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NEW MODELS OF POWER CONCENTRATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Sándor Fekete ¹

ABSTRACT

This article examines new models of political power concentration in the 21st century through a comparative analysis of the Russian Federation after 2000 and Turkey under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Using a structured, focused comparison and qualitative process tracing, the study analyses how formally democratic institutions are gradually transformed into instruments of executive dominance. The findings demonstrate that both regimes represent deliberately constructed forms of electoral and presidential autocracy rather than merely “imperfect democracies” or cases of democratic backsliding. In both cases, the erosion of political pluralism, judicial independence, media freedom, and civil society occurs through incremental and legally codified mechanisms. At the same time, the article identifies important differences in regime logic: while the Russian model is based on centralized control and depoliticization, the Turkish model relies more heavily on electoral mobilization and plebiscitary legitimacy.

Keywords: political power concentration, electoral autocracy, hybrid regimes, Russia, Turkey

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INTRODUCTION

The article builds on the literature on hybrid regimes and competitive authoritarianism, particularly the framework developed by Levitsky and Way, which conceptualizes regimes that formally maintain democratic institutions while systematically undermining their substantive functioning. In addition, the concept of “autocratic legalism” (Scheppele) provides an important analytical lens, highlighting how legal and constitutional instruments are used to consolidate executive power from within the system.

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Conceptually, the article distinguishes between several overlapping but analytically different regime types. Diamond's notion of pseudo-democracy is useful for capturing regimes in which elections exist but do not produce genuine democratic accountability. Levitsky and Way's competitive authoritarianism highlights the persistence of formal democratic institutions under conditions of systematic incumbent abuse. Schedler's concept of electoral authoritarianism shifts attention to the manipulation of the electoral arena itself, while Merkel's defective democracy identifies cases in which individual democratic partial regimes—such as civil rights, horizontal accountability, or effective power to govern—are impaired. Sartori's category of a hegemonic-party system is particularly relevant for analysing ruling parties that organize participation and loyalty while preventing meaningful alternation in power.

On this basis, the article does not treat Russia and Turkey simply as flawed democracies. Instead, it examines them as regimes in which elections, courts, parliaments, parties, and constitutional rules are retained but refunctionalized: their role is no longer primarily to limit executive power, but to stabilize and reproduce it. This conceptual choice also avoids reducing regime change to the electoral dimension alone, since the analysis includes party-system engineering, control of the judiciary, media ownership and regulation, civil society restrictions, and informal power networks.

The central aim of this study is to conceptualize new models of political power concentration in the 21st century using the examples of the Russian Federation after 2000 and Turkey during the period of Justice and Development Party (AKP) rule. The point of departure is the assumption that both regimes can no longer be adequately understood within the dichotomy of "democracy versus dictatorship" and that the more appropriate lens is that of hybrid or electoral-authoritarian regimes, in which formally preserved electoral procedures and institutions of representative democracy coexist with the systematic erosion of political pluralism, level playing field, and separation of powers.

In the case of Russia, the consolidation of an electoral autocracy followed Vladimir Putin's rise to power, characterised by the centralisation of

executive authority, the restructuring of federal relations and the subordination of regional self-government, as well as the gradual dismantling of independent oversight institutions, including parliament, the judiciary, and the media. The key instruments of this transformation have included extra-constitutional power centres (security services, oligarchic networks, *siloviki*), legislative engineering at both federal and regional levels, the use of “technical parties”, and tightly controlled electoral infrastructure, which together have produced a highly centralised system of presidential dominance.

Turkey’s post-millennial trajectory represents a different yet functionally related path: an initially reformist, pro-European and post-Islamist agenda of the AKP gradually evolved into a project of presidential autocracy in which regime legitimacy rests on a combination of electoral victories, clientelist networks, and permanent mobilisation against internal and external enemies (Esen, Gümüşçü, 2016). The progressive “emptying out” of democratic institutions manifested itself above all in the politicisation of the judiciary, interventions against the media and civil society, and a series of constitutional reforms (2010, 2017) that strengthened the executive at the expense of parliament and independent checks and balances.

A view on Russia and Turkey thus makes it possible to capture two distinct yet convergent models of power concentration: the Russian model, grounded in the fusion of the state, the security apparatus, and economic elites, and the Turkish model, which combines a majoritarian understanding of democracy with a personalised presidential system and intense party control over public institutions (Hale, 2015).

The ambition of the article is to contribute to current debates on hybrid regimes and new forms of autocratic modernisation by showing, on the basis of an analysis of institutional reforms, legislative changes and power practices in Russia and Turkey, how a liberal-democratic framework can be dismantled through incremental, often legally codified steps without openly abolishing elections or the constitution. At the same time, the text argues that, in the cases under study, we are no longer dealing merely with the degeneration of formerly democratic regimes, (Bermeo, 2016) but with

deliberately constructed alternative models of rule that deploy the tools of the 21st century (Scheppelle, 2018).

This study employs a structured, focused comparative approach to examine the transformation of political systems in Russia and Turkey in the 21st century. The selection of cases follows a “most-different systems design”: despite distinct historical, cultural, and geopolitical trajectories, both countries exhibit convergent outcomes in terms of power concentration and institutional transformation.

The analysis is based on qualitative process tracing of institutional, legal, and political developments, with particular attention to constitutional amendments, legislative reforms, and executive practices. The empirical material draws on secondary academic literature, policy reports, and publicly available legal and political documents.

The comparison is therefore structured around six dimensions: executive centralization, party-system control, judicial subordination, media control, constraints on civil society, and mechanisms of legitimation. These dimensions make it possible to compare different historical trajectories without assuming that Russia and Turkey follow the same sequence of authoritarian consolidation.

The article’s main methodological limitation is that it relies on qualitative, interpretive comparison rather than quantitative measurement. Its purpose is not to rank the two regimes on a democracy index, but to reconstruct the institutional mechanisms through which power concentration becomes durable. This also explains the focus on decisive constitutional and political turning points rather than on a comprehensive chronology of all events.

1 RUSSIA AFTER 2000: THE CONSOLIDATION OF ELECTORAL AUTOCRACY

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation formally committed itself to democratic transition and market reforms. In practice, however, what emerged was an unstable, decentralized, and ungovernable political system. The Yeltsin era (1991–1999) was characterized by weak state capacity; the central government

was unable to assert its authority over peripheral regions (e.g., Chechnya, the Far East), and both the administration and legislative branches were highly fragmented. Although the constitutional framework functioned formally, real power was exercised by the executive apparatus and „grey zones”—the Federal Security Service (FSB), oligarchs, and the military elite—which structurally obstructed democratic consolidation.

The constitutional settlement that followed the domestic political crisis of autumn 1993 is crucial for understanding this trajectory. The 1993 Constitution created a strongly presidential system in which the president could govern through decrees with the force of law and exercise substantial influence over the government, regional elites, and the legislative agenda. This institutional design weakened the development of autonomous political parties and made the party spectrum dependent on the executive centre rather than on programmatic social cleavages.

During the Yeltsin presidency, the State Duma was often ideologically polarized between the Communist left and the ultranationalist LDPR, while pro-presidential projects such as Our Home—Russia remained too weak to discipline parliament. At the same time, an informal centre of power emerged around the presidential administration. In the late Yeltsin period, this administration was associated with the so-called “family” and figures such as Boris Berezovsky, demonstrating that the formal constitutional architecture was already accompanied by informal networks of influence.

In May 2000, following his inauguration as president, Vladimir Putin established seven federal districts, each overseen by a presidential envoy. These districts lacked constitutional status and were designed to reinforce the central government's control over the regions. The tasks of the presidential envoys included overseeing the implementation of federal laws, monitoring the activities of regional governors, and enforcing central government policies at local levels.

During the early 2000s, the gradual elimination and reintegration of autonomous districts into their corresponding regions or territories began—a process legitimized through referenda. This development was driven primarily by two factors: most autonomous districts lacked the institutional capacity to sustain themselves independently.

Constitutionally, it was problematic that some federal subjects operated embedded within the territory of another.

As a result, a significant portion of regional autonomies was dissolved, and the central government's influence over peripheral areas was further strengthened.

The Federation Council—the upper chamber of the Russian parliament—originally comprised regional governors and legislators. After 2000, significant reforms were introduced: governors lost their automatic membership, and were replaced by appointed representatives, who were typically loyal to the central government (Koehn, 2011). In the wake of the 2004 Beslan hostage crisis, President Putin initiated the abolition of direct gubernatorial elections. Instead, governors were to be nominated by the president and approved by the regional legislatures. (This system of presidential nomination remained in effect until 2012, when direct elections were reinstated.)

Putin dismantled regional autonomy through several legal and institutional measures: he ordered a comprehensive review of regional laws and constitutions. Ensured that the Russian legal system and Constitution would take precedence in all regions. Removed ethnically-based treaties from political practice (e.g., the power-sharing agreement with Tatarstan after 2002). Forced legal harmonization among the federation's constituent entities by eliminating asymmetrical arrangements.

In sum, Putin restructured both the Federation Council and the governorships to ensure the full subordination of regional governance to the central executive authority.

This process is commonly described as the construction of a “vertical of power”: a hierarchical chain of command linking the presidency, federal districts, governors, regional administrations, security structures, and economic actors. The concept captures not only administrative centralization but also the political logic of loyalty, in which access to resources and institutional survival depend on subordination to the Kremlin.

Following Putin's assumption of office, the de facto and de jure expansion of executive powers commenced. Although the appointment of the

government and ministers formally requires the approval of the State Duma, in practice, this process constitutes a presidential prerogative. National security, foreign policy, and legislative priorities are defined by the presidential administration.

The president may govern by decree (*ukaz*), which often carries quasi-legislative force and does not require parliamentary approval. The 2020 constitutional amendments deepened this trend: the president was granted the authority to propose the dismissal of judges of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts and initiate appointments of the Prosecutor General and regional prosecutors in the Federation Council, thereby acquiring near-total control over institutional checks and balances.

In 2008, due to constitutional term limits, Putin formally stepped down and Dmitry Medvedev assumed the presidency, while Putin himself became Prime Minister. This maneuver is commonly referred to in political science as “tandemism” or “delegated governance”.

Although Medvedev formally held the presidential office, the actual decision-making center of the regime remained the executive apparatus led by Putin. The Kremlin’s decision-making structures continued to operate under Putin’s direction. The security elite (*siloviki*) and strategic economic actors still regarded Putin as the true leader. Strategic legislation (e.g., in law enforcement reforms) and foreign policy decisions remained under his purview.

In 2012, Putin returned to the presidency, now with a six-year term—made possible by the 2008 constitutional amendment. This marked a clear indication that constitutional structures had become subordinate to the logic of political survival.

After the 2003 parliamentary elections, United Russia—Putin’s direct political power base—gained an absolute majority in the Duma. Since then, the party has institutionalized its parliamentary dominance in every electoral cycle (2007, 2011, 2016, 2021), coordinating legislative votes along lines of loyalty and typically following presidential decrees and government initiatives. Parliamentary actors are not structured around political pluralism but rather around loyalty and centralized legitimacy.

United Russia thus became a classic pro-presidential “party of power”. Its function has not been to articulate an autonomous ideology, but to organize parliamentary discipline, distribute patronage, and translate presidential preferences into legislation. From a Sartorian perspective, this development resembles a hegemonic-party arrangement: opposition parties may exist, but the mechanics of competition are structured in such a way that the ruling party’s dominance is not genuinely contestable.

The nature of legislative practice has shifted significantly over the past decade. The State Duma no longer functions as a forum for debate, but rather as an executive-like body that automatically approves presidential or governmental proposals. Legislative turnaround times have been drastically reduced, and the number of debates has sharply declined—some bills are passed within hours.

A large proportion of legislative initiatives originate from the presidential administration or the government. Despite the appearance of political pluralism, the Russian party system has effectively transformed into a one-party dominant regime, utilizing the following mechanisms: the creation of “technical parties” (to be discussed in a later subsection). Registration barriers, such as signature quotas and administrative hurdles to prevent opposition parties from running. Political disqualifications, as the Central Election Commission frequently refuses to register opposition candidates—most notably Alexei Navalny and his associates. Political trials and exile, including the imprisonment of opposition leaders, labeling them as “foreign agents,” and forcing them into exile.

The opposition present in parliament (e.g., the Communist Party, LDPR) functions as satellite actors, without offering meaningful legislative resistance. This is commonly referred to in the literature as selective pluralism.

Even in the early 2000s, the judicial corps began to be gradually subordinated to presidential oversight in matters of discipline and appointment. The 2020 constitutional amendments marked a turning point, (Russell, 2020) allowing the president to propose the dismissal of judges from the Constitutional and Supreme Courts on the grounds of “unfitness”—a criterion that is not clearly defined. Moreover, on the recommendation of

the President of the Supreme Court, the president may now dismiss federal judges and participate in the appointment of prosecutors by submitting nominations to the Federation Council.

These reforms dismantled the institutional guarantees of judicial independence—particularly in politically sensitive or regime-critical cases. In the 1990s, the Constitutional Court had on several occasions acted as a check on abuse of power (e.g., during the Yeltsin-era parliamentary crisis), but under Putin, the Court evolved into a loyalty-based institution, no longer posing a real constraint on executive authority.

By the late 2000s, the Court had effectively legitimized all major legislative proposals, including the abolition of gubernatorial elections, laws targeting NGOs, and the implementation of the „foreign agent” label. Justices are selected and removed based on presidential nominations—a power further strengthened by the 2020 reforms.

The Constitutional Court no longer functions as an initiating or limiting institution but instead operates reactively and affirmatively.

2 STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO ELECTORAL COMPETITION

Opposition candidates in Russia face extraordinary administrative and political hurdles when attempting to participate in elections. In the most recent case, Boris Nadezhdin was required to collect 100,000 valid signatures, of which 9,000 were invalidated. The most significant obstacles include:

- Signature quotas: In many elections, political parties and independent candidates must submit disproportionately high numbers of verified signatures, the assessment of which is often subjective and politically motivated.
- “Extremism” or “foreign agent” designation: Any organization or individual labeled in this manner can be automatically excluded from participation.
- Judicial disqualifications: Opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny have been barred from running due to politically motivated or fabricated criminal proceedings.

In addition, so-called technical parties—organizations that formally present themselves as part of the opposition but in fact receive covert support from the Kremlin—play a key role in fragmenting the vote, dividing the opposition, and simulating electoral pluralism. Notable examples include New People, Green Party, and Motherland.

The entire electoral infrastructure—including election commissions, media platforms, and public institutions—is kept under tight state control. During campaign periods, opposition candidates are routinely silenced or discredited, while the government's narrative is amplified. Efforts to suppress „smart voting” strategies—initiatives aimed at coordinated opposition voting—are part of this broader framework.

3 THE CENTRALIZATION OF THE MEDIA SPHERE

From the early 2000s onward, a state-dominated media conglomerate system gradually emerged, controlling television, radio, and online news dissemination across Russia. Key actors include:

- VGTRK (All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company): The largest state-run media entity in Russia, overseeing channels such as Rossiya-1, Rossiya-24, and numerous regional broadcasters. It operates entirely under state supervision.
- Gazprom-Media: While formally a private entity, it functions as a subsidiary of the state-owned energy giant Gazprom. It owns NTV, previously Echo Moskvy, and NTV Plus.

Together, these two holdings dominate 80–90% of news and political content—particularly among rural audiences (Guriev, Treisman, 2022).

But how was the dismantling of independent media accomplished in practice?

At the upper levels, through strategic acquisitions—notably the 2001 takeover of NTV by Gazprom-Media and the replacement of the Lenta.ru editorial team in 2014. However, criminal pressure and legal repression were also employed, as seen in the restrictions placed on Meduza (2019), TV Rain (2021), and Novaya Gazeta (2022). The “foreign agent” label

became a key tool, severely limiting the financial viability of targeted media outlets by deterring advertisers and supporters.

Rather than overt censorship, the Russian state implemented a system of structural repression through regulatory mechanisms.

After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, media policy underwent a total transformation: disinformation and propaganda became official state doctrine, and the information space was treated as a battlefield governed by military logic. The term “special military operation” became mandatory; the use of “invasion” or “war” was criminalized.

In March 2022, the so-called “disinformation law” was passed, allowing prison sentences of up to 15 years for disseminating information that contradicts the official narrative. Over 300 media outlets had their licenses revoked or were blocked—including BBC Russian, Deutsche Welle, Current Time, and Radio Free Europe. The digital sphere was also restructured: Roskomnadzor, the federal telecommunications agency, began censoring social media, internet content, and even blocking VPN services. In deploying hybrid tools such as disinformation campaigns, Russia targets the inherent weaknesses of open and democratic systems, playing a zero-sum game – it does not strengthen by building its brand, it strengthens by weakening other actors (Dubóczy, Dvorský, 2025).

4 CRACKDOWN ON CIVIL SOCIETY

The 2012 “foreign agent” law required all organizations that:

- accept foreign funding, and
- engage in “political activity” (a term left deliberately vague)

To register in the official foreign agents registry. This designation entails discrimination, social stigma, and legal sanctions. In 2020, the status was extended to individuals, and by 2022, to media organizations as well.

Entities labeled as foreign agents were: obligated to label all publications with a “foreign agent” warning; required to submit quarterly financial reports to authorities; subject to arbitrary suspension by the state.

In 2015, legislation came into effect enabling the state to declare any foreign or international organization “undesirable” if deemed a threat to

Russia's constitutional order, national defense, or security. This resulted in the complete prohibition of operations within Russia and potential criminal liability for domestic collaborators, including NGOs, media outlets, and individuals.

The policy explicitly targeted NGOs connected to the United States, the European Union, and international donors—such as the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Foundations.

Beyond legal measures, the state exerted administrative and financial pressure on the NGO sector. Tactics included: withdrawal of state subsidies; continuous tax inspections; freezing of bank accounts; imposing strict registration requirements.

The most severely affected were organizations involved in human rights, electoral reform, women's rights, and LGBTQ advocacy—notably Memorial, Agora, and Bellona.

At the same time, the Kremlin did not merely repress civil society; it also constructed a top-down substitute for it. The Civic Chamber, created in 2004, institutionalized a managed form of public consultation, while pro-regime youth projects such as Nashi mobilized loyalist activism and countered liberal or opposition movements in the streets and media sphere. The Russian Orthodox Church increasingly functioned as a symbolic and political ally of the Kremlin, providing a civilizational language of tradition, sovereignty, and national unity that complemented the regime's anti-liberal discourse.

5 THE FUSION OF THE ECONOMIC SPHERE AND THE STATE

In 2000, President Vladimir Putin held a closed-door meeting with Russia's most influential oligarchs (including Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky). At this meeting, Putin made it clear that only those who refrained from interfering in politics would be allowed to retain their wealth. As a result, the business elite ceased to influence state decision-making through wealth; instead, it became a financier and servant of the regime (Laruelle, 2010).

The Yukos affair marked a turning point in Putin's economic policy. Yukos, one of Russia's largest oil companies, was owned by the MENATEP

group under Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The issue arose when Khodorkovsky openly supported opposition parties. In 2003, he was arrested, his assets were liquidated, and Yukos was ultimately absorbed by the state-owned Rosneft. In 2014, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague awarded \$50 billion in damages to the former shareholders, but Russia refused to comply. Subsequently, it amended its constitution to establish the primacy of Russian domestic law over international law, codifying its rejection of supranational legal rulings.

One of the earliest major constitutional changes occurred in 2008, when the presidential term was extended from four to six years. Although Dmitry Medvedev was formally president at the time, this amendment was widely understood as laying the groundwork for Putin's return to the presidency.

A more dramatic change came in 2020, when—upon the proposal of Valentina Tereshkova—the Russian parliament passed legislation in an expedited process to reset presidential term limits. This enabled Putin to remain in power until 2036, by which time he will be 84 years old.

The 2020 amendments also formally enshrined the supremacy of the Russian Constitution over international treaties and court decisions, reinforcing the principle that national law overrides any foreign legal obligations or rulings.

The same constitutional package also changed the composition and political role of the Federation Council. It introduced the category of senators of the Russian Federation appointed by the president, including the possibility of lifetime senators, and opened the way for former presidents to become senators for life. These changes strengthened the upper chamber's dependence on the presidential centre and further blurred the boundary between constitutional office and regime preservation.

Putin's system is not a "backsliding" democracy, but rather an authoritarian regime deliberately constructed as an alternative model of modernization. It fuses post-Soviet techniques of power consolidation with 21st-century tools of informational control. The long-term stability of this system does not rely on economic performance, but on institutionalized repression, structural apathy, and centralized resource distribution.

The ideological vocabulary of this system is captured by the notion of “sovereign democracy”, associated with Vladislav Surkov and often discussed alongside the concepts of “managed” or “controlled” democracy. Its core claim is that Russia constitutes a distinct civilizational space whose political order cannot be judged by Western liberal-democratic standards. The concept therefore legitimizes executive concentration by presenting pluralism, external criticism, and liberal constitutionalism as alien or hostile to the Russian world (Russkij mir).

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian case moved even further from the grey zone of hybridism toward open autocracy. The criminalization of the word “war”, the repression of non-conformist historical and cultural narratives, and the elimination or exile of major opposition voices indicate that electoral authoritarianism has become increasingly fused with militarized dictatorship. The murders or attempted murders of critics and opposition figures—such as Anna Politkovskaya, Natalia Estemirova, Alexander Litvinenko, Sergei Skripal, Boris Nemtsov, and Alexei Navalny—also show that repression operates not only through law, but through violence and fear.

6 POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN TURKEY AFTER THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM – THE FIRST DECADE OF THE AKP

The Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) was founded in August 2001 by political figures such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül, and Bülent Arınç, who had previously been active in the Islamist Welfare (Refah) Party and the Virtue (Fazilet) Party. Following the banning of the Fazilet Party, this new generation of political leadership distanced itself from overt Islamism and adopted a post-Islamist, moderately conservative-democratic agenda. The AKP presented itself as a pro-European, reform-oriented party advocating “moderate Islamic democracy” and promising economic stability. Just one year after its establishment, the AKP secured victory in the 2002 general elections.

The backdrop to this success was a deep financial crisis in 2001, which caused runaway inflation and a dramatic rise in unemployment, leading to a widespread collapse of public confidence. The political elite—particularly

the Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti, DSP)—suffered a severe loss of legitimacy. At the time, the electoral threshold was 10%, meaning that only two parties gained seats in Parliament: the AKP and the Republican People's Party (CHP), despite other parties collectively receiving over 45% of the vote. As a result, the AKP achieved an absolute parliamentary majority with only 34% of the vote, granting it an unprecedented opportunity to govern unilaterally.

The first reform package was enacted in February 2002: the death penalty was abolished, except for crimes related to terrorism, and amendments to the Penal Code strengthened protections against torture. The second reform package, introduced in March 2002, relaxed restrictions on freedom of assembly—legalizing peaceful demonstrations—and expanded press freedoms, including the publication of Kurdish-language materials. The third reform package, introduced in August 2002, fully abolished the death penalty, including in cases of terrorism. Kurdish was permitted in both media and education, and Turkey ratified international human rights conventions, such as the UN Convention Against Torture.

In May 2004, constitutional amendments were initiated to bring the National Security Council (MGK) under civilian control, reducing the military's influence in politics. In July 2004, an additional reform package tightened sanctions against torture and inhuman treatment. These reforms were primarily aimed at facilitating Turkey's accession to the European Union. Although Turkey had been on the list of candidate countries since 1999, it has consistently fallen short of fully meeting the Copenhagen criteria. Accession negotiations officially began on October 3, 2005, during which Turkey pledged to continue reforms in the areas of rule of law, human rights, and democracy.

As previously mentioned, the transformation of the MGK into a civilian body marked the first step in reducing the military's political role. This process continued in 2007 with the forced retirement—and in some cases coercion—of high-ranking military officers suspected of plotting a coup. In 2009, the Ergenekon trials were launched, during which hundreds of soldiers, journalists, and academics were accused of planning a coup. These trials amounted to one of the largest purges in modern Turkish history.

After 2007, during its second term, the AKP initiated institutional and legislative restructuring of the judiciary, particularly by altering the composition of judicial and prosecutorial councils. Here, the party encountered resistance from the secular state apparatus, especially the military and judiciary. The High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) and the Constitutional Court frequently blocked AKP-led reform efforts, particularly in areas related to religion, education, and public service dress codes. The judiciary was openly critical of the ruling party, and in 2008 the Chief Public Prosecutor even launched dissolution proceedings against the AKP on grounds of violating secularism.

These events culminated in the 2010 constitutional referendum, which had been preceded by a three-year communication campaign. The referendum marked a turning point in Turkey's political and legal system. One of its central elements was the restructuring of the HSYK, increasing the number of full members from 7 to 22, along with 12 alternate members. The executive branch gained greater influence over judicial appointments, enabling the AKP to change the composition of the judiciary. New powers were also granted to the HSYK, including authority over judicial appointments, promotions, and disciplinary actions. The number of Constitutional Court members was raised from 11 to 17, and for the first time individual complaints were allowed if fundamental rights were violated. Military personnel also became subject to civilian courts in certain criminal cases (Bâli, 2010).

In its early years, the AKP formed a strategic alliance with the Hizmet movement, a modernist-Islamist network led by Fethullah Gülen. Members or sympathizers of the movement gained positions within the police, judiciary, and prosecution services after 2007. They played a key role in weakening the military elite through the Ergenekon and Balyoz (Sledgehammer) trials, as well as other alleged coup plots—some of which were based on dubious or fabricated evidence. According to economist Dani Rodrik, Gülenists orchestrated many of these events, facilitating the rise of sympathizers to high-ranking positions. By the end of 2013, however, the alliance collapsed, turning into a full-scale conflict. Erdoğan began closing

Gülen-affiliated schools and businesses and initiated their removal from state institutions.

Turkey has a long history of coup attempts in the 20th century, and Erdoğan—perhaps not without reason—became increasingly obsessed with the possibility of being overthrown. This fear materialized on July 15, 2016, when factions within the military—allegedly aligned with the Gülen movement—attempted a coup. The chronology of the failed coup is as follows:

- July 15, 2016, 10:00 PM: Military units block the Bosphorus bridges; helicopters and fighter jets fly low over Ankara and Istanbul.
- 11:00 PM: The coup plotters announce they have seized control and impose a curfew.
- 1:30 AM (July 16): Erdoğan calls on citizens to take to the streets.
- Early morning: Parliament is bombed; civilians and police clash with coup forces.
- Morning: The government announces the coup has been successfully suppressed, leaving hundreds dead and thousands injured.

Fethullah Gülen denied any involvement of his network in the 2016 coup attempt. Nonetheless, by the morning following the attack, more than 2,800 military personnel, including generals, were detained, and 2,745 judges were dismissed. The failed coup provided Erdoğan with an opportunity to declare a state of emergency, initially set for three months but repeatedly extended. This legal framework enabled the government to rule by decree and curtail fundamental rights.

A sweeping purge soon began, not only through arrests but also through mass dismissals in the public sector, affecting teachers, soldiers, and judges alike. According to the Freedom of the Press – Turkey Country Report by Freedom House (2017), hundreds of media outlets—primarily those critical of the government, but also Kurdish media—were shut down, including TV stations, radio broadcasters, newspapers, and publishing houses. These closures were enacted by decree under the state of emergency and justified by alleged ties to the Gülen movement. Notable examples include:

- Zaman newspaper: Accused of affiliation with the Gülen network, it had one of the highest circulations in Turkey and was placed under state control in 2016.
- Samanyolu TV and Bugün TV: Both were completely shut down due to their presumed connections with the movement.
- Cihan News Agency: Closed in July 2016, as it was identified as the Gülenist news agency.

