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#### IRAN AND CENTRAL ASIA: SOCIO-CULTURAL RELATIONS

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Today, "soft power" is an attribute of the policy of the developed countries of the world. Over the past decades, various states tried to realize their potential of "soft power" in foreign policy in different ways, which allows talk about the existence of several different strategies for its use. As we know, in the international arena, absolutely all developed countries achieve their geostrategic goals in a conflict-free way, actively using the resources of "soft power". External cultural exchanges are a mandatory component of public diplomacy.

Central Asia is among the regions that have become increasingly important for regional and international affairs since the collapse of the Soviet Union. At present, Central Asia has become more important, primarily due to the presence of important energy resources and connecting routes between East and West. In this regard, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in relation to this region is based on the convergence of factors in the political, economic and cultural spheres and the search for opportunities for influence and cooperation [1].

In ancient Iran, which included parts of Central Asia, Iranian society had unique cultural and civilizational traits, and these traits are still the common link between Iran and Central Asia today. In 1995, Iranian Foreign Minister A. Velayati said in his speech on regional relations between Iran and Central Asia that "the success and reality of the implementation of which guarantees a common cultural heritage for these countries." If we consider his statement in the context of Iran's regional policy in Central Asia in the 1990s, it demonstrates how Iran uses the ideas of a common culture to develop ties and strengthen its influence and position in the countries of the region. At the same time, it is emphasized that Iranian culture is not something introduced from the outside for the countries of the region, but is a part of their own cultural past. Thus, it does not take the form of propaganda of Iranian culture, but a call to return to its historical and cultural origins. Thus, from then to the present day, the commonality of culture, history, art, literature and religion of the Iranian peoples with the peoples of Central Asia has become a reliable foundation and a solid basis for the development of relations [2].

In his book "Relationships between Iran and the countries of Central Asia", Iranian researcher Mehdi Sanai writes that contacts between the two regions "began to develop before the advent of Islam and even before the advent of Christianity, when most of the territory of present-day Central Asia was part of the Persian civilization. One of the reasons for Iran's close connection with Central Asia is the presence of national minorities on both sides of the common border. Mutual resettlement took place especially intensively during the Great Silk Road," notes M. Sanai in his book.

Iran has established the closest contacts with Tajikistan, which is the only Persian-speaking state in the post-Soviet territory. Iran was one of the first countries to recognize the sovereignty of Tajikistan, however, this is also true for other former Soviet republics of Central Asia. The war in Iraq actually led to the fact that Tehran began to pursue a pragmatic foreign policy towards Central Asia, which was primarily due to the need to reduce its international isolation. In the 1990s, Iran's regional policy was aimed at developing new relations with Central Asia, as well as participating in multilateral forums such as the Economic Cooperation Organization, which includes all five Central Asian states.

Today, Iran ranks second - after China - in terms of investment in Tajikistan. In particular, the Iranians are building the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric power station in this republic, laying the Istiklol tunnel, and preparing to implement the Shurabad hydroelectric power station project. In addition to economic projects, Iran is actively involved in other areas of the life of the Tajik people. Thus, international symposiums and seminars devoted to the Persian language and literature are regularly held in Tajikistan, the Persian Language Foundation has been created, libraries named

after Rudaki and Amir Kabir have been built with Iranian funds. The office of the Imam Khomeini Committee in Tajikistan, with the assistance of local authorities, provides assistance to representatives of low-income segments of the population in conducting mass family and religious ceremonies [3].

Iran's foreign policy towards Central Asia is generally focused on the development of diplomatic, economic and cultural ties with the region, but it is difficult to generalize Iran's relations with Central Asia as a whole. Until recently, Tajikistan was considered one of Iran's closest friends in Central Asia due to the shared linguistic, cultural and historical ties between the two countries. During the 2000s, Iran implemented numerous economic and infrastructure projects such as the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric power plant and the Istiqlal tunnel.

