Making Friends with Neighbors?

Local Perceptions of Russia and
China in Kyrgyzstan

Catherine Owen

Abstract: Many studies have compared the Russian and Chinese projects currently underway in the Central Asian region, namely the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), both of which seek to increase integration with Central Asian states. Yet little attention has been paid to how these endeavors are perceived locally by Central Asians themselves. This article aims to fill this gap by presenting the findings of a comparative discourse analysis of perceptions of Russia and China in online Russian-language media in Kyrgyzstan. The research reveals that while Russia's role in the region has been seen primarily in political terms and China's role chiefly in economic terms, these perceptions are changing, and that a growing percentage of articles are devoted to economics in the case of Russia and politics in the case of China. Another finding from this research is that China receives a greater

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percentage of positive coverage than Russia. It is suggested that as two important poles in the emerging multi-polar world, China and Russia should ensure their respective projects complement, rather than conflict, with one another in the region.

Keywords: China; Russia; Kyrgyzstan; online media coverage; perception.

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Russia and China in Central Asia: Division of Labor?

There has been a certain incongruence between Russian and Chinese relations with Central Asian states at the level of government discourse, which proclaims great friendship between the two giants and their smaller neighbors, as well as the everyday practices of inter-ethnic relations and politics on the ground. In the case of China, while state leaders talk of “boosting strategic partnerships” and “mutual cooperation,” Chinese citizens living in Central Asia have been victims of violence and racism, and protests against Chinese investments in the region have often occurred.¹ In the case of Russia, while Central Asian state leaders are undertaking a rapprochement toward Russia, a growing nationalism is

¹See, for example, “Chinese Mining Company Operations in Kyrgyzstan Blocked by Protesters,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 16, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/a/chinese-mining-company-operationskyrgyzstan-blocked-protesters/24987866.html>; Antoine Blua and Merhat Sharipzhan, “Veiled Threat: Mail-Order Kazakh Matchmaker Elicits China Fears,” *RFE/RL*, January 15, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-china-matchmaker-fears-identity-farmland/28234301.html>; “Kazakhstan’s Land Reform Protests Explained,” BBC News, April 28, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-36163103>; and “Central Asia’s Silk Road Rivalries,” *Europe and Central Asia Report No. 245*, International Crisis Group, July 27, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/245-central-asias-silk-road-rivalries>.

evident in domestic politics and at the local level driven in part by anti-Russian sentiments.²

Both China and Russia have significant strategic visions for the region — the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), respectively — that presuppose ever closer integration. The SREB, announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, comprises a network of infrastructural hubs across Eurasia that aim to connect Chinese producers to European markets. The EAEU, on the other hand, came into force in 2015 and is modeled on the European Union (EU) and proposes an integrated single market among Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Armenia (Tajikistan is considering membership at the time of writing).³ This apparent disjuncture between official portrayals of the relationships between Russia and China and the Central Asian countries, and the contrasting manifestations of bilateral relations at the everyday level, suggests that more research is required on Central Asians' views vis-à-vis their two powerful neighbors.

Scholarly research on the SREB and EAEU remains in early stages due to the emergent nature of the topic. Most analyses so far have focused on these projects' implications for the relations between the two great powers,⁴

²David Lewis, "Re-asserting Hegemony in Central Asia: Russian Policy in Post-2010 Kyrgyzstan," *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, No. 3 (2015), pp. 58–80; Stefanie Ortmann, "Beyond Spheres of Influence: the Myth of the State and Russia's Seductive Power in Kyrgyzstan," *Geopolitics*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (June 2018); Samuel Ramani, "Tajikistan Mulls EEU Membership, Feels Pull of Russia," *RFE/RL*, August 1, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-tajikistan-mulls-eeu-feels-pull-of-russia/27893070.html>; and Erica Marat, "'We Disputed Every Word': The Plight of Moderates in Post-Violence Kyrgyzstan," in Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall, eds., *Kyrgyzstan Beyond "Democracy Island" and "Failing State"* (London: Lexington Books, 2015).

³According to Kazakh President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, 40 countries are interested in joining the EAEU. See Vestnik Kavkaza, "Nazarbayev: 40 Countries Want to Join Eurasian Economic Union," June 15, 2018, <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/news/Nazarbayev-40-countries-want-to-join-Eurasian-Economic-Union.html>.

⁴Alexander Gabuev, "Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: 'One Belt One Road' and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia," *Journal of Contemporary East Asian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2016), pp. 61–78; Fabio Indeo, "The Eurasian Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt: the Impact of Sino-Russian Geopolitical Strategies in the Eurasian Region,"

while little attention has been paid to the ways in which Russia and China are perceived by residents of the Central Asian states themselves. The few related studies are focused on China, noting that while government officials are enthusiastic about deepening relations with China, there exists a deep-rooted fear and suspicion of Chinese intentions among ordinary citizens in the region — particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, a fact that suggests a potential for more domestic social unrest in the future.⁵

Working Paper No. 2016/5, Maastricht School of Management, <https://www.msm.nl/resources/uploads/2016/09/MSM-WP2016-5.pdf>; Jeanne L. Wilson, "The Eurasian Economic Union and China's Silk Road: Implications for the Russian-Chinese Relationship," *European Politics and Society*, Vol. 17, Supplement 1 (2016), pp. 113–132; Liselotte Odgaard, "Beijing's Quest for Stability in its Neighbourhood: China's Relations with Russia in Central Asia," *Asian Security*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2017), pp. 41–58.

For research focused solely on SREB, see Marcin Kaczmarek, "Silk Globalisation: China's Vision of International Order," *Point of View*, No. 60 (October 2016), Centre for Eastern Studies, https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/pw_60_ang_silk_globalisation_net.pdf; Tom Miller, *China's Asian Dream: Empire Building along the New Silk Road* (London: Zed Books, 2017); and Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle, WA: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017).

For research on EAEU, see Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk, "The Eurasian Economic Union: Deals, Rules and the Exercise of Power," Chatham House Paper, May 2, 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2017-05-02-eurasian-economic-union-dragneva-wolczuk.pdf>.

From a comparative approach, see Marcin Kaczmarek, "Non-Western Visions of Regionalism: China's New Silk Road and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union," *International Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 6 (November/December 2017), pp. 1357–1376.

⁵Marlene Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change and the Chinese Factor* (London: Hurst, 2012); Sébastien Peyrouse, "Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (January 2016), pp. 14–23; Nadine Godehardt, *The Chinese Constitution of Central Asia: Regions and Intertwined Actors in International Relations* (London: Palgrave, 2014); Aziz Burkhanov and Chen Yuwen, "Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese and Chinese Migration," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 12 (2016), pp. 2129–2148; Alexander Cooley, "The Emerging Political Economy of OBOR: The Challenges of Promoting Connectivity in Central Asia and Beyond," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 24, 2016, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161021_Cooley_OBOR.Web.pdf; Catherine Owen, "'The Sleeping Dragon is Gathering Strength': Causes of Sinophobia in Central Asia," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2017); and ICG, "Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries."

Kyrgyz public opinion toward Russia, meanwhile, is characterized by a post-colonial ambivalence, caught between memories of the “brotherly” connection of the Soviet period and a growing nationalism that focuses on Soviet-era exploitation and contemporary racist attitudes toward labor migrants in Russia.⁶

It is oversimplifying to see Russia as mainly a political giant and China as an economic one in Central Asia.

Comparative studies of Central Asians’ receptions of and reactions to Russian and Chinese influence are even fewer, showing that Central Asian states evince a strong pragmatism when dealing with their giant neighbors.⁷ Nevertheless, Central Asian states are sovereign states with the capacity to shape international alliances and undermine hegemonic schemes. The views of their citizens regarding Russia and China are

therefore not to be dismissed, and a comparative perspective can provide insight into the ways in which Central Asian policymakers balance the influence of the two great powers.

Conventional wisdom has it that Russia is seen primarily as a political actor in Central Asia, thanks to its longstanding military presence and Soviet legacy, while China’s engagement is seen chiefly in economic terms, due to the vast Chinese investments and the rapidly growing volume of trade between China and the region.⁸ However, this perception of great power division of labor is a gross oversimplification.

First, Kyrgyzstan’s and Tajikistan’s economies are dependent on remittances from labor migrants in Russia, and the EAEU, which allows for the free movement of goods, people and services, is set to tie the fates of the

⁶Catherine Owen, John Heathershaw, and Igor Savin, “How Postcolonial Is Post-Western IR? Mimicry and Métis in the International Politics of Russia and Central Asia,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (October 2017), pp. 1–22.

⁷Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Owen *et al.*, “How Postcolonial is Post-Western IR?”; and ICG, “Central Asia’s Silk Road Rivalries.”

⁸Bruce Pannier, “A New Chinese Interest in Central Asian Security,” *RFE/RL*, March 30, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-central-asia-security-uyghurs-russia/28400327.html>; and Owen, “The Sleeping Dragon is Gathering Strength.”

member states' economies even closer together, at least on paper.⁹ Second, China is gradually involving itself more in regional security and politics, not only through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), but also by military aid and bilateral training exercises.¹⁰

Nevertheless, political and economic influence are not a zero-sum game: Russia's reassertion of economic power does not necessarily imply a decline in Chinese economic influence; nor do Chinese political activities in Central Asia mean a reduction of Russia's. Yet the expansion of political and economic influence by the two powers across Central Asia could have profound consequences for stability in a region with a tumultuous post-independence history and a number of pressing security challenges.¹¹ How do local media portray Russia and China? Are they seen in broadly positive or negative terms? To what extent are the growing economic role of Russia and the growing political role of China reflected in local news sources? Answers to these questions could provide insight into the way in which local populations might interpret and respond to the various integrative projects of Russia and China.

With its focus on one Central Asian country, namely Kyrgyzstan, this paper presents the findings from a qualitative content analysis of representations of Russia and China in four Russian-language Kyrgyz online media outlets over the period of one year. The analysis is intended to provide a synchronic snapshot of the volume and thematic types of articles associated with Russia and China, which are likely to be digested by political and cultural elites in Kyrgyzstan. Clearly, the five post-Soviet Central Asian states have very differing relations with Russia and China, and the findings showcased below cannot be extended beyond Kyrgyzstan without

⁹Dragneva and Wolczuk, "The Eurasian Economic Union."

¹⁰Timofey Bordachev, "Russia and China in Central Asia: The Great Win-Win Game," *Russia in Global Affairs*, July 1, 2016, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/valday/Russia-and-China-in-Central-Asia-The-Great-Win-Win-Game-18259>; Fuad Shahbazov, "China's Long March into Central Asia: How Beijing Expands Military Influence in Tajikistan," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13429-china%E2%80%99s-long-march-into-central-asia-how-beijing-expands-military-influence-in-tajikistan.html>; and Pannier, "A New Chinese Interest In Central Asian Security."

¹¹Catherine Owen *et al.*, eds., *Interrogating Illiberal Peace in Eurasia: Critical Perspectives on Peace and Conflict* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018).

further research. However, this small research aims to build on similar analysis of Kazakh media and to contribute to the construction of a bigger picture of contemporary Central Asians' views of Russia and China.¹²

The use of the Russian language in Kyrgyzstan remains very strong — it is one of the two former Soviet republics that have retained Russian as an official language. Natalya Kosmarskaya claims that the Kyrgyz are one of the most Russified ethnic groups in the post-Soviet space, despite a period of national revival in the years following Soviet collapse.¹³ Other analysts have pointed out the “cultural closeness” that persists between the two states.¹⁴ Kyrgyz politicians, policymakers, and other influential shapers of public opinion articulate themselves in Russian. Russian news channels feature heavily on Kyrgyz television; and Kyrgyz editions of Russian newspapers are sold by news agents.

Soviet cultural influence on Kyrgyzstan remains very strong.

However, it is important to note Burkhanov and Chen's findings in the case of Kazakhstan's views of China, that the most hostile opinions were expressed in Kazakh, rather than Russian.¹⁵ It is likely that similar trends would be observed in the Kyrgyz case. Nonetheless, the research showcased

below captures an important and influential segment of opinion voiced in Kyrgyz media, that of the middle-class urban elite.

The paper first describes the method used — qualitative content analysis — and present the categories developed by the author to interpret the texts. It then gives some background on press freedom in Kyrgyzstan and introduces the four selected newspapers. In the third part, the paper presents the findings and discusses three trends emerging from the analysis: (1) while relations with China are still seen primarily in economic

¹²Burkhanov and Chen, “Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese and Chinese Migration.”

¹³Natalya Kosmarskaya, “The Russian Language in Kyrgyzstan: Changing Roles and Inspiring Prospects,” *Russian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2015), pp. 217–222.

¹⁴Lewis, “Re-asserting Hegemony in Central Asia”; and Ortmann, “Beyond Spheres of Influence.”

¹⁵Burkhanov and Chen, “Kazakh Perspective on China, the Chinese and Chinese Migration.”

terms, and relations with Russia primarily in political terms, substantial coverage is given to political stories concerning China; (2) in contrast to the Sinophobic views uncovered by a number of researchers through interviews, a greater percentage of positive articles are written about China-Kyrgyzstan relations than Russia-Kyrgyzstan relations; and (3) Russian cultural influence is still much stronger, demonstrated by the far greater number of articles pertaining to cultural affairs vis-à-vis Russia, although some positive development is also happening in this sphere regarding China.

Analytical Categories: Positive, Negative, or Neutral

According to Hardy, Harley, and Philipps, content analysis “involves the development of analytical categories that are used to construct a coding frame that is then applied to textual data.”¹⁶ Within this broad research method, both quantitatively and qualitatively oriented approaches are discernible.¹⁷ While quantitative content analysis refers to the statistical description of text data, qualitative content analysis has an important interpretive dimension and is the methodological approach adopted in the present article.

The two questions to answer vis-à-vis each text were:

First, “Does the text primarily concern political, economic, or cultural issues?”

Second, “Does the text present Russia/China primarily in a positive or negative light?”

The classifications for the first question were relatively easy to design. Stories were designated “political” if they covered bilateral meetings between political leaders, foreign policy, military affairs, or migration. Stories relating to trans-border crime were also designated as “political,” since such crimes not only require political cooperation between security

¹⁶Cynthia Hardy, Bill Harley, and Nelson W. Philipps, “Discourse Analysis and Content Analysis: Two Solitudes,” *Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2004), pp. 19–22.

¹⁷Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013), p. 23.

services, but also feed into broader politically charged narratives of migration. Stories were designated “economic” if they pertained to aid, investment, debt relief, exports and imports, as well as infrastructural projects funded by Russia or China. Cultural stories covered joint exhibitions, film festivals and sporting matches, as well as events pertaining to shared historical experiences, such as World War Two, the Soviet experience, and Urkun.¹⁸ They also included issues relating to language, media, and tourism (where it described the attributes of a particular destination, rather than the economic value of tourism).

The second question posed more problems for developing distinctive categories, since it contains a strongly subjective and interpretive component. The categories “positive” and “negative” refer to the question of whether an article gives the reader a favorable or unfavorable impression of Kyrgyzstan’s relations with Russia or China, and are thus necessarily based on extensive prior knowledge of points of conflict and cooperation between the states in question. Therefore, unlike most other content analyses, which rely on software to code texts, the author read each and every text analyzed, as a computer-generated keyword search would not be able to interpret positivity or negativity within a given text — a total of 2,127 texts.¹⁹ In order to make these categorizations, the author developed the rubric heuristically, relating the content of the article to ongoing themes and issues in Kyrgyzstan’s national relations with Russia and China.

The criterion for membership in the “positive” category is that the bulk of an article should be devoted to one or more of the following: description of a shared historical experience in which the two states jointly achieved a goal (for example, World War Two) or produced fond memories (for example, Soviet brotherhood among nations); description of successful bilateral political, economic, or cultural projects; description of policies or actions in Russia or China as examples or guides for policymakers in Kyrgyzstan; or description of good deeds of Kyrgyz people in Russia or

¹⁸Urkun is the Kyrgyz name for a 1916 uprising in Russian Turkestan (today’s Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) against Tsarist colonizers, which resulted in a mass flight over the Tien Shan mountain range to China, and in which between 3,000 and 100,000 people lost their lives. The centenary of the uprising occurred during the period chosen for analysis, and a number of articles were devoted to it.

¹⁹Robert P. Weber, *Basic Content Analysis* (London: Sage, 1990), p. 23.

China and, likewise, description of good deeds of Russians or Chinese in Kyrgyzstan.

The criterion for membership in the “negative” category is that the bulk of an article should be devoted to one or more of the following: description of a shared historical experience in which the two states were in conflict with one another (for example, Urkun) or produced bad feelings (for example, Soviet repression and exploitation of Kyrgyzstan); description of past/ongoing trans-border crimes and conflicts, including terrorist attacks; description of unsuccessful joint political, economic or cultural endeavors; description of actions in Russia/China as examples that Kyrgyzstan should avoid; or description of the failings of the political, economic, or administrative systems in Russia or China.

There is also the “neutral” category, which is used in two types of circumstance. First, it pertains to stories where no clear positive or negative value is assigned. Examples of such stories include the announcement of ambassadorial appointments; the closure of border checkpoints due to public holidays; or the listing of trade figures with no additional commentary, such as an article reporting that more than a third of Kyrgyz debt is to China State Export-Import Bank.²⁰ Second, the “neutral” category is used when both positive and negative elements appear equally weighted in a given article. For instance, a story reporting that Russia declares a decrease in trade but an increase in investment with Kyrgyzstan would have received a “neutral” categorization.²¹

In order to obtain a balance of views and political orientations, four very different sources were selected: *Vecherniy Bishkek*, a moderately conservative, pro-Russia website; *Kloop.kg*, a Western-oriented outlet that also runs a journalism school; *Radio Azattyk*, the Kyrgyz branch of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; and *24.kg*, an independent Bishkek-based news agency. In each case, the website’s

China is much less covered than Russia in mainstream Kyrgyz media.

²⁰“Dolg Platezhom Krasen: Skolko Deneg Tratit Kyrgyzstan Na Vyplatu Gosdolga?,” *Radio Azattyk*, March 15, 2017, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/28371179.html>.

²¹“Rossiya Zayavlyayet O Snizhenii Tovaroorobota S Kyrgyzstanom, No Uvelichenii Investitsii,” *Radio Azattyk*, June 2, 2016, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/27774054.html>.

“search” function is employed with the terms “Россия Кыргызстан (Rossiya Kyrgyzstan)” and “Китай Кыргызстан (Kitai Kyrgyzstan),” reading and classifying all articles containing stories concerning Kyrgyzstan’s interactions at various levels with Russia and China over the period of one year, between April 28, 2016 and April 27, 2017. These dates were chosen at random, since the goal of the research was to gain a general picture of the volume and themes of articles associated with the two regional giants.

Articles were only analyzed if at least one paragraph was devoted to an aspect of interaction between Kyrgyzstan and Russia or China; articles in which one or both of the two states were mentioned only in passing were discarded. However, there is an important caveat here: in all four cases, there were between four and five times as many articles concerning Russian-Kyrgyz interactions than Chinese-Kyrgyz interactions. This indicates that the average reader is much more likely to be socialized into a Russian-oriented perspective than a Chinese one, even if the percentage of positive and negative articles on each state are broadly equal, and reflects the strength of the Soviet legacy in the Kyrgyz public sphere.

The Russian-Language Online Media Landscape in Kyrgyzstan

Although Kyrgyzstan is often considered a liberal outlier in Central Asia in terms of openness, press freedom in the country has faced repeated attacks.²² Access to public information is enshrined in law, yet this right is often poorly implemented and all media outlets are required to register with the government, often undergoing lengthy background checks.²³ As discussed in this section, all the four news outlets selected for analysis have faced some kind of pressure from Kyrgyz authorities. In spring 2017, Kyrgyzstan’s General Prosecutor’s Office filed a series of lawsuits against a number of media outlets, including two analyzed below, *24.kg* and *Radio Azattyk*.²⁴ According to Human Rights Watch, the outlets are accused of

²²Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvalleds, eds., *Kyrgyzstan Beyond “Democracy Island” and “Failing State”* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2015), p. x.

²³Freedom House, “Kyrgyzstan: Freedom of the Press 2016,” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/kyrgyzstan>.

²⁴“President’s Lawsuits Intimidate Kyrgyz Media,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, March 24, 2017, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/presidents-lawsuits-intimidate-kyrgyz-media>.

“discrediting the honour and dignity of the president and spreading false information.”²⁵ Around the same time, a Russian journalist with the pro-Kremlin agency REGNUM was expelled from the country, apparently for violating migration law.²⁶ This restrictive media environment means that the content of the four websites analyzed below should not necessarily be seen as an objective representation of the views of the urban middle class in Kyrgyzstan; instead, the analysis shows the kind of information about Russian and Chinese interaction with Kyrgyzstan available to the readers of these sites.

First, *Vecherniy Bishkek*, selected to represent a traditional, pro-Russia segment of opinion, was founded in 1974 and is Kyrgyzstan’s largest newspaper. Under the erstwhile editorship of Alexander Kim, the paper espoused a critical stance toward the government. However, in August 2015, a Bishkek court ousted Kim, ruling that former co-owner,

Alexander Ryabushkin, was to receive a 50-percent stake in the paper as well as other media outlets. According to Freedom House, “Ryabushkin’s unexpected claim raised suspicions of government involvement”²⁷ and since then has lost its “sparky reporting style,” has “tacked to a heavily Russia-boosting position,” and has “regularly served as a vehicle for smear attacks on critics of the government.”²⁸ Further, in April 2017, Kim, now in his 70s, was charged with “abuse and embezzlement” by the Kyrgyz government, with the case ongoing at the time of writing.²⁹ In total,

Kyrgyz public media are often under government pressure.

²⁵“Kyrgyzstan: Growing Pressure on Media Groups,” Human Rights Watch, March 27, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/27/kyrgyzstan-growing-pressure-media-groups>.

²⁶“Kyrgyzstan: Russian Embassy Throws Pro-Kremlin Reporter Under the Bus,” *Eurasianet.org*, March 14, 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/82821>.

²⁷Freedom House, “Kyrgyzstan: Freedom of the Press 2016.”

²⁸Aktan Rysaliev, “Kyrgyzstan: Former Newspaper Owner Threatened with Arrest,” *Eurasianet.org*, March 18, 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/82901>.

²⁹“Kyrgyzstan: Abuse and Embezzlement Charges Against Former Owner of ‘Vecherniy Bishkek’ Newspaper Aleksandr Kim,” *Ferghananews*, April 23, 2017, <http://enews.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=3300&mode=snews>.

Vecherniy Bishkek produced 146 articles on Russia-Kyrgyzstan relations and 59 articles on China-Kyrgyzstan relations.

Second, *Kloop.kg* was selected to represent a pro-democracy, opposition-oriented segment of opinion. Founded in 2007 by a group of young journalists, who had been expelled from the journalism department, *Kloop.kg* has become the fifth most popular news website in Kyrgyzstan. Most of the journalists are aged 18–25 and attend a journalism course run by Kloop Media Foundation, which seeks to train students by Western standards of journalism. Its alumni have gone on to work for *Vecherniy Bishkek* and *Radio Liberty*.³⁰ Espousing an avowedly Western-oriented stance, the website covers opposition protests and government corruption scandals. Unsurprisingly, *Kloop.kg* has also received its share of attention from the authorities. In November 2014, it was briefly blocked on Kyrgyz servers for reporting on terrorism, having re-posted an ISIS video from the *Daily Mail* website that appeared to show Kazakh children training in Syria.³¹ However, there were surprisingly few articles dealing with Russia-Kyrgyzstan and China-Kyrgyzstan relations — just 11 articles on the former and 2 articles on the latter. Therefore, the author chose to analyse a second, “Western-oriented” website, in which more data might be gathered: *Radio Azattyk*. Nevertheless, the discussion of *Kloop.kg* is retained in this article in order to provide more information on the Russian-language media landscape in Kyrgyzstan, which may be of interest to readers.

Third, *Radio Azattyk* is the Kyrgyz service of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL), which, according to its website, “seeks to bridge divides within Kyrgyz society by providing influential audiences with informed reporting and balanced debate on topics that other media ignore, including minority rights, government corruption, and Islamic radicalism.” Founded by the U.S. government in 1949 as part of the anti-Communist effort during the Cold War, what became RFE/RL now broadcasts in 26 languages and in 23 countries. *Radio Azattyk* broadcasts in both Russian and Kyrgyz, and many of the articles analyzed below were originally published in Kyrgyz and subsequently translated into Russian. As mentioned above, *Radio*

³⁰See Kloop Media Foundation, <http://kloop.jlm.me/>.

³¹Chris Rickleton, “Kyrgyzstan Exiles Leading News Site,” *Eurasianet.org*, December 15, 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71371>.

Azattyk was also subjected to the government crackdown on the media in the Spring of 2017. However, in May, President Atambayev met with the director of RFE/RL and subsequently indicated that court proceedings would be dropped.³² In total, *Radio Azattyk* produced 803 articles on Russia-Kyrgyzstan relations and 225 on China-Kyrgyzstan relations.

Finally, *24.kg* was selected to represent a more independent segment of opinion, which cannot be described as primarily “pro-Western” or “pro-Russian.” Indeed, *24.kg* describes itself as one of the media read by the Kyrgyz President, Almazbek Atambayev.³³ Despite this accolade, the news service did not escape a crackdown on media perceived to contain articles damaging the president’s reputation. In February 2017, the president’s Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK) took the news agency and one of its journalists, Tatyana Kudryavtseva, to court and sued them for 1 million som over an article which revealed that the SDPK was allegedly auctioning off government posts to the highest bidder.³⁴ In total, *24.kg* produced 730 articles on Russia and Kyrgyzstan, and 151 on China and Kyrgyzstan.

Shifting Perceptions of Russia and China

Before presenting the statistical data, this paper highlights some of the main stories concerning the two great powers during the year. In the case of Russia, political stories focused on the terrorist attack in the St. Petersburg metro, committed by an ethnic Kyrgyz on April 3, 2017, killing 15 people; the numerous problems faced by Kyrgyzstani labor migrants in Russia; and the various high-level and diplomatic meetings between members of the Russian and Kyrgyz governments. Economic stories focused on the pros

³²Anastasia Bengard, “President of Kyrgyzstan Proposes to Withdraw Claim to Azattyk,” *24.kg*, May 12, 2017, https://24.kg/english/51571_President_of_Kyrgyzstan_proposes_to_withdraw_claim_to_Azattyk/.

³³“Prezident Kyrgyzstana Podvodit Itogi 2016 Goda. Translyatsiya,” *24.kg*, December 1, 2016, <https://24.kg/vlast/40806-prezident-kyrgyzstana-podvodit-itogi-2016-goda-translyatsiya/>.

³⁴Naryn Aiyp, “‘Inciters, Deceivers, Slaves’: Kyrgyzstan’s President Takes Aim at the Press,” *OpenDemocracy.net*, March 30, 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/naryn-aiyp/inciters-deceivers-slaves-kyrgyzstan-s-president-takes-aim-at-press>.

and cons of joining the EAEU (with opinion sharply divided); the fallout over the financing of the Upper Naryn Hydroelectric power station, in which Russia had invested \$37 million and is now demanding reimbursement following the project's collapse; and the problems of Kyrgyz producers in meeting phytosanitary standards for export to Russia. Cultural stories concerned events commemorating the 71st anniversary of World War Two; discussion over the legacy of Urkun; and a variety of film festivals, sporting events, and chess matches.

In the case of China, political stories focused on various bilateral meetings between the Chinese and Kyrgyz leaderships; the suicide bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek, allegedly by a Uyghur separatist on August 30, 2016; and the discovery at Istanbul Airport of 98 Chinese citizens with fake Kyrgyz passports on their way to Mecca attempting to perform the Hajj. Economic stories focused on discussion of the SREB, largely portrayed in a positive light; the planned purchase of 40 bankrupt Kyrgyz production plants by China; and various problems concerning the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway. There were few cultural stories concerning China across all newspapers, and it was thus difficult to identify overarching themes or key stories. However, the occasional joint film project or cultural initiative (such as a noodle making workshop and a Chinese "caravan of culture" passing through Bishkek) was mentioned.

China receives more positive coverage than Russia in percentage by *Vecherniy Bishkek*.

Despite its reputation as a "pro-Russian" website, this research shows that *Vecherniy Bishkek* provides generally balanced coverage of Russia and China. In the case of Russia, 90 of 146 articles (61.64 percent) were interpreted as "positive," 49 (33.56 percent) as "negative," and 7 (4.79 percent) as "neutral." In the case of China, 43 of 59

(72.88 percent) were interpreted as "positive," 12 (20.33 percent) as "negative," and 4 (6.78 percent) as "neutral." Surprisingly, although more positively oriented articles were written about Russia than China in total, when the figures are considered in percentages, China fares somewhat better (see Table 1).

Regarding the subject classifications, in the case of Russia, 53 (36.30 percent) were interpreted to pertain to economic issues; 29 (19.86 percent) to

Table 1. *Vecherniy Bishkek's* Coverage of Russia and China: A General View.

	Total Articles	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Economic (%)	Political (%)	Cultural (%)
Russia	146	61.64	33.56	4.79	36.30	43.84	19.86
China	59	72.88	20.33	6.78	52.54	37.29	10.17

Source: Compiled by the author.

cultural issues; and 64 (43.84 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 31 (52.54 percent) were interpreted to pertain to economic issues; 6 (10.17 percent) to cultural issues; and 22 (37.29 percent) to political issues. The large percentage of articles on China devoted to political matters reflects the perception that China's political role in the region is increasing, but Russia still trails China in terms of the percentage of articles devoted to economic issues.

Within the positive category, in the case of Russia, 19 (21.11 percent) pertained to economic issues, 28 (31.11 percent) to cultural issues and 43 (47.78 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 21 (48.84 percent) pertained to economic issues, 6 (13.95 percent) to cultural issues and 16 (37.21 percent) to political issues. Thus, traditional perceptions of Russia as a political ally and China as an economic partner are more discernible here: economic stories are more than twice as likely to be portrayed in a positive light in the case of China, while political stories are more likely to be portrayed positively in the case of Russia.

Within the negative category, in the case of Russia, 28 (57.14 percent) pertained to economic issues, 1 (2.04 percent) to cultural issues and 20 (40.82 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 7 (58.33 percent) pertained to economic issues, none pertained to cultural issues and 5 (41.67 percent) to political issues. Here, the percentages are broadly similar: in both cases, economic stories are more likely to be presented negatively than political stories, a fact which perhaps reflects the moderately conservative stance of the newspaper.

Within the neutral category, in the case of Russia, 6 (86.71 percent) pertained to economic issues, none pertained to cultural issues and 1 (14.29 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 3 (75 percent) pertained to economic issues, none pertained to cultural issues and 1 (25 percent) to political issues. The lack of neutral political stories in the case of both Russia

Table 2. *Vecherniy Bishkek's* Coverage of Russia and China (By Subjects and Categories).

	Positive		Negative		Neutral	
	Russia (%)	China (%)	Russia (%)	China (%)	Russia (%)	China (%)
Economic	21.11	48.84	57.14	58.33	86.71	75
Cultural	31.11	13.95	2.04	0	0	0
Political	47.78	37.21	40.82	41.67	14.29	25

Source: Compiled by the author.

and China is perhaps due to the political focus of the particular outlet — the analysis of both *Radio Azattyk* and *24.kg* shows much higher percentages of neutral political articles. Table 2 displays the data broken down by subject and according to positive/negative/neutral categories.

In the case of *Kloop.kg*, there were surprisingly few articles pertaining to either Russia or China. This could be due either to the preferences of the journalists (young, Western-oriented, with no budget for international stories) or to the preferences of the readership, who prefer stories relating to domestic politics. Of the 11 articles in the case of Russia analyzed by the author, 3 (27.27 percent) were considered “positive,” 8 (72.72 percent) considered “negative,” and none considered “neutral.” In the case of China, just two articles came up on *Kloop.kg's* webpage search, one of which was classified as “positive” and the other as “negative.” Regarding the subject classifications, in the case of Russia, 1 (9.09 percent) was judged to pertain to economic issues; 2 (18.18 percent) to cultural issues; and 8 (72.72 percent) to political issues. Regarding China, both articles were judged to pertain to economic issues. Overall, very little can be deduced about perceptions of Russia and China in Kyrgyzstan from this website. Hence, the results are not presented in a table.

In *Radio Azattyk*, research demonstrated a rather explicit political orientation evinced by the website, with the majority of related articles characterized as “negative” and “political.” In the case of Russia, 184 of 803 articles (22.91 percent) were interpreted as “positive,” 541 (67.37 percent) as “negative,” and 78 (9.71 percent) as “neutral.” In the case of China, 58 of 225 (25.78 percent) were interpreted as “positive,” 129 (57.33 percent) as “negative,” and 38 (16.89 percent) as “neutral.” Here, although both powers are portrayed in an overwhelmingly negative fashion, when the figures are

Table 3. *Radio Azattyk's* Coverage of Russia and China: A General View.

	Total Articles	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Economic (%)	Political (%)	Cultural (%)
Russia	803	22.91	67.37	9.71	14.45	73.94	11.58
China	225	25.78	57.33	16.89	36.44	59.56	4

Source: Compiled by the author.

considered in percentages, again, China fares marginally better than Russia (see Table 3).

Regarding the subject classifications, in the case of Russia, 116 (14.45 percent) were interpreted as pertaining to economic issues; 93 (11.58%) to cultural issues; and 594 (73.94 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 82 (36.44 percent) were interpreted to pertain to economic issues; 9 (4 percent) to cultural issues; and 134 (59.56 percent) to political issues. These figures demonstrate two things: first, *Radio Azattyk* overwhelmingly focuses on political issues in the case of both Russia and China; second, although twice as many articles were produced about Russian-Kyrgyz economic affairs than Chinese-Kyrgyz economic affairs, this balance changes when the figures are considered in percentages.

Most articles by *Radio Azattyk* about Russia and China are considered “negative” and “political.”

As Table 4 indicates, within the positive category, in the case of Russia, 53 (28.8 percent) pertained to economic issues, 54 (29.35 percent) to cultural issues, and 77 (41.85 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 23 (39.66 percent) pertained to economic issues, 9 (15.52 percent) to cultural issues, and 26 (44.83 percent) to political issues. In contrast to *Vecherniy*

Table 4. *Radio Azattyk's* Coverage of Russia and China (By Subjects and Categories).

	Positive		Negative		Neutral	
	Russia (%)	China (%)	Russia (%)	China (%)	Russia (%)	China (%)
Economic	28.8	39.66	9.80	24.81	12.82	71.05
Cultural	29.35	15.52	4.10	0	15.38	0
Political	41.85	44.83	85.21	75.19	71.80	28.95

Source: Compiled by the author.

Bishkek, Russia and China are treated relatively equally regarding the portrayal of political and economic affairs; indeed, the percentage of political stories about China is slightly higher than that of Russia.

Within the negative category, in the case of Russia, 53 (9.8 percent) pertained to economic issues, 27 (4.1 percent) to cultural issues and 461 (85.21 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 32 (24.81 percent) pertained to economic issues, none pertained to cultural issues and 97 (75.19 percent) pertained to political issues. Again, although political stories about both Russia and China were most likely to be presented in a negative fashion, a fact perhaps explained by *Radio Azattyk's* Western oriented perspective, the percentage of negative economic stories about China was significantly higher.

Within the neutral category, in the case of Russia, 10 (12.82 percent) pertained to economic issues, 12 (15.38 percent) to cultural issues and 56 (71.8 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 27 (71.05 percent) pertained to economic issues, none pertained to cultural issues and 11 (28.95 percent) pertained to political issues. Here, political stories concerning Russia are more likely to be presented in a neutral fashion, while economic stories concerning China are more likely to be presented neutrally, a finding which confirms traditional perceptions of the two great powers.

In the case of *24.kg*, 363 of 730 articles (49.72 percent) were interpreted as "positive" toward Russia, 329 (45.07 percent) as "negative," and 38 (5.21 percent) as "neutral." In the case of China, 69 of 151 articles (45.7 percent) were interpreted as "positive," 66 (43.71 percent) as "negative," and 16 (10.59 percent) as "neutral." As with *Vecherniy Bishkek*, although many more articles were written about Russia than China, when these numbers are converted to percentages, the two powers receive largely the same treatment (see Table 5).

Regarding the subject classifications, in the case of Russia, 158 (21.64 percent) were judged to pertain to economic issues; 154 (21.06 percent) to

Table 5. *24.kg's* Coverage of Russia and China: A General View.

	Total Articles	Positive (%)	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Economic (%)	Political (%)	Cultural (%)
Russia	730	49.72	45.07	5.21	21.64	57.26	21.06
China	151	45.70	43.71	10.59	51.66	43.05	11.23

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table 6. 24.kg’s Coverage of Russia and China (By Subjects and Categories).

	Positive		Negative		Neutral	
	Russia (%)	China (%)	Russia (%)	China (%)	Russia (%)	China (%)
Economic	21.21	50.72	21.89	50.00	23.68	62.50
Cultural	33.33	21.74	7.60	1.52	21.05	6.25
Political	45.45	27.54	70.52	48.48	55.26	31.25

Source: Compiled by the author.

cultural issues; and 418 (57.26 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 78 (51.66 percent) were judged to pertain to economic issues; 17 (11.23 percent) to cultural issues; and 65 (43.05 percent) to political issues. Here, then, the figures diverge: China-related articles on economics more than double the percentage of that of Russia. Nonetheless, nearly half of the China-related articles analyzed pertained to political issues.

As shown in Table 6, within the positive category, in the case of Russia, 77 (21.21 percent) pertained to economic issues, 121 (33.33 percent) to cultural issues, and 165 (45.45 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 35 (50.72 percent) pertained to economic issues, 15 (21.74 percent) to cultural issues and 19 (27.54 percent) to political issues.

As with *Vecherniy Bishkek*, traditional perceptions of Russian and Chinese roles are more discernible here: economic stories are more than twice as likely to be portrayed in a positive fashion in the case of China, while political stories are more likely to be portrayed positively in the case of Russia.

Within the negative category, in the case of Russia, 72 (21.89 percent) pertained to economic issues, 25 (7.6 percent) to cultural issues and 232 (70.52 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 33 (50 percent) pertained to economic issues, 1 (1.52 percent) to cultural issues and 32 (48.48 percent) to political issues. Economic articles about China were more likely to be portrayed negatively than economic articles about Russia, while political articles about Russia were more likely to be portrayed negatively than political articles about China.

In percentage, 24.kg coverage on China in economics nearly doubles that on Russia.

Within the “neutral” category, in the case of Russia, 9 (23.68 percent) pertained to economic issues, 8 (21.05 percent) to cultural issues and 21 (55.26 percent) to political issues. In the case of China, 10 (62.5 percent) pertained to economic issues, 1 (6.25 percent) to cultural issues and 5 (31.25 percent) to political issues. Economic articles about China were more likely to be portrayed neutrally than economic articles about Russia, while political articles about Russia were more likely to be portrayed neutrally than those about China. This reinforces the portrayal of China as an economic power and Russia as a political power.

Conclusion

These data point to three main conclusions. First, although it confirms the traditional view that relations with China are seen primarily in economic terms, and relations with Russia primarily in political terms, the percentage of political stories devoted to China is surprisingly high, a fact which suggests that there is a perception in Kyrgyzstan that China does have a political agenda for its small neighbor. However, this opinion should be set in context: as Bruce Pannier points out, “While China won’t replace Russia in the security equation in Central Asia, Beijing might replace Washington.”³⁵ In other words, it is highly unlikely that China will dislodge Russia in the political realm.

Stories about Russia and economics, on the other hand, do not represent the same surprising shift: when the numbers of stories are viewed in percentage terms, China still trumps Russia on the amount of space devoted to economic issues. This suggests that the EAEU is not really taken seriously in Kyrgyzstan as an economic project. Indeed, the reality of the magnitude of Chinese investments in the region are virtually impossible for Russia to counter in its current economic position. The EAEU has hardly brought economic benefits to members so far: by late 2016, trade between Kyrgyzstan and Russia had decreased by nearly 20 percent.³⁶ Whether this will change remains open to debate — the ongoing Western sanctions

³⁵Pannier, “A New Chinese Interest in Central Asian Security.”

