

Beyond Culture – Rethinking the EU’s Approach to Soft Power in a Turbulent World

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Executive Summary

The European Union is beginning a review of its 2016 Joint Communication on international cultural relations. This policy brief argues that the review presents an opportunity to reconceive the scope and purpose of EU-level coordination of international engagement. Drawing on a 25-jurisdiction comparative study published by the British Council in March 2026 (the [Trends study](#)) and on a practitioner-academic workshop held at the NRW Representation in Brussels on 5 March 2026, it proposes a broader framework oriented towards influence, resilience, security, and democratic legitimacy. The brief concludes that the approach best suited to the EU's distinctive character is one that extends coordination beyond culture to encompass education and science; establishes strategic alignment mechanisms rather than a single strategy; positions European regions as active contributors; and invests in the evidence base required to understand what multi-level soft power coordination actually achieves.

1. The EU's Soft Power at a Crossroads

The international environment has changed fundamentally since 2016. Great powers use economic integration as coercion, tariffs as leverage, and supply chains as vulnerabilities. The retrenchment of United States public diplomacy infrastructure has created a vacuum that Chinese and Russian influence operations are expanding to fill. Whether the EU's current framework is fit for this environment is the central question the review should address.

The Trends study provides a timely evidence base. It examines how 25 jurisdictions deploy cultural, educational, and diplomatic resources to achieve international influence. The study uses an Assets-Infrastructure-Outcomes (AIO) framework that distinguishes between what a jurisdiction possesses, the institutional structures through which soft power is delivered, and measurable results assessed against 15 methodologically reliable indices.

2. The EU as a Distinctive Case

The Trends study places the EU as a 'distinctive variant' within its taxonomy of soft power governance models. Its multi-level governance system prevents adoption of a single supranational strategy, yet sectoral coordination by the European External Action Service and EUNIC achieves partial integration. The constraints are legal, institutional, and political simultaneously: culture remains an area of supporting competence under Article 167 TFEU, member states guard their cultural sovereignty, and national cultural institutes operate under distinct mandates and professional cultures.

The Brussels workshop underscored a related difficulty: the concept of soft power sits uneasily with many of the institutions expected to deliver it. The Goethe-Institut's self-understanding centres on cultural relations, mutuality, and partnership, not on an

instrumentalised concept of power. Participants proposed distinguishing more carefully between cultural diplomacy (state-directed), cultural relations (cooperative), and soft power (competitive). These tensions are not merely semantic; any revised framework must navigate them.

3. Goals, Scope, and the Case for Extension

The Trends study's headline finding is that the most effective soft power systems achieve alignment between institutional mandates, objectives and delivery. For the EU, goals should operate at two levels: reflecting what is distinctively European (democratic pluralism, the rule of law, the pooling of sovereignty for mutual benefit), and identifying what EU-level coordination can achieve that member states individually cannot.

Both the study and the workshop point strongly towards extending coordination beyond culture. The AIO framework treats soft power as operating across six domains. Its central finding is that integrated ecosystems linking culture, education, and development cooperation generate more resilient influence than reliance on a single asset class. The EU's confinement of coordination to the cultural domain looks anomalous. Erasmus+ is one of the EU's most powerful soft power instruments, yet it operates under a different logic from the EEAS-coordinated cultural relations agenda. Workshop testimony from the European Commission provided evidence of undercoordinated assets at scale: global student mobility projected to reach nearly nine million by 2030; 65 European University Alliances comprising over 600 institutions; and a new Council Recommendation on Science Diplomacy framing science as a core element of EU soft power. What may be needed is not more strategies but a strategic narrative that explains where Europe stands and what it seeks to achieve.

4. The Role of Europe's Regions

European regions are not merely passive beneficiaries of national or EU-level soft power. Many are active international actors. The Brussels workshop demonstrated that subnational partnerships preserve international cooperation when state-level relations are strained: over 200 German-US city partnerships continue across topics including climate and citizen protection, even under hostile federal conditions. A French region's 30-year partnership with Niger has survived multiple coups, droughts, and political crises.

The Committee of the Regions' December 2025 opinion on the Global Gateway calls for formal recognition of local and regional governments as strategic actors, and for decentralised cooperation as a recognised modality in the post-2027 financial framework. Yet barriers persist. NRW, despite being the EU's most populous region, is excluded from Commission working groups because member-state representatives block regional participation. The review could recognise regions as delivery partners, whose universities and innovation ecosystems EU-level coordination currently fails to engage; as laboratories of practice, where cross-border cooperation prefigures the partnership approach the EU seeks to project; and as strategic actors providing the local knowledge that depth of

engagement requires. The logic must, however, run in both directions: if the EU draws on regional assets for its international engagement, that engagement must demonstrably benefit the regions and citizens whose creativity and institutional capacity it mobilises.

5. Trust, Time, and Democratic Resilience

Trust emerged as arguably the central concept of the Brussels workshop: the capital of soft power, slow to build and fast to destroy. An era of political shamelessness, in which leaders lie without consequences, represents a new challenge for trust-based engagement. The workshop surfaced a dimension the review cannot ignore: the deliberate deployment of attraction towards illiberal ends, termed 'dark soft power'. Three reinforcing sources were identified: Russian hybrid warfare extending to sabotage and cognitive campaigns; political interference aligned with the current US administration; and an emerging Silicon Valley ideological project that is anti-democratic at its core. Artificial intelligence amplifies all channels.

Participants characterised soft power as 'slow power', where presence, continuity, and reliability matter more than campaign-driven initiatives. Dark soft power benefits from accelerating political and media cycles; durable city partnerships and decentralised cooperation provide a counter-model. Perhaps the most significant finding was that approximately 30 per cent of young people in Europe are reported to be attracted by authoritarian models. The implication is that the most effective response is not counter-messaging but delivery on the democratic social contract. If liberal societies choose not to engage, the alternative is colluding in the perpetuation of distorted narratives.

6. Policy Recommendations

This brief offers six recommendations:

- First, the review should expand the scope of coordination beyond culture to encompass education, science, and development cooperation, using strategic alignment rather than structural unification.
- Second, the review should work towards a shared strategic narrative: a coherent account of what Europe stands for internationally and what its engagement seeks to achieve. This is easier to recommend than to deliver. Member states will resist formulations that appear to subsume national cultural identities within a European frame, and civil society organisations will insist that a narrative imposed from above lacks the authenticity on which soft power depends. The process matters as much as the product, requiring structured dialogue conducted with sufficient candour to surface genuine disagreements rather than paper over them.
- Third, it should formally recognise regions as strategic actors in EU external relations, consistent with the Committee of the Regions' call in its December 2025 Global Gateway opinion for local and regional governments to be recognised as partners in shaping, implementing, and monitoring EU external investment.

Barriers to regional participation in Commission working groups should be addressed under the principle of active subsidiarity.

- Fourth, it should invest in the evidence base, including new methodological approaches for para-diplomacy data.
- Fifth, the review should retain and strengthen the 2016 Joint Communication's commitment to a cultural relations approach, grounded in mutuality, long-term relationship-building, and genuine partnership rather than one-directional cultural projection or message control. The comparative evidence shows that systems built on credibility, authenticity, and reciprocity consistently outperform those oriented towards state-directed cultural diplomacy, and the arm's-length principle that underpins this approach is essential to its credibility.
- Sixth, the review should ensure that the EU's international engagement is grounded in the assets and concerns of European citizens and regions, demonstrating tangible domestic benefit rather than operating as a foreign policy abstraction disconnected from the societies it claims to represent.

7. Conclusion

The review arrives at a moment of rupture. Coherence in soft power policy is claimed more often than it is practised. A policy is words on paper; it must be implemented by people down chains of delivery. The quantity of transactions that governments do not influence, do not know about, and cannot control is vast. The task is to create a framework that connects and amplifies the distributed creativity and institutional capacity of a continent of 450 million people. The constituency for this broader approach exists. The challenge is to match institutional ambition with the evidence and operational tools to sustain it.

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