s government and its influence in Kyrgyzstan, including through the Eurasian Economic Union. Results suggest that migrants have nuanced, pragmatic pro-Russian views. They understand Kyrgyzstan’s dependency on Russia and admire the efficiency of Russia’s government. Yet, they also disapprove of its high levels of corruption and of its disregard for individual rights. Our work contributes to the literature on the diffusion of norms through migration; it also sheds light on Russia’s soft power in Central Asia at a time when rivalry with China is growing in the region.

KEYWORDS  Russia’s soft power, Russia, migrants’ norms, labor migration, Kyrgyzstan

For decades, Russia has shaped politics in its “near abroad” by relying on a mix of hard and soft power—where soft power refers to the ability to achieve one’s goals “through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Nye, 2008, p. 94). According to Nye, soft power has become an attractive foreign policy tool given the depth of global connections and the proliferation of virtual communities (Nye, 2004, pp. 30, 31; Fletcher Security Review, 2018). It is increasingly popular among the political elite in Russia (Rotaru, 2018), as exemplified by the country’s growing efforts to influence the media narrative around the world. In the words of Fiona Hill (2016), “Russia today is on its way to recovering the degree of soft power the Soviet Union once enjoyed in its immediate sphere of influence” (p. 341).

This study focuses on the small Central Asian nation of Kyrgyzstan, where Russia’s presence is multifaceted, with tools ranging from economic investments and political pressure to a military base. Since 2015, Kyrgyzstan has belonged to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—an economic community of five post-Soviet states seen by many experts as Russia’s attempt to assert political control in the region.¹ Russia also continues to exercise soft power in Kyrgyzstan, in particular through media outreach;

¹. Some analysts go as far as to argue that Kyrgyzstan was “blackmailed” (Peyrouse, 2015) or “pushed” into joining (Kudaibergenova, 2016) and that the union can be seen as the “geopolitical heir of the USSR” (Kubayeva, 2015, p. 5) cementing Kyrgyzstan’s dependency on Russia (International Crisis Group, 2016).
historical, cultural, and linguistic ties; and investments in Russian education (Cooley, 2017; Laruelle, 2015; Laruelle & McGlinchey, 2017).

The strength of Russia’s soft power in Kyrgyzstan translates into highly favorable opinion polls, with large majorities of the Kyrgyz public seeing Russia as a friendly country—this at an even higher rate than in other post-Soviet nations (Eurasian Development Bank, 2017). For example, 99% of Kyrgyzstanis describe their country’s relations with Russia as “good” (International Republican Institute, 2017). A 2014 poll also found a very high level of support among the Kyrgyz public for the Russian president at 90% (Trilling, 2014).

However, these polls do not identify among respondents the high percentage of Kyrgyzstanis who travel to Russia as labor migrants. At least 700,000 Kyrgyzstanis (close to 15% of the total population) work there, sending back remittances that keep their home country’s economy afloat (UNDP and Eurasian Development Bank, 2015). A study found that these large migration flows, and the economic opportunities that they create, “bolster the reputation of Russia” in Kyrgyzstan (Gerber & Zakisva, 2020, p. 79). Thus, as argued by Rutland and Kazantsev (2016), migration in the post-Soviet sphere “has considerable potential as a source of soft power” (p. 401).

This article addresses a neglected dimension of soft power by exploring how it can be diffused through migration. Relying on fieldwork completed in Kyrgyzstan in 2017 and 2018, including semi-structured interviews with 40 migrants and return migrants, we examine how migrants view Russia’s government and its relations with Kyrgyzstan, and the extent to which these views are shaped by their experiences abroad. We focus on political and geopolitical opinions because Russia continues to play a significant role in Kyrgyzstan’s politics, arguably even more than in other Central Asian nations (Malashenko, 2013). Kyrgyzstan has modeled many recent policies on Russia and even debated adopting a “foreign agent” bill inspired by a Russian law a few years ago (Freedom House, 2017).

Our case study differs markedly from much of the existing literature and, as a result, builds upon a varied body of work. The literature on soft power has largely overlooked the potential attraction wielded by countries promoting an alternative to Western liberal values (Laruelle, 2021). Additionally, few scholars have explored the ways in which soft power and migration intersect, for example, by creating cross-border dependency and forms of leverage (Cooley, 2017; Hill, 2016; Laruelle, 2015; Tsourapas, 2018a). Similarly, migration theory has long relied on the case studies of Western receiving countries, creating an “empirical gap” (Schenk, 2018, p. 18). In contrast, while Russia’s economy and political system perform much better than Kyrgyzstan’s, and according to well-known political indicators such as those compiled by Freedom House, the World Bank

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2. For comparison, next on the list of nine options were Kazakhstan (89%), the European Union (68%), Turkey (67%), and China (60%). Only a small minority of civil society, pro-Western activists, such as members of “Kyrgyzstanis against Customs Union,” is publicly deploring Russia’s political sway in their country.
3. Almost a million Kyrgyzstanis left for Russia in 2019 (Kuznetsova et al., 2020).
4. As explained by a journalist: “Bishkek is tied to Moscow . . . and is politically dependent” (interview with a journalist, Bishkek, 4 June 2018).
(Governance Indicators), and the V-Dem Institute, Russia’s political system is in fact less competitive than Kyrgyzstan’s (although Kyrgyzstan’s position in these indexes has deteriorated in the past few years). Thus, Kyrgyzstanis in Russia are among the 20% of migrants in the world who live in a regime that is less democratic than their own (V-Dem Institute, 2018). There, they personally witness corruption and live in constant fear of local authorities, who routinely demand bribes, threaten expulsion, and rely on a “blacklist” of migrants who are not allowed to reenter Russia after violating migration rules (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2019; Reeves, 2015).

We found that migrants think highly of the Russian political system but that they are far from seeing it as a model to emulate. These findings contribute to an understanding of how nondemocratic political norms can be transferred through migration. The current literature is mostly silent on this topic; yet, according to the International Organization for Migration (2020), along with Russia, several other top migrant-receiving countries in the world are authoritarian, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kazakhstan.

The article starts with a review of the literature and an explanation of our argument. After describing our methodology, we present the results of our fieldwork, followed by our conclusion.

**SOFT POWER AND MIGRATION**

To what extent can the literature on soft power offer a relevant framework to understand migrants’ opinions of their host country? A country’s soft power relies on its ability to “shape the preferences of others” (Nye, 2004, p. 5). In the case of Russia, soft power is exercised in the near abroad through a variety of tools, including a shared historical legacy, economic investments, the supply of energy, language, and education policies, as well as media outreach (Baumann, 2018; Cooley, 2017; Hill, 2016; Laruelle, 2015; Rotaru, 2018). Exposure to Russian media is particularly common in Central Asia, where state-sponsored media often mirror Russia’s coverage of global affairs (Laruelle & McGlinchey, 2017), while portraying Western societies negatively and denouncing “Western hypocrisy” (Cooley, 2017). Politically, Russia’s soft power centers on offering an alternative model to Western democracy. Whereas the West generally condemns Russia for its lack of pluralism and poor human rights record, Russia’s political system is perceived more favorably in its sphere of influence and credited for securing stability and external protection (Tsygankov, 2013). Similarly, Vladimir Putin is generally seen as a “rational and responsible leader” (Baumann, 2018, p. 55) in Central Asia.

A soft power paradigm, however, has rarely been used to operationalize the relations between migrants and states—in part because the field of international relations itself has historically overlooked the political dimension of migration and diasporas (Shain & Barth, 2003; Tsourapas, 2018a). Only in the mid-1990s did a significant number of

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5. Among the 40 migrants we interviewed, the influence of Russian media was clear: most respondents listed pro-Kremlin channels as their main source of information besides social media.
scholars of international relations start exploring the politics of cross-border migration (see Hollifield, 2012).

How do soft power and migration intersect? Cross-border migration creates dependency between countries (Tsourapas, 2018a). For migrant-sending countries, this provides opportunities to pursue diplomatic objectives through diasporas; in a recent study, Tsourapas (2018b) analyzed how authoritarian governments like Egypt can use skilled migrants as a tool of soft power in foreign policy. Another example is Russia’s initiatives to reach its so-called compatriots—a nebulous category that includes Russian citizens, ethnic Russians living abroad, as well as individuals speaking Russian or who have kept cultural ties to Russia (Williams, 2020; see also Rotaru, 2018; Ziegler, 2006). This soft power outreach to compatriots has relied heavily on “passportization” (Grigas, 2016)—the widespread distribution of Russian citizenship to hundreds of thousands of residents of the former Soviet republics (Chudinovskikh & Denisenko, 2017). Although most labor migrants are not technically “compatriots,” they have taken advantage of these laws to naturalize in high numbers, affording them better professional opportunities and legal protection in Russia.6

Most analyses of soft power and migration focus, however, on the diffusion of soft power from the migrant-receiving country. For example, Nye (2004) suggested that diasporas could “help to convey accurate and positive information about the United States” to their country of origin (p. 58). He also identified soft power in diasporic efforts to encourage reform at home, as was the case with the Iranian community in Los Angeles via a television broadcast (Nye, 2004), but such examples were not conceptualized in much detail. There is also growing interest in the role that diasporas play in foreign policy making, though the attention is generally on skilled migrants—including students, diplomats, artists, and entrepreneurs (La Corte & Voisine, 2020)—thus with limited application for the study of a largely unskilled and unorganized migrant population like Kyrgyz laborers in Russia.

