ABSTRACT
of the dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the educational program "8D03101 - Sociology"
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Topic of the dissertation: «One belt, one road» initiative: social perceptions in Central Asian countries

The relevance of the dissertation research is determined by the following circumstances:

- social perception is linked to the formation of public perceptions and opinions about various phenomena and processes in society. The "Belt and Road Initiative" can influence the formation of public opinion regarding the interactions among regional countries, the prospects for economic development, and the role of Central Asia in the global community.

- social perception has an impact on decision-making and actions in the social sphere. The study of the social perception of the "Belt and Road Initiative" can help better understand which factors influence decisions regarding participation in the project, what opinions and beliefs different social groups hold, and how these decisions can be influenced in various social contexts.

- the examination of the social perception of the "Belt and Road Initiative" in Central Asian countries holds significant importance from a sociological perspective. It can aid in better understanding social processes in the region, assessing their impact on public opinion and behavior, and developing more effective strategies for social protection and cooperation within the project framework.

The aim of the dissertation is to analyze the social perception of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative in Central Asian countries.

In accordance with this aim, the following **research objectives** have been defined:

Examine the conceptual foundations of theoretical and methodological approaches to studying the influence of "soft power" policies and the "agenda-setting" concept on the social perception of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative.

Analyze the theory of information integration, which describes how individuals integrate information from various sources to form a comprehensive judgment and perception.

Conduct critical discourse analysis of media in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan using N. Fairclough's model.

Assess the features of social perception of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative in major cities of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

Identify the main risks and benefits of Kazakhstan's cooperation within the "One Belt, One Road" initiative.

Highlight the specifics of the perception of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative in different regions of Kazakhstan.

Define the specificity of the perception of the initiative among different age groups.

Describe the specificity of the perception of the initiative among respondents with connections to China and those without such connections.

Research Methods: This dissertation work utilized both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The initial stage of the research involved a content analysis of media discourse related to the research topic. The selection of articles was based on two criteria: ownership of publications (state-owned and private media) and language of publication (Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Russian). The analysis included articles published from September 8, 2013, to December 30, 2022, considering that the "One Belt, One Road" initiative was proposed in 2013. Article collection took place from February 2020 to December 2022. A total of 1,394 articles were analytically processed, including 277 in Kazakh, 309 in Kyrgyz, and 176 in Uzbek, with an additional 632 articles in Russian, published in all three countries. The search for articles was conducted using the following keywords:

In Kazakh: "Бір белдеу, бір жол" ("One belt, one road"), "Қытай" (China), "жібек жолы" (Silk road), "56 жоба" (56 projects), "Қазақстан-Қытай зауыттары" (Kazakhstan-China relations).

In Russian: "Один пояс, один путь" (One belt, one road), "Китай" (China), "шелковый путь" (Silk road), "56 проектов" (56 projects), "казахско-китайские заводы" (Kazakhstan-China factories) for Kazakhstan-related media only.

In Kyrgyz: "Бир алкак, бир жол" (One belt, one road), "Кытай" (China), "жибек жолу" (Silk road).

In Uzbek: "Bir kamar, bir yo'l" (One belt, one road), "Xitoy" (China), "Ipak yo'li" (Silk road).

The second stage of the research involved surveying the population of Central Asian countries. The survey questions are provided in the dissertation's Appendix G. A total of N=3004 respondents participated in the survey, including N=2512 in Kazakhstan, N=223 in Kyrgyzstan, and N=269 in Uzbekistan. Data processing was carried out using the SPSS program. All responses underwent thorough authentication to identify duplicate respondents and attempts at multiple participation. The survey procedure followed a snowball sampling methodology over a six-month period, from July to December 2022. Survey materials were actively distributed through various social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram, ensuring a wide reach to potential respondents. Hyperlinks to the survey questionnaire were disseminated not only through the specified social networks but also directly delivered to known contacts who further shared this information within their own social circles. Consequently, the research reached a multi-level network of individual connections. The survey was successfully conducted throughout the territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as in major cities in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Ethical expertise was conducted on all survey questions during the preparation of the questionnaire. The ethical approval was granted by the local ethics committee of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, with approval number IRB-A436 and issuance date of February 28, 2022.

Confirmed Scientific Hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: State-owned media, aimed at shaping a positive perception of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, contain a positive discourse, while private media tend to have a more critical discourse. This hypothesis was confirmed as the research results indicate that media ownership significantly influences the tone and content of discourse regarding the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. State-owned media, loyal to the state and aimed at supporting the official political discourse, tend to form a positive discourse, while private media tend to create a critical discourse.

Hypothesis 2: Discourse in the Kazakh language about China and the "One Belt, One Road" initiative is predominantly critical, while discourse in the Russian language tends to be more positive and neutral. The study confirmed the assumption of differences in discourse in Kazakh and Russian languages regarding China and the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. Data analysis shows that discourse in the Kazakh language often expresses a critical attitude towards China and the initiative, often containing subtexts expressing concerns or doubts. Meanwhile, discourse in the Russian language tends to be more positive and neutral in its expression of opinions about the initiative. These differences in discourse are explained by cultural, political, and media influences on public opinion formation. These findings underscore the importance of analyzing language discourses when studying social perception.

Hypothesis 3: The social perception of the population in major cities of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is more negative compared to Uzbekistan, where the perception is predominantly positive. This hypothesis was partially confirmed. The research results showed that the most negative perception among urban populations was observed in Kyrgyzstan. In Kazakhstan, the data showed an equal share of "positive" and "negative" perceptions. In Uzbekistan, the majority of respondents expressed uncertainty regarding the "One Belt, One Road" initiative.

Hypothesis 4: In Kazakhstan, regions with high levels of interaction within the "One Belt, One Road" initiative and with China tend to have a more negative perception, in contrast to regions with lower interaction. The hypothesis about differences in social perception of the initiative depending on the number of Chinese enterprises in Kazakhstan's regions was confirmed. Regional specifics are crucial for understanding social perception of the initiative.

Hypothesis 5: Respondents with experience in interacting with China through education, work, leisure, and other connections tend to have a positive attitude toward the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. The hypothesis regarding the influence of experience in interacting with China on the formation of a positive attitude toward the initiative was confirmed. Experience in interacting with China, even through relatives, colleagues, or friends, has a positive impact on perception.

Hypothesis 6: In comparison to the middle-aged and elderly generations, the younger generation has a more positive attitude toward the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. This hypothesis was not confirmed, as the younger generation showed less loyalty to the initiative compared to the older generation.

Significance and Main Results.

The study provides new research data and analyzes social perception and media discourse in the context of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, expanding our

understanding of the mechanisms shaping social perception and the influence of media on public opinion.

The research confirms several hypotheses related to the impact of media ownership, language-specific discourse, experience in interacting with China, and differences in social perception, contributing to the strengthening of existing theoretical approaches and hypotheses in the fields of media and sociology.

The research results have practical significance for the development of communication strategies and information policies aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of important international projects in society. It directly impacts social changes and the development of society, as lack of knowledge or insufficient understanding of international initiatives can lead to the formation of negative perceptions.

Regional Specifics. The study identifies differences in social perception of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative in different countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan) and regions, enriching knowledge about regional peculiarities in public opinion formation and guiding a differentiated approach to information campaigns.

The research highlights several factors, such as media ownership, language differences, interaction experience with China, and age differences, influencing social perception. This helps identify key factors shaping public opinion and serves as a basis for further research.

The overall significance of this research lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of complex relationships between media, public opinion, and international initiatives. This holds importance for both the academic community and practitioners in the fields of media and international relations. The study involved an analysis of theoretical foundations, such as the theory of information integration, the agenda-setting theory, and the theory of soft power, contributing to an understanding of the context and basis upon which the research is built. This strengthens the theoretical foundation for future research and analysis in the region. A comprehensive analysis of media discourse in Central Asian countries regarding the Belt and Road Initiative allows for a better understanding of public opinion and perception of the initiative in the region, which can be valuable for further trend analysis related to China and Chinese projects. Identified risks and benefits of Central Asian countries' collaboration within the Belt and Road Initiative can be used by governments and organizations to develop strategies for risk management and mitigation when participating in the initiative. The results indicating the characteristics of social perception of the Belt and Road Initiative can be applied to shape the image of the initiative in the eyes of the public and enhance its support.

The most important part of the study is the proposed recommendations. They offer specific steps for improving the perception of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia, including addressing environmental, social, and economic issues, promoting local participation, cultural exchange, and regional cooperation. These recommendations can serve as a basis for policy development in the region. The research results have the potential to make a significant contribution to the development and understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan and Central Asia. They can be used as a scientific foundation for future research and as

a practical guide for policymakers and decision-makers in the field of international cooperation and sustainable development.

Validation of Research Results

The main content of the dissertation, along with the ideas and research findings, has been presented in 7 scholarly articles, of which 3 were published in journals recommended by the Committee for Quality Assurance in Education of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and 3 were presented at international conferences in Tokyo and Moscow. One article was published in the 'International Journal of Water Resources Development' (percentile - 93%), indexed in the SCOPUS and Thomson Reuters databases. The research findings were also validated at the annual CESS 2023 conference at the University of Pittsburgh, USA.