

Letters to Scotland: the first Central Asian embassy

Introduction

This paper accompanies the interactive story ‘Letters to Scotland,’ which can be found online [here](#). The paper explains the story’s context and conceptualisation, before examining the place of small states’ soft power and embassy placement in the literature. An explanation of the theory and rationale behind the story’s interactive decision-making framework will then be made. Concluding remarks are provided at the end of the paper, before a bibliography which provides references not only from this paper but also for facts and statistics in the story.

Context

For those not familiar with Scotland, it may be useful to provide some background on why a project like Letters to Scotland has particular relevance now. There are a multitude of ways to describe Scotland’s present constitutional status but, put simply, it is one of four nations that together make up the United Kingdom. One helpfully politically neutral description of Scotland’s status is that it is among ‘constituent entities, [...] which are endowed with national characteristics,’ including others like Quebec and Catalonia (Requejo, 2010:11). Scotland had a history of independent nationhood prior to its joining the United Kingdom in 1707. In any case, since 1999 Scotland has had a devolved national parliament, where the Scottish Government has competency in a number of areas, but remains excluded from some others – including foreign policy – which are reserved to the UK Parliament and Government in London (Jeffery, 2010:104-5). Nevertheless, within this arrangement Scottish administrations have been able to pursue and develop Scotland’s interests abroad by working alongside the UK-level ministries.

For the first several years of devolved government there was no great deviation between the administrations in Edinburgh and London, arguably due to the fact that the Labour Party was the dominant force in both systems (Jeffery, 2010:104). However, following the pro-independence Scottish National Party’s (SNP) victory in the 2007 Scottish election, there was a ‘partial shift’ in the aims of Scotland’s external policy to move from working with

constitutionally similar ‘legislative regions,’ i.e. subnational entities, such as Catalonia or Bavaria, to working with small European nations and African states (Jeffery, 2010:107). The SNP is the largest pro-independence party in the Scottish political system and has been the party of government in Scotland since 2007.¹

In 2014, a referendum was held in Scotland on the question of independence, with 55.3% voting against (BBC, 2014a). It was, at the time, described by the then SNP leader as a ‘once-in-a-generation’ vote (BBC, 2014b). Nevertheless, the question has not been settled in the public consciousness and the SNP have continued to dominate elections in Scotland at every level since. The party now argues that Scotland has been taken out of the European Union against its will (having voted to remain in the ‘Brexit’ referendum but leaving regardless because of the overall weight of UK-level votes) and that this material change negates the once-in-a-generation commitment (IfG, 2021). At the time of writing, a Scottish General Election is approaching, and the SNP manifesto contains a pledge to hold a second referendum on Scottish independence once the pandemic crisis has passed (SNP, 2021:2). With polling predicting a victory for the SNP (ballotbox.scot, 2021) and support for independence also generally standing around or above 50% in polling (IfG, 2021), the prospect of independent Scottish foreign policy becoming a reality is not particularly fantastical.

Letters to Scotland

The story is set in a fictional future, in early 2024, where Scotland has recently become independent from the United Kingdom and is establishing its foreign policy and international relations. To some extent, identifying the aims that a future Scotland would have in this arena is a guessing game, but for these purposes I assumed that the first government of independent Scotland is a continuation of the present SNP government. A good deal in terms of aims and actions can be extrapolated from existing documentary evidence, including the Scotland’s Future white paper published by the Scottish Government (2013) in advance of the 2014 referendum. More recently, the Scottish Government continues to maintain comprehensive planning and concept documents

¹ Though at the time of writing it is just weeks until the Scottish General Election, so change may be imminent.

related to its international policy, including the International Policy Statement (2017a), the International Framework (2017b) and more topic-specific information such as the policy action on Promoting Human Rights Internationally (nd).

The story places the reader in the shoes of a newly appointed ambassador who will represent Scotland in Central Asia. The catch is that the government has decided it will have only one embassy covering the five states, and the reader's task is to decide which country will host the embassy by assessing which state best fits Scotland's aims. As will be seen below, the choice to place one embassy in a region is in line with the government's plans and capabilities (Scottish Government, 2013:229). I have tried to inject some comedy into the story and have also included a text in the Scots language (with interactive translation for non-speakers).

Why a story?

Set the task of creating my own final project for this course, I initially had intended to simply write a policy paper addressing the same question of Central Asian embassy placement. However, the opportunity to do something different was too good to pass up and I made a last-minute decision to design an interactive story instead. The inspiration to do so came from reading about the educative power of interactive fiction and games (Connolly et al. 2012), the potential to 'bridge the gap' between academic theorists and practitioners the field (Teo, 2021). Given the theme of this course is political communication, I was therefore keen that my project output might have some impact beyond just my own education and might serve to help others think about the decision-making processes at play.

Embassies, diplomacy and soft power

There does not appear to be a great deal of literature on the placement of embassies, or on the way these decisions factor into other concerns like nation-branding and soft power. Of course, a great deal has been written about concepts such as 'public diplomacy,' which is often viewed as a form of 'soft propaganda that sought to shape and direct... image and influence abroad' (Auerbach and Castronovo, 2013:13) but is usually written about large and powerful states such as the USA and China. Similarly, the concept of 'soft power' is

widely explored in literature, where it is understood to be the ‘ability to shape other states’ foreign policy choices through noncoercive measures’ including ‘culture, political values, and nonmilitary foreign policy’ (Nye, 2004, in Bukh 2014:461-2). Again, I have been unable to find any literature which links these concepts with decisions on where small or new states establish diplomatic relations via embassies. It seems likely that absence is because new states are a relatively uncommon phenomenon, and literature on soft power diplomacy tends to examine small states as recipients.

A few notable exceptions did prove useful in preparing this project, however. Thorhallsson and Bailes’ (2016) chapter on small state diplomacy does focus on imperative diplomatic aims such as state survival and maintaining foreign policy autonomy, but again does not examine decisions or strategies on embassy placement. Webster (2001) examines the placement strategies of members of the Commonwealth, and whether Commonwealth membership factors in decisions. While this has relevance for Scotland in that the Scottish Government intends to remain in the Commonwealth after independence (Scottish Government, 2013:2), it is not a consideration in Central Asia where there are no other members and, in any case, Webster found no link (Webster, 2001:538). Though only one of the states he analyses (Cyprus) could be reasonably considered comparable to Scotland in size terms, all are ‘new’ in some sense, having gained independence from the United Kingdom in the twentieth century. The paper’s findings that the principal influences on diplomatic placement were the host country’s perceived power, geographical proximity and regional influence (2001:538) have influenced my decisions in Letters to Scotland’s framework (see below) to some extent. Webster (2001:538), Webster and Ivanov (2008:13) and Webster and Hadjimanoli (2014:109) also suggest a weak influence from religious ties on embassy placement, though this would not be relevant to the posited Scottish embassy in Central Asia.

Webster and Ivanov (2008) in studying embassy placement by Bulgaria and Romania once again identify the perceived power of the host state as being of primary concern. Perhaps with more relevance to Scotland, a study of Cyprus’ embassy placement does identify trade – a relevant factor in soft power considerations – as a factor influencing the embassy staff allocations of a small, relatively new state (Webster and Hadjimanoli, 2014:122) along with

cultural ties and power. This has also been taken into account in the framework for the story.

The decision framework

Based upon Scotland's current foreign policy goals, the story assumes that an embassy in Central Asia will be one of the 70-90 overseas missions the government envisioned in its 2013 independence white paper, which is broadly in line with states of a similar size, such as Denmark, Ireland and Finland, among others (2013:229). While there is no explicit statement that Scotland will aim for a mission in Central Asia in particular, Asia as a whole is mentioned as a target for post-independence diplomacy (Scottish Government, 2013:229). The white paper also specifies that co-locating embassies and missions is an aim, and this played into the inclusion of 'priority ties' in the framework for the story, particularly with reference to the UK and Canada, with both of whom Scotland hoped to make such an arrangement (Scottish Government, 2013:230).

The framework is in five categories, three of which are weighted to contribute more to the overall decision. As is explained in the story's 'briefing note,' they are: trade potential, political considerations, culture and existing links, the presence of 'priority countries' and 'hard power.' The inclusion of hard power within a framework which ostensibly seeks to assess recipients for broadly soft power initiatives may seem out of place, but as can be seen in the above discussion of literature, the perceived might and power of host countries is a recurring factor identified in the literature and so it would be highly unrealistic to exclude it completely. In the 'hard power' category, along with 'priority ties' the story's narrator awards potential host countries points on a descending scale from five, and in the other categories, from ten. The task here is, after all, a comparative ranking to decide where to place an embassy, and not an assessment of a country's overall merit, so in most categories the states are ranked, and points assigned, comparatively. I will now briefly outline each category.

Trade potential

The promotion of Scottish goods and services abroad is identified by the government as being one of the keys roles of overseas missions (2013:99; 2017a:4; 2017b:11) and is also recognised in much of the literature as being part of soft power, especially where cultural products are concerned (Iwabuchi, 2015:419).

I therefore identified Scotland's most significant exports (Scottish Government, 2020) and matched these with the closest category in the World Bank statistics on imports in the five countries of Central Asia. While it is accepted that these statistics are somewhat blunt, more in-depth figures on potential trade with the region are not available and would be outwith the scope of this project to compile.

	Whisky	Food	Services	Glass/stone	Total	Points
Kaz	23,318	1,885,556	11,978,271	746,484	14,633,629	10
Kyr	2,603	337,495	969,949	92,569	1,402,616	6
Taj	0*	13,029*	457,833	4,355*	475,217	4
Tur	157*	112,556*	0*	28,762*	141,475	2
Uzb	706	650,458	5,191,101	217,369	6,059,634	8

Table 1: Import figures, in 1000 USD, rounded to nearest thousand. *Figures from 2000, as no later figure available. For sources, see 'World Bank' in bibliography.

As can be seen, in this category, Kazakhstan places first and is awarded ten points towards the overall framework score.

Political Considerations

As is made clear in the story, the Scottish Government takes a position that its international relations policies, both currently and in an independent Scotland, must be based upon respect for and promotion of human rights (2017a:6; 2017b:10; 2013:208). However, in the context of the story, assessing human rights in host countries through a lens which the public can understand and without appearing to endorse repressive regimes proved challenging. I was mindful that the framework needed to be clearly understandable to the public, but also had to make clear that the selection of a country as host for the embassy should not be misinterpreted as an endorsement of its human rights record. Further, given

the Scottish Government's vocal stances on LGBTQ+ rights, I was keen that this should also be taken into account.

With this in mind, I selected three well-known indices: the Fragile States Index (Fund for Peace, 2020), the Freedom in the World Report (Freedom House, 2021) and the Democracy Index (EIU, 2020). While none of these measures is entirely without controversy, it was impossible to create a new dataset for this project, and it was hoped that this relatively broad combination would minimise bias, whilst still affirming public trust in the decision. Each country was ranked and assigned a score out of five according to their relative position in the index. In addition to these, the narrator gave each country a score out of five for LGBTQ+ rights, based upon the information in the ILGA State-Sponsored Homophobia report (Mendos 2020), as there is no available index which includes Central Asia.

	Fragile States	Freedom	LGBT	Democracy index	Total	Points
Kaz	59.8 / 117 th (5 pts)	Not free 23 (4 pts)	3	3.14 / Authoritarian (4 pts)	16	10
Kyr	73.9 / 73 rd (2 pts)	Not free 28 (5 pts)	3	4.21 / Hybrid regime (5 pts)	15	8
Taj	75.5 / 66 th (1 pts)	Not free 8 (2 pts)	2	1.94 / Authoritarian (2 pts)	7	4
Tur	69.1 / 90 th (4 pts)	Not free 2 (1 pt)	1	1.72 / Authoritarian (1 pt)	7	4
Uzb	73.1 / 74 th (3 pts)	Not free 11 (3 pts)	1	2.12 / Authoritarian (3 pts)	10	6

Table 2: Scores in the three indices, plus narrator's LGBT assessment.

Culture and existing links

In this category, the narrator assesses the host country's receptibility to Scottish cultural offerings, as well as the suitability of the tourist and arts and culture industries for exchange. I selected the KOF Globalisation Index's Social Globalisation index which measures a number of factors including international travel and contact, consumption of

media and the internet (Gygli et al, 2019) as a proxy measure for this receptibility, arguing that this provides an estimate of a population's ability and willingness to engage with cultures outside their own. To this, I added an unranked ambassador's score, which was assigned by the author on the basis of general information about tourism, Scottish societal links and the number of students from that country studying in Scotland (HESA, 2020).

	Social Globalisation Index	Ambassador	Total
Kaz	68.69 (95 th) 5 pts	5	10
Kyr	65.93 (107 th) 4 pts	5	9
Taj	45.41 (164 th) 2 pts	3	5
Tur	43.96 (169 th) 1 pts	2	3
Uzb	51.13 (149 th) 3 pts	5	8

Table 3: combined scores in KOF SGI and ambassador score

Priority ties

This category is almost entirely data-based, and the basis for its inclusion is discussed above. The Scottish Government has identified five 'priority countries,' plus Japan for particular foreign engagement (2017a:4,6-7). In addition, it has also highlighted a desire for an independent Scotland to enhance foreign ties both with and through the UK, the European Union and the Council of Europe (2013:260-1;229). This category therefore assesses the presence of a foreign embassy or consulate of these countries/organisations (and for the case of the Council of Europe, whether the country actively engages or not) and scores and ranks accordingly. In accordance with the weighting discussed above, this category awards only 5 points.

	EU	US	Canada	China	India	Pakistan	Japan	UK	CoE	Total	Points
Kaz	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	2	10	5
Kyr	Y	Y	C	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	2	9.5	4
Taj	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	1	8.5	2
Tur	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	1	8.5	2
Uzb	Y	Y	C	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	1	9	3

Table 4: Priority ties. Y= embassy/delegation present, C= consulate present, N= neither. CoE category based on level of engagement. For sources, see 'priority ties' in bibliography.

Hard power

This category is based entirely on the 2012 Composite Index of National Capability v.5 (Singer, Bremer and Stuckey, 1972), associated with the Correlates of War database.

Though there are too many arguments in literature about methods of measuring power to explore here, this one was chosen as coming from a well-respected and well-cited source (Beckley, 2018:9) and to use measures that were judged likely to be understandable to the public. In the story, however, some licence is taken in suggesting that the diplomatic party obtained the information from the states visited.

	CINC	Points
Kaz	0.003103	5
Kyr	0.0003326	1
Taj	0.0003635	2
Tur	0.0007789	3
Uzb	0.0026664	4

Table 5: Points assigned on the basis of CINC score

Concluding remarks

With the framework's assigned points totalled and ranked, we can see that Kazakhstan tops the table and is judged by the framework to be the country most suited to a Scottish embassy in the region. As noted above, this should not be mistaken for an endorsement of Kazakhstan as *the* perfect country in every category, but rather that it scores better than the others, and the story text goes some way to emphasising this.

	Power	Trade	Priority	Politics	Cult/Links	Total
Kaz	5	10	5	10	10	40
Kyr	1	6	4	8	9	28
Taj	2	4	2	4	5	17
Tur	3	2	2	4	3	14
Uzb	4	8	3	6	8	29

Table 6: final framework scores

After presenting the reader with the final outcome of the framework, the story invites the reader to choose which destination to recommend to the Prime Minister rather than forcing the choice of the framework 'winner,' Kazakhstan. This was included for two reasons:

firstly, to inject some ownership and agency to involve the reader, but also to emphasise that governmental decisions are rarely made without some kind of personal element. This is further emphasised by the fact that from the five choices open to the reader, the story has four distinct endings – which I will not ‘spoil’ here.

With more time and more advanced computer skills, I would have liked to further gamify the story, to present the reader with evidence and invite them to score and assess the host countries themselves. However, I hope that the story proves a satisfying and entertaining insight into the decisions that new and young states may face in the fields of power, soft power and diplomacy. Perhaps a future project could expand the story through research into the decision-making processes that states undertake in these circumstances – perhaps such research might even be possible in Scotland in the near future – but in the meantime, I present this story and its framework as one possible way to explore doing so.

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Whisky imports to Tajikistan:

<https://wits.worldbank.org/trade/comtrade/en/country/TJK/year/2000/tradeflow/Imports/partner/WLD/product/220830>

Whisky imports to Turkmenistan:

<https://wits.worldbank.org/trade/comtrade/en/country/TKM/year/2000/tradeflow/Imports/partner/WLD/product/220830>

Services:

Kazakhstan:

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Kyrgyzstan:

<https://wits.worldbank.org/countryprofile/en/country/KGZ/startyear/2014/endyear/2018/indicator/BM-GSR-NFSV-CD>

Tajikistan:

<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/TJK/StartYear/2017/EndYear/2018/Indicator/BM-GSR-NFSV-CD>

Uzbekistan:

<https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/UZB/StartYear/2017/EndYear/2018/Indicator/BM-GSR-NFSV-CD>

Food, mining:

Kazakhstan:

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