

Soft and Hard Power (July 29, 2017)

Abstract

Germany routinely ranks high in soft power attributes, but as many observers note, for soft power to be effective, it has to be backed by credible hard power potential. Wolf Poulet, a former colonel in the German Armed Forces, critically assesses Germany's soft and hard power and proposes ways to expand its hard power.

Source

More soft power for Europe!

Soft power is becoming ever more important in international relations – even Russia's President Putin would like to have more of it. However, without hard (military) strength, soft power is worth nothing.

Many states want to be seen as a "soft power" today. The United States, notwithstanding its colorful head of state, is still the number one soft power, and Germany, too, is undeniably a soft power. "Soft power" is in demand today and is becoming increasingly attractive politically – also for the autocratic great powers Russia and China. Here in the West this still goes largely unnoticed. And that even though there are sound reasons for this development.

How is soft power defined? Great cultural nations like China (Confucius Institute), France (Alliance Française), and Great Britain (model of democratic development) claim to have shaped the fundamental function of soft power early on in their own development. The shortest definition of soft power is: "The ability to attract" – something like: attractive appeal. To put it differently: the exercise of political power on the basis of cultural attraction and credible offers of intergovernmental cooperation. One central characteristic of soft power is thus the exercise of power by influencing the goals of political actors, without deploying to that end (economic) incentives or (military) threats.

The potential of this soft power is great. Influential great and medium powers are now investigating the question of whether their own country has enough "soft power." China's President Hu Jintao told the Communist Party as early as 2007 that China had to increase its soft power. Russian President Vladimir Putin likewise called on his diplomats already in the summer of 2013 to use more soft power. Russia's Foreign Ministry was supposed to develop a relevant concept by the fall of 2013. However, with the occupation of Crimea and the military aggression against eastern Ukraine beginning in early 2014, the question about Russia's soft power is done for now.

In France and Great Britain, too, there has been a discussion about the notion of soft power for a long time. In the United States, the term "soft" is often replaced with "smart" – but the premises remain the same. Soft power represents persuasive and attractive force, but above all authority, credibility, and in individual cases, also a country's model character. In the process, the spectrum is broad, ranging from the attractiveness of the "American Way of Life" to Western values such as democracy and human rights. A classic example for America's soft power is the "Marshall Plan," from which even former enemies benefited after the war.

Engineering skill, world championship, the rule of law

Soft power can come about in very different ways: through exemplary governance, through a foreign policy seen as reliable, or through the radiance of special achievements in various social realms, such as

culture, science, or sports. German soft power consists above all of the rule of law, a cooperative foreign policy, but also of the literary and musical legacy of the great classics, of innovative engineering skill, an atmospheric world cup win, or the worldly attractiveness of the capital of Berlin. As it is, civil society provides important impulses when it comes to assessing how great a nation's "soft power" is. The large financial contribution to development cooperation and for worldwide humanitarian aid is a factor of German soft power, the importance of which one should not underestimate.

The attraction of this combination is great: in the annual 2013 report of the "Soft Power Survey," Germany was voted the No. 1 Soft Power among thirty states, ahead of England, the United States, France, Japan, Sweden, Australia, Switzerland, Canada, and Italy. The approximately 50 indicators evaluated for this assessment include, among others, the standard of governmental work, the diplomatic structures, the cultural productivity, the capacity of the educational system, or the attractiveness to foreign investors. Cultural activities, Olympic medals (!), the attractiveness of the national architecture, or globally successful industrial products play a role in the evaluation of soft power. In the "Soft Power 30, Ranking 2016," Germany landed in third place, after the United States and Great Britain. Russia came in twenty-seventh, China twenty-eighth. The current "Soft Power 30 Ranking 2017" lists France at No. 1, justified by, among other things, the dynamism of President Macron. "We see France's global engagement and influence becoming stronger." It was followed by Great Britain, the United States, Germany, and Canada.

That Russia shows up in the Soft Power Ranking is no surprise – Moscow, too, has long recognized the importance of "soft power." However, many experts take an extremely critical view of how it is realized. "Following the end of Communism, Russia was not able to become attractive to its neighboring countries," wrote Jaroslav Cwiek-Karpowicz in July 2012 in his essay "Russia's Failure as a Soft Power" for the German Society for Foreign Policy. And he went on: "Its social and political development holds little attraction. Moreover, it is acting towards its neighbors with an imperial posture." Moscow evidently misunderstands "soft power" as an instrument for manipulating public opinion in target countries. Russia's inadequate soft power activities also stem from a neo-imperial attitude towards neighbor countries. Moscow is incapable of offering them an attractive prospect of integration without at the same time lapsing into earlier patterns of dominance and dependence."

No attractiveness without domestic political successes

Cwiek-Karpowicz went on to say that it was also not possible to radiate attractiveness without dealing with one's domestic political problems. "Russia, however, continues to have major problems with corruption, a disregard for human rights, a deficient democracy, and a weak rule of law. That is why its political and socio-economic transformation cannot serve as a model for other post-Soviet states."

The American political science professor Joseph Nye was even more blunt in a television debate in December 2014: "In global competition there is not only economic and military strength, but also attractiveness and charisma," he said. "America has this 'soft power,' Russia does not." Nye sees Russia's soft power dwindling – with potentially disastrous consequences. "Russia's problem is that it already has very little soft power to operate with."

[...]

Soft power for Germany is not enough by itself

Since 2007, there have been expert political commentaries on Germany's orientation, for example by Peter Wittig, the German ambassador in Washington (*The Role and Understanding of Soft Power in German Foreign Policy*), and Volker Perthes, the director of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) (*Soft Power as Part of Foreign Policy*). Perthes, for example, warns against exaggerated expectations

when using soft power: “The combination of soft power with other instruments of power (i.e, economic aid and military power) has been described by Joseph Nye as ‘smart power.’ . . What is decisive, especially since soft power is often a question of non-material values, is the credibility of politics: that the gap is not too great between discourse and practical politics. . . As a warning against an excessively idealistic reading of soft power it should be said that soft power can imply the greater use of means of hard power: the expectation toward Germany and Europe to become more involved with material resources and, under certain circumstances, to intervene in crises not only politically and economically, but also militarily, has clearly risen. The development of soft power therefore does not keep us out of the hard conflicts of this world” (Perthes).

Former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer recently summed it up this way in the FAZ: “Soft power can be brought to bear only if you also have hard power, that is to say, if people take it seriously.”

However, the domestic political discussion about the role of the Federal Republic in a conflict-prone and highly complex world order suggests that many politicians in this country obviously do not recognize the connection between (invariable) geopolitical constraints, on the one hand, and well-understood German (and European) interests, on the other. It is questionable whether they want to or can, non-ideologically, develop new premises for a balanced foreign and security policy for the good of Germany and in favor of a stable European peace order. President Trump's harsh request to the European NATO partners to pay two percent of their gross domestic product to finance the Atlantic Defense Pact should have led to serious reflections in order to avoid a blow-up with the leading power America and the other partners. Trump won't last forever, but the two percent threshold will.

Such an important demