

MEETING NOTE

The Future of European Soft Power: The Role of Regions and Multi-Level Governance

Representation of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Brussels

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Organised by Stuart MacDonald, FRSA, Fellow of the Academy of International Affairs NRW (Bonn)¹, in cooperation with the Representation of NRW in Brussels

Note on Attribution

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Participants

The workshop brought together approximately 50 participants (in person and online), drawn from EU institutions, national cultural institutes, regional and national governments, academia, and practitioner networks. Participants included representatives from: the Representation of NRW in Brussels; the Academy of International Affairs NRW; the European Committee of the Regions; the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (European Commission); the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service); the Goethe-Institut; the British Council; Wilton Park (UK FCDO); the UK Mission to the EU; the Scottish Government Brussels office; the Scottish Council on Global Affairs; the University of Oxford; Aston University; the University of Bonn; and the University of Edinburgh.

1. Purpose and Context

The workshop marked the conclusion of the Academy of International Affairs NRW's year-long focus on subnational diplomacy. It examined how European regions can contribute to and strengthen Europe's soft power at a time of heightened geopolitical tension, the return of power politics, and the transformation of public communication by digital technologies and artificial intelligence. The event combined opening addresses, a keynote research presentation, two moderated panel discussions, live audience polling, and structured question-and-answer sessions.

The core question was: how can European regions be better recognised, coordinated, and resourced as strategic actors in EU external relations and soft power projection?

2. Opening Remarks

¹ Stuart MacDonald is Founder Director of [ICR Research](#), London, a research consultancy specialising in soft power.

Opening speakers set the geopolitical context. The international situation is more tense, digital technologies are fundamentally changing public communication, and soft power is a strategic element in determining whether Europe is seen as a reliable partner. The attractiveness of the European way of life does not begin at the member-state or EU level; it arises in the regions, in universities, start-ups, and civil society. NRW, as Germany's most populous federal state (18 million inhabitants), possesses a dense network of universities, research institutions, cultural bodies, and international partnerships, and sees itself as "a laboratory of Europe's lived reality."

Three themes were identified for the day:

- what regions can do better than other levels of governance in terms of Europe's external impact;
- multi-level governance and the need for genuine co-determination between the Commission, the External Action Service, member states, and regions; and
- the permanent changes to the conditions under which soft power operates brought about by digital transformation, including AI and disinformation.

Recent EU institutional developments were noted, including the European Commission's Cultural Compass for Europe (2025) and the European Committee of the Regions' call for regions to be formally recognised as strategic actors in EU foreign policy.

3. Keynote Research Presentation

The keynote drew on a newly published report, [Trends in Soft Power 2020–2025](#), produced by ICR Research in collaboration with the University of Edinburgh and the British Foreign Policy Group and funded by the British Council. The study surveyed what 25 jurisdictions worldwide, including the EU, have been doing in soft power, using a three-part analytical framework: Assets (what a jurisdiction possesses that can be mobilised), Infrastructure (the institutional structures through which soft power is delivered), and Outcomes (what difference it all makes, measured against 15 methodologically reliable indices).

Five reasons were advanced for why soft power remains a strategic necessity: it is present even in hard conflict; strategic attraction is more durable than coercion; finding allies requires trust; unilateral action is insufficient even for the most powerful states; and if liberal states withdraw from the soft power arena, others will fill the vacuum.

The headline finding was that coherence beats scale. The jurisdictions achieving the best outcomes are those with the greatest alignment between foreign policy objectives, institutions, and results. This is not necessarily achieved through central direction, but through institutional alignment. Germany emerged as the leading example of this kind of coherence.

However, a significant evidence gap was identified: no jurisdiction of the 25 studied could reliably link regional soft power activities to measurable outcomes, because the data have simply not been collected. Building that evidence base was described as the obvious starting point. It was also noted that the EU does not currently have a soft power strategy; what it has is the 2016 Joint Communication on International Cultural Relations, which is now under review. Building the evidence base and improving coordination should be central to that review.

4. Audience Polling

Four live polls were conducted:

- On the effectiveness of current multi-level governance for regional soft power, the leading response was that the situation is too varied across regions and sectors to generalise, with strong support also for “partially effective but with significant gaps.”
- On whether the EU should broaden its definition of soft power to include education and science, the broad consensus was yes, with caveats around coordination mechanisms and risk.
- When asked to identify the single greatest barrier to more effective regional soft power, responses were roughly evenly distributed among insufficient evidence, lack of formal recognition for regions, and absence of coordination mechanisms.
- On the most urgent priority, the two top responses were developing practical coordination mechanisms and building the research and evidence base.

5. Regional Soft Power in Practice

Para-diplomacy and regional agency. The discussion explored the academic framework of para-diplomacy (diplomacy that happens in parallel to traditional state diplomacy) and its intersection with soft power. Regions and sub-state actors have become highly skilled at operating within a world dominated by national governments and transnational organisations. While the objective of para-diplomacy as practised by regional governments is not defined as soft power, its impact falls squarely in the soft power space. Motivations were grouped into political, cultural, and economic categories, often linked through place branding. However, the data remain largely anecdotal, focused more on understanding why regions go abroad than on collecting evidence of impact. New methods such as ethnographic research, participant observation, and discourse analysis were proposed to illuminate previously obscured dimensions.

Higher education and science diplomacy. Detailed discussion took place on the scale of EU educational and scientific assets. Global student mobility is projected to reach nearly 9 million by 2030, and Europe receives over one million international students (25 per cent of the current global total). The European University Alliances² now comprise 65 alliances and over 600 institutions, with approximately 2,500 associated partners including local authorities and cultural bodies. A new Council Recommendation on Science Diplomacy,³ adopted the week before the workshop, frames science as a global public good and a core element of EU soft power. It was argued that what may be needed is not more strategies but a strategic narrative that explains where Europe stands, why, and what it wants to achieve.

Transatlantic subnational partnerships. The value of subnational partnerships was illustrated through transatlantic relations. Even when the US federal government is hostile to relationships with the EU, other actors within the US system remain friendly. There has been a proliferation of initiatives at the subnational level, including over 200 German-US city partnerships covering topics from citizen protection to climate. The key insight was that when relations at the state level are strained, the regional and city level can maintain connections. This is a practical demonstration of how subnational soft power operates under adversarial geopolitical conditions.

² See: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>

³ See: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/eu-strengthens-science-diplomacy-and-research-security-support-global-research-cooperation-2026-02-27_en

Mutuality and cultural relations. Discussion challenged the assumption that soft power is one-directional. It was argued that soft power does not arise from the sender's self-image but from the perspective of the recipient, and that where attractiveness is imposed, propaganda begins. "Soft power is slow power": presence, continuity, and reliability outperform short-term successes because the capital of soft power is credibility. Practical examples from Ethiopia illustrated how international cultural networks can create spaces for local agency, connecting local cultural scenes with international markets and enabling public cultural activity in restrictive political environments.

Dark soft power and digital resilience. The discussion turned to adversarial dynamics. It was noted that the normative environment in which soft power was first conceived no longer holds; there is now strong contestation from attraction to illiberal and anti-democratic models. Three distinct but cumulatively reinforcing threats were identified: Russian hybrid warfare (encompassing disinformation, sabotage, and cognitive campaigns across six dimensions identified by NATO); US-aligned interference through media ecosystems and direct political intervention in European politics; and an emerging Silicon Valley ideological project that is anti-democratic at its core, arguing that democratic politics cannot cope with the pace of technological transformation. AI acts as an amplifier. It was suggested that the EU's regulatory framework (Digital Services Act, AI Act) may itself become a soft power asset, but these regulations are currently under attack.

6. Coordination, Evidence, and the Future

The Committee of the Regions (CoR) and decentralised cooperation. The CoR's core value in external relations lies in peer-to-peer cooperation: putting locally elected people from different parts of the world together on a shared topic generates a common language and common basis that produces trust. Positive developments were noted, including the first European Public Diplomacy Week⁴ (in which the subnational diplomacy session was one of the most successful) and the Forum of Cities and Regions for International Partnership⁵. However, it was observed that the shift in EU approach towards economic foreign policy (Global Gateway) has diverted attention from cooperation and partnership, marginalising the role of regions and cities. In recent Commission documents, local authorities are at best mentioned alongside civil society and are often dropped entirely.

Evidence and measurement. The evidence gap was identified in every session as the most significant structural barrier. No jurisdiction studied could reliably link regional soft power activities to measurable outcomes. Calls were made for new methodological approaches and greater investment in data collection and evaluation. It was argued that tying soft power to policy objectives with clear performance indicators would make the measurement question more tractable. There was also discussion of how ten years of longitudinal research on youth perceptions shows traditional Western liberal democracies losing ground while Asian countries rise, driven by ageing Western societies, democratic sclerosis, and strategic investment by rising Asian states.

The arm's length principle. Discussion emphasised the importance of institutional independence in soft power delivery. The merit of the arm's-length relationship between government and cultural institutes is that it ensures credibility and legitimacy. Target

⁴ See: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-public-diplomacy-week_en

⁵ See: <https://cor.europa.eu/en/plenaries-events/forum-cities-and-regions-international-partnerships-localising-global-gateway>

audiences recognise a discrete and trustworthy actor who can be a long-term partner in their own right, regardless of government-to-government relations. However, it was observed that over recent decades the arm has been shortening, with increasing demands for evaluative evidence of impact.

7. Cross-Cutting Themes

The problem of time. Multiple contributors identified time as a fundamental challenge. International relations have become increasingly transactional, and political cycles, media cycles, and social media attention spans, all push towards immediate results. ‘Dark soft power’ benefits from this because it is easy to produce and disseminate. Local-level cooperation (city twinnings, decentralised cooperation) was offered as a partial counter, providing durability; a French region’s 30-year partnership with Niger has survived multiple coups, droughts, and political crises.

Trust and credibility. Trust emerged as arguably the central concept of the workshop. It was variously described as the capital of soft power, something that must be earned rather than declared, slow to build and fast to destroy. It was noted that an era of political shamelessness, in which leaders lie without consequences, represents a new challenge for trust-based soft power.

Young people and the social contract. A critical point was raised that much attraction to illiberal models comes not from bad actors but from people who feel the post-Soviet liberal world order has failed them. Young people in particular, after multiple crises, are attracted to countries that project stability and promise to deliver on a social contract of good jobs, housing, and governance. Approximately 30 per cent of young people in Europe are reported to be attracted by authoritarian models. It was argued that Europe needs to be more humble and deliver on its own promises rather than simply exporting values.

Terminology. A sustained debate concerned terminology itself. Some participants prefer “international cultural relations” or avoid the term “soft power” altogether in operational contexts. Others argued for reclaiming the “power” element of soft power and distinguishing more carefully between cultural diplomacy (state-directed), cultural relations (cooperative), and soft power (competitive). The historical point was made that the concept originated not in liberal triumphalism but in American declinism of the 1980s.

The regional scale: potential and limits. It was estimated that between 40–60 NUTS 1 regions and 100–140 NUTS 2 regions in the EU could make a meaningful contribution to EU soft power. This still leaves many regions that are too peripheral or too poor. Not all regions have the capacity to conduct their own smart internationalisation, and the divide between the richest and poorest regions is significant.

8. Closing Synthesis

Closing remarks drew together several threads. Coherence (in soft power policy and strategy) is claimed more often than it is practised. A policy is just words on paper and has to be implemented by people down chains of delivery. Cultural relations, understanding the interactions that go on below the intentional policy level of states across borders, constitute the substrate. The quantity of transactions that governments do not influence, do not know about, and cannot control, including in scientific cooperation, is vast. The coordination challenge is real: even a single member state cannot easily coordinate among hundreds of

local authorities, and in the EU context the scale is enormous. There is, however, reason for optimism: technology offers the potential to measure things in more intelligent, policy-useful ways than before. Finally, there is a normative dimension that matters. If liberal societies choose not to engage, the alternative is colluding in the perpetuation of distorted narratives.

9. Agreed Priorities and Next Steps

Research and evidence: build a systematic evidence base on regional soft power activities and outcomes; explore new methodological approaches for capturing para-diplomacy data; codify existing evidence (including longitudinal youth perceptions research and Erasmus+ impact studies) in actionable form for policymakers.

Coordination and governance: develop practical coordination mechanisms between EU institutions, member states, and regions for external relations and soft power; advocate for formal recognition of regions as strategic actors in EU foreign policy; pursue regional participation in Commission working groups and consultation processes under the principle of active subsidiarity; ensure the review of the 2016 Joint Communication incorporates the regional dimension.

Specific initiatives: expand the European Public Diplomacy Week and its subnational diplomacy component; leverage the international dimension being added to European University Alliances; maintain and invest in subnational and city-to-city partnerships, especially in the transatlantic context; protect and advocate for the EU regulatory framework as a soft power asset.

Workshop outputs: this report will be circulated to participants. Participants were encouraged to remain in contact and continue the discussion.

This note was prepared on behalf of the Academy of International Affairs NRW.

It does not represent the views of any individual participant or institution.