The education sector was also severely affected: nearly 4,000 academics were suspended, and 15 universities were closed altogether (e.g., Fatih University, Mevlana University) under the pretext that they had trained the Gülenist elite.

Civil society organizations (NGOs) also suffered significant setbacks: 1,229 foundations and associations, as well as 19 trade unions, were dissolved without judicial proceedings. In November, another 375 associations and civil organizations were shut down under accusations of ties to terrorism, and their assets were confiscated by the government. Among these were organizations advocating for women's and children's rights, as well as medical and legal associations and charities.

The 2016 coup attempt represents a critical turning point in Turkish governance. However, to fully understand the context, one must look back to 2013, when a major corruption scandal erupted in Turkey. Although different in nature, it marked another critical shift in the country's political dynamics, with lasting consequences (Diamond, 2022).

The events unfolded rapidly, over the course of just a few days:

- December 17, 2013: Istanbul's financial crimes unit detained 47 individuals, including high-ranking officials and businessmen. Charges included bribery, money laundering, fraud, and gold smuggling. Among them was the CEO of Halkbank, Süleyman Aslan, in whose home \$4.5 million was found hidden in shoeboxes. Also implicated was Reza Zarrab, an Iranian businessman accused of evading U.S. sanctions. Authorities seized \$17.5 million, identified as bribe money.

- December 21, 2013: A court ordered the arrest of 14 individuals, including Barış Güler, Kaan Çağlayan, and Oğuz Bayraktar—all sons of government ministers. The charges mirrored the earlier ones: bribery, money laundering, and fraud.
- December 23–24, 2013: Hakan Yüksekdağ, head of the Ankara Police Department's organized crime unit, was found dead in his car. Official reports cited suicide, though the family disputed this. The situation became even more suspicious when Abdi Altınok, deputy governor of Isparta Province, also committed suicide shortly thereafter.
- December 25, 2013: Muammer Güler (Minister of the Interior), Zafer Çağlayan (Minister of Economy), and Erdoğan Bayraktar (Minister of Environment and Urbanization) resigned after their sons were implicated. Bayraktar stated that his resignation was not voluntary, and publicly called on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to step down as well.
- December 26, 2013: A second wave of investigations was reportedly in preparation. Allegedly, this round would have implicated Erdoğan's sons, prompting the government to reassign the lead prosecutor and several police officials, thereby halting further arrests.
- December 31, 2013: Hasan Hami Yıldırım, an AKP Member of Parliament, resigned.

These investigations could have marked a turning point for Turkey, providing a unique opportunity to eliminate corruption once and for all. Instead, they only confirmed that the AKP government sought to cover up its own criminal activities and its links to corrupt networks.

Even during the 2010 constitutional amendments, the AKP had already begun to undermine the secular constitution based on the separation of powers. This tendency culminated in 2017, when another referendum was held on April 16, resulting in the adoption of a presidential system with a 51.9% majority. The key changes included: the abolition of the prime minister's office, with executive power concentrated in the hands of the

president. The president was granted authority to issue executive decrees and dissolve parliament. The requirement for presidential political neutrality was eliminated, allowing the president to maintain party membership. The number of parliamentary seats increased from 550 to 600, and the minimum age for candidacy was lowered to 18.

Following these changes, on July 9, 2018, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan took the presidential oath, officially marking the start of the new system. Several justifications were given for this shift: increased governmental efficiency:

- The new system allowed for quicker decision-making and stronger executive authority, which—according to its proponents—was essential during times of crisis.
- Political stability: The reform aimed to reduce political instability and ensure the continuity of governance.
- Restoration of pre-coup order: After the 2016 attempted coup, Erdoğan emphasized the need to preserve the state of emergency and reinforce authority to prevent similar future events.

However, this system granted significant political advantages to Erdoğan and enabled the realization of his personal political ambitions:

- Concentration of executive power: The president gained full authority to appoint and dismiss ministers and vice presidents, and to issue decrees. This allowed Erdoğan to bypass collective decision-making and install loyal party cadres in key positions, transforming the executive branch into a single command chain.
- Influence over the legislative branch: The president could dissolve parliament at will, making it de facto dependent on presidential will. The legislative branch's autonomy diminished, gradually delegitimizing opposition initiatives.
- Control over the judiciary: Given the president's influence over the appointment of judges and prosecutors, judicial independence declined, fostering a climate of self-censorship and precedent-driven political alignment.
- Consolidation of power: The new system enabled Erdoğan to maintain long-term political dominance.

The new framework centralized executive functions. Although the Grand National Assembly of Turkey formally remained a part of the political system, it was functionally marginalized.

Turkey's current domestic political dynamics are shaped by the erosion of governmental authority, the breakdown of institutional checks and balances, and the economic and political instability generated by a volatile fiscal and regulatory environment. Regime stability faces mounting challenges, particularly following the arrest of Istanbul's mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, an event that deepened political and societal divisions. The arrest served not only as a means of neutralizing rival political forces, but also as a preventive deterrent against emerging democratic alternatives.

The imprisonment of Ekrem İmamoğlu is therefore not only another episode of selective judicial pressure, but a potential regime threshold. İmamoğlu's political significance derives from his capacity to unite opposition constituencies and from the symbolic importance of Istanbul, where Erdoğan's own national career began. By removing a credible presidential challenger through the courts, the regime reduces the remaining competitive element of competitive authoritarianism and moves closer to a consolidated presidential dictatorship in which alternation in power is no longer realistically available.

Nationwide mass protests erupted in response, directly reflecting the arbitrary exercise of state power and the crisis of political pluralism. These demonstrations were accompanied by police brutality, preemptive arrests, and social media censorship (Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018).

The devaluation of the Turkish lira and the destabilization of financial markets further indicated that investors began perceiving political risk as a form of structural uncertainty. Civil society space has narrowed considerably; the right to protest is systematically restricted, and state reprisals pose a constant threat to dissent.

The trajectory of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule clearly illustrates that Turkey's political system has, over the past two decades, shifted from a liberal-democratic framework toward a centralized presidential autocracy. This occurred despite the fact that Erdoğan's early reforms had once paved

the way toward potential European Union accession. Over time, however, the principles of political pluralism, separation of powers, and institutional autonomy have eroded. In their place, the regime's construction has centered on executive dominance, the monopolization of mechanisms of social control, and the development of loyalty-based networks around the nucleus of power.

This authoritarian transformation has also been accompanied by a powerful nationalist and civilizational narrative. Erdoğan's appeal to a "Great Turkey" links domestic legitimacy to foreign-policy activism, military assertiveness, and the recovery of Ottoman-Islamic historical pride. In the literature on Turkish politics and international relations, this ideological orientation is often described as Neo-Ottomanism. It helps mobilize nationalist sentiment, justify exceptional leadership, and present external conflicts as evidence that only a strong presidential centre can defend the nation.

7 COMPARATIVE PATTERNS OF POWER CONCENTRATION

A direct comparison of the Russian and Turkish cases reveals both structural similarities and important differences in the mechanisms of power consolidation.

In both systems, executive power has expanded significantly, though through different trajectories. In Russia, this process was driven by the reconstruction of the state and the establishment of a centralized "vertical of power," whereas in Turkey it emerged through the gradual transformation of a parliamentary system into a personalized presidential regime.

Judicial institutions in both countries have been systematically subordinated to political authority. In Russia, this occurred through the gradual erosion of judicial independence and increased presidential influence over appointments and dismissals. In Turkey, constitutional reforms—particularly after 2010—enabled the executive to reshape the composition of judicial bodies.

The media environment in both cases is characterized by structural control rather than overt censorship alone. While Russia relies heavily on

state-controlled media conglomerates, Turkey combines regulatory pressure and legal interventions to limit pluralism.

Civil society has also been constrained through legal and administrative mechanisms. Russia’s “foreign agent” legislation and Turkey’s post-2016 emergency decrees illustrate how legal frameworks are used to restrict independent actors.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that contemporary forms of authoritarianism do not eliminate democratic institutions but rather transform them into instruments of controlled political competition and executive dominance.

The comparison also clarifies an important asymmetry. Russia’s regime logic rests increasingly on depoliticization, fear, and the administrative production of consent, especially after the war against Ukraine. Turkey’s regime logic, by contrast, still relies more visibly on electoral mobilization, polarization, and plebiscitary claims to majority will. Yet both models converge in their core institutional outcome: the conversion of formally democratic institutions into instruments of executive survival.

Table 1: Comparative Dimensions of Power Concentration in Russia and Turkey.

Dimension	Russia	Turkey
Executive Power	Centralized presidential system; “vertical of power”; extensive decree authority	Presidentialization of a former parliamentary system; personalized executive authority
Legislature	Dominated by ruling party (United Russia); limited deliberation	Increasingly subordinated to executive; weakened parliamentary oversight

Dimension	Russia	Turkey
Judiciary	Gradual erosion of independence; presidential influence over appointments and dismissals	Restructured through constitutional reforms; executive influence over judicial councils
Media	State-dominated media conglomerates; structural control	Regulatory pressure, ownership restructuring, and legal repression
Civil Society	“Foreign agent” laws; administrative and financial pressure	Post-2016 purges; emergency decrees; restrictions on NGOs
Elections	Controlled competition; technical parties; administrative barriers	Competitive but increasingly unfair; strong incumbency advantage
Legitimation	Depoliticization; managed participation	Electoral mobilization; plebiscitary legitimacy

Source: Authors’ work.

CONCLUSION

The study has demonstrated that the political systems of the Russian Federation after 2000 and Turkey under the dominance of the AKP represent two specific yet convergent models of power concentration which can no longer be described as “imperfect democracies”, but rather as deliberately constructed forms of electoral and presidential autocracy. In both cases, we observe a gradual transformation of the constitutional framework, whereby formal democratic procedures remain in place but

their substance is systematically hollowed out through legal engineering, selective repression, and highly asymmetric access to the resources of political competition.

The Russian model rests on the fusion of the state, the security apparatus and economic elites, with its stability relying on the combination of centralised executive authority, loyal regional structures and a controlled party system in which the dominance of the ruling party effectively precludes genuine alternation in power. The Turkish model, by contrast, illustrates how an initially reformist and pro-European political force can reshape a parliamentary system into a personalised presidential autocracy, grounded in plebiscitary legitimation, far-reaching interventions into the judiciary, media and civil society, and a discourse of permanent crisis that serves to justify exceptional powers of the executive.

The key feature of these regimes is not sudden rupture, but incremental dismantling of liberal-democratic norms through formally legal instruments – constitutional amendments, changes to electoral law, reorganisation of judicial councils, and the introduction of selective categories such as “foreign agent” or “extremist”. Although the Russian and Turkish cases differ in historical context, geopolitical orientation and elite structures, both confirm a broader tendency to transform institutions of checks and balances into tools for legitimising executive decisions, thereby narrowing the space for political contestation, civic participation and effective opposition.

The findings of the article support interpretations that treat hybrid regimes not as a “transitional phase” between democracy and authoritarianism, but as relatively stable and adaptable forms of rule capable of using elections, media and the legal order as instruments for reproducing power. The Russian and Turkish cases thus serve as a warning to liberal democracies that the erosion of democratic institutions does not occur primarily through overt coups, but through the long-term rewriting of the rules of the game from within, with political elites willing to subordinate the constitutional order to the logic of their own survival playing a decisive role.

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CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY¹

Jozef Huljak²

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the theoretical foundations of cultural diplomacy within contemporary foreign policy strategies. Cultural diplomacy is understood as an important instrument of soft power through which states pursue their interests by promoting culture, education, language, and international artistic cooperation. The paper aims to identify and critically analyse the main theoretical approaches to cultural diplomacy, particularly in relation to soft power theory, public diplomacy, and constructivist perspectives in international relations. The study highlights the growing importance of non-coercive forms of influence in an increasingly interconnected and competitive international environment. It interprets cultural diplomacy as a flexible strategic tool that enables states to shape international perceptions, strengthen national identity, enhance reputation, and expand political influence abroad. The paper further argues that cultural diplomacy has evolved from a supplementary foreign policy activity into an institutionalised component of modern statecraft. By synthesising key theoretical concepts, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the role and significance of cultural diplomacy in contemporary international relations.

Keywords: cultural diplomacy, soft power, foreign policy, theoretical frameworks, cultural relations

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INTRODUCTION

In the era. In the era of digital communication, escalating geopolitical tensions, and the gradual weakening of multilateral cooperation, cultural diplomacy has acquired renewed strategic relevance. Both state and non state actors increasingly employ cultural instruments, such as language

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programs, artistic exchanges, scientific cooperation, and digital storytelling, to build trust, shape public opinion, and strengthen their position within the international system. Despite this growing practical significance, the academic discourse on cultural diplomacy remains marked by a surprising degree of theoretical fragmentation: although the concept frequently appears in political strategies, media narratives, and scholarly texts, consensus regarding its precise definition remains absent.

This terminological ambiguity is not merely an academic shortcoming; rather, it reflects the genuine multidimensionality of the phenomenon itself. Cultural diplomacy lies at the intersection of political science, diplomatic theory, cultural studies, and international relations. Diplomats tend to perceive it as an instrument for advancing national interests, curators and artists as a platform for cultural dialogue independent of political agendas, and international relations theorists as a manifestation of soft power. Each of these perspectives is legitimate, yet none is fully sufficient on its own. The search for a single universal definition would therefore risk oversimplifying a complex reality; a more meaningful objective lies in the critical identification and comparison of the principal theoretical approaches.

The current state of research on cultural diplomacy is characterized by dynamic development that intensified after 2000, particularly in connection with debates on public diplomacy following the events of September 11, 2001, the expansion of Chinese, Russian, and Turkish cultural diplomacy programs, and the growing scholarly interest in soft power theory. Anglophone scholarship offers extensive overview studies (Clarke, 2020; Cull, 2008; Goff, 2013) as well as critical reflections (Zamorano, 2016; Channick, 2005). Within Central European scholarship, valuable national and regional case studies are available; however, systematic work integrating Anglo American, Western European, and Central European traditions into a unified analytical framework, while simultaneously addressing the differences among them, remains lacking. The present study seeks to partially fill this gap.

The central research question of this study is as follows: What are the principal theoretical approaches to defining cultural diplomacy in the scholarly literature, and how can their normative assumptions and mutual

tensions be synthesized into a coherent analytical framework? This question is further divided into two related sub questions. The first concerns the differences between the normative foundations of state centric and relational approaches and the implications of this divergence for the operationalization of the concept in political practice. The second examines the role of poststructuralist critiques in exposing the power asymmetries embedded within dominant definitions of cultural diplomacy.

The study makes three interrelated contributions. First, it offers a conceptual contribution by proposing an original three layer typology of approaches to cultural diplomacy that integrates state centric, relational, and critical perspectives within a single analytical framework. Second, it provides a comparative contribution through the systematic comparison of Anglophone, Western European, and Central European academic traditions, thereby uncovering tensions that have thus far received limited scholarly attention. Third, it makes a contextual contribution by situating Slovak academic discourse within a broader international framework and identifying potential directions for its future development.

The study is structured as follows. The first section presents the methodological framework and research design. The second section maps the conceptual foundations of cultural diplomacy, including its relationship to cultural relations and soft power theory. The third section systematically analyses the principal academic definitions and critical perspectives. The fourth section synthesizes the findings through the proposed typology and discusses their broader implications. The conclusion outlines the study's theoretical contributions and proposes avenues for future research.

1 METHODOLOGY

Research on cultural diplomacy requires explicit methodological grounding, particularly because the interdisciplinary nature of the phenomenon, situated at the intersection of political science, diplomatic studies, cultural studies, and international relations, renders the selection of methodological instruments especially sensitive. The present study is based on a systematic qualitative research design combining three mutually

complementary methods: Systematic Literature Review, comparative conceptual analysis, and interpretative discourse analysis.

The criteria for including sources in the analysis were as follows: the source had to contain an explicit definition or conceptualization of cultural diplomacy; it had to originate from a peer reviewed academic journal, scholarly monograph, or authoritative institutional document; and it had to be available in one of the four selected languages. Popular science texts, non peer reviewed reports lacking scholarly apparatus, and sources without clear conceptual argumentation were excluded. Based on these criteria, twenty five sources representing Anglophone, Francophone, Central European, and German language traditions were included in the final analysis.

The analytical framework of the study is grounded in conceptual analysis focused on identifying normative assumptions, actor models, and functional definitions within individual sources. Each analyzed source was evaluated according to four analytical categories: (a) the primary actor of cultural diplomacy, namely the state versus non state actors; (b) the direction of communication, namely one directional and asymmetrical versus bidirectional and reciprocal; (c) normative orientation, namely instrumental versus relational; and (d) epistemological assumptions, namely positivist versus poststructuralist. This analytical matrix enabled a systematic comparison of definitions across traditions and created the basis for the proposed three layer typology.

Interpretative discourse analysis was applied primarily in examining the normative assumptions embedded in definitions that at first glance appear to be neutral descriptive formulations. In accordance with the tradition of critical international relations theory (Zamorano, 2016) and Foucault's discourse analysis, every definition of cultural diplomacy not only describes reality but actively constructs it by legitimizing certain forms of cultural engagement while marginalizing others. The objective of the discourse analysis was therefore to uncover these constructive mechanisms.

Among the principal methodological challenges of this research are the problems of impact measurement and scholarly positionality. Cultural diplomatic activities primarily generate diffuse effects, namely long term

changes in perceptions, attitudes, and trust, which are difficult to operationalize (Clarke, 2020). Isolating the effects of cultural diplomacy programs from other factors influencing international relations therefore remains methodologically demanding (Nye, 2008). With regard to researcher positionality, the study is grounded in a Central European academic perspective, which may influence both interpretation and source selection in favour of Anglophone and Central European traditions. Moreover, Zamorano (2016) and Channick (2005) draw attention to the risks associated with research conducted in close proximity to state actors, where the danger of perspectival bias becomes significant. A methodological limitation of the present study therefore lies in its focus on an analytical overview of theoretical literature without a direct empirical component and with relatively limited representation of Francophone and German language traditions.

2 CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

2.1 Cultural Diplomacy and Cultural Relations

The scholarly literature on cultural diplomacy encompasses a broad spectrum of definitions reflecting diverse theoretical approaches as well as the contextual conditions in which they emerged. Although culture as a component of social life has existed throughout human history, its systematic use within the framework of state foreign policy is a distinctly modern phenomenon. One of the most significant methodological contributions to the conceptual delineation of the term remains the distinction formulated by the American diplomat and historian Richard Arndt. In his extensive study of American cultural diplomacy, Arndt (2005) differentiates between cultural relations as a natural, bottom up process of exchange among civilizations and cultural diplomacy as a deliberate governmental policy that shapes, stimulates, and at times instrumentalizes these relations in pursuit of state interests. This distinction has become a methodological foundation for subsequent research, and its analytical relevance has increased in the contemporary environment, where digital platforms and new categories of actors increasingly blur the boundaries

between government directed representation and autonomous cultural exchange.

The concept of cultural diplomacy became firmly established within scholarly discourse during the second half of the twentieth century. Historically, the first official use of the term is generally attributed to 1959, when Robert H. Thayer, Assistant Secretary of State for the Coordination of International Educational and Cultural Relations in the United States, emphasized that foreign relations are shaped by the ways in which people live, think, feel, and act. According to Thayer, cultural diplomacy had become a central instrument of foreign policy and the most essential means of achieving mutual understanding among nations, thereby also fostering understanding among governments. In the same year, the United States Department of State defined cultural diplomacy in concise terms as direct and enduring contact between people from different countries. This early institutional definition, emphasizing interpersonal contact rather than state programs, represents a noteworthy precursor to later relational approaches.

Australian scholars Ang, Isar, and Mar (2015) further develop Arndt's distinction and conceptualize it as a tension between two modalities: cultural diplomacy as an interest driven governmental practice on the one hand and cultural relations as a broader network of non state cultural exchanges on the other. They critically highlight the tendency of dominant discourse to conflate these two phenomena, thereby obscuring the autonomy and authenticity of cultural actors who do not operate on behalf of the state. This distinction has direct implications for evaluating the legitimacy and effectiveness of cultural diplomacy programs: when a state presents what is effectively one sided propaganda as cultural diplomacy, the credibility of the entire field is weakened.

Historically, some of the earliest systematic definitions of cultural diplomacy emerged from the diplomatic milieu itself. In their terminological dictionary of key diplomatic concepts, Berridge and James (2003) characterize cultural diplomacy as the promotion of a state's cultural achievements abroad, or more broadly, as the promotion of achievements in science and technology, the arts, and the humanities, with particular

emphasis on fostering connections between parallel institutions at home and abroad, such as domestic and foreign universities. This definition captures the presentational and promotional dimension of cultural diplomacy, yet it limits the concept to one directional communication from the state toward foreign audiences. Canadian political scientist Bélanger (1999) proposes a substantively richer characterization, arguing that cultural diplomacy encompasses foreign policy activities related to culture, education, science, and communication. This definition suggests the multisectoral nature of the phenomenon while nevertheless firmly anchoring it within the logic of foreign policy.

Diplomatic theorists Hamilton and Langhorne (2010) describe cultural diplomacy as governmental support for the protection and presentation of national culture abroad. This formulation introduces into the discussion an important tension between the protection of cultural heritage and active foreign policy promotion. A common feature of the cited definitions is their focus on the state as the primary actor. They differ, however, in whether they perceive culture primarily as an instrument or as an autonomous value worthy of presentation, and in whether they conceptualize communication as one directional or reciprocal.

2.2 Cultural Diplomacy in the Context of Soft Power Theory

Culture has gradually established itself in international relations as one of the key sources of state influence. In Joseph Nye's conceptualization (2004), it constitutes one of the three pillars of soft power, alongside the values of the political system and foreign policy, that is, power derived from attractiveness rather than coercion or direct reward. Within this framework, cultural diplomacy becomes the instrument through which states transform cultural attractiveness into concrete foreign policy influence. Nye's conceptualization provided cultural diplomacy not only with a new analytical language but also with strategic legitimacy in the eyes of policy makers: if culture is power, then cultural diplomacy represents foreign policy pursued through alternative means.

According to Nye (2008), the effectiveness of this mechanism depends on credibility. Soft power functions only when foreign audiences perceive a

state's cultural communication as authentic, namely when the values being promoted correspond to actual political practice. Once this coherence is disrupted, the attractiveness of culture weakens and the diplomatic function of culture loses its legitimacy. Cultural diplomacy is therefore not merely a technical instrument of representation but also a reflection of a state's broader commitment to the values it promotes. In practice, however, Nye's argument regarding consistency is only rarely fulfilled. Historical examples, ranging from American cultural diplomacy during the Vietnam War to Russian cultural diplomacy activities following the annexation of Crimea, demonstrate how contradictions between proclaimed values and actual policies systematically undermine the credibility of cultural programs.

Ang, Isar, and Mar (2015), however, emphasize that cultural attractiveness in itself does not yet constitute soft power. It becomes a source of soft power only when it is deliberately and strategically employed to achieve specific political objectives. This perspective connects the analytical understanding of soft power with its instrumental application while simultaneously rejecting the assumption that cultural exchange alone automatically generates political capital.

In this context, the relationship between cultural policy and cultural diplomacy becomes particularly important. UNESCO (1969) defines cultural policy as a set of social practices and interventions aimed at satisfying the cultural needs of society through the use of all available material and human resources. From this perspective, cultural diplomacy emerges as the external dimension of cultural policy, namely its projection into the international sphere. Papaioannou (2018) emphasizes the mutual interdependence of these concepts, arguing that without a strong domestic cultural policy, external cultural representation cannot remain either credible or sustainable. This argument raises an important question for small and medium sized states: countries with limited cultural policy capacities face a structural disadvantage in building authentic cultural diplomacy, regardless of how sophisticated their diplomatic instruments may be.

3 ACADEMIC DEFINITIONS: AN OVERVIEW OF APPROACHES

3.1 Major Theoretical Approaches to Cultural Diplomacy

The academic community offers a broad range of definitions of cultural diplomacy reflecting diverse disciplinary perspectives, regional contexts, and normative orientations. For the purposes of comparative analysis, the approaches examined in this study are categorized into three groups, which will be further elaborated in the Discussion section: (a) state centric definitions emphasizing the foreign policy function of cultural diplomacy, (b) relational definitions focused on mutual understanding and bidirectional communication, and (c) poststructuralist critical approaches addressing power asymmetries. The following overview presents the principal representatives of these traditions.

Within Slovak scholarly discourse, Pajtinka (2016) defines cultural diplomacy as a specific component of diplomacy aimed at advancing the foreign policy interests of the state primarily through instruments originating in the cultural sphere. In this conception, the practice of cultural diplomacy extends beyond the mere presentation of national art and includes direct assistance to national cultural actors abroad, the proactive organization of events in cooperation with local institutions, the dissemination of language and cultural values, as well as the preparation of international agreements on cultural cooperation and support for expatriate communities. Pajtinka's definition is instrumental and normatively neutral: culture constitutes the means, while foreign policy interests represent the objective. Kurucz (2007) further argues that cultural diplomacy is closely linked to both foreign and cultural policy and mediates the international exchange of ideas, information, and values in the fields of art, education, science, sport, and popular culture, while its effectiveness depends on the coherence between cultural diplomacy and the state's domestic and foreign policy.

Hubinger (2006) describes cultural diplomacy as a means of representing and promoting the state within the international environment, through which a country strengthens cultural awareness and builds a

positive image abroad. Rusiňák, Mattoš, and Rusiňáková (2012) perceive it as a distinct dimension of state foreign policy aimed at supporting and developing cultural influence within international relations, identifying culture, art, science, and sport as its principal instruments. Ivey and Cleggett (n.d.) enrich this state centric line of thought with a relational dimension by defining cultural diplomacy as a domain of diplomacy whose purpose is to establish, develop, and maintain relations with foreign nations through cultural exchanges. Despite the emphasis on mutual exchange, however, their definition remains firmly embedded within formal diplomatic practice.

The German diplomat Enders (2005) characterizes cultural diplomacy as an instrument serving the political objectives of the state. Even where cultural diplomacy pursues its own goals, these remain derived from and subordinated to the broader framework of foreign policy. Enders therefore represents the tradition of continental European, specifically German, diplomacy, which emphasizes institutional hierarchy and the political dependence of cultural programs. Hubinger, by contrast, stresses the representational and communicative dimension: cultural diplomacy is not merely a political instrument but also a platform through which a country shapes its identity abroad. The two perspectives are complementary, with Enders emphasizing the strategic foundation and Hubinger highlighting communicative autonomy.

Mark (2010) defines cultural diplomacy as a form of state diplomacy conducted within the framework of foreign policy or in support of governmental diplomatic objectives. It involves the deliberate use of cultural activities to present the identity, values, and cultural heritage of the state to foreign publics and elites. Mark emphasizes that cultural diplomacy is not limited to traditional instruments such as language courses, artistic tours, or academic exchanges; rather, its essence lies in its flexibility and multilayered character, which allows programs to be adapted to different target audiences. A key element of Mark's approach is also its long term orientation: the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy activities cannot be measured through short term outcomes or conventional diplomatic indicators.