Unlike Tajikistan, with which Iran has often emphasized common cultural and linguistic ties, the nature of Iranian-Turkmen relations is mainly determined by geo-economics, especially in the field of energy, transport and industrial cooperation. Despite unresolved disputes over the purchase of natural gas, Tehran's relationship with Ashgabat is one of Iran's most important bilateral partnerships in the region. Previously, due to a lack of domestic pipeline capacity in northeast Iran, the country needed imported gas from Turkmenistan during the winter, but as of January 2017, gas imports from Turkmenistan stopped due to disputes over payments and gas quality.

As with Kazakhstan, Iran's relations with Kyrgyzstan have been, and remain, generally quite positive, albeit underdeveloped, despite the two countries' long-standing efforts to develop trade relations. The trade turnover of Kyrgyzstan with Iran is much lower compared to China, Russia or even Turkey. In May 2018, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) entered into an interim agreement to create a free trade zone between Iran and the EAEU. This has facilitated trade between Iran and EAEU members, including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The countries of Central Asia are still heavily dependent on land transportation, and as a result, cooperation with Iran to develop international transit corridors connecting the region with the Iranian seaports of Bandar Abbas or Chabahar is an important incentive to maintain close relations with Tehran.

The relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran with the countries of Central Asia have always been among the priorities, especially in the cultural sphere, since the moment these states gained independence and the signing of a cultural agreement with Iran. In practice, these ties have acquired an official and practical character. Tehran and the Central Asian countries have many cultural and religious features in common, in other words, they are in the cultural sphere of civilization. Taking into account these cultural communities and the importance of these states for Iran, and on the one hand, the desire of the governments of these states for mutual cooperation. All these years, Tehran has been actively establishing cooperation in the field of culture. The coronavirus pandemic has significantly affected all activities and other areas in Iran, as well as in other countries. The cultural realms have also not been immune to the effects of the virus and the inevitable restrictions imposed by governments to combat it.

Despite the fact that each state used measures and mechanisms for effective struggle, the closure of the activities of cultural centers and the cancellation of any conference were inevitable: an exhibition, a festival, an exchange of cultural delegations, and sometimes even meetings became impossible. They were carried out only online. Naturally, this situation created problems for many pre-planned cultural programs. Tehran noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran, during the pandemic, was attacked by two viruses: US sanctions and coronavirus.

In fact, they faced the first embargo in many years earlier. Sanctions, which have only intensified in recent years, and the pandemic has further complicated the situation. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the possibility of cultural exchange has been reduced to a minimum.

Although new methods such as webinars and online courses have been replaced for these conditions and we are still at the beginning of the journey, but it is clear that these measures cannot have the effect of courses and face-to-face training. Culture has always played a role in advancing the fight against crises, and any information, recognition and creation of images and mentalities is carried out through the channel of culture and cultural diplomacy. Iranian Studies Centers operate in several cities of Central Asia and Russia. With the support of the embassy, there are also Persian language classrooms in schools and higher education buildings, and about 2,000 students study Persian as an elective free of charge in various educational institutions [4].

Iran, as a factor of cultural and historical influence in the development of Central Asia, is an indisputable historical fact. It is associated with the development of culture, science, education and religion in the Middle Ages, when Iran was the only center of science and religion for Central Asia, while Persian, along with Arabic, were the languages of science, religion, and poetry. Although the natural influence of Russia in the following periods of history deprived Iran of the status of a scientific center of attraction for the peoples of the region, Iran has always remained as an integral part of the cultural and religious heritage of the peoples of Central Asia. The peculiarities of the current situation in Central Asia do not allow us to talk about the possibility of restoring the role of Iran in the region as an important center of gravity, capable of influencing integration processes in the foreseeable future, both culturally, ideologically and politically. A possible perspective on Iran's actions in Central Asia is to create a platform for dialogue in the field of trade, economic and transport development and dialogue in the field of security to counter the common threat in the face of international terrorism. Especially as a complement to the SCO's efforts in this area.

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## AN EVALUATION OF THE EU'S HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE PROVIDED TO UKRAINE

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Abstract. The armed conflict in Ukraine that escalated in February 2022 became on of the greatest challenges to the international relations and the world order of the 21st century. The