

TAKING SOFT POWER SERIOUSLY:
POWER AND PRESTIGE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS TODAY

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the prevailing theories of ‘soft power’, mostly deriving from the pioneering work of Joseph S. Nye, and suggests an additional approach. While Nye’s is moralistic, foreign-policy oriented, and intended to benefit the biggest states, the vision suggested here shows that by applying a non-moralistic ‘force of example’ analysis, other dimensions of their existence, and other states, can be brought into play. The suggestion here is that the force of example is what connects hard power to *influence*, and the most enduring, influential examples a society can offer the world come from its models of change, innovation, ‘progress’. America, from this perspective, remains the sole soft power superpower, because so many elements of its society produce innovations which the rest of the world must come to terms with. The other major cases presented here are China, Russia and the EU, with discussion of the efforts of each to link their hard power to their real or aspirational influence. In conclusion attention is paid briefly to Britain and the Gulf States, as these are nations which have openly embraced versions of the the ‘soft power’ formula with particular energy and investments.

Keywords: Soft Power, Influence, The Force of Example, Modernity.

INTRODUCTION

Thirty years have gone by since the well-known Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye Jr. launched his concept of ‘soft power’ on its extraordinary career. Today, Google lists “about 1.97 billion” references to the phrase; Google Scholar counts over 3.68 million articles.¹ The Emirate of Abu

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¹ Google.com, Google Scholar. Accessed August 22, 2021. There must be doubts about these figures. In mid-May 2021 they were respectively 2.01bn and 69,000.

Dhabi has created a 'Soft Power Council', which has produced a 'Soft Power Strategy' for its nation-state. Macquarie University in Australia boasts a 'Soft Power Analysis and Resource Centre'. The British Council, the nation's formal institution for promoting its culture and image in the world, claims that Britain is a "soft power superpower" (British Council 2019). For a brief moment in spring 2021, with the arrival of so-called 'vaccine diplomacy', the 'soft power' phrase achieved even greater prominence, e.g. "Germany, Russia and the Sputnik V vaccine – a tale of soft power" (*Deutsche Welle* 2021).

1. THE THEORETICAL DIMENSION

What was so revolutionary about the language Nye used when, in 1990, he launched his idea in *Bound to Lead. The Changing Nature of America Power?* He talks of...

[...] what might be called indirect or co-optive power behaviour. Co-optive power can rest on the attraction of one's ideas or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences that others express... The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology and institutions. This dimension can be thought of as soft power, in contrast to the hard command power usually associated with tangible resources like military and economic strength (Nye 1990: 31).

Nye was prescient. He insisted that the nature of 'power' in the international system was changing, taking on new dimensions, becoming more diffuse, eliminating the boundaries between state and non-state actors. He talked of the 'transnational interdependence' that the information revolution of that time – pre-Internet – was already producing. He listed other factors which would condition the future evolution of the international system: health epidemics (he was thinking of AIDS), climate change, drug trafficking, terrorism. Over the succeeding decades he would develop and adapt his soft power conception, until in 2004 he produced a comprehensive definition of it in *Soft Power. The Means to Success in World Politics*:

The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority) (Nye 2004: 11).

Almost all the vast academic and political debate which has arisen around soft power in the last fifteen years or so still starts with Nye, and the

question of power in international relations today. The most ambitious attempt to turn ‘soft power’ into a functional research tool, grounded on appropriate conceptual rigour, has come now from a German political scientist, Hendrik Ohnesorge, in an impressive book of 2020. Nye himself never claimed that his idea offered a fully developed analytical approach, much less a theory. This is what Ohnesorge proposes in his monumental text:

The work in hand [...] seeks to offer a new taxonomy of soft power. Thus (it) distinguishes between the four subunits of soft power (1) resources, (2) instruments, (3) reception, and (4) outcomes, each of which containing distinct components by itself (Ohnesorge 2020: 18).

The key Chapter 3 organises the section on ‘Resources’ into ‘Culture’, ‘Values’, ‘Policies’ and ‘Personalities’. Each is provided with ample evidence from history, literature and relevant practice to demonstrate its possible contribution to a theory of soft power. On ‘Policies’ for instance, Ohnesorge echoes Nye by emphasising the importance of the perceptions of legitimacy of a given foreign policy action, while acknowledging that legitimacy itself is a contested notion, even if its dialectical, two-way basis cannot be doubted: “Therefore, only when rhetoric and deeds, promise and performance, go hand in hand, can soft power be successfully derived from governmental policies” (Ohnesorge 2020: 107-108). However Ohnesorge does not offer examples of when this very high standard of political and moral consistency has been reached in history.

But there’s another problem here. Because so much of the work on soft power has been provided by Anglo-American scholars, there is also the sensation, reading it, that their preoccupations are with those nation-states used to projecting hard, military and political power in the world, so the problem becomes how to combine ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ power. What could a nation’s cultural and moral assets do for its foreign policy, understood in traditional geopolitical terms? That was the question Professor Nye was always asking in the end, thinking of course of the US first and last (Nye 2011: 10).

But as a group of central European and Scandinavian scholars pointed out in 2018, at a conference on soft power seen from their perspective, of the 193 members of the United Nations all but two dozen “can be categorized as small states”, and – we might add – of them only the three principal nuclear states can be said to be able to project strategic power around the world (Cura and Rouet 2019: 47).

