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## DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE PERCEPTION OF THE CHINESE INITIATIVE «ONE BELT, ONE ROAD» IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

The initiative «One belt, one road» becomes increasingly recognized among the population of Central Asian countries year by year. The information environment is also relevant to this topic. Nowadays you can find more articles with headlines «China increases investment in Central Asia», «China builds a new factory in Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan», «China increases exports through Central Asia», etc. As China's attitude towards the countries of Central Asia is growing, so is the information space. China's attitude towards the countries of Central Asia is growing. The development of modern technology and social media allows many independent media to present today's realities. Thus, by analyzing the discourse of the information space of these countries, one can see how China and the Chinese BRI initiative are perceived in society. The aim of the study is therefore to analyse the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek discourse on Chinese investment and the Chinese BRI initiative. The significance of this study is that very few papers address the social perception of the BRI initiative. Most of the works describe more the economic, political or logistical peculiarities of the project. An analysis of Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek media was chosen as the research method. During the research, 117 articles were analysed in Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek. The article was searched on different news sites, according to keywords: «China», «BRI», «Chinese investment» and «Chinese projects». The study is also descriptive and is based on the context of China's perception of the Chinese BRI initiative. The results of the study showed that the discourse in these countries is very diverse and has both similarities and differences. The importance of the study lies in the fact that there are not many comparative studies on the topic at this time, as many authors consider one country as a case.

**Key words:** initiative «one belt, one road», Silk Road, Central Asia, China, perception.

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### Қытайдың Орталық Азия елдеріндегі “Бір белдеу, бір жол” бастамасын қабылдау дискурсы

“Бір белдеу, бір жол” бастамасы жыл сайын Орталық Азия елдерінің халқы арасында кеңінен танымал болып келеді. Ақпараттық кеңістік бұл тақырыпты да назардан тыс қалдырмайды. Біз “Қытай Орталық Азиядағы инвестицияларды ұлғайтуда”, “Қытай Өзбекстанда немесе Қазақстанда жаңа зауыт салуда”, “Қытай Орталық Азия арқылы экспортты ұлғайтуда” және т.б. тақырыптары бар мақалаларды жиі кездестіреміз. Қазіргі заманғы технологиялар мен әлеуметтік желілердің дамуы көптеген тәуелсіз БАҚ-тарға бүгінгі болмысын көрсетуге мүмкіндік береді. Демек, осы елдердің ақпараттық кеңістігінің дискурсын талдай отырып, Қытай мен BRI Қытай бастамасы қоғамда қалай қабылданатынын көруге болады. Осыған байланысты, аталған зерттеудің мақсаты – Қытай инвестициялары және BRI қытайлық бастамасы тақырыбындағы қазақстандық, қырғыз және өзбек дискурстарын талдау. Бұл зерттеудің маңыздылығы – BRI бастамасын әлеуметтік қабылдауды қарастыратын жұмыстар өте аз. Көптеген еңбектер осы жобаның экономикалық, саяси немесе логистикалық ерекшеліктерін көбірек сипаттайды. Зерттеу әдісі ретінде қазақстандық, қырғыз және өзбек БАҚ-тарының дискурсы таңдалды. Зерттеу барысында барлығы 117 мақала орыс, қазақ, қырғыз және өзбек тілдерінде талданды. Мақаланы әр түрлі жаңалықтар сайттарында “Қытай”, “BRI”, “Қытай инвестициялары” және “Қытай жобалары” деген кілт сөздері арқылы қарастырылды. Соңдай-ақ, зерттеу сипаттамалық мәнге ие және Қытай мен Қытайдың BRI бастамасын қабылдау контексіне негізделген. Зерттеу нәтижелері бұл елдердегі дискурс өте алуан түрлі және ұқсастықтары мен айырмашылықтары бар екенін көрсетті. Зерттеудің маңыздылығы қазіргі уақытта осы тақырып бойынша салыстырмалы зерттеулер онша көп емес, өйткені көптеген авторлар тек кейсі ретінде бір елді ғана қарастырады.

