



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Constructing Russia's Positive Image through Cultural Diplomacy: A Discourse Analysis of Russian Language Promotion Strategies in India and China

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ABSTRACT

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Russia's growing engagement with Asian countries has increased the importance of Russian-language promotion as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and international image-building. Yet the cultural narratives embedded in such initiatives have received comparatively limited scholarly attention, particularly in studies that examine how language promotion operates within different institutional and socio-cultural environments. The present article addresses this gap by comparing the ways in which Russian-language promotion in China and India employs cultural narratives to construct representations of Russia and by identifying the contextual factors that shape these representations. The study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytical approach and examines a selected corpus of promotional materials, cultural programme descriptions, educational resources, and public communications issued by Russian Houses and affiliated organisations in both China and India during the past five years. The analysis demonstrates that the two contexts rely on substantially different narrative configurations. In China, promotional discourse tends to associate the Russian language with strategic cooperation, technological development, and Russia's position as an important international partner. Knowledge of Russian is consequently represented not only as a cultural competence but also as a means of gaining access to professional and institutional opportunities connected with broader frameworks of cooperation, including the Belt and Road Initiative and BRICS. The Indian discourse follows a bit different pattern. Greater emphasis here is placed on historical ties, Russian literary and cultural heritage, and educational opportunities. Russia is represented as a culturally significant yet accessible destination for students seeking technical and medical education. Cultural narratives therefore interact with aspirations for social and professional advancement and contribute to the attractiveness of Russian-language learning. The findings indicate that these differences are closely related to the institutional organisations of language promotion in the two countries. While China demonstrates a more centrally coordinated model, the Indian context is characterized by greater deal of fragmentation and stronger market influence. The present study argues that effective cultural diplomacy requires locally adapted strategies rather than a uniform promotional model. Context-sensitive language policies can therefore play a significant role in strengthening Russia's cultural presence and soft power in Asia.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between language promotion and cultural diplomacy has attracted increasing scholarly attention as governments have come to regard language not simply as a means of communication, but also as a perspective resource for international influence and image formation. Much of the existing research, however, has focused on languages with an established global position. Considerably less attention has been paid to the cultural meanings and narratives

associated with the international promotion of languages that occupy a more limited position in the global linguistic landscape. The Russian language provides an illustrative case. Although substantial institutional efforts have been made to maintain and expand the presence of Russian outside the country, particularly in Asian states, there is still a lack of systematic research into the cultural narratives through which these initiatives contribute to perceptions of Russia. This article therefore focuses on Russian-language promotion in China and India, asking how cultural narratives are incorporated into promotional practices and how their use varies between the two national settings.

Russia's increasing orientation towards Asia, reflected in the expansion of cooperation through frameworks such as BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, has given cultural diplomacy greater practical significance (Andreeva, 2022). Within this broader policy context, the international promotion of Russian can be realized as more than the provision of language education. It also provides a means of establishing interpersonal contacts, communicating aspects of national identity, and encouraging a more favorable understanding of Russia. Previous studies of cultural diplomacy have similarly highlighted the role of language in the external projection of national identity (Syed et al., 2020). At the same time, cultural promotion cannot be treated as a uniform process: its effectiveness is closely connected with the social, institutional, and cultural environment in which it takes place (Cui, 2025). This contextual dimension is essential when comparing countries with substantially different models of educational and cultural policy.

The analytical framework of the study combines three complementary theoretical perspectives. The first one is critical discourse analysis which provides a basis for examining the ways in which linguistic choices contribute to the construction of social meanings, identities, and relations of power (Fairclough, 1995). The second is Nye's concept of soft power which draws attention to the capacity of cultural attractiveness to influence preferences without relying primarily on coercion or material incentives (Nye, 2004). The third perspective derives from research on nation branding and strategic narratives, focusing on the ways in which states select, organize, and communicate representations of themselves in international context (Yang, 2020).