Yet in a globalised, market-oriented international system, all the members of the UN have long been competing for recognition, attention, respect and trust. Hence the importance of *influence*, or what another new

soft power book, by a British literary critic, Robert Winder, calls “national charm”, or “a nation’s overall glow”, “a form of enchantment”, “the cultivation of goodwill”, “national story-telling”, “the planting of seeds” (Winder 2020). As these phrases suggest, ‘influence’ is a very hard concept to define with any precision, and the international relations scholars don’t even try. If you are one of today’s ‘influencers’, you have ‘likes’ and ‘followers’. That’s a clue to a definition, but in the end I have come to a fairly clear idea of what an effective definition of ‘influence’ might be, and have done so by using an approach implied by the ‘soft power’ formula.

I would like to suggest that the influence of a true soft-power superpower does not depend on the operations of its state and governmental machine, but consists in a special ability of its society to generate and deploy models of change and innovation, of progress: showing the world, its economies, its individuals, possible ways to change for the better, however defined. Such models offer what the sociologist Peter Wagner, in his essay on ‘Modernity’, calls “the interpretative and practical power of (their) normativity and functionality” (Wagner 2012: 4-5); in other words – those of his colleague Gerard Delanty – their ‘normative salience’: new standards and new standard practices (Delanty 2014, 2013: 18-19)

2. AMERICA: STILL THE SOFT POWER SUPERPOWER

In the by-gone days of ideology, whole societies – or their ruling cliques at least – could claim that they possessed these interpretative, normative keys to the future. America, the sole survivor of the 18th century notions of general progress based on an ideological project, no longer claims an exclusive franchise on the evolution of the world, as it did from the days of the Four Freedoms onwards. Nevertheless, it is easy to see that the US still possesses some of the most powerful sources of cultural and economic innovation and attraction, from Silicon Valley and all its products to its great universities, from Hollywood to its Nobel Prize winners, from its foundations to its outstanding personalities. And it still possesses a special capacity to combine old and new ways of projecting power which few can match. It is non-state actors which today propel the force of America’s disruptive, innovative influence, a reality which unites such apparently different developments as Über and Air BnB in 2011, Black Lives Matter in 2020, and the proposal in May 2021 for a new European Super League of football, driven principally by the billionaire US owners of certain key clubs in Europe.²

² My discussion of Super League project and its fate at *La rivista il Mulino*, “Superlega, quando lo spirito yankee non funziona”, May 5, 2021.

America's soft power assets represent forces of change and disruption which the rest of the world *must* come to terms with as long as people and societies want to be considered as competitive, up-to-date, at or near the top in those rankings of what's considered best that the US private sector has been so adept at producing in these years. This is what I've recast – following Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber's classic example of 1969 (Servan-Schreiber 1968) – as the American challenge, an "invitation to participate in a competition", as the Oxford English Dictionary defines it, or a "a bold and defiant summons", as Webster's puts it, provocative, inciting, arousing.

But very often with a hint of menace: if you don't respond to the challenge, we can overwhelm you – look at the giants of the digital world; ask traditional TV networks everywhere how they intend to cope with Netflix, the Disney Channel, Amazon-MGM and Warner-Discovery; look at youth culture and fashion, the private equity giants and the ratings agencies; ask the competitors of Walmart's former chain in Britain, Asda, which was the first to bring Black Friday shopping mayhem to Europe. Taxis may be a small part of everyday life, but Über's arrival provoked reactions – even violent – up and down the Old World (as elsewhere), and everyone took notice. The way Über pushed its 'normative salience' was just what long-established taxi firms feared most, and they pushed back, often with success. Über is a classic case of 'disruptive innovation', of a trans-Atlantic modernity-versus-tradition mechanism which eventually forces both sides to adapt (*Financial Times* 2015; *New York Times* 2016).

The fall of the European football Super League project, provoked by the vast backlash of fans, managers, some owners and leading politicians, shows the sort of resistance certain kinds of challenge, if badly proposed, can provoke. But as in every other comparable case, the aftermath will be long, and all will change to some degree.

3. THE SOFT POWER CHALLENGERS ELSEWHERE

Meanwhile all the other, lesser, states who want to be world players in the soft power game invest ever greater resources into the competition for influence, which I take to mean *authority, attention, sympathy, support, respect, recognition, legitimacy, trust*. They use an increasingly wide and self-conscious series of devices for this purpose, some rather old and marginal, such as public diplomacy, others much more ambitious such as world class sports events, Expo's, giant arts festivals, gatherings of celebrities, displays of technical advances, nation-branding. (e.g. Song 2020). They want their

economies, their companies, their personalities, their universities and now their health systems, to top the world rankings of those things.³

In Asia, China, South Korea and Japan carry on an endless soft power struggle. But, as *Foreign Policy.com* noted in October 2020:

China is bad at soft power. Its recent turn toward heightened and obnoxious nationalism is not winning hearts and minds [...] That's in stark contrast to its next-door neighbor South Korea, which does not take a back seat to many countries when it comes to expressive nationalism. In a 2019 survey conducted by the Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS), the average favorability of South Korea among the 15 countries surveyed was a solid 76.7 percent, with over 90 percent favorability ratings from several countries, including Russia, India, Brazil, and Thailand. South Korea, in other words, is as popular as China is unpopular. South Korea's pop culture has played a major role in the world's positive image of the nation: A plurality of the respondents in the same KOCIS survey said K-pop was the first thing that came to mind about South Korea (12.5 percent), followed by Korean food (8.5 percent) and culture (6.5 percent) (*Foreign Policy.com* 2020).