Cummings (2003) conceptualizes cultural diplomacy as an instrument of international communication that facilitates interstate and intercultural understanding through the transmission of ideas, artistic works, knowledge, and broader cultural values. Importantly, this mechanism does not necessarily operate on the basis of reciprocity. It often functions as a unilateral form of influence in which an actor employs cultural means to support its own foreign policy objectives or shape a favorable image in the eyes of foreign audiences. Cummings's definition therefore suggests that cultural diplomacy may operate as an asymmetrical instrument of influence rather than solely as a platform for equal dialogue.

Tomalová (2008) presents cultural diplomacy as a systematic component of state foreign policy aimed at positively influencing the perception of a country abroad through cultural activities. It is implemented through foreign cultural institutes, language instruction, exhibitions, artistic and academic exchanges, translations of literary works, and media projects. The concrete form of cultural diplomacy depends on the cultural model of the state, its political will, and its financial capacities, while in practice increasing emphasis is placed on cooperation among the state, the private sector, and civil society. Goff (2013), beyond offering definitional analysis, emphasizes four strategic functions of cultural diplomacy. First, it facilitates deeper understanding of social values and norms, often through personal experiences such as student exchanges. Second, it possesses the capacity to overcome political barriers and reach audiences beyond the scope of traditional diplomacy. Connections established within the cultural sphere may endure even in the absence of official relations, keeping communication channels open and creating conditions for future political dialogue. Finally, cultural diplomacy provides context for political decisions and humanizes the image of the state abroad, thereby disrupting simplified stereotypes.

Schneider (2006) understands cultural diplomacy as a long term process of mutual exchange and understanding among nations functioning as a bidirectional channel of communication. It does not serve as a substitute for unpopular political decisions but rather enables the presentation of a state's values, traditions, and cultural characteristics, including diversity, freedom

of expression, opportunity, individual self realization, and meritocracy. The success of cultural diplomacy lies in creating space for communication between diplomats and the publics of target countries, even during periods of strained relations. Although its effects cannot be precisely quantified, it contributes to qualitative improvements in relations between states and cultures. In the contemporary environment of limited budgets, Schneider emphasizes the necessity of creative planning, flexibility in adapting programs, and the effective use of available opportunities. Schneider's approach, emphasizing symmetry, authenticity, and values, differs substantially from instrumental logic and anticipates later poststructuralist critiques.

The Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (ICD) further expands the perspective by arguing that cultural diplomacy extends beyond traditional state activity and actively involves non state actors, including universities, cultural institutions, artists, and civil society organizations. An illustrative example is provided by American cultural exchange programs during the Cold War, when the United States employed jazz musicians as ambassadors of goodwill. Although these activities were supported by state institutions, they were carried out by non state artists and contributed to shaping a positive image of the United States while simultaneously creating space for intercultural dialogue during periods of political tension. This multi actor perspective corresponds with the distinction formulated by Arndt and later developed by Ang et al. between government directed diplomacy and autonomous cultural relations.

Cull (2008) attributes a dual role to cultural diplomacy within the framework of public diplomacy theory: it serves both to present the identity and values of the state and to build long term relationships and understanding with foreign audiences. It operates in conjunction with other components of public diplomacy, including listening, advocacy, exchanges, and international broadcasting. Cull emphasizes that efforts to influence the international environment through the presentation of cultural resources possess deep historical roots, ranging from the construction of the Library of Alexandria to the education of elites from allied nations in the Roman Republic. Contemporary institutions such as the British Council, Italian

cultural institutes, and the extensive network of French schools continue this tradition by securing global influence and prestige for their respective countries.

Clarke (2020), in an encyclopedic entry, highlights the problem of defining the cultural content of cultural diplomacy. Beyond art in the narrow sense, the cultural dimension encompasses radio, television, education, science, sport, as well as language and religion. Such breadth complicates the operationalization of the concept while simultaneously reflecting the genuine multidimensionality of cultural processes. In this regard, Polgár (2013) distinguishes between narrow and broad definitions of cultural diplomacy. The narrow definition primarily serves an informational function, whereas the broader definition encompasses the full spectrum of activities, ranging from exchanges of artists and academics to scientific cooperation and language dissemination.

3.2 Critical and Analytical Perspectives

Alongside definitional approaches, the literature also contains functional, strategic, and critical perspectives that move beyond questions of terminology and examine cultural diplomacy within its broader socio political context. Finn (2003) understands cultural diplomacy as a means of shaping a positive image of the state and securing the support of foreign publics through cultural activities. This approach emphasizes the direct connection between cultural policy and the strategic objectives of foreign policy, including ideological influence and the strengthening of national security. This was particularly evident in the practice of the United States after the Second World War, when the state employed cultural diplomacy to disseminate democratic values and promote American culture throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Finn specifically highlights the potential of cultural exchanges to influence younger generations in target countries and the capacity of cultural ties to sustain relationships even during periods of strained diplomatic relations.

Laqueur (1994) emphasizes the strategic function of cultural diplomacy within foreign policy. Through cultural diplomacy, states are able to present their values, political positions, and ways of life to foreign audiences. Unlike

traditional diplomacy or military power, both of which possess clear limitations of reach, Laqueur considers cultural diplomacy a long term instrument for shaping public opinion and fostering mutual understanding. He argues that after the end of the Cold War, the United States underestimated its strategic importance. Significant budget cuts and the termination of key programs, including the broadcasting services Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, represented a serious weakening of the United States' ability to communicate its values during a period of growing global instability. According to Laqueur, cultural diplomacy should not be perceived as a luxury but rather as a fundamental component of national interest and security that systematically shapes the image of the state over the long term.

Stamatoudi (2009) describes an innovative application of cultural diplomacy as a mediating instrument in disputes concerning the repatriation of cultural artifacts to their countries of origin. This approach is based on flexible procedures that extend beyond strictly legal mechanisms. In such a framework, cultural diplomacy facilitates constructive dialogue and contributes to the achievement of agreements through negotiation. Successful cases, including the return of the Obelisk of Axum to Ethiopia, the transfer of human remains to South Australia, and the repatriation of a ceremonial mask belonging to the Kwakwaka'wakw community in Canada, demonstrate that cultural diplomacy may at times prove more effective than formal legal instruments. In this context, culture functions not only as the object of dispute but also as a method of diplomatic communication.

The most significant challenge to the dominant framework is represented by the poststructuralist critique advanced by Zamorano (2016, p. 167). He argues that although the concept of soft power presents itself as a neutral analytical instrument, it in fact naturalizes power asymmetries, legitimizes foreign policy interests, and conceals them beneath the language of cultural attractiveness. Drawing on Foucault's understanding of power as an inherent component of all social relations, Zamorano demonstrates how the logic of soft power within cultural diplomacy obscures the actual sources and agendas of power projection. Sophisticated propaganda

instruments thereby acquire the appearance of autonomous cultural exchange, weakening the capacity for critical reflection, including within academia itself.

Channick (2005) develops this critique from the perspective of artistic practice and distinguishes between two fundamental approaches to the implementation of cultural diplomacy. The official approach perceives culture primarily as an instrument for advancing national interests, with artists functioning as ambassadors of state values. The alternative approach, by contrast, is grounded in the authenticity of artistic expression and argues that unconstrained artistic creativity and open dialogue are ultimately more persuasive and more effective in the long term than deliberate political promotion. This tension between the instrumentalization and the autonomy of culture remains one of the central themes of the entire discourse and is directly connected to the question of who ultimately controls the content and form of cultural diplomatic communication.

4 DISCUSSION

The systematic analysis of the approaches presented above demonstrates that cultural diplomacy is not a monolithic concept but rather a dynamic conceptual space in which three distinct logics intersect and mutually condition one another. On the basis of the analytical framework formulated in the methodological section, encompassing actor models, direction of communication, normative orientation, and epistemological assumptions, this study proposes a three layer typology of approaches to cultural diplomacy.

The first layer consists of state centric instrumental approaches, represented by Pajtinka, Kurucz, Hubinger, Enders, Mark, and Cummings. These definitions share the assumption that the state constitutes the primary actor, communication may be unilateral, normative orientation is instrumental, and epistemological assumptions are predominantly positivist. Within this framework, cultural diplomacy is understood as an instrument, whether effective or ineffective, for achieving predefined foreign policy objectives. The principal strength of these approaches lies in

their operationalizability: they allow the measurement of inputs, activities, and at least partially the outputs of cultural diplomacy programs. Their weakness, however, lies in the potential reduction of culture to a mere instrument and in the neglect of informal and non state forms of cultural exchange.

The second layer comprises relational and dialogical approaches, represented by Schneider, Goff, Cull, the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, and partially also by Tomalová. These definitions emphasize bidirectional communication, mutual understanding, and the long term cultivation of relationships, while assigning a central role to non state actors. Their normative orientation is relational: cultural exchange possesses intrinsic value independent of short term political outcomes. This approach corresponds with the normative ambitions of international organizations such as UNESCO and the European Union, as well as with the practice of cultural institutions that resist direct political control. The weakness of relational approaches lies in their lower degree of operationalizability and the risk of idealization: cultural exchange is neither automatically symmetrical nor inherently apolitical.