The Russian case is particularly relevant to this discussion since its relations with Asian societies have a substantial historical dimension. Soviet educational initiatives, cultural exchanges, academic cooperation established networks that continue to shape contemporary linguistic and cultural relations, while newer forms of cooperation have developed through BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Protassova et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the ways in which contemporary Russian cultural diplomacy draws upon these historical connections and transforms them into narratives of Russia's present-day identity remain insufficiently examined. A comparative analysis of China and India makes it possible to identify not only recurring elements of Russian-language promotion, but also the extent to which these narratives are adapted to different institutional conditions, cultural expectations, and motivations for engaging with the Russian language.

Comparative studies that systematically contrast the strategies deployed in China and India are conspicuously absent from the existing literature (Wang, 2022). Most treatments of Russian cultural diplomacy consider each country in isolation, enumerating institutional presence without probing the deeper discursive structures that shape how Russia is represented and received in each context. This omission carries practical consequences for policymakers seeking to optimize the effectiveness of limited cultural diplomacy resources.

China and India represent particularly significant cases. Both are demographic giants with rapidly growing economies and have been designated as priority countries for Russian educational and cultural outreach. Yet their institutional landscapes differ markedly. China's educational framework is notably centralized, with language curricula directly aligned with national strategic objectives (Zhang, Kerimov, 2025). In contrast, India's educational system is more fragmented, with language promotion occurring through a diverse array of Russian Houses, private entities, and diaspora

networks (Dziuba, Mushenko, 2025). These differing institutional structures imply that the cultural narratives utilized in each setting may vary in terms of content, focus, and effectiveness. This research aims to fill the existing gap by exploring three interconnected questions. Firstly, what cultural narratives are employed in the promotion of the Russian language in China and India, and in what ways do these narratives shape the perception of Russia? Second, how do these discursive strategies differ across the two national settings, and what accounts for these differences? Finally, what consequences do these findings hold for practitioners of cultural diplomacy and policymakers in the field of language? The next section outlines the methodological approach, followed by the empirical findings, discussion, and conclusion.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study uses qualitative discourse analysis to examine how cultural narratives about Russia are constructed in language promotion materials. This approach is appropriate because it allows for detailed interpretation of texts rather than counting frequencies or testing hypotheses. The goal is to understand what messages are being communicated and how they differ between China and India.

The analysis draws on promotional materials and cultural program descriptions produced by Russian cultural institutions operating in China and India. All materials are publicly available and were accessed through official websites and social media accounts.

From China:

- Program descriptions and cultural event announcements from Russian Houses in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou;
- Promotional materials about Russian language courses;
- Press releases and public statements.

From India:

- Program descriptions and cultural event announcements from Russian Houses in New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, and Trivandrum;
- Promotional materials about Russian language courses;
- Press releases and public statements.

The materials cover the period from 2020 to 2026, providing recent and relevant data. A total of approximately 80 texts were examined, including brochures, event descriptions, course announcements, social media posts, and press releases. Translations from Russian and Chinese were verified for accuracy.

The analysis was conducted in three stages.

Stage 1: Initial Reading and Open Coding

The analysis began with a close reading of the selected materials. At this point, attention was given to recurring ways of presenting Russia, as well as to the themes that appeared across different types of promotional texts. Several initial codes were identified, including cultural heritage, educational opportunities, economic partnership, strategic cooperation, historical ties. The codes were not established in advance. Instead, they were formulated during the reading process as a reaction to the content of the materials, enabling the primary topics to surface from the data itself.

Stage 2: Identification of Narrative Frames

The initial codes were then compared and categorized into more extensive thematic groups. This facilitated the identification of recurring narrative frames that depicted Russia and the Russian

language within the promotional discourse. By comparing materials from China and India, two predominant frames emerged: a "strategic partnership frame" and a "cultural heritage and opportunity frame." The analysis explored which frame was more prevalent in each country and how these frames were constructed through particular language choices.

Stage 3: Comparative Analysis

The concluding stage entailed a systematic comparison of the utilization of these narrative frames in Chinese and Indian materials. Emphasis was placed on word selection, recurring phrases, and the overall tone of the materials. The comparison aimed to uncover the similarities and differences in the construction of Russia's image for each audience.

RESULTS

This section outlines the results of the discourse analysis, which is organized according to the three research questions. The findings are divided into three subsections: initially, the cultural narratives found in Russian language promotion materials in China are discussed; subsequently, the narratives identified in India are examined; and finally, a comparative synthesis is provided.