Fundamentally, South Korean pop culture found global resonance because Korea's artists created new cultural products that the world found compelling. But the Korean government did play a role: It wanted to gain soft power through pop culture, devised an overarching strategy to boost its own artists' reach, and implemented specific policies conducive to the flowering of pop culture. Here then we see an artificial nation – South Korea – deliberately placing its emphasis on a certain idea of modernity, connecting up its global hardware brands – Samsung, LG, Kia, Hyundai – to a new youth culture, created from scratch (Hong 2014).

But it's too simple to say that China is just "bad at soft power." The evolution of the régime's attitude to the idea and practice of soft power is enigmatic. In their introduction to a 2020 book on *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*, the editors make clear that senior people in Beijing were thinking about the concept as far back as 1993, and began to take it seriously after 2007, when the Communist Party Secretary of the time, Hu Jintao, told the annual congress of his party that much more attention should be paid to highlighting Chinese culture both at home and abroad (Edney, Rosen and Zhu 2020: 2). The editors continue:

China has spent hundreds of billions of US dollars to expand the international reach of its media outlets, organize major events such as the 2008 Olympic Games and 2010 Shanghai Expo, launch hundreds of Confucius Institutes to teach Chi-

³ The most prominent of these rankings is produced by the London-based 'strategic communications company', Portland. Their 'soft power rankings', based on extensive international polling, includes all these items: <https://softpower30.com> (accessed November 10, 2021).

nese language and culture, host summits attended by world leaders and sponsor forums on regional security and prosperity.

Great financial resources were ploughed into international television, cinema and other media channels in the early years of this century. The Party's theoretical journal *Seeking Truth*, launched an English-language edition in 2009 "to make the core values of the party more understandable to Western societies, especially in academic and theoretical circles there" (*ibid.*: 3). But as Edney, Rosen and Zhu make clear, the arrival of Xi Jinping to supreme power in 2012 brought a significant shift: domestic politics became more closed, geopolitical assertiveness more obvious, and the strategic priorities shifted to geoeconomics, with the launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and above all the world-reaching Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Soft power methods and language gave way to 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy – reacting aggressively to the slightest hint of foreign criticism of the nation – and the country came no nearer to improving its standing in the world rankings of reputation and attractiveness compiled by western agencies whose methodologies would always privilege liberal democracies. "Where then", ask Edney, Rosen and Zhu, "does soft power fit in to China's foreign policy now that its ability to employ coercion or inducements to achieve its objectives is greater than it has ever been?" (*ibid.*: 5-6).⁴

In 2014 Chairman Xi said: "To raise national cultural soft power, we must make efforts to spread... the values of socialism with Chinese characteristics". But by 2021 the most obvious attempts to buy cultural influence, such as offering access to the world's largest film market, so that Hollywood studios would make films which tell heroic Chinese stories for both Chinese and global markets, these have failed.⁵ In response, films made with in China with Hollywood-style resources, production values and even American professionals, had begun to project explicitly anti-American messages (Bayles 2019). Yet because Hollywood now made more money in the China market than at home, its executives were increasingly practising self-censorship, and going to ever-greater lengths to pay respect to the régime's moral, cultural and ideological sensibilities.⁶ Expert observers noted that a comprehensive trade deal between the EU and China, concluded in De-

⁴ The contradictions this situation produced in China's English-language broadcasting is illustrated in "Behind the Scenes at China TV: Soft Power and State Propaganda", *Financial Times*, June 20, 2021.

⁵ Cit. in "China and Hollywood: The End of the Affair", *Financial Times*, April 23, 2021.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/aug/05/china-hollywood-films-damaging-impact-report> (accessed November 10, 2021).

ember 2020, conspicuously failed to recognise any sort of reciprocity in the all-important news and media sectors

Long known as a bastion of cultural protectionism – only 34 foreign films may be imported into China each year – the EU accord even specified the times in which the Chinese people might be exposed to European or other outside influences: “foreign programs cannot be shown between 7 p.m. and 10 p.m. without special approval and... only Chinese cartoons can be shown between 5 p.m. and 10 p.m.”. The agreement prompted the European Parliament’s dominant grouping, the European People’s Party, to produce its first ever paper on China, in March 2021. This noted that while Chinese-controlled firms had invested \$3bn. in European media interests in the previous ten years, European equivalents were not only excluded from similar initiatives, but that the Chinese had succeeded in splitting the Europeans: only a minority had put limits on what the Chinese could buy locally. The Dutch and Spanish governments had allowed their media to be included in it. As for Italy, the 2019 BRI agreement⁷ between Italy and China also included a clause to “promote exchanges and cooperation between their... media”⁸ (Lau and Vela 2021).

When in early 2021 certain states began to produce and distribute in the world their own, national, anti-Covid vaccines, China was among the first to present their effort as a stake in a new form of geopolitical and soft power competition (and to overcome the fact that the virus had originated in some unexplained fashion in China). A March headline in *Foreign Affairs* proclaimed: “Beijing Hasn’t Won the Soft-Power Stakes But It Has An Early Lead”.⁹ “Health was one of the many subtopics of the Belt and Road Initiative. With the pandemic, it has become the main focus,” said Moritz Rudolf of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.¹⁰

Yet pollsters noted that the nation continued to be actively disliked and distrusted by large majorities around the world, and particularly in Asia. Commenting on this reality, Richard Lloyd Parry, the Asia editor of *The Times* of London said that Japan and South Korea had been much more

⁷ Available at: https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Memorandum_Italia-Cina_EN.pdf (accessed November 15, 2021).