**Түйін сөздер:** “Бір белдеу, бір жол” бастамасы, Жібек жолы, Орталық Азия, Қытай.

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### **Дискурс-анализ восприятия китайской инициативы «Один пояс, один путь» в странах Центральной Азии**

Инициатива «Один пояс, один путь» с каждым годом становится все более узнаваемой среди населения стран Центральной Азии. Информационное пространство также не оставляет без внимания данную тему. Все чаще мы встречаем статьи с заголовками «Китай увеличивает инвестиции в Центральной Азии», «Китай строит новый завод в Узбекистане или в Казахстане», «Китай увеличивает экспорт через Центральную Азию» и т.д. В связи с активным развитием отношений Китая со странами Центральной Азии активизируется и информационное пространство. Развитие современных технологий и социальных сетей позволяет многим независимым СМИ показывать сегодняшние реалии. Следовательно, анализируя дискурс информационного пространства данных стран, можно понять, как в действительности воспринимается Китай и китайская инициатива «Один пояс, один путь» в обществе. В связи с чем, целью данного исследования является анализ казахстанского, киргизского и узбекского дискурса на тему китайских инвестиций и китайской инициативы «Один пояс, один путь». Значимость данного исследования заключается в том, что очень мало трудов, которые рассматривают социальное восприятие инициативы «Один пояс, один путь». Большинство трудов описывают экономическую, политическую или логистическую особенность данной инициативы. В качестве метода исследования был выбран дискурс-анализ казахстанских, киргизских и узбекских СМИ. В ходе исследования всего было проанализировано 117 статей на русском, казахском, киргизском и узбекском языках. Поиск статей осуществлялся на разных новостных сайтах по ключевым словам: «Китай», «Один пояс, один путь», «китайские инвестиции» и «китайские проекты». Также, исследование носит описательный характер и основано на контексте восприятия Китая и китайской инициативы BRI. Полученные результаты исследования показали, что дискурс в данных странах очень разнообразен и имеет как сходства, так и отличия. Значимость исследования заключается в том, что на данный момент не так много сравнительных исследований по данной теме, так как многие авторы рассматривают в виде кейса только одну страну.

**Ключевые слова:** инициатива «Один пояс, один путь», Шелковый путь, Центральная Азия, Китай.

## **Introduction**

The «One Belt, One Road» initiative is a large-scale project of China covering many countries of Asia, Europe and Africa. The Central Asian countries are important players in China's initiative.

The Central Asian countries were involved not only in the transport corridor for Chinese products to Europe but also in joint projects with China in various fields. To date, 55 Kazakh-Chinese joint projects are being actively implemented in Kazakhstan. These projects are being implemented in the following areas: engineering, construction, agriculture, chemicals, oil and gas, and energy. However, Chinese projects encountered a lack of confidence in Kazakh society. The realization of 55 Chinese projects led to a wave of anti-Chinese rallies in 2019, where the main slogans were «no Chinese expansion», «we against Chinese factories», etc. During the peak of the pandemic and the series of lockdowns in 2020, anti-Chinese rallies were at a standstill. However, later, by early spring 2021, we

can see the resumption of anti-Chinese rallies with the same slogans and demands.

However, in Kazakhstan, the government quickly suppressed anti-Chinese rallies, so these rallies did not have a strong influence on the implementation of Chinese projects. The situation is similar in Kyrgyzstan. Chinese investment in Kyrgyzstan is also hampered by public distrust of China. In Kyrgyzstan, large investments faced protests that ended in the winding down of projects. The situation in Uzbekistan is somewhat different, where Chinese projects and investments are viewed positively, as these investments contribute to the development of the industrial sector of the country. It is also important to note that in Uzbekistan the active realization of Chinese projects and the use of Chinese investment began with the arrival of the new President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016.

The discourse of analysis on Chinese investment and Chinese initiative «One belt, one road» differs in these countries. **The problem of the research** is that most of the research is focused on the economic, political or logistical aspects of the BRI initiative.

The discourse of analysis on Chinese investment and Chinese initiative «One belt, one road» differs in these countries. The problem with the research is that most of the research is focused on the economic, political or logistical aspects of the BRI initiative. This is explained, of course, by the fact that the BRI initiative itself is aimed at developing the economies of China and the member countries of the project. In addition, the scale of the BRI project is seen by political scientists as an attempt by China to enhance its geopolitical power in the world arena. Consequently, few papers in the scientific literature address the topic as part of the discussion analysis.