Cultural Narratives in China: The Strategic Partnership Frame

The materials analyzed from the Russian Houses located in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou reveal a distinct focus on the relationship between Russia and China, characterized as a strategic and mutually advantageous partnership. Within this discourse, Russia is primarily depicted as a modern state endowed with economic and technological capabilities. Furthermore, it is portrayed as a nation whose collaboration with China encompasses both regional and international matters. Consequently, cultural references are intricately linked to wider political and economic themes rather than being presented in isolation. Emphasis on strategic and geopolitical cooperation. References to BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization occur regularly in the promotional discourse and place Russian-language learning within the broader context of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The language is presented as a practical resource that can facilitate access to areas of professional and institutional interaction. In some material, Russian is also associated with major economic initiatives, including cooperation related to the Belt and Road Initiative. For example, one brochure advertising Russian-language courses notes: "The oil industry has always been an important sector for exchange between China and Russia." In this context, the motivation for learning Russian extends beyond cultural interest. Language proficiency is implicitly connected with professional opportunities and participation in sectors where cooperation between the two countries is particularly significant. Representation of Russia as a modern and technologically developed country. The promotional discourse directed at Chinese audiences differs noticeably from representations of Russia traditionally associated with classical literature, ballet, and historical heritage. While these cultural aspects continue to exist, they do not form the primary narrative. Mentions of Russian proficiency in energy, engineering, and space exploration are prevalent. An advanced course description for Russian learners states: "Russia's technological sector presents unparalleled opportunities for Chinese professionals in energy collaboration and high-tech fields." This narrative portrays Russia as a progressive partner rather than merely a custodian of cultural heritage. Elite positioning and status signaling. The language used in promotional materials for Chinese audiences consistently conveys prestige and selectivity. Russian is presented as a language for high-achieving students pursuing distinguished careers. An announcement for a scholarship program reads: "Studying abroad is becoming increasingly popular in China, especially for master's and doctoral degrees. Chinese students find it much easier to study in Russia than in European or American countries, and many Russian specialists offer higher-quality teaching. Let's take a look at some information about Russian universities!". This framing appeals to ambition and social distinction, reinforcing the perception of Russian as a credential of elite status.

Absence of cultural heritage framing. Strikingly, in the analyzed sources references to Russian literature, classical music, and traditional arts are minimal in Chinese-facing materials. When cultural elements appear, they are integrated into broader narratives of contemporary exchange rather than presented as standalone attractions. This suggests that cultural heritage is perceived as insufficient motivation for Chinese learners and is therefore subordinated to pragmatic and status-oriented appeals.

Cultural Narratives in India: The Cultural Heritage and Opportunity Frame

In contrast, promotional materials from Russian Houses in India-New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, and Trivandrum as well as promotional materials and press releases employ a distinctly different narrative frame centered on cultural heritage and educational opportunity.

Key discursive features:

Emphasis on historical and cultural connections. In materials aimed at Indian audiences, the references to the longstanding ties between Russia and India are especially common. The discussions often emphasize the historical background of cultural and educational interactions, including those that were formed during the Soviet period. Such references help to establish a sense of continuity between previous collaborations and current relations. This is illustrated, for example, in a publication from the Russian House in New Delhi, which notes: "A gala concert commemorating the 79th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and India took place in the Russian House in New Delhi." By referring to shared historical experience and established diplomatic ties, the promotional discourse presents Russia as a familiar cultural partner rather than a distant country.

Literary and artistic heritage as a central element of attraction. Russian literature and art occupy a much more visible position in materials aimed at Indian audiences than in the Chinese promotional discourse examined in this study. References to Russian writers, classical music, ballet, and cinema are used to foreground the cultural dimension of Russia and to create an accessible entry point for engagement with the Russian language. Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Tchaikovsky, and Bolshoi Theatre appear repeatedly in cultural program descriptions. A brochure for a cultural festival reads: "Through the roles of Nicholas Roerich and his son Svetoslav on their travels around India, the imprint that the Russian ballet, theatre, and literature had on the Indian culture life, these exchanges established a rich bond of cultural exchange." Cultural heritage here functions as one of the primary drivers of interest rather than a secondary consideration. Educational opportunity and affordability. The most consistent theme across Indian materials is the pragmatic appeal of Russian education. Medical and engineering programs are highlighted, with explicit references to affordability and accessibility. For instance, an announcement for a language course states: "Russia is a global energy powerhouse, known for its vast natural resources. For professionals in the energy sector, learning Russian opens the door to understanding and navigating the complexities of the Russian energy industry." This narrative positions Russia as a practical solution to India's overcrowded educational system and competitive medical entrance examinations.

Accessibility and warmth. The tone of Indian-facing materials is notably warmer and more inclusive than the Chinese materials. Phrases such as "welcoming environment," "cultural exchange," and "mutual understanding" are common. Or an event description from the Russian House in Mumbai reads: "Fascinating films were watched by students of Shailendra College, students of the Russian language department of Shivaji University in Kolhapur, students of Sonapant Dandekar College in Palghar. The laid-back presentation of the material - somewhere humorous, somewhere sad - did not leave anyone indifferent." This contrasts with the more formal and distanced tone adopted in Chinese materials.

Comparative Synthesis

The comparative analysis reveals systematic differences in how Russian language promotion constructs the image of Russia for Chinese versus Indian audiences.

Table 1: Comparative summary of cultural narratives in China and India

Dimension	China	India
Dominant Narrative Frame	Strategic Partnership	Cultural Heritage and Opportunity
Primary Image of Russia	Modern, technologically advanced, reliable partner	Culturally rich, welcoming, educational destination
Key Themes	BRICS cooperation, Belt and Road, energy, engineering	Literature, music, ballet, affordable education
Tone	Formal, elite, status-oriented	Warm, accessible, inclusive
Target Audience Appeal	Ambition, career advancement, distinction	Aspiration, educational access, cultural curiosity
Language Framing	Instrument of strategic necessity	Tool for educational and professional opportunity

Summary of Key Findings

The analysis yields three key findings.

The comparison of the two cases points to a clear difference in the way Russia is represented through Russian-language promotion. In the Chinese materials, the language is largely associated with Russia's role as a strategic partner, the economic potential and technological development. Learning Russian is therefore presented in connection with professional advancement, international cooperation, and participation in areas of high economic and political significance. The Indian materials rely on a different set of associations. Here, Russia is more often presented through its cultural heritage and educational opportunities, while knowledge of Russian is linked to access to cultural resources as well as to professional qualifications and affordable education.

The contrast between the two cases can be related to the institutional conditions under which Russian-language promotion takes place. In China, a comparatively centralized educational environment in large-scale international cooperation projects create favourable conditions for narratives that correspond with broader state and strategic priorities. Promotional discourse consequently tends to emphasize the practical value of Russian and its relevance to international cooperation. The Indian context is less institutionally centralized and involves a greater number of educational and commercial actors. As a result, promotional practices can respond more directly to the interests of individual learners and their families. The emphasis on cultural heritage, academic opportunities, and access to professional education reflects these motivations and gives the discourse a more diverse character. Thus, the differences between the two cases cannot be reduced to variations in promotional style alone. They are also connected with the institutional environment, educational structures, and social motivations that shape the demand for Russian-language learning in each country.

Finally, the comparative analysis suggests that cultural heritage is not inherently attractive or unattractive-its effectiveness depends on the target audience's existing perceptions, motivations, and institutional context. In China, where pragmatic and status-driven motivations prevail, cultural heritage framing is minimized. In India, where cultural curiosity and educational aspirations converge, cultural heritage assumes a central role.

DISCUSSION

The section interprets the empirical findings presented above through the theoretical lenses of discourse analysis and soft power theory, addresses the implications for cultural diplomacy practice, and acknowledges the study's limitations.

Theoretical Interpretation: Two Discursive Strategies

The findings reveal that Russian language promotion in China and India employs fundamentally different discursive strategies for constructing Russia's image. These differences can be understood through the concept of strategic narrative - the deliberate construction and dissemination of stories about a nation's identity, values, and aspirations (Wang, 2026). China's narrative predominantly depicts Russia as a contemporary technological and strategic ally,

whereas in India, Russia is characterized as a culturally unique and approachable locale for education and personal growth.