⁸ In March 2019 President Xi Jinping arrived in Rome on a state visit, accompanied by 500 officials and managers, plus 120 journalists. In an expansive article in *Corriere della Sera*, the President announced an array of co-operative aspirations, including the BRI, culture (“China and Italy Both Cultural Superpowers”), business, climate change policy and diplomacy, *CorSera*, March 20, 2019.

⁹ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-03-11/vaccine-diplomacy-paying-china> (accessed November 10, 2021).

¹⁰ “The West Should Pay Attention to Russia and China’s Vaccine Diplomacy”, *Financial Times*, February 10, 2021.

successful in projecting their cultures, old and new; that the 500 Confucius Institutes around the world had often attracted opprobrium by overtly spreading official propaganda, and reacting aggressively to even the most indirect forms of criticism; that the violent style of the ‘wolf warrior’ diplomats was alienating people everywhere. He ended by quoting Kevin Rudd, the Chinese-speaking former Prime Minister of Australia, who said:

Whatever China’s new generation of ‘wolf warrior’ diplomats may report back to Beijing, the reality is that China’s standing has taken a huge hit... Anti-Chinese reaction over the spread of the virus, often racially charged, has been seen in countries as disparate as India, Indonesia and Iran. Chinese soft power runs the risk of being shredded.¹¹

* * *

No-one doubts that Russia, with its Sputnik V, sees in its vaccine a new weapon – the first for many years – in its eternal struggle with the West, and for projecting influence more widely. According to the *Financial Times* (n. 8), its clients had requested 1.2 bn. doses by the end of February, 2021. For a time, Italy – where a new Sputnik V factory is allegedly to be built – Iran and Hungary provided Russia with propaganda successes on this front, and helped conceal the disinformation efforts aimed at discrediting western products denounced by the US State Department.¹² Sputnik was forecast to be used across Latin America, and in places as different as Belarus, Algeria and Nigeria. At home, meanwhile just over half of the population had been vaccinated at least once by late August 2021.¹³

From the start of 2021 a geopolitical competition broke out between China and Russia to see whose vaccine would most effectively be taken up across Africa and Latin America particularly, but even in those parts of central and eastern Europe, where the EU’s faltering start had left whole areas un-provided for. German commentators were particularly impressed by the way Russian vaccine diplomacy was dividing the EU, and even Germany itself. “Russia is trying to employ the vaccine as a political tool globally to insert instability, division, and polarization in the political scene”, Jörg Forbrig, director for Central and Eastern Europe at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, told *Deutsche Welle*.¹⁴ Amid controversy across Europe

¹¹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/xi-jinpings-china-may-one-day-lead-the-world-but-it-will-never-be-loved-v9cngjx6t?region=global> (accessed November 10, 2021).

¹² *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2021.

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-vaccinations-tracker.html> (accessed November 10, 2021).

¹⁴ “Germany, Russia and the Sputnik V Vaccine – A Tale of Soft Power | Germany | News

in April – by then Bavaria, Hungary, Slovakia and Austria had already ordered doses from Moscow – France’s foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, described the shot as “more a means of propaganda and aggressive diplomacy than of solidarity and assistance”.¹⁵

If soft power can be succinctly described as *the force of example*, then Sputnik was able to present a side of Russian society – medical science – which was technologically advanced and able to compete with the best the rest could offer. But when the ‘soft’ features of Sputnik diplomacy were inserted into the wider context of Russia’s deeply ambiguous policies towards the outside world, and the West in particular, then its attractions took on a quite different light. How to relate this development to the Kremlin’s perpetual information and propaganda war against the West, its overt and covert forms of subversion, its ever tougher clamp-down on the alleged influences of western media on Russian society?

In 2008 Foreign Minister Lavrov had become the first Kremlin official to argue that “competition is becoming truly global and acquiring a civilizational dimension; that is the subject of competition now includes values and development models”. In 2013 Vladimir Putin talked of “a rivalry of values and development models within the framework of the universal principles of democracy and the market economy”. The Kremlin Foreign Policy Concept paper of February 2013 talked explicitly of ‘soft power’. A Polish summary of the document said that Moscow:

[...] is convinced that the West is using new political technologies (‘soft power’) to interfere in the political life of sovereign states and, by manipulating the public mood of both the masses and the elites, is seeking to impose their political and social model upon them.

So the only possible response must be to develop an equivalent Russian counter campaign:

The Russian understanding of ‘soft power’ has its roots in local political tradition, and relies on an ability to actively affect the formation of opinion about Russia in influential foreign milieus, and to manipulate domestic and foreign public opinion by means of institutions and pressure groups which are formally independent of the state.¹⁶

and In-Depth Reporting from Berlin and Beyond”, *Deutsche Welle*, May 6, 2021. This news report contains a Russian video inviting Europeans to combine tourism to Russia with a vaccine shot.

¹⁵ “Is Russia’s Covid Vaccine Anything More Than a Political Weapon?”, *The Guardian*, April 30, 2021. But by late July 2021 many countries were complaining that Russia had not delivered the promised vaccines: “Stalled Russian Vaccines Cause Global Anger”, *msn.com*, July 29, 2021.

¹⁶ <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2013-02-20/russian-federations-foreign-policy-concept> (accessed November 10, 2021).

A 2017 book by the political scientist, Dimitar Bechev, on the role of Russia in the evolution of the Balkans today, insists that soft power is the key currency of influence which the Kremlin deploys in that region: “Soft power is hands down, one of the most significant – if not the most significant – asset that Russia has at its disposal. Winning over hearts and minds is easier and immensely more cost-effective than bribing governments, maintaining alliances, let alone resorting to hard power”. Media and civil society, says Bechev, “constitute an arena of remorseless struggle”, where the battle over “ideas, culture, and information” is always zero-sum (Bechev 2017: 242).