**The object of the research** is the discourse of the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek media. **The subject of the research** is the perception of the Chinese BRI initiative and Chinese investment in the discourse of Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek media.

**The aim of the research** is to analyse the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek discourse on Chinese investment and the Chinese BRI initiative. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to perform a number of the following **tasks**: to collect a database of articles from news portals; to analyze and compare the discourse of the Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek media on the topic of the Chinese BRI initiative. **The research question** is as follows: «How the discourse in the media can reflect the social perception of the Chinese BRI initiative in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan».

According to the **theoretical approach** of the «agenda-setting» study, mass media have a significant influence on the perception and formation of the opinion of the public directly by the selection of what exactly they report. The information space may also reflect social phenomena and social attitudes. Consequently, **the research hypothesis** suggests that the discourse of information space may not only influence social opinion or perception but may reflect the development of negative or positive perceptions of the Chinese BRI initiative.

## Material and Methods

The research is descriptive and based on a discussion analysis in countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The study focuses mainly on the context of China's perception of and China's BRI initiative based on business, economic, political, social and environmental aspects. During the analysis, 117 articles were analysed in such languages as Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek. The following information portals were used for the analysis:

In Kazakhstan: Sputnik, Vesti.kz, Today.kz, Tengrinews, Holanewskz, Official website of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Litter, Radio Azattyk, informburo.kz.

In Kyrgyzstan: akchabar.kg, Kloop.kg, Радио Азаттык, Sputnik, knews.kg, kargazstan.ro, centralasia.media.

In Uzbekistan: CERR, podrobno.uz, uz.sputniknews, газета.uz, UzNews.uz.

The keywords in the article search were «China», «one belt, one road», «Chinese investment», «Chinese projects » and «anti-Chinese rallies». It also considered articles from 2015.

## Literature Review

In 2013, China launched an ambitious global infrastructure plan, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at creating a new platform for international cooperation and development with a focus on politics, infrastructure, trade and finance and people-to-people interaction. More than 160 countries and organizations have joined the initiative. BRI provides development finance and projects to build communication networks across railways, highways, bridges, airports and ports to accelerate global, regional and domestic economic development (Laruelle, 2015; Garibov Azad, 2018).

BRI is a kind of umbrella brand that includes various projects that China lends or invests in. Time has shown that the main purpose of the initiative is to develop the Chinese economy. As for Central Asia, the main goal of the BRI is the development of Western China, which is one of the priorities of Xi Jinping's domestic policy (Takeuchi, 2019). A. Bugaenko adheres to a similar opinion. BRI became an umbrella project that included all projects related to China. The BRI is a Chinese-centric project, essentially aimed at developing the Chinese economy, which implies in the new phase the optimal use of external resources, power and stimulus for economic development. As far as Central Asia is concerned, it is related to the development of the regions of Western China. BRI is also aimed at creating a friendly environment around the People's Republic of China. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have concentrated Chinese investment in the non-energy sector. For example, 46 projects worth \$6.8 billion in Uzbekistan are focused on manufacturing. The situation in Kyrgyzstan is somewhat different. Chinese investment in Kyrgyzstan is not centralized, which significantly reduces the effectiveness of such investment. As a result, various elite groups used investment flows for their purposes, while

uncontrolled Chinese investment caused public outrage (Bugaenko, 2020).

For the Central Asian countries, Chinese infrastructure development projects offer an opportunity to enter world trade. Investments under BRI are developing rail and road networks to increase the competitiveness of both cross-border and inland transport in Central Asia. Two of the six BRI corridors run through the region, connecting China to Europe and Iran and West Asia, respectively. By allocating substantial funds to BRI in the absence of genuine investment and financial competitors in the region, China formulates project terms in a way that ensures that Chinese companies have a leading role in their implementation.

For example, the construction of the same factories under the BRI initiative is carried out entirely by Chinese companies and Chinese workers (Jaborov, 2017; Taliga, 2021). This contributes to the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment among the public in Central Asian countries, especially in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. However, China is actively using soft power to improve its image. One such example is the creation of Confucius Institutes, where they teach not only the Chinese language, but also introduce the Chinese culture. The Confucius Institute has thirty-seven branches in Central Asia. In Kazakhstan, 14,000 students study at five Confucius Institutes, and in Uzbekistan, 1,500 students per year study at the Confucius Institute at the Tashkent State Institute, the oldest branch in the region. Also, China annually increases the number of educational grants for students from Central Asian countries. In 2010-2018, more than 5,000 scholarships were awarded to applicants from Central Asia, and as of 2017, about 30,000 students from Central Asia were studying in China (Umarov, 2020; Vakulchuk, 2020; Vinokurov, 2020).

Most experts note that no matter how China tries to improve its image, the existing risks have a more significant impact on the perception of China and Chinese projects. The following risks of Chinese investments are noted. Firstly, information about large Chinese projects is either completely closed or does not contain details about the project lending, the participation of the project parties in its implementation and further operation of the facility, loan repayment and the economic and political significance of the project. This is one of the main reasons for anti-Chinese rallies in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, the lack of access to projects raises doubts and concerns among the expert community. Second, the support of an established resource-based economy in the countries of the

region threatens the possibility of developing more sustainable production in Central Asia. Many experts in Kazakhstan note the fact that the country's economy is exportable, including for China. Thirdly, the region has a high probability of financing projects that damage its economy and ecology. In particular, the topic of ecology is actively raised in Kazakhstan when it comes to the construction of 55 Chinese factories. Also considering the situation in Kyrgyzstan, it is important to note that the country's growing debt to China is also a risk. After all, there are many precedents when China took away strategically important objects from debtor countries. For example, Sri Lanka handed over its port "Hambantota" to the Chinese side, Tajikistan ratified the protocol on the demarcation of its border, or Zambia lost control over the capital's international airport. All these risks and the rapid expansion of China's presence in Central Asia are alarming and contribute to the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment among the population (Horn, Reinhart, Trebesch, 2019).

Another reason for the negative perception of the Chinese is labour issues. Workers employed by Chinese companies in Central Asia face poor working conditions and receive lower wages than Chinese workers. There is a dual perception of China's involvement. In terms of inter-State relations, political and economic cooperation between China and Central Asia is well developed and actively supported by the ruling elites. However, any increase in China's participation in the country's economy will backslide and reinforce China's negative public discourse (Burkhanov, Chen, 2016).

In early 2020, negative perceptions of China and the Chinese BRI initiative grew due to the coronavirus pandemic. At the global level, many countries blamed China for the spread of the virus and the global recession. The BRI initiative has also been affected by the global crisis caused by the pandemic. Supplies were disrupted, and logistics went through a crisis because countries went to lockdowns on different dates. Many projects under the BRI initiative have been suspended or are delayed from earlier specified dates.

However, China quickly reacted to the crisis and has already taken measures to adapt the projects of the initiative to the new realities in order to restore the economy and support local production. China began to actively support the countries of Central Asia during the pandemic. They have repeatedly sent humanitarian aid and highly qualified specialists to fight the pandemic in Central Asian countries. In addition, China during the period activated the

“Silk Road of Health” project within the framework of the BRI initiative and this had a positive effect. Also, by the end of 2020, China quickly recovered its economy and was able to adapt many projects to new realities and now continue to actively develop the BRI initiative, since this initiative is very important for China in the long term (Corneliusson, 2020; Mouritz, 2020; Olive, 2020).

## Results and discussion

BRI has been actively discussed in the media from the very beginning. In recent years, the topic of China, Chinese investments and Chinese projects have been gaining more and more popularity in the media discourse of Central Asian countries. Discourse in the media space of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan on the topic of Chinese projects and investments has both positive and negative discourses. However, according to the analysis, it can be noted that the Uzbek discourse is the least critical concerning China. But according to many authors, Chinese investments are much more popular in Uzbekistan. The more positive attitude of the Uzbek people can be explained by the fact that Uzbekistan still has less experience of doing business with the PRC (Trilling, 2020). The analysis also shows that in most cases the formation of a positive discourse is observed where a news portal or newspaper has government funding or is affiliated with quasi-enterprises. More critical discourse is formed by private and independent media, some of which have headquarters abroad. Also, critical discourse is mostly associated with economic and political aspects and is based on the existing cynophobia in these countries. Most of the positive discourse is expressed by the ruling authorities, which relies on the development of friendly and partnership relations between countries. Let's take a look at some of the articles in all three countries.

