Day one of the international conference ‘The Superpower of Japanese Soft-Power’ went successfully as it provided an overview on important topics such as what is Japanese soft-power and the country’s overall strategies for increasing its popularity among young people worldwide, and does Bulgaria have what it takes to harness the potentials of its own soft-power. Discussions focused on the importance of education, ‘the power to live’ in times of a pandemic, the culture and ethnopsychology of Bulgarian and Japanese people, health care and insurance and many other.

With introductory remarks from moderator Boyko Vassilev of the Bulgarian National Television and prof. Madeleine Danova, Dean of Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology at Sofia University, the first session opened with the presentation of prof. Watanabe Yasushi, Keio University. Prof. Watanabe clarified the term ‘soft-power’ and its history in Japan, which he divided into a number of stages, starting with the Tokugawa shogunate to its influence nowadays. The professor also discussed the ‘Cool Japan’ strategy and the experience in preventing disasters and disease which Japan can share with Bulgaria and the world. He expressed his uncertainty whether the upcoming Olympic games would be held and the possibility that they would serve as an example of overcoming the pandemic if they are. Prof. Watanabe also addressed problems such as Japan’s population aging and the country’s need to create a more accepting and adaptable society.

Next was professor Ivan Ilchev from Sofia University who talked about Bulgaria’s first attempts at using soft power from a historical point of view. Although the term is rather new, this strategy has existed for more than a century and a half around the world. Prof. Ilchev mentioned Osaka World Expo 1970 and Bulgaria’s inconsistency and lack of strategy in promoting the country’s cultural heritage during the regime of the Bulgarian Communist Party. Nevertheless, he pointed the numerous visits of the Bulgarian National Radio Children’s Choir to Japan, many exhibitions of the Panagyurishte Thracian Gold Treasure, John Atanasoff’s computer and many others. Prof. Ilchev commented that even nowadays Bulgaria’s soft-power is a marginal interest of the country’s foreign policy.

Assoc. professor Evgenyi Kandilarov added to the discussion from a different perspective – the first signs of the influence of Japanese soft-power in Bulgaria which appear around the 1970s and can be clearly perceived after the 1990s. He mentioned the opening of many martial arts schools, various events and initiatives about Japan. He also talked about the cultural connections between the sister cities Tokyo and Sofia, Okayama and Plovdiv, Fukuyama and Kazanlak.

The conversation then proceeded with questions from students of the Japanese Studies Department at Sofia University – they were eager to know if there would be new possibilities for academic exchanges with Japan; the growing soft-power of South Korea and its influence in Bulgaria and Japan; and the points where the two countries could intersect – culture, music, art and literature, but also overcoming difficult times.

The focus of the second session for the day was on the global pandemic, online education, health care and the need to be united and help one another. The discussion started professor Uesugi Tomiyuki from Seijo University, who talked about the socio-cultural aspects of Japanese soft-power and the reason why the Japanese don’t panic as much during the pandemic as well as the fairly low number of cases and deceased from COVID-19 in Japan. Prof. Uesugi considered many reasons including the self-isolation and restraint that Japanese people successfully maintain by themselves and therefore the lack of lockdowns in Japan. Another cultural aspect was that Japanese culture does now favour physical contact in public, but the most curious one was the power of manga, anime and mythology that brings people together. Prof. Uesugi gave an example with the popularization of the mythological creature amabie that is believed to be able to stop the pandemic. People have started creating various images, products, foods, manga and so on with amabie. The professor also made references to Studio Ghibli movies and the importance of living in peace with nature.

Professor Gergana Petkova, Head of the Japanese Studies Department at Sofia University conversed about ‘the power to live’ in times of immense trial and the need of connection, communication, partnership and togetherness now more than ever. Prof. Petkova focused on where education stands when all else is lost, the importance of helping one another and how we could improve and learn from Japanese people’s perspective.

Prof. Ivaylo Dichev from Sofia University presented about the difficulties Western cultures face during the pandemic and their rising distrust in governments and authorities. He posed the questions where we would indeed go back to the reality before the crisis and talked the downside of politicizing the virus. Assoc. prof. Boyan Zhekov, Chairman of JICA Alumni, Bulgaria and Permanent Secretary of "Friends of Japan in Bulgaria" - Nihon Tomo no Kai, joined the discussion about the digitalization as the center of European politics ‘Industry 4.0’ against the societal transformation plan of Japan ‘Society 5.0’ where ‘humans’ are the essence of the strategy.

On the topic of digitalization participated assoc. prof. Anton Andreev of Sofia University who is currently on a specialization in Toyo University. Assoc. prof. Andreev shared his views and experience on online education from the past year, the hardships for teachers and students respectively and the opportunity for us all to show and realize what education is truly about during these times.

Dr. Nayden Kandilarov, Chairman of a chain of medical laboratories and Dr. Nikolai Bakalov, Sofia University and Doctor in Law from the Faculty of Law of Nagoya University, brought a crucial point of view on Japan’s health care and insurance systems, the skepticism of Bulgarian people towards doctors and whether soft-power can ‘heal’. Students’ questions were directed towards Japanese people’s take on online education and health care in Bulgaria and Japan. Everyone unanimously agreed that even in the face of a pandemic, culture and education are what is left with us and what brings us together. The first conference day was closed with the motto ‘A smile is stronger than a fist’.