While the Kremlin’s information warfare has been extensively studied (Pomarantsev 2014, Van Herpen 2016, Rutenberg 2017), the evolution of the Russian conception of soft power as such has received less attention. The nation’s soft power assets may be classified as follows:

1. ‘The Russian World’ ... a unique socio-cultural civilizational entity formed of the multi-people Russian nation’ (Putin cit. in Tsygankov 2013: 262) ... as well as élites, economic ties, aid, diplomacy, language, all amounting to an assertion of the régime’s understanding of Russian/Slavic exceptionalism.¹⁷ The Kremlin’s geopolitical understanding of the ‘Russian World’ would include the Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Bulgaria, Moldova and Belarus. A crucial spiritual foundation of this dominion is...

2. the Russian Orthodox church: In 2015 the BBC reported that:

Orthodox rhetoric is now widely used by TV commentators and state officials. Since Vladimir Putin’s return to power in 2012, the Church has become visible in practically all spheres of public life in Russia, from charity drives to science and the army¹⁸ (Higgins 2016).

The Church’s vigilantes have physically attacked arts and music exhibitions they consider alien to the conservative Russian traditions they defend, and have applied the same treatment to demonstrations in favour of LGBT rights, a supreme symbol in their view of western decadence.

3. The legacy of Russian high culture and performing arts, especially including the cinema. Opening the Fifth St.Petersburg international Cultural Forum in 2016, Putin said:

¹⁷ <http://globalinterests.org/2015/05/26/the-russian-world-russias-soft-power-and-geo-political-imagination/> (accessed November 10, 2021).

¹⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33982267> (accessed November 10, 2021). This report features, among other images, the sight of an Orthodox priest blessing with holy water a Russian fighter jet.

I should say that this is the third year in a row that we have been holding national events – the first year, the second and the third – that are in some way or other related to Russian culture. Last year, we had the Year of Literature. This year is the Year of the Cinema. The year before last was in fact the Year of Culture. I am pleased to note that although we rightly take pride in Russian cultural achievements, we always say that they are part of world culture and there is absolutely no doubt about that.¹⁹

4. Sport. ‘Russia, Country of Sports’, as defined by the annual international forum dedicated to this theme. In his speech opening the 2016 event, Putin emphasised sport’s place in the social, economic and ‘humanistic’ development of Russia, talked of its 2020 Development Strategy and how “We will work together to keep sport fair and transparent, completely open and non-political, so that its ideas and values unite countries and peoples”. He also emphasised the need to keep all sports clean and doping free.²⁰

On-lookers saw historical forces at work. Andrei Kolesnikov, a commentator at the Carnegie Foundation’s Moscow Center wrote in 2018: “The tradition of sport acting as a kind of hybrid war has seamlessly continued in Russia into the post-Soviet period. It is victory at any cost, because victory has political significance. It’s soft power, the face of the country, the image of an invincible nation ruled by a wise leader”. Kolesnikov recalled the many episodes in Soviet history when sporting events had been placed at the service of the state, and how they had been turned into nationalistic legend via heroic films. Sport, he concluded, is “one of the tenets of patriotism”.²¹

This commentary appeared just as Russia prepared – at enormous expense – to host the 2018 football world Cup in Sochi, the same mid-size town north of the Black Sea where the 2014 Winter Olympics had been held. It was a diplomatic triumph for Putin: the Saudi leader Mohammed Bin Salman appeared, as did high-level representatives from Japan, South Korea, the US and Sweden. President Macron arrived as France entered the final (and went on to win the competition).

Alas, Sochi Russia’s days of sporting glory were short-lived. At the end of 2019 the World Anti-Doping Agency banned Russia from the Olympic

¹⁹ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53392> (accessed November 10, 2021).

²⁰ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53069> (accessed November 10, 2021).

²¹ <https://carnegie.ru/2018/06/21/for-putin-sport-is-state-affair-pub-76671> (accessed November 10, 2021). The article is headed by a photo of Putin participating in an ice-hockey match.

Games and all international sports for four years, following the confirmation of years of malpractice involving performance-enhancing drugs across most major sports in which Russian athletes were involved. The authorities in Moscow reacted with a defiant storm of verbal violence which would become the norm in so many expressions of Russian attitudes to its treatment by the outside world.²²

Meanwhile, as the years of Vladimir Putin's presidency rolled on, his régime's efforts at cultural protectionism became more and more intense. As early as 2014 the Russian Parliament passed a law limiting foreign ownership in domestic media to 20%. Even fashion magazines such as *GQ* and *Cosmopolitan* would be hit. Russian members of the Duma were quoted as saying "every glossy magazine is a tank division rolling over the traditional values and patriotic sentiments of Russia's innocent and unsuspecting readers".²³ By 2020 the Duma and the Kremlin were blocking, or trying to block, a variety of US social media sites, although the régime's massive disinformation campaign, in episodes such as the US election campaign of 2016, had used these platforms extensively (Smith 2018).²⁴ By 2021, YouTube – "where [oppositon leader] Navalny has millions more subscribers than state television networks", said the *Financial Times*²⁵ – CNN, Twitter, Tik Tok and the venerable US public radio station Radio Free Europe had all felt or were feeling the pressure of the Kremlin's 'digital sovereignty' drive, not least because Alexei Navalny and his supporters had used US-based social media extensively.²⁶

By the usual, benign definitions of 'soft power', Russia could not possibly be considered a significant or credible player in the game to link hard power to influence in the world. There was no connection between its declared constitutional principles – dramatically revised by Putin in 2020 to favour his continued personal rule – and the way its domestic society was run or governed (Taylor 2021). Whatever moral authority its foreign policy might pretend to was undermined by its long-term association with dictators such as Assad in Syria and Lukashenko in Belarus, and by its mili-

²² "Russia Doping Scandal: 2019, WADA Findings, What Did Russia Do", *news.com.au*, 14 December. Full background in Day 2021.