Crucially, migration confers leverage to receiving countries (Tsourapas, 2018a), as is the case for Russia in Eurasia (Cooley, 2017; Hill, 2016). Cooley (2017) identified soft power in Moscow’s ability to pressure other countries through migration policy. For example, Kyrgyzstan was enticed to join by the EEU in part because of Russia’s promise to improve conditions for labor migrants (UNDP and Eurasian Development Bank, 2015). Similarly, migrants’ high naturalization rates give Russia “potential leverage” over countries like Kyrgyzstan (Laruelle, 2015, p. 12). Finally, soft power is also a consideration when governments improve the condition of immigrants on their soil to enhance their global reputation (de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020, p. 232). This is clearly not on the agenda in Russia today; there, migrants are constructed as a threat rather than regarded as a potential vector of soft power (Rutland & Kazantsez, 2016), while “anti-migration populism” is part of the “social contract that aims to keep the population a passive observer of politics” (Schenk, 2018, p. 23).

6. Kyrgyzstanis now naturalize at a lower rate than other Central Asian migrants because Kyrgyzstan’s membership in the EEU has resulted in less-stringent migration requirements (Voices on Central Asia, 2021).
In summary, the literature on soft power and migration points to the strength of Russia’s soft power in its near abroad, exercised, for example, through media outreach and naturalization policies and by promoting an alternative to liberal democracy. It suggests that Russia does not currently see labor migrants as tools of soft power, even as many have acquired a Russian passport. However, this literature has only peripherally explored migration, and falls short of providing a conceptual framework to understand how migrants can be vectors of soft power even when not actively engaged as a diaspora.

MIGRATION AND THE TRANSFER OF NORMS

In recent years, another set of theories has conceptualized the transfer of political norms that can happen through migration, offering key insights to understand how migrants might be receptive to Russia’s model of authoritarianism. Such political remittances happen when migrants are transferring “political principles, vocabulary and practices between two or more places, which migrants and their descendants share a connection with” (Kravatzek & Müller-Funk 2020, p. 1004). Experts believe that migration changes people’s views on politics (Levitt, 2001, p. 155), by exposing them to “new information through interactions with different cultures, media, institutions, policies, and social norms” (Berlinschi, 2019, p. 12; see also Batista & Vicente, 2010).

Much of this literature has focused on the extent to which the transfer of norms by migrants leads to more-democratic outlooks in the country of origin (Pérez-Amendáriz & Crow, 2010; Tuccio, Wahba & Hamdouch, 2019; Wahba, 2015) and is therefore not directly applicable to our study. Interestingly, researchers found that the quality of the receiving country’s institutions matters greatly (Chauvet & Mercier 2014; Batista & Vicente, 2010). For example, Beine and Sekkat (2013) concluded that the transfer of norms through migration can positively improve the home country’s institutions only when the host country itself has good institutions. However, in a comprehensive study of migration from the Philippines to both democratic and nondemocratic nations, Kessler and Rother (2016) observed that migrants’ views are influenced less by the host country’s political system itself than by the extent to which it protects labor rights, political rights, and individual freedoms—an important insight for our case study given the political climate in Russia.

Political remittances also happen when migrants and their families grow disillusioned with the home-country government (Kessler & Rother, 2016; Pérez-Armendáriz & Crow 2010), or when households with relatives abroad become less accepting of bribery and corruption (Ivlevs & King, 2017). Migration even seems to shape geopolitical preferences. For instance, a study of Moldovan migrants showed that working in a Western country lowered support for strong ties with Russia, whereas working in Russia or other

7. Interest in migrants’ political leverage is relatively recent as it has long been eclipsed by a focus on their economic power (Meseguer & Burgess, 2014; Piper & Rother, 2015).
8. Scholars further believe that migrants’ norms are transmitted through their social networks, including their friends and families (Mahmoud et al., 2014; Docquier, Lodigiani & Rapoport, 2011).
9. Similarly, Tuccio, Wahba, and Hamdouch (2019) found that Moroccan migrants returning from Western Europe are more likely to demand political change than those returning from a non-Western country.
Eastern European countries such as Kazakhstan or Ukraine did not significantly affect geopolitical preferences (Berlinschi, 2019).

Unfortunately, few studies have analyzed the transfer of nondemocratic norms, though there are suggestions that a well-functioning authoritarian government is appealing to migrants coming from lower-income countries. Rother (2009) noted, for instance, that Philippine return migrants from Saudi Arabia “witnessed the efficient functioning of the Saudi Arabian state for the Saudi citizens and concluded from this observation that authoritarian systems do have certain advantages” (p. 271). Crucially, focus groups conducted among Ukrainian and Kyrgyz migrants returning from Russia showed that they held favorable opinions of Russia and of bilateral relations with Russia—to a large extent because of perceived economic benefits (Gerber & Zavisca, 2020). The authors hypothesized that these positive migration stories constitute “geopolitical remittances” that contribute to Russia’s favorable reputation in the near abroad, despite its poor treatment of foreign workers. However, given the scope of their study, they provided only a preliminary account of these geopolitical remittances. Finally, in previous research exploring whether the economic power of the Kyrgyz diaspora in Russia and Kazakhstan translates into public influence at home, we noted that many migrants favored stability over democracy; some were struck upon return by how less economically and politically effective Kyrgyzstan appeared in comparison to Russia (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2011).

The two bodies of literature that we have reviewed provide important context for our study. But their findings don’t always directly apply to nondemocratic receiving countries—leading us to articulate nuanced hypotheses. First, migrants are likely to have a positive outlook on regimes that they consider more effective than their own (Kessler & Rother, 2016; Rother, 2009), and to grow disappointed with politics in their home country (Kessler & Rother, 2016; Pérez-Armendáriz & Crow, 2010). We hypothesized that this would be true for Kyrgyz migrants in Russia: though slightly more politically competitive, Kyrgyzstan is much less stable and effective than Russia—according to the World Bank, the country is only in the 25th percentile for government effectiveness, while Russia is in the 58th percentile (World Bank Governance Indicators). Additionally, migrants generally support strong relations between their home and host countries, as they personally experience their economic interdependence, as well as the benefits of cross-border mobility (Gerber & Zavisca, 2020; Tsourapas, 2018a). However, the literature also cautions that conditions in the host country, including interactions with predatory officials, affect political remittances (Beine & Sekkat, 2013; Chauvet & Mercier, 2014; Batista & Vincente, 2010; Kessler & Rother, 2016). Thus, we hypothesized that Kyrgyz migrants’ views of Russia, though generally positive, would be complicated by their precarious situation and direct exposure to corruption.

In the following sections, we explain the methodology we used to test these hypotheses and present the results of our field work.

10. Management of migration is particularly lacking. See, for example, Kuznetsova et al. (2020).
METHODS

Evidence comes from fieldwork completed in Kyrgyzstan in 2017 and 2018 as part of a larger project that also explored migrants’ use of smartphones (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2019). It consists of semi-structured interviews with 40 migrants and return migrants (23 men and 17 women for a median age of 36) who were identified through snowball sampling. We interviewed about one-third of respondents in Kyrgyzstan as they were visiting home temporarily or had returned for good, and the other two-thirds (who were in Russia during our fieldwork) using the application WhatsApp. To better understand Russia’s influence in Kyrgyzstan, we also conducted informal interviews with Kyrgyz civil society activists, university professors, and other experts.

While in Russia, respondents worked primarily in construction and trade; other frequently mentioned professions included catering, waitressing, cleaning, tailoring, management, security, pharmacy, and caretaking. The median time abroad was nine years. Roughly one-third of respondents had acquired Russian citizenship.

Interviewing migrants on WhatsApp, though an unusual methodology, had several advantages. First, it allowed us to include migrants working across the country, in cities like Moscow, Ekaterinburg, Krasnoyarsk, Saint Petersburg, Rostov-on-Don, Samara, Bratsk, Tyumen, and Yakutsk. Second, it enabled us to connect with migrants at a time that was convenient for them given their busy schedules. Third, WhatsApp is almost universally used by migrants to communicate with family and friends (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2019), so this is a technology that they are familiar with and made it relatively easy to reach them.

Besides inviting them to tell their migration story, we asked respondents to assess Kyrgyzstan’s relations with Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union, and to indicate which countries they saw as Kyrgyzstan’s top geopolitical partners. We inquired how they viewed the Russian government and its influence in Kyrgyzstan (e.g., through investments and the military base). They were prompted to consider whether Kyrgyzstan should import policies or institutions from Russia (or other countries). Finally, we included questions about the Eurasian Economic Union, including what specific changes migrants witnessed after Kyrgyzstan’s accession. The questions varied slightly between 2017 and 2018 as data collected in 2017 helped us refine the questionnaire.

To protect respondents, given that some of the information that they shared is politically sensitive, names and identifying information have been omitted. Both Russia and Kyrgyzstan restrict freedom of expression, as noted by independent organizations such as Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, and Human Rights Watch. We acknowledge the potential empirical pitfalls of asking migrants to evaluate the government of a country that they economically depend on and whose public authorities they fear greatly. Questions were designed carefully, and respondents were allowed to speak as little or as much as they felt adequate and comfortable. We found consistency in their replies, both across our sample and compared to other studies, including our previous research on Kyrgyz migrants’ influence in their home country (Ruget & Usmanalieva,
Finally, because of the small size of our sample, we searched for general patterns in the narratives we collected and do not claim that our findings are fully representative. For the same reason, we did not break down results by ethnicity, gender, age, education level, place of origin, or time spent abroad.

KYRGYZ MIGRANTS’ VIEWS OF RUSSIA: EVIDENCE OF SOFT POWER

Results from our semi-structured interviews show that Russia’s model of authoritarianism is appealing to citizens of its near abroad. Specifically, the migrants we spoke with almost all perceived the Russian government as effective, Vladimir Putin as a strong leader, and Kyrgyzstan as economically dependent on Russia. These findings confirm our hypothesis that migrants’ interactions with a political system that is more effective than their own, as well as their experience of economic interdependence, shape their views of the receiving country.

One of our strongest findings was respondents’ admiration for effective government and public goods delivery in Russia. They talked about laws that work, operational police, paved roads, effective snow removal and trash collection, good schools and kindergartens, functional playgrounds, accessible bus stops, clean and smoke-free public spaces, and relatively generous social benefits (pension, medical insurance, maternity leave). In many cases, respondents brought up small-scale infrastructures, emphasizing how far behind Kyrgyzstan has fallen in that area:

The children’s playgrounds in front of block houses are very good, they have artificial carpets so that children do not get hurt if they fall down from the slides. . . At every bus stop it is not allowed to smoke. One can only smoke ten meters away from the bus stop. . . They do not throw trash everywhere. There are trash cans every now and then. (returned migrant who worked for nine years as a seamstress in Moscow)

As they commented on these topics, many respondents drew explicit or implicit comparisons between their host and home countries—echoing other researchers’ findings about migrants’ disenchantment with their home country government (Kessler & Rother, 2016; Pérez-Armendáriz & Crow, 2010). A trader in Rostov-on-Don (which borders Southern Ukraine), a naturalized citizen, noted: “I approve of the Russian government. They may be stealing 50%, but they are providing the remaining 50%. . . Compared to us, their system works more consistently.” A former migrant returning from Moscow likewise highlighted that “Russians believe in their government. They turn to the state for security and jobs. Some companies hang Putin’s photo and are proud of him. In Kyrgyzstan, we expect nothing from the state.” She also noted: “Laws are enforced much better than in our own country. They do not sell alcohol or tobacco to 18-year-olds.”

A naturalized migrant who worked various jobs in Moscow, but who was on maternity leave at the time of the interview, emphasized the effectiveness of e-government:

In Russia, state services are better than in Kyrgyzstan, for example, e-government, social benefits, maternity leaves. When I get a new passport, I use state services online. Even for enrolling a child to kindergarten, you enter information online. You do not spend
much time waiting in line. Also, one can sign up online for the polyclinic. The website does not work sometimes, but in principle, it exists, and it makes life more convenient.

A topic that frequently led respondents to compare Kyrgyzstan unfavorably to Russia was social benefits. A trader who had been selling clothes in Krasnoyarsk for nine years pointed out: “Social protection . . . is significantly better [here] than in Kyrgyzstan. Their e-government is more developed. For example, I heard that the pension system can be accessed by people online.” A caregiver to the elderly in Moscow also argued that in Russia, “Social services and benefits are good. And they pay them regularly.” A naturalized translator in Saint Petersburg, concurred: “Russia’s pension system, benefits, and medical insurance are much more meaningful than ours. For them it is very little money, but the point is that they are a good minimum.” Generous maternity leave was mentioned on multiple occasions, including by male respondents. According to one of them, a construction worker and driver in several cities across Russia: “I personally saw how well they take care of the pregnant woman, of women who gave birth, and of the newborn baby who is discharged from the hospital.”

Another evidence that Russia’s model of authoritarianism is appealing to migrants was interviewees’ approval of the country’s top leadership. Respondents often described Vladimir Putin as a strong leader who is able to maintain order not only in Russia but in the “near abroad” as well (“As a leader, he uplifting his country,” “He restored discipline,” “He is an excellent president,” “Putin is good to the Kyrgyz citizens,” “He is an educated man,” are examples of what we heard). Migrants who naturalized in Russia were somewhat more likely to have adopted a positive stance of Russia’s president—though given the small size of our sample, any generalization is difficult.

Finally, we found that respondents valued Kyrgyzstan’s close relations with Russia, a relation that underpins their own economic survival and that of their country: studies estimate that remittances from Russia have lowered poverty in Kyrgyzstan by six to seven percentage points (UNDP and Eurasian Development Bank, 2015, p. 6). Thus, almost all respondents viewed relations between Kyrgyzstan and Russia as very positive, which is consistent with findings from opinion polls among the Kyrgyzstani public (International Republican Institute, 2017). Asked specifically who Kyrgyzstan’s top geopolitical partners should be, almost every respondent listed Russia first (again mirroring the general Kyrgyz population), as shown in the following quotes:

I hear that Kyrgyzstan has a huge debt toward Russia. . . . Kyrgyzstan remains a poor country. We are still dependent on Russia. Our Central Asian neighbors also depend on Russia. So, we should stick to Russia. It seems most logical. (waiter in Moscow)

The Russian Federation [should be Kyrgyzstan’s top geopolitical partner] because Russia hosts our migrants and the financial transfers from our migrants are very significant. Their contribution to the Kyrgyz economy is mentioned many times by members of Parliament. That is why I think we should have tight relations with Russia. . . . The Kant military base provides security to us. God saves us from danger, but in case of threat, we hope it will provide us protection. (head of a Moscow-based consulting company assisting migrants in Russia)
So many of our Kyrgyzstani students are now studying in Russia. Every year our military officers and soldiers take part in simulation exercises, which Russia holds. There is also the Kant airbase... membership in the CSTO. (entrepreneur in the autonomous district of Yamalo-Nenets)

Dependency on Russia was in fact a recurrent theme in respondents’ answers. This finding echoes Gerber and Zavisca’s study (2020) of labor migrants’ geopolitical remittances, as well as Tsourapas’s thesis (2018a) about the dependency created by cross-border mobility. Though they cannot all be cited, representative examples underlying dependency include: “Russia is feeding us. We should acknowledge it openly. Our government should know this” (naturalized migrant working in Ekaterinburg in transport and security); “Russia has become like a second home to many” (entrepreneur in the autonomous district of Yamalo-Nenets); “Russia is feeding so many Kyrgyz. If all of us returned one day, I can’t imagine what would happen” (interpreter in Saint Petersburg); “I hear that they are helping with our hydropower stations and we know that petroleum products all come from Russia” (supermarket employee in Moscow).

Providing a bit more detail, a naturalized migrant working in Ekaterinburg, explained:

It would be ungrateful to say that we do not approve of Russia. We make a living here and we should be thankful for it. Everyone in Kyrgyzstan who is buying a car, building a house, doing business, is someone who works in Russia. No one in Kyrgyzstan working as a teacher or doctor can afford building a house with their salary. With a state salary, one cannot make a serious living without getting involved in corruption.

Additionally, respondents stated that membership in the EEU had been advantageous to migrants, so they generally supported it. Almost all agreed that accession had improved relations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan, how Kyrgyzstanis see Russia, as well as migrants’ ability to travel to, and work in, Russia. They mentioned simplified registration procedures for foreign workers and access to social benefits such as free medical care for children. Almost half of all respondents also noted that it was easier to secure legal employment in Russia. One of them argued: “Kyrgyzstan’s joining the Union made my work legal. Prior to this I worked illegally. When things are officially recognized, you have more confidence.” A return migrant who worked in Moscow for one year explained how difficult the situation was before Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU:

The time I arrived [in Russia] was prior to Kyrgyzstan joining the Eurasian Economic Union. We had to fix documents like migrants from other countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. We had to obtain work permits. So, everyone, everyone without exception, did fake documents. The service cost 500 rubles. There is a metro, named Dobryninskaya, it is a mini Kyrgyzstan. They did all the documents that were needed: work permit, registration with the police, entrance and exit from Russia.

11. Since Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU, migrants from Kyrgyzstan no longer need to obtain work authorization or to pass the Russian language, history, and civics test. Kyrgyzstanis also have 30 days (instead of seven previously) to register in Russia. Other concrete advantages for labor migrants include provisions for free medical emergency services and improved access to a pension (Parkhomchik et al., 2015).
Naturalized respondents were less likely to know about the impact of the EEU on migrants since it did not affect them as much.

Overall, the evidence presented in this section confirms that Kyrgyz migrants hold favorable views of Russia and its government, and that they value close relations between their home and host countries. However, respondents’ narratives contained extensive criticism of the Russian model as well, which we detail next.

LIMITS TO SOFT POWER: MIGRANTS’ CRITICAL VIEWS OF RUSSIA

Empirical results confirm the hypothesis that migrants’ opinions of Russia are complicated by their negative experiences abroad. Far from being unqualified supporters of the country “that feeds them,” respondents were at times critical of the Russian government and its leadership; as a result, they did not see Russia as a political model. They also lamented precarity for foreign workers and held nuanced views of Russia’s influence over Kyrgyzstan and of its foreign policy.

First, though they praised Russia’s effective service delivery, many respondents complained about systemic corruption. According to a woman who had been working as a waiter in Moscow for 15 years: “Corruption and money laundering are everywhere.” A construction worker dryly noted: “They have the same corruption, and perhaps even more sophisticated corruption than ours.” Several respondents noted that corruption in Russia is more “hidden” (interpreter in Saint Petersburg), “less visible than in Kyrgyzstan” (caregiver in Moscow).

In the same vein, not all respondents were solid Putin supporters. About a third had more neutral views and three expressed negative opinions of the Russian president—one pointed out that “the middle class and middle age people of Russia are all very dissatisfied with Putin” (businessman in Moscow who recently returned to Kyrgyzstan). A naturalized dentist in Moscow observed: “At each election, the same person is elected. It is the same as in Central Asia, but in a very cunning way. He [Vladimir Putin] plays with the electoral system, and he controls the entire country with his authoritarian system.” Respondents with neutral views noted, for example: “Another person would be even worse” (contract worker in Moscow); “Since I work in his country, I feel okay about him” (seller of Russian souvenirs in Moscow); “People do not see an alternative to him” (trader in Krasnoyarsk); and “He is my president. . . . I hear that he does corruption, but who else can rule the country?” (naturalized trader in Bratsk).

It follows that besides infrastructures and social service delivery, our respondents did not think there was much that Kyrgyzstan should consider “importing” from Russia. In fact, several interviewees noted that Kyrgyzstan has already modeled many policies after Russia so that there is essentially not much left to import. “Our government is the same as Russia’s, but its worst version. We copy all the laws of Russia, and we do not implement these laws either,” said a security officer in Ekaterinburg. “I think that in Kyrgyzstan all laws are copied from Russia. All post-Soviet countries do,” said a concierge working in Moscow. A third went as far as to argue that “we have imported everything
from Russia, so there is nothing else left to copy” (another security worker in Ekaterinburg).

Migrants’ direct exposure to Russian authoritarianism, police repression, and everyday discrimination further eroded their support. Thus, when assessing the Russian political system, migrants contrasted its overall efficiency with their precarious situation there, including being harassed by the police. These results give credence to Kessler and Rother’s (2016) hypothesis that migrants’ views of their host country are affected by their personal experience, especially the presence or absence of labor rights, political rights, and individual freedoms.

Several respondents brought up the topic of police abuse and explained that they felt unsafe in Russia. A construction worker stated that he “always fears deportation.” A barista in Moscow concurred: “Russia law enforcement treats our citizens with suspicion and that makes me tense all the time.” An office worker who recently returned to Kyrgyzstan observed: “Raids against migrants are directly done by instruction from the leadership of the city of Moscow.” He also denounced the “tightening of sanctions for violating rules of stay, physical abuse by police or Federal Migration Service, lack of legal protection for migrants.” Hence, migrants’ inclination to stay away from politics; as noted by the naturalized trader who has lived in Bratsk for 15 years, “We are not political in Russia, so we are not a threat to them.”

In fact, even after EEU accession, migrants, unless they naturalized, continue to struggle with cumbersome requirements such as residency registration. Describing these challenges, a clerk in Moscow explained: “It is difficult to find a person who will let you register at their house, even if you are paying the rent. Also, if you have an employer, they will not agree to go with you. And the police conduct raids any time to make money.”

Crucially, roughly a third of interviewees noted that migrants are still experiencing racism and discrimination in Russia. According to the woman working in Moscow as a concierge: “Negative attitudes toward Central Asians remain the same . . . Russians treat us as a second-rate people.” A former waiter who was deported from Moscow after losing his registration card concurred: “They do not like Asians. You can see it from the way they look at us, even in the metro.” A worker in a logistics company in Moscow noted: “Most employers do not want to hire non-Russians, unless a person is highly qualified.”

Finally, our data indicate that many migrants are concerned about Russia’s regional and global influence, including its bilateral relations with Kyrgyzstan. First, several respondents noted negative consequences of EEU membership for Kyrgyzstan: consumer prices rising much faster than salaries, a “flooding” of the Kyrgyz market with Kazakh and Russian goods, and steeper custom fees for products coming from non-EEU countries (including China), impacting the livelihood of traders at outdoor markets. A construction worker in Moscow observed about EEU accession:

There are some benefits for Kyrgyz migrants, but I think not so much for the country in general. For example, in Osh there is a market (Kara-Suu). People used to make a living from trade in this market as goods came from China and Kyrgyzstan re-
exported them. But now our neighbors are not interested in importing from us, as they have their own access to Chinese markets. I think the Union made us worse off. At least for the time being.

Critically, more than half of the respondents stated, in one form or another, that Kyrgyzstan’s accession was a political process benefiting primarily Russia. In the words of a construction worker who lived in Russia for almost ten years: “I think it is Russia that wanted it. . . . They do not want us to be friends with the European Union, with America, or with the West.” The three quotes below illustrate a similar outlook:

I think it was Putin’s decision. Putin is interested in keeping Kyrgyzstan in control only because of its geopolitical location and role. Otherwise, what can Kyrgyzstan offer? It has no natural resources, no oil. It is all about security reasons. They want to control Kyrgyzstan. (security guard in Ekaterinburg supermarket)

I think Russia sees us as their southern frontier with China. They want to protect themselves against Europe, America. We are their gates. They used us to strengthen their own sovereignty. And we entered without choice, we are a small country. They forced us. (naturalized construction worker in Tyumen)

If you recall, Putin said one time: I regret very much that we lost the Soviet Union; but we have to restore it, in some different form. I think it is the Soviet Union in a new way. (migrant returning from Moscow after two years selling fruits and honey in Moscow)

These conflicting views were also apparent when discussing foreign policy. About a third of respondents did not feel confident to share their views on this topic, simply noting that they did not follow politics closely enough to answer. Among those who answered, by far the most commonly discussed subjects were Ukraine and Syria—and there was a sharp contrast in opinions on these two conflicts: almost all respondents supported Russia’s actions in Ukraine, but not its involvement in Syria, as illustrated by the following quotes:

They took Crimea, and it is right. It was Russian land. (construction worker in various cities)

What happened in Crimea is that they voted in a referendum to separate from Ukraine. . . . Russia stood up for Ukrainian Russians because the West wants to destroy Russia, by entering its traditional geopolitical borders. (trader in Rostov-on-Don)

I am opposed to Russia’s involvement in Syria. Ukraine is their own problem. (naturalized Kyrgyzstani who has worked in Ekaterinburg for over a decade)