This divergence reflects the distinct institutional architectures of language promotion in each country. In China, the state-centralized model, with its tight coordination between educational institutions and national strategic priorities, produces a narrative aligned with state objectives (Peiyu, 2023). The Russian language is framed as a tool for participating in high-profile initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, appealing to students' ambition and desire for social distinction. In India, the fragmented, market-driven ecology permits a more diverse and culturally oriented approach. Russian Houses, private providers, and diaspora networks each contribute to a narrative that emphasizes cultural heritage, educational access, and personal enrichment-themes that resonate with Indian students seeking affordable pathways to professional qualifications (Doraiswamy, 2023).

From the perspective of soft power theory (Nye, 2004), both strategies represent attempts to cultivate attraction and influence through cultural means. Yet the mechanisms differ. In China, soft power operates through elite appeal-the language is positioned as a credential of distinction, conferring status on those who acquire it. The attractiveness of Russia lies in its association with power, modernity, and strategic relevance. In India, soft power operates through cultural resonance and pragmatic utility-the language is positioned as a tool for accessing educational opportunities and cultural enrichment. The attractiveness of Russia lies in its cultural depth and practical value as an educational destination.

Different languages serve distinct narrative functions for different audiences (Obdalova, Levashkina, 2019). In the Russian case, the same language is promoted through different narrative frames depending on the institutional and cultural context of the target country. This suggests that effective language promotion requires not only linguistic resources but also cultural intelligence-the capacity to understand and respond to the distinct motivations, expectations, and aspirations of different audiences.

Why Cultural Heritage Framing Works Differently

One of the most striking findings of this study is the differential role of cultural heritage in Chinese and Indian promotional materials. In Chinese analyzed materials, references to Russian literature, classical music, and traditional arts are minimal; in India, they are central. This divergence is unlikely to reflect differences in Russia's cultural heritage itself-which is equally rich and accessible in both contexts-but rather differences in how that heritage is perceived and valued by the target audiences.

In China, pragmatic and status-driven motivations prevail among Russian-language learners. Students from urban, upper-middle-class backgrounds view Russian as a credential for accessing elite career trajectories in diplomacy, international trade, and state-affiliated enterprises. The strategic partnership frame, with its emphasis on modernity, technology, and economic cooperation, resonates more strongly with this audience.

In India, the situation is different. Russian-language learners come predominantly from middle-class families seeking affordable medical education abroad. For this audience, cultural heritage serves as a complementary source of attraction-it provides a positive image of Russia that reinforces the pragmatic appeal of educational access (Suryanarayan, 2017). The warmth and cultural richness of Russia, conveyed through references to literature, music, and historical ties, humanizes the educational experience and reduces the perceived risk of studying abroad. Cultural heritage thus functions as an emotional reassurance that complements the pragmatic appeal of affordability.

This finding suggests that cultural heritage is not inherently attractive or unattractive as a promotional tool. Its effectiveness depends on its alignment with the pre-existing motivations and expectations of the target audience.

Implications for Cultural Diplomacy Practitioners

The results present numerous practical implications for Russian organizations engaged in language promotion and cultural diplomacy within Asia. Most notably, they suggest that promotional strategies must consider the unique circumstances of the country where they are applied. Strategies designed for one national context cannot be directly applied to another without appropriate adjustments. The distinctions noted between China and India illustrate that institutional frameworks, educational methodologies, and learners' motivations can greatly affect how promotional messages are received.

Table 2: Context-Specific Recommendations for Russian Language Promotion in China and India

Culture	Key motivation factors	Promotional emphasis
China	International cooperation, career prospects, professional status	Strategic value of Russian, international careers, business and diplomatic communication
India	Access to affordable education, professional qualifications, cultural interest	Educational opportunities, affordability, academic quality, Russian cultural heritage
Both contexts	Interest in Russia and Russian-language learning	Locally adapted cultural and educational programmes

This connection plays a significant role in how effectively the content resonates with the target audience. In China, materials may benefit from drawing greater attention to the professional value of Russian and its relevance to international cooperation. References to careers in diplomacy, trade, international business, and other fields involving contact with Russian-speaking partners can make language learning more directly relevant to prospective students. The Indian case calls for a somewhat different emphasis. Here, information about educational opportunities, the cost and quality of study, professional prospects, and the experience of international students may be particularly important. Cultural content can complement these practical considerations by presenting Russian literature, music, cinema and other aspects of the rich Russian culture as additional reasons for engaging with the language.