²³ *The Week*, 11 October, 2014.

²⁴ "Russian MPs Back Law to Block US Social Media Sites | World", *The Times*, December 24, 2020.

²⁵ "Russia Flexes Its 'Sovereign Internet' With Move to Curb Twitter", *Financial Times*, April 5, 2021.

²⁶ "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Says Russia Wants to Force It Out", *The New York Times*, January 21, 2021; "YouTube Feels Heat As Russia Ramps Up 'Digital Sovereignty' Drive", *Financial Times*, May 22, 2021.

tary offensives both real – in eastern Ukraine and Syria – and threatened. The Irish government protested when even it found Russian bombers in its airspace at a certain point in 2020.²⁷ Then there was the extraordinary, enduring effort the régime put into cyber-warfare: the malicious, clandestine undermining of major western agencies both public and private.²⁸ Not surprisingly, the Western ratings agencies consistently gave Russia very low scores for the nation's standing in the world, as judged from their world-wide opinion polling.²⁹

But should the definition of 'soft power' be shifted to a much less moralistic basis, such as the simple force of example as previously suggested, then a very different profile appears. How else to explain the admiration and friendship of heads of state or government as different as Trump of the US, Erdogan of Turkey, Orbán of Hungary, Brnabic of Serbia, Sisi of Egypt, Modi of India, as well as local right-wing leaders such as Le Pen in France, Hofer in Austria, Berlusconi and Salvini in Italy? While some of these figures openly acknowledged that they had received subsidies or loans from Moscow, no-one could doubt that the form of nationalistic populism that Putin expressed personally and politically – proud, defiant and muscular – appealed to them very genuinely. (Orenstein 2014; for the Italian case: Merlo 2014). This consensus, particularly on display in the world-views of Victor Orbán in Hungary and Marie LePen in France, constituted the true expression of Russian soft power in contemporary times, whether Putin and his régime still believed in the concept as such, or not.

* * *

A favourite object of contempt for the Russian government, its media and its apologists in the West, was and is the European Union in all its forms. A western commentator on *Russia Today* blasted the European Parliament in May 2021 when it issued a draft report inviting the Commission in Brussels to revise radically the Union's relations with Russia, meaning a push-back against the 'security threat', resistance to 'Russian interference' in 'the EU and Eastern neighbourhood countries', and supporting democracy in various ways, leading eventually to 'a democratic transformation' of Russia itself. The fact that the task of pouring scorn and derision on this

²⁷ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/russian-bombers-in-irish-air-space-for-second-time-in-days-1.4200213> (accessed November 10, 2021).

²⁸ "Russian Groups Behind SolarWinds Spy Campaign Conduct New Cyber Attacks", *Financial Times*, May 28, 2021.

²⁹ Example at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/russia-and-putin-receive-low-ratings-globally/> (accessed November 10, 2021).

document was left to one of *Russia Today*'s lesser-known western contributors probably meant that no-one took it very seriously.³⁰

Yet in the same days the President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, was herself offering €3bn to the organised opposition in Belarus if it succeeded in dethroning the dictatorial President of that country, Lukashenko, and carried out a 'democratic transformation' there.³¹ This in spite of the Russian invasion and permanent seizure of parts of the Ukraine in 2014, after its democratically elected government had been about to sign an association agreement with the EU, setting off years of violent internal upheaval and military confrontation with Russia in the eastern part of the country, a situation still unresolved in 2021. The new grand EU gesture towards Belarus came after the Minsk régime had diverted a passing international passenger flight to the airport of the capital, and seized the leader of the opposition, known to be aboard the plane. Years of small-scale financial support for the forces of democracy as seen in Brussels, and sanctions against the dictator and his system, had come to nothing. Lukashenko had just ignored them.³² Would a much bigger plan make the difference?

The Belarus package indicates the kind of soft power currencies the EU can deploy when it wishes to transform its force of attraction into hard policy, in the context of its long-standing 'European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations':

First, through direct financial support we will boost the country's economic recovery.

Second, we will mobilise a Transition Package of up to €400 million in grant assistance under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation (NCIDI)-Global Europe to support the democratic transition and address key structural reforms.

Third, we will invest in sustainable infrastructures and the green and digital transformation. In partnership with International Financial Institutions, the EU expects to mobilise up to €100 million in grant funding to leverage up to €1 billion of key public and private investments supporting the country's green and digital transformation, connectivity and access to finance for Belarusian SMEs.³³

³⁰ The European Parliament's Report, from its Committee of Foreign Affairs, is visible at PR_INI_RecommCFSP (europa.eu), May 5, 2021; commentary at "The European Parliament Has Called For Regime Change in Russia, But No One in Europe Cares Because It Is a Pointless Talking Shop", *RT*, May 21, 2021.

³¹ Details of the comprehensive support package, which followed earlier, more modest support for democracy over several years, and a variety of sanctions on the government, at "Plan for €3 billion support package to democratic Belarus" (europa.eu), May 28, 2021.

³² "Mired in Minsk: EU Summit Hijacked by Belarus", *POLITICO*, May 25, 2021.

³³ Doc. cit. n. 30. Emphasis in original.

In 2007, at a Lisbon prize-giving ceremony for its efforts in enlargement over the years, the then Commissioner for Enlargement, Ohlli Rehn had said:

As Enlargement Commissioner for nearly three years now, I am convinced that enlargement is at the core of the EU's soft power – its power to transform its nearest neighbours into functioning democracies, market economies, and true partners in meeting common challenges.

Enlargement has proven to be one of the most important instruments for European security. It reflects the essence of the EU as a civilian power, extending the area of peace and prosperity, liberty and democracy. The EU has achieved far more through its gravitational pull than it could ever have done with a stick or a sword.³⁴

The latest (2021) EU Commission statement explains that the objectives of enlargement remain as ever. They aspire to:

- foster peace and stability in regions close to the EU's borders
- help improve the quality of people's lives through integration and cooperation across borders
- increase prosperity and opportunities for European businesses and citizens
- guide, support and monitor changes in countries wishing to join the European Union in line with EU values, laws and standards.”³⁵ The Copenhagen Criteria of 1993, which laid down specific rules for eligibility also demanded the existence of ‘a functioning market economy’, as well as ‘institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for, and protection of, minorities.’

But by the time the new ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’ was convened in May 2021, what was widely termed ‘enlargement fatigue’ could be seen on many sides. Every year the Commission published an ‘enlargement report’ on the progress made by candidate countries. In 2020 each report ran to over 100 pages, meaning 600 pages on the Balkan applicants (Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia, Turkey). An expert on the region at the London School of Economics noted that most of these countries had, after long years of negotiation, lost interest in the EU prospect. The conclusion was clear:

While the reports have moved closer to capturing the problems of the region than earlier reports, they are still lagging behind in capturing the decline of democ-

³⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_07_642 (accessed November 10, 2021).

³⁵ “EU Enlargement”, European Commission (*europa.eu*). Accessed May 29, 2021.

racy and rule of law in most countries and offer too little analysis to show a path forward. Ultimately, the reports are a PR disaster for the EU in the Western Balkans.³⁶

An in-depth analysis in the *Financial Times* of December 2020 confirmed this judgment: “The dispute over the rule of law in some countries is damaging the union’s moral legitimacy.” In a number of east European nations, the will and ability of ultra-nationalist governments to defy or ignore EU rules on democracy and pluralism, free media, the law and human rights, was obvious. The Polish President, Duda, had declared that “‘LGBT ideology’ is more destructive to man than Soviet communism.” The *FT* article talked of the impotence of the Union in its efforts to “project, enforce and embody its founding values”. At a time when the Union was still digesting Brexit, and above all debating how to re-float its remaining members economically as the Covid epidemic roared on, the inability of Brussels to link funding to respect for its basic moral, social, political and economic criteria was obvious, particularly in the Balkans.³⁷

Once again a moralistic conception of ‘soft power’ had shown its limits, when confronted by those determined to reject such an approach. But measured by force of example standards, a quite different picture emerged yet again. A widely-reviewed 2020 book by Columbia University law professor, Anu Bradford, provided a full-length account on how the EU had become a global regulatory superpower. In *The Brussels Effect*, Bradford demonstrated how EU standards, norms, laws and regulations had affected such areas as data privacy, consumer health and safety, environmental protection, competition law and even on-line hate speech, and had done so on a global scale.³⁸ The Commission made elaborate plans for a radical ‘green deal’, and included environmental provisions in as many of its future plans as possible.³⁹ In March 2021 the Commission launched its vision of a ‘digital decade’, focusing – said its lead promoters, “on the four cardinal issues of skills, infrastructure and capacities, public services, and the digitalization of business, the European Union aims to be at the forefront of today’s digital revolution”.⁴⁰ The Commission’s long battles with the giants

³⁶ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/10/12/49895/> (accessed November 10, 2021).

³⁷ “EU Identity Crisis: Poland, Hungary and the Fight Over Brussels’ Values”, *Financial Times*, December 4, 2020. I have discussed the EU’s soft power failures in the Balkans in ELLWOOD (2021a).

³⁸ “Brussels Effect”, <https://www.brusselseffect.com> (accessed November 10, 2021). See also bibliography.

³⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en (accessed November 10, 2021).

⁴⁰ “Why Europe’s Digital Decade Matters”, *Project Syndicate*, March 10, 2021. Author Ve-stager was the Competition Commissioner, and Borrell the Union’s foreign policy chief.

of Silicon Valley and Seattle, in the effort to neutralise the alleged “abuse of their dominant position” was before the eyes of everyone, and attracted attention around the world.⁴¹

But the greatest challenge the Union set itself was in providing a vast range of subsidies for all its members hit by the Covid epidemic, in exchange for concrete plans to spend the funds allocated on modernisation processes to be approved by the Commission. This was the *Next-Generation Recovery Fund*, an un-precedented commitment to spend €750bn. on “transforming our economies and creating jobs so that everyone can live in the Europe we all desire”, as an exceptional publicity campaign proclaimed.⁴² After stumbling badly in the early phases of its self-appointed efforts to vaccinate all 450 million citizens of the member-states, here was the Union’s great opportunity to overcome the painful memory of that phase, and with “the largest stimulus package ever” renew its soft power force of example for decades to come, with or without Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and Belarus.