I do not approve of Russia’s involvement in Syria. As to Crimea, I think Russia is right. Crimea was part of Russia during the Soviet Union. . . . And I think the Crimean people themselves voted to separate from Ukraine. . . . Whatever Russia is doing to Ukraine is justified for security reasons. In the 1990s Russia received guarantees from NATO that it would not approach Russia, but later the European Union and NATO started to encroach. (security guard in Ekaterinburg)
It is scary that Russia got involved in the Syrian war. I do not follow foreign policy very much, as I am busy with my own life and work, but I think Russia wants to scare the world by its weapons and muscles. . . . The conflict in Ukraine is different. We watched the Russian TV mostly, and we saw that they were giving humanitarian aid to Eastern Ukraine. (pharmacist in Moscow)

In short, Kyrgyz migrants’ geopolitical remittances (Gerber & Zavisca, 2020) are nuanced and contingent, and informed by their personal experiences as migrants, or, in the case of foreign policy, by their understanding of what constitutes Russia’s legitimate sphere of influence.

CONCLUSION
Our findings confirm the hypothesis that migrants admire Russia’s political system, but only to some extent. Thus, to the literature on soft power and migration, we provide evidence that Russia’s model of authoritarianism is only partially attractive to migrants. Respondents were pragmatic and sometimes critical in their assessment of the political system and top leadership of their host country, not entirely supportive of its foreign policy, and relatively well-informed about the mixed impact of EEU membership for Kyrgyzstan. As argued by Collins and Gambrel (2017), “citizens, even in transitional regimes, develop sophisticated political views based on both rational and ideational considerations” (p. 1286).

To the literature on political remittances, we offer an original case study of what remittances look like when migrants travel to a country that is less democratic than their own, and where they are directly experiencing the restrictions and lack of accountability found in autocracies (Kessler & Rother, 2016). Respondents, while acknowledging the efficiency of the Russian government, were prompt to denounce its high level of corruption and their exposure to police abuse and discrimination. Results also confirm the hypothesis that migration lowers people’s tolerance for corruption (Ivlevs & King, 2017) and increases disappointment with the home-country government (Kessler & Rother, 2016; Pérez-Armendáriz & Crow, 2010).

Though our sample size is too small to reach robust conclusions, naturalization did not seem to drastically change migrants’ opinions of their host country, casting doubt on Russia’s “passportization” efforts (Grigas, 2016).12 Naturalized citizens were slightly more likely to perceive the Russian government and president favorably, but several of them were critical of Russia, while some of the strongest supporters were not naturalized. This is consistent with our prior research on naturalization among Kyrgyz migrants, which concluded that Russian citizenship is primarily conceived in pragmatic terms (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2010).

This article sheds light on a key aspect of Russia’s soft power in Central Asia, at a time when rivalry with China for influence in the region is growing, while American influence

12. Rotaru (2018) similarly found that Russia’s soft power strategy in the near abroad has not always been successful and has at times led to distrust rather than engagement.
is waning. Since Kyrgyzstan’s independence, Russia has provided political and security assistance to the small post-Soviet republic, while China has predominantly focused on economic investments and infrastructure development, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (Daly, 2019). But China is increasingly asserting itself politically in the region, for example, by contemplating opening military bases (Goble, 2019).

Our study has several limitations beyond its small sample size. First, we did not collect evidence that would indicate an actual transfer of norms between migrants and their networks at home. Next, fieldwork took place before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only restricted international mobility, but also affected countries’ global image according to their ability to manage the crisis. Further research should, for example, examine how Russia, along with China, has been engaging in “vaccine diplomacy” by exporting vaccines to many countries, including Kyrgyzstan. Finally, we did not assess the role of conspiracy theories and misinformation, which are rampant in both Russia and Central Asia, and which likely affect migrants’ perceptions. In fact, while interviewing experts in Kyrgyzstan, we encountered several conspiracy theories involving Russia, echoing Heathershaw’s (2012) observation that “there are few conspiracy theories of international politics in Central Asia where Russia does not play a leading role” (p. 624).

Russia’s soft power is complex and far-reaching, with messages ranging from the preservation of conservative moral values, to anti-migrant rhetoric and the denunciation of liberal values (Laruelle, 2021). This study has explored only a small, overlooked aspect of Russia’s soft power reach. Given the topicality of migration, and with mounting concerns over Russia’s attempts to shape politics in other countries, further research is warranted to precisely assess the interplay between soft power, political norms, and the movement of people across borders.

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13. Interestingly, our respondents expressed negative opinions of the United States and of Western interests in the region. A naturalized migrant said on this topic: “Let the West bring back order inside its own home. They have no right to meddle into someone else’s affairs with their rules.” Another naturalized respondent, thinking about the role of the United States in Central Asia today, observed: “I think the time of Americans is over. They had more active influence between the end of 1990 to 2010, but not now.”


15. For example, one respondent described former president Atambaev as “a secret informer of Russia.” Another confided that Russia interfered in the 2010 election and that “history will reveal itself some years from now.”
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