³⁶Kamila Aliyeva, “Kyrgyzstan Sees Fall in Trade Turnover with EEU States,” *Azernews*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.azernews.az/region/109833.html>.

against Russia and the primary economy in the Union have doubtlessly contributed to the sluggish progress.

The second conclusion concerns the positive representation of China in the Kyrgyz media. The figures show that although there are many more articles about Russia than China in total, when the figures are viewed in percentage terms, China receives a surprising amount of positive coverage — more, in fact, than Russia. This initially appears to contradict both the scholarly research surveyed in the introduction, which has highlighted the high levels of mistrust of China among Central Asians, and recent public opinion surveys. Indeed, according to a Gallup poll conducted in March 2016, 94 percent of respondents see Russia as a strategic partner and no one sees it as a threat, compared to 21 percent who see China as a strategic partner and 27 percent who see it as a threat.³⁷

There are two explanations for this disjuncture. First, the media surveyed above are those favored by the middle-class elite and officialdom, the demographic group most likely to favor and benefit from increasing engagement with China. It is therefore not surprising to find positive views well represented here. Second, research by Burkhanov and Chen indicated that conspiratorial or prejudiced views are more frequently expressed in local languages, rather than in Russian, and that such views are unlikely to be spread through formal news outlets, but are rather propagated via social media. Further research is therefore needed in the Kyrgyz language, not only of Kyrgyz language media, but also of social media, where conspiracy theories are most likely to propagate.³⁸ This finding also points to the complex and ambivalent relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Russia: even though there are multiple points of tension in everyday relations, the post-colonial bond remains very strong.

The third conclusion highlights the important legacies left by the regional empire.

Russia and China
need to work
together to further
engage Central Asia.

³⁷E. Surotchuev, "Gallup: Naselenie KR Schitaet, Chto Strana Dvizhetsya V Pravil'nom Napravlenii," *Vecherniy Bishkek*, May 23, 2016, http://www.vb.kg/doc/340293_gallup:_nase-lenie_kr_schitaet_cho_strana_dvijetsia_v_pravilnom_napravlenii.html.

³⁸Stefanie Ortmann and John Heathershaw, "Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet Space," *The Russian Review*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (2012), pp. 551–564.

Russian cultural influence in Kyrgyzstan is still much stronger than China's, thanks to colonial and Soviet legacies, although there are some positive developments happening regarding China. The shared linguistic space between Russia and Kyrgyzstan gives the former a huge advantage over China when it comes to developing soft power initiatives in the region. However, given the low level of interaction between Kyrgyzstan and China during the Soviet times, as well as the virulent levels of negative propaganda spread during the height of Sino-Soviet tensions and the prevailing suspicion of China in the contemporary period, the level of cultural activities between the two countries is nothing short of an achievement.³⁹

A final note on the prospects of Russia-China relations. Eric McGlinchey has argued that there are signs that "Russian interests are gravitating more towards the economic and Chinese interests are gravitating more to the political."⁴⁰ This research indicates that there is indeed a sense among some sections of opinion in Kyrgyzstan that China is shifting more toward political affairs than Russia is toward economic affairs. How Central Asian governments and citizens respond to these perceived changes in regional geopolitical influence will have profound implications for regional stability.

Two questions arise from this conclusion. First, is China ready to perform this political role and, if so, what form will it take? Here, one might hypothesize that the strategic centrality of the SREB for China's rise in the international system means that China is indeed ready to play a more explicitly political role in the region; however, one may expect this role to be nuanced, subtle and in keeping with its traditional foreign policy tenets of international peace and respect for territorial integrity.

Second, how will Russia react to China's growing political role in the region? On the one hand, Central Asia is very much seen in Russia as its "sphere of influence," a fact of which Chinese policymakers are all too aware. China will thus always defer to Russia on security matters in the region. On the other hand, Russia needs China as an important

³⁹Charles Dobbs, *Triangles, Symbols and Constraints: The United States, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, 1963–1969* (Lanham, MA: University Press of America, 2010).

⁴⁰Eric McGlinchey, "Leadership Succession, Great Power Ambitions, and the Future of Central Asia," *Central Asian Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2016), pp. 209–225.

counterweight to the Western vision of the international system, of which both Russia and China have been critical — this may lead Russia to allow China a greater role in influencing political outcomes in the region. As important non-Western poles in a fast-emerging multipolar world, it is in both Russia's and China's interest to ensure that their respective integrative projects for the region complement, rather than contradict, each other. As the author has argued elsewhere, contemporary Central Asia is an important example of a "post-Western" space in the international system.⁴¹

In April 2018, Russia and China pronounced that bilateral relations were at the "best level in history."⁴² However, a number of analysts have noted that it is actually China who calls the shots in this relationship: Russia's weakened economy and deteriorating relations with the West mean that Chinese support, both discursive and material, is of paramount importance, and that Russia may be open to joint thinking with China on the development prospects for Central Asia.⁴³ Nevertheless, in order for any regional integrative project to be successful, whether it is Russia or China who takes the lead, the voices of Central Asians themselves must be taken into account.

⁴¹Owen *et al.*, "How Post-colonial is Post-Western IR?"

⁴²Ben Westcott, "China Says Relations with Russia at Best Level in History," CNN, April 6, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/06/asia/russia-china-relations-us-intl/index.html>.

⁴³Peter Wood, "China-Russia Relations Reality Check," The Jamestown Foundation, January 12, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/china-russia-relations-reality-check/>; and Marcin Kaczmarek, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015). See also "Divnyi Novyi Mir: Chto Stroyat Rossiya I Kitai," *Gazeta.ru*, May 30, 2018, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2018/05/29_a_11774683.shtml.

For a view that is skeptical of Russian dependence on China, see Alexander Lukin, *A China and Russia: The New Rapprochement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).