* * *

The states beyond Europe which today have invested most economic, cultural and political resources in soft power, in the most self-conscious fashion, are undoubtedly the Emirates of the Persian Gulf. Sport, and football in particular, is just one element in a strategy which includes massive investment in education, in culture, and in mass media. Qatar has made Al Jazeera a force in global broadcasting, while Saudi Arabia is building a grand cinema and TV complex, and proposes a huge new city on the Red Sea.⁴³ Abu Dhabi is unique in possessing a formal Soft Power Council, which has expressed its own Soft Power Strategy. In the name of this vision the emirate has built three world-class museums. Qatar’s version is reported to have cost over \$400m in construction costs alone. The *Guardian* said that the museum “tells the story of how this tiny nation of nomadic bedouins and pearl divers became, with the discovery of natural gas, the most wealthy country per capita on Earth in just 50 years”. The building was an extraordinary monument to this, ‘the world epicentre of soft power’.⁴⁴

⁴¹ “A Transatlantic Effort To Take On Big Tech”, *Financial Times*, December 6, 2020.

⁴² Details at https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en (accessed November 10, 2021). Example of ad campaign in Italy in *La Stampa*, May 11, 2021.

⁴³ My discussion at <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/geopolitics-sport-soft-power-soccer-and-arab-gulf>. June 23, 2020 (accessed November 10, 2021).

⁴⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/mar/27/flying-saucers-have-landed-qatar-supersized-national-museum> (accessed November 3, 2021).

Abu Dhabi's Soft Power Council talks of "building up the nation's reputation in the world, highlighting its identity, its heritage, its culture and its contributions to the world." Clearly all these states consider sport to be a vital element among these contributions, an arena of competition full of symbolic meaning in the never-ending battle for soft power and prestige between the rivals of the Persian Gulf.

In western Europe, Britain has emerged as the European nation most dedicated to the 'soft power' idea of its world role. In 2013 the House of Lords set up a Select Committee to investigate 'Soft Power and the UK's Influence.' (House of Lords, London 2014). The British Council had just published a report entitled, *Influence and Attraction. Culture and the Race for Soft Power in the 21st Century*, and coincidentally the British Academy produced *The Art of Attraction. Soft Power and the UK's Role in the World*, written by a distinguished Professor of International Relations from Cambridge. There are plenty of indications that the UK government intends soft power as a key dimension of its foreign policy, trying to leverage events like the Olympic Games, and institutions like leading universities, the BBC and the Royal Family. In 2022 London will promote a year-long, nation-wide 'festival of creativity and innovation', the most extravagant effort to reconcile its vision of 'Global Britain' with the 'Little England' impulses which took Britain out of the European Union.

Compared to the US, the current (2021) UK Prime Minister's insistence that his nation is a 'soft-power superpower' looks like nonsense. But when matched against the reach of other European nations, and further afield, the claim does not look so silly. The list of British soft-power assets is very long, from the English language to its long heritage in all the great fields of high and popular culture, from its media and publishing, to its legal system, advertising industry and financial services. It is impossible to over-estimate the prestige and reach of the English Premier League, with its billionaire backers from the US, Russia, and – above all – the Gulf States. It is only when looks at the few pages dedicated to soft power in the official 'Defense and Security Review' of 2021 that one understands where the UK governing class's true priorities lie in its idea of 'Global Britain'.⁴⁵ When the great Afghanistan exit drama blew up in August, it was discussed in Parliament and the media – with great intensity – in entirely geopolitical terms. If a soft power option remained to a humiliated 'Global Britain', said the deputy editor of the conservative *Spectator* magazine, that would be in development aid, but the aid budget had been radically cut by the government in power.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ I have discussed the concept of 'Global Britain' in ELLWOOD (2021b).

⁴⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/19/with-ministers-at-war-and-mps-in-revolt-boris-johnson-is-fighting-a-losing-battle> (accessed November 10, 2021).

CONCLUSION: MODELS OF MODERNITY AS THE SOFT POWER CONNECTION BETWEEN POWER AND INFLUENCE

The standard definitions of soft power present it as tool for leveraging a nation's cultural and 'moral' assets so that they might serve conventional objectives of foreign policy. But the notion can only be taken seriously if it's seen as an expression of prestige and leadership in areas which rarely have anything to do with geopolitics. Nations – and non-state institutions – can only become serious players in the game of soft power when they present models, and tell stories, that others can admire and trust, or set standards – preferably new – which others choose spontaneously to follow.

'Soft power' is about the managing the relationship between material power and intangible influence. As many observers have pointed out, including Barack Obama and Joe Biden, the most effective connection between the two derives from the force of example, whether national, institutional, personal, even corporate: how many companies are now trying to prove their green credentials?⁴⁷ When it comes to entire nations, as Christopher Hill and Sarah Beadle wrote in their British Academy pamphlet of 2014 on *The Art of Attraction*, "the assets that really matter are the deeper, slow-moving qualities of a society, and not the surface glitter of a successful Olympics or royal wedding... Soft Power begins at home, as reputation and trust are both intimately linked to the nature of domestic achievements". (Hill and Beadle 2014: 7) Over the longer term, it's one's models of change that count above all: that is one of the great lessons of the 'American Century'. Everywhere else, the true test of the soft power qualities of a society is its ability to present – whether consciously or spontaneously – exemplary syntheses of its lasting traditions and its ideas of acceptable innovation. This is perhaps a very European view of what soft power is all about, but the phenomena it describes can be seen at work all over the world.

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⁴⁷ eg. "Dassault Systèmes, Water & Consumption | Progress Is Human", *Dassault Systèmes (3ds.com)*. Accessed January 18, 2021.

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