Kazakhstan:

- Building good-neighbourly relations with China is one of the most important priorities of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Political, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian ties between our countries are an example of mutually beneficial and effective interstate interaction (*today.kz*, “Tokayev: Building good-neighbourly relations with China is one of the priorities”, May 16, 2019).

- In turn, the head of state emphasized the friendly nature of relations between the two countries, based on mutual respect for sovereign rights, adherence to fundamental international principles, and developing in the spirit of mutually

beneficial cooperation (*informburo.kz*, “Tokayev and Li Zhanshu discussed the prospects for the development of Kazakh-Chinese cooperation”, September 22, 2019).

Kyrgyzstan:

- Today, Kyrgyz-Chinese relations are developing dynamically and in the entire history of bilateral interaction are at an unprecedented high level. This was stated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan, Ruslan Kazakbayev speaking at a scientific-practical conference in Bishkek on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the countries (*Radio Azattyk*, “The head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan spoke about the” unprecedentedly high level “of relations with China”, October 8 2021).

- Altynai Omurbekova noted that the Kyrgyz side highly appreciates the Kyrgyz-Chinese relations of good-neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation, which are dynamically developing in all areas of interaction (*akchabar.kg*, “Kyrgyzstan and China discussed cooperation in the field of digital technologies”, August 28, 2019).

Uzbekistan:

- “In a word, Uzbek-Chinese relations have broad prospects and rightfully serve as an example of good-neighbourliness, friendship and mutual assistance. Uzbekistan is an important partner of China in the joint construction of “One Belt - One Road”. The Chinese side is ready to further deepen cooperation with the Uzbek side within the BRI. We will jointly strengthen the interconnectedness of the region, ensure the stability of world production and supply chains in order to enter the path of socio-economic recovery, unleash the development potential in the interests of giving a powerful impetus to the universal development and prosperity of the world, creating a community of the common destiny of mankind (CERR, “Model of Good Neighborhood, friendship and mutual assistance”, June 22, 2021).

- As the leaders said, all this became another evidence of the strengthening Uzbek-Chinese relations of a comprehensive strategic partnership based on the principles of friendship, mutual respect and trust (*podrobno.uz*, “Mirziyoyev and Xi Jinping held telephone talks. It became known that Uzbekistan is studying the best experience of the PRC in the fight against poverty”, May 7, 2020).

The analysis showed that articles of similar nature are published in all three countries and in the majority with the submission of the current government. However, in Kazakhstan, articles with such content are published much more often

and regularly in comparison with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Through the media, the governments of all three countries position their relations with China on a positive side. Thus, influencing the formation of a positive perception of China and the Chinese initiative. The positive discourse on the relationship with China is also justified by the economic benefits for the countries of Central Asia. The discourse notes that BRI makes it possible to develop infrastructure, increase exports to other countries, give access to the sea, create jobs and contribute to the technological development of Central Asian countries. For example, Shukhrat Irgashev, an expert at the Development Strategy Center in Uzbekistan, spoke as follows at an expert discussion of the impact of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the countries of Central Asia:

- "China is a key partner of Uzbekistan, we are interested in the development of the BRI," he stressed. - The program plays an important role in expanding transport corridors, helping to launch new industries, create new jobs, which is very important for a densely populated region. Investment attractiveness for Uzbekistan is a priority ("*Forbes.kz*," *One Belt, One Road "The Central Asian Countries Are Driving into a Debt Trap"*, September 18, 2019).

In Uzbekistan's discourse, similar positive statements about the initiative are encountered quite often. Let us look at some of them.

- At present, Uzbekistan and China are actively building up cooperation on the implementation of various projects. Participation in the Chinese initiative makes the republic more attractive in the eyes of investors, which is one of the priority tasks specified in the 2017-2021 Development Strategy. BRI will allow Uzbekistan to diversify sources of direct investment, as well as increase access to regional markets through new transport corridors (*uz.sputniknews*, "*Silk Road for Uzbekistan*", April 25, 2019).

- "I am sure that the implementation of this large-scale project as a BRI, which today covers more than 60% of the world's population, will contribute to the formation of a single belt of peace and prosperity, prosperity and progress, cooperation and friendship between our countries and peoples," Shavkat Mirziyoyev emphasized (*newspaper.uz*, "*Shavkat Mirziyoyev spoke in favour of filling the Belt and Road with specific projects*", May 15, 2017).

Consider similar articles in Kazakhstan.

- Direct investments of the Chinese side in all sectors of Kazakhstan amounted to 190 million

US dollars, an increase of 39.7%. Many industrial cooperation projects have been completed and commissioned, such as West Europe - West China highway and the Shymkent refinery, providing Kazakhstan with a powerful wing for economic growth. The President pays great attention to attracting foreign investment and strengthening anti-corruption work, which is in line with the development goals of China "two centuries" and the concept of opening, greenness and incorruptibility of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative (*Time*, "*Zhang XIAO: China and Kazakhstan are developing friendship for the good two peoples*" September 6, 2019).

- Up to 20 thousand new jobs will be created within the framework of joint projects with China, 95% of which will be occupied by Kazakhstanis. According to him, of the proposed investment projects, priority is given to high-tech projects with high Kazakhstani content and ensuring maximum job creation for Kazakhstani citizens (*Liter*, "*95% of new jobs created will be occupied by Kazakhstanis*", September 5, 2019).

Considering the Kyrgyz discourse, it can be noted that, since 2018, the discourse in relation to China and Chinese investments has significantly changed towards criticism. The volume of investments coming from China to Kyrgyzstan has halved already in 2018 compared to 2017. The situation was further complicated by anti-Chinese rallies in Bishkek in 2019. Moreover, the reason for the decline in Chinese investment and the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment in the country was the population's distrust of the government and the growth of public debt.

For example, at the beginning of 2021, the state external debt of Kyrgyzstan to China amounted to \$ 4 billion 221.61 million (*akchabar*, "*The debt of Kyrgyzstan to China increased by 1.37 billion soms over the month*", March 16, 2021). Critical discourse in Kyrgyzstan has also intensified with the dissemination of information that in case of non-payment of debts, Kyrgyzstan should give objects to China. The current President of Kyrgyzstan provided this information.

- President of Kyrgyzstan Sadir Zhaparov in an interview with «Radio Azattyk» informed that some objects of the country can be transferred to the administration of China, if not repaid the state debt to it. He explained that under the arrangements if Kyrgyzstan did not pay the loan to the Chinese Export-Import Bank China would take over large infrastructure facilities. We are talking about the largest thermal power plant in Kyrgyzstan - CHP

Bishkek, alternative route «North-South» and LEP «Datka-Kemin». «We took money for these projects. Agreements were signed under which the management of facilities in case of non-payment passes to the other party. If this is not enough, they have the right to other objects, said the president, but did not specify which objects (*Radio Azattyk*, «*Sadyr Zhaparov: Kyrgyzstan will remain a democracy*», March 15, 2021).

Kazakhstan has also seen an increase in critical discourse. However, unlike Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan's discourse is very diverse and contains a positive, negative and neutral discourse. As we have shown in Kazakhstan in the past, proxy media publish a fairly large amount of positive articles. However, the more independent media still criticized the government for its Kazakh-Chinese attitude. However, an analysis of the discourse of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan showed that the formation of critical discourse is similar. The similarity is that, in both countries, people express their distrust of power and China, fear increased labour migration from China, rising government debt, and the environmental consequences of building Chinese factories. However, Kazakhstan's discourse differs in one aspect. The difference is that in Kazakhstan the issue of 55 Chinese factories under the BRI initiative is being raised harshly, while in Kyrgyzstan the issue of public debt is acute. Regarding the question of 55 Chinese factories, the Kazakh discourse contained a very negative discourse because the contracts of those projects were not available to the public. The lack of information further heightens anti-Chinese sentiment. Questions like who will build these plants, who will work at these plants, what threat these plants pose to Kazakhstan's ecology also remain unanswered. The discourse notes that the population considers these projects as part of China's economic expansion. The main reason for this is the current high level of popular mistrust of power. The corruption of power can play into the hands of the Chinese and make the agreements more beneficial to the Chinese side. Analysis shows that these issues were the main causes of anti-Chinese rallies in 2019. Also, the discourse showed that at the beginning the power of the information about 55 Chinese factories called false. Later, however, the authorities began not to deny the existence of Kazakh-Chinese projects, but to explain why these factories were being set up and why it would benefit Kazakhstan. Look at the quotes from the article:

- Official Nur-Sultan calls «lies» information about «construction of 55 Chinese factories in Kazakhstan», but does not deny that 55 joint projects

with Beijing will be implemented (*Radio Azattyk*, «*Opposing «Chinese projects» Zhanaozeni have returned to the square*», September 9, 2019).

- About 55 factories. There was no such programme. This information is disseminated by bloggers or users through WhatsApp (that 55 old plants will be transferred from China to Kazakhstan). I officially declare that there is no such program, old factories no one transports (*tengrinews.kz* «*55 Chinese factories in Kazakhstan - to MFA commented dispatch*», September 2, 2019).

- There is no debt. We agreed - specialists from Chinese companies come, work, after finishing their work - go home. It is normal practice all over the world. Therefore, if we implement these 55 enterprises, it will be a great benefit for Kazakhstan, and thousands of people will get a job," said the First President of Kazakhstan (*Today.kz* «*God Himself told us to trade with China - Nursultan Nazarbayev*» 29 November 2019).

By analyzing this discourse, it can be seen that the government, through the media, tried to smooth the negative perception of 55 Chinese projects. The experts also note that 55 Chinese projects have been sharply rejected for lack of reliable information. Moreover, it is noted that it will be difficult for the Government to develop a positive perception of these projects until all information is transparent and accessible to the public.

## Conclusion

To date, the BRI for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has become an important element for the development of the country's economy. The implementation of the initiative in these countries is still at an active stage and has not been completed. Overall, the Chinese BRI initiative has gained momentum over the past few years, but the coronavirus pandemic has slowed the initiative. But, as experts have noted, China quickly recovered its economy in 2020 and is now actively pursuing the BRI initiative. This topic will therefore remain relevant for Central Asia for a long time to come.

In sum, the discourse in the countries we have examined is both similar and different. It may also be noted that the scope of the discourse varies from country to country. In Kazakhstan, the theme of China, the Chinese initiative and Chinese projects have been given more consideration and more extensive and varied information. The reason is that initially the initiative «One belt, one road» was first proposed in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has been involved in this initiative since its inception

in 2013. Also in Kazakhstan, the initiative projects started earlier than in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan has also led Chinese investment and projects since the initiative was launched. In the Kyrgyz discourse, the issue of China and the BRI initiative are also being actively raised, but most of it has a critical discourse. In Uzbekistan, the discourse is of a more modest or positive nature. Some experts attribute the more positive discourse in Uzbekistan to the fact that the country has had limited relations with China and has little experience so far. Indeed, unlike Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Chinese investment came to Uzbekistan in 2017 with the arrival of a new president. Over the last couple of years, however, there has also been a decline in public confidence in China and Chinese projects in Uzbekistan. In addition, the growing anti-Chinese sentiment in other Central Asian countries may

influence the discourse in the future. Overall, the discourse shows that there is real concern among Central Asian populations about China and Chinese investment. The rise of anti-Chinese sentiment and cynophobia is also reflected in discourse, which has a negative impact on perception. Moreover, the fear of a great neighbour in these countries is heightened by the presence of direct borders. In this regard, land leases to Chinese companies, fear of labour migration from China also found their place in the discourse. Consequently, our research hypothesis is confirmed and the discourse in the information space in the Central Asian countries reflects the social perception of the Chinese initiative. The existence of negative perceptions of Chinese projects and investments can be observed even in an environment where most media are loyal to the ruling power and are positive about Chinese projects and investments.

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