The third layer consists of poststructuralist critical approaches represented by Zamorano and Channick. These perspectives challenge not only definitions of cultural diplomacy but also the epistemological assumptions underlying the dominant discourse itself. Cultural diplomacy is examined through the lens of power relations: who defines which forms of culture are worthy of presentation? In whose interests does the rhetoric of authentic cultural exchange operate? How are asymmetries between culturally dominant and peripheral actors legitimized? These questions are particularly relevant in the Central European context, as states in the region have historically often occupied the receiving end of the cultural diplomacy activities of major powers.

Productive tensions exist among these three layers, reflecting the real dilemmas of practical cultural diplomacy. The first is the paradox of authenticity: cultural diplomacy is often most effective precisely when it does not appear to be diplomacy, namely when cultural exchange unfolds naturally and without visible state direction. For this reason, states invest

in seemingly autonomous cultural institutions such as the British Council, Goethe Institut, Institut Français, and Instituto Cervantes, all of which maintain a degree of operational independence. The critiques advanced by Zamorano and Channick nevertheless remind us that such autonomy is always conditional and partial. The second tension concerns the dilemma of asymmetry: if cultural diplomacy is inherently asymmetrical, as suggested by Cummings, can it simultaneously remain ethical? The third tension relates to temporal horizons. Instrumental approaches tend to define success within short political cycles, whereas relational approaches require generational patience, something that is difficult to reconcile in practice with electoral and budgetary cycles.

The Central European, and particularly Slovak, tradition of research on cultural diplomacy provides valuable conceptualizations of the phenomenon within national and regional contexts (Pajtinka, 2016; Kurucz, 2007; Polgár, 2013; Rusiňák, Mattoš and Rusiňáková, 2012). However, the systematic integration of relational and critical perspectives remains largely absent. This gap is not accidental. The Central European tradition historically developed within a context in which the state functioned as the dominant actor of foreign policy and where critical reflection on power asymmetries was not institutionally embedded within academia. Processes of globalization, digitalization, and the growing role of non state actors in international relations therefore require a reassessment of this legacy and the incorporation of critical perspectives developed within Anglophone scholarship. The present study seeks to contribute precisely to this process of integration.

From the perspective of future research, the proposed three layer typology opens several directions for further inquiry. The first involves empirical testing of the typology through concrete case studies of cultural diplomacy programs within the Central European context, with the aim of assessing the extent to which declared institutional definitions correspond to actual practice. The second concerns comparative analysis of how different types of states, whether small or large, democratic or authoritarian, employ distinct definitional frameworks to legitimize their cultural diplomacy activities. The third direction involves examining how

digital environments and social media transform the boundaries between government directed cultural diplomacy and autonomous cultural relations.

CONCLUSION

The present study has provided a systematic and critically grounded overview of the theoretical foundations of cultural diplomacy as an instrument of soft power in contemporary international relations. The analysis of twenty five academic sources drawn from Anglophone, Francophone, Central European, and German language traditions demonstrates that the terminological inconsistency characterizing this field is not the result of conceptual negligence, but rather reflects genuine differences in political traditions, disciplinary perspectives, and normative assumptions concerning the nature and role of culture in international relations.

The first and most significant contribution of the study is the proposal of a three layer typology of approaches to cultural diplomacy integrating state centric instrumental definitions, relational and dialogical approaches, and poststructuralist critical perspectives within a single analytical framework. This typology is not merely descriptive. It enables the systematic comparison of normative assumptions, actor models, and functional definitions of cultural diplomacy across different traditions while also providing an analytical instrument for future empirical research. The second contribution lies in the comparative positioning of the Central European, and particularly Slovak, scholarly tradition within the broader international context. The identification of the absence of critical and relational perspectives in Central European discourse should not be understood as criticism but rather as a challenge and direction for future development: under contemporary geopolitical conditions, these perspectives are analytically and normatively indispensable. The third contribution is methodological. The systematic research design combining Systematic Literature Review, comparative conceptual analysis, and interpretative discourse analysis offers a replicable framework for future review studies in this field.

The findings of the analysis confirm that the effectiveness of cultural diplomacy depends on the fulfilment of three mutually interconnected conditions. The first is consistency between declared values and actual political practice. Nye (2004, 2008) formulates this requirement as a critical condition for the credibility of soft power. The second is the authenticity of cultural exchanges and the respect for the autonomy of cultural actors. Channick (2005) and Ang, Isar, and Mar (2015) demonstrate that culture loses its attractiveness precisely when it becomes excessively transparent as an instrument of propaganda. The third condition is critical reflection on the dimension of power. Zamorano's (2016) analysis reveals how the rhetoric of autonomous cultural exchange may conceal structural asymmetries of power, a reality of which both practitioners and researchers in this field must remain aware.

The study intentionally limits itself to an analytical overview of theoretical literature without a direct empirical component. Future research should therefore connect the proposed typology with empirical examination of specific cultural diplomacy programs, particularly within the Central European context, where cultural diplomacy acquires distinctive characteristics shaped both by historical experience and contemporary geopolitical challenges. At the same time, a particularly promising avenue of inquiry lies in examining how digital environments and artificial intelligence are transforming the practices, definitions, and power relations within the field of cultural diplomacy, a question to which existing scholarship has thus far provided only limited answers. Cultural diplomacy remains a compelling subject of research in the twenty first century precisely because it stands at the intersection of some of the most significant tensions of the contemporary international order: between national interest and global responsibility, between state control and cultural autonomy, and between power and dialogue.

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BOOK REVIEW:
ČÍNSKA MÄKKÄ MOC A SLOVENSKÄ SKÜSENOST'
(CHINESE SOFT POWER AND THE SLOVAK
EXPERIENCE)

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Scholarly attention to Chinese influence in Central and Eastern Europe has tended to gravitate toward larger states such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, often leaving Slovakia at the margins. Tomáš Dvorský's monograph addresses this gap with a careful and well-organised study of how China deploys soft power in the Slovak Republic. Published in 2022 by the University of Pavol Jozef Šafárik in Košice, the book spans 235 pages and is structured into three substantive chapters moving from theory to global strategy to a Slovak case study (Dvorský, 2022).

The opening chapter offers a thorough grounding in the concept of soft power, drawing on Joseph Nye's foundational work and tracing its evolution over four decades. Dvorský also engages with the more recent notion of sharp power, the manipulation of information and institutions by authoritarian regimes that exploits the openness of democratic societies. This is one of the relatively few Slovak-language texts that explains this theoretical terrain in such accessible terms, and the chapter alone makes the monograph a useful teaching resource.

The second chapter examines China's soft power toolkit in a broader context. Dvorský opens with an intriguing historical thread, tracing elements of soft power thinking back to classical Chinese philosophy and Sun Tzu's emphasis on psychological dominance achieved through legitimacy rather than force. He then follows the trajectory of Chinese foreign policy from 1949 through the assertive turn under Xi Jinping,

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cataloguing the principal instruments: Confucius Institutes, state-controlled media, cultural diplomacy through sport and popular culture, and the Belt and Road Initiative. The discussion of COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy provides a timely capstone, capturing the tension between Chinese outreach and the international backlash it has provoked.

The third chapter is the monograph's most original contribution. It presents a detailed case study of Chinese soft power in Slovakia, tracing bilateral relations from the Czechoslovak era to the present and examining political, economic, security, cultural, and media dimensions of Chinese engagement. Particularly compelling is the analysis of the Chinese embassy's media strategy, which documents how successive ambassadors placed commentary in outlets ranging from mainstream business publications to fringe platforms classified as disinformation channels by Slovakia's own Ministry of Defence. The treatment of economic ties, including the Huawei controversy at the GLOBSEC forum, anchors abstract claims about influence in concrete and verifiable examples.

Perhaps the most striking finding is Dvorský's measured conclusion that Slovakia does not in fact rank among the priority targets of Chinese interest in the region. As he puts it, the activities of the Chinese embassy and cultural institutes do not substantially deviate from the standard framework of economic and cultural diplomacy. This sober assessment sets the book apart from more alarmist accounts of Chinese influence in Europe and lends the analysis considerable credibility. It also invites instructive comparison with neighbouring Hungary, whose deeper entanglement with Chinese infrastructure projects, vaccine procurement, and political alignment under Viktor Orbán is treated in the monograph as a useful contrasting case.

Among the book's clear strengths are its breadth of sources, its readable prose, and the way its three-level structure builds a coherent analytical arc from theory through global strategy to local application. Some sections of the Slovak case study lean more towards description than analytical interrogation, and the rapidly changing landscape of European responses to China means that certain assessments will inevitably need updating. These observations should not, however, detract from the book's value. They

simply point to directions in which future scholarship can build on the foundation Dvorský has laid.

The greatest disadvantage of this publication, however, is the lack of an English-language version. This significantly limits the reach of the study and represents a hindrance to the wider field, given that the monograph clearly has great potential to enhance further research and inform policy debates beyond Slovakia. A translation would allow comparative scholarship in CEE-China studies to draw fully on its findings.

Overall, *Čínska mäkká moc a slovenská skúsenosť* is a thoughtful, well-researched, and genuinely useful contribution to a literature that too often overlooks smaller European states. Dvorský's careful empirical grounding, his willingness to draw evidence-based rather than alarmist conclusions, and his fluent integration of theoretical and case-study material make this a book worth reading for scholars of international relations, Chinese foreign policy, and Central European politics, as well as for policymakers seeking a clear-eyed account of how external influence actually operates in the smaller member states of the European Union.

RESOURCES

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