The findings also point to the importance of cultural competence among institutions responsible for language promotion. Effective communication requires an understanding of how particular cultural references are interpreted by local audiences. The same element of Russian cultural heritage may have different meanings and levels of relevance depending on the social and educational context in which it is presented. Consequently, linguistic competence alone is insufficient; promotional work also requires familiarity with local cultural expectations and patterns of motivation.

Finally, the results suggest that audience segmentation could improve the effectiveness of Russian-language promotion. In China, greater attention could be given to students at leading universities and those considering internationally oriented careers. In India, programmes could be more closely connected with groups for whom access to professional education is a major motivation, including prospective medical students. Such differentiation would allow Russian Houses and other cultural institutions to move away from a uniform promotional model and develop communication strategies that correspond more closely to the interest of particular audiences.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of cultural narratives used in Russian-language promotion in China and India points to three main conclusions.

First of all, the two countries employ noticeably different ways of presenting Russia and the value of learning Russian. In China, promotional discourse is largely built around strategic cooperation, economic ties, and technological development. Russia is consequently presented as a reliable international partner, while knowledge of Russian is associated with boundless professional opportunities and career development. In India, greater attention is given to the sphere of cultural heritage, educational opportunities, and the long history of bilateral relations. Russia is presented as a culturally familiar and accessible destination, particularly for students interested in affordable

professional education. These differences correspond to the contrasting institutional environments of the language promotion in the two countries: a more centralized model in China and a more fragmented, market-oriented one in India.

Secondly, the findings reveal that cultural heritage does not have the same promotional value in both contexts. In China, factors such as career opportunities, international collaboration, and social standing seem to take precedence, relegating cultural heritage to a lesser role. In India, cultural interest is more closely related to educational aspirations, which gives Russian literature, the arts, and historical ties a more important role. This suggests that cultural heritage cannot be treated as an equally effective promotional resource across different audiences; its impact depends on the motivations and expectations of potential learners.

Last but not least, the study points to the need for greater contextual flexibility in cultural diplomacy. Promotional strategies that prove effective in one country cannot simply be transferred to another without considering local institutional arrangements. In China, great emphasis on professional opportunities and the international relevance of Russian may be appropriate, whereas in India educational benefits, cultural familiarity, and accessibility may be more effective. Russian Houses and other cultural institutions therefore need to take local differences into account when developing language-promotion programmes.

The study also points toward several avenues for future research. Primary data collection through interviews and surveys with students, policymakers, and cultural diplomacy practitioners would illuminate the reception and effectiveness of the narrative strategies identified here. Longitudinal research tracing the evolution of cultural narratives over time would reveal how they have been shaped by changing geopolitical and economic conditions. Comparative studies including other Asian countries would enable broader generalization and a more nuanced understanding of the factors shaping cultural narratives in language promotion.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that cultural narratives in Russian language promotion are not incidental or decorative—they are constitutive of the image of Russia that is projected abroad. The narratives matter not only for what they say about Russia, but for how they position Russian language learners and the relationships they construct between Russia and its Asian partners. Effective cultural diplomacy requires not only resources and institutional presence but also the capacity to craft narratives that resonate with the distinct aspirations, expectations, and cultural sensibilities of diverse audiences. The findings presented here offer both a theoretical framework and practical guidance for meeting this challenge.

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The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: Irina I. Klimova; literature review and theoretical synthesis: Natalia V. Yudina, Ekaterina Yu. Andreeva; framework development and conceptualization: Natalia V. Yudina; supervision and critical revision: Irina I. Klimova; draft manuscript preparation: Ekaterina Yu. Andreeva; designing tables: Zhenya A. Ogannisyan. All authors reviewed the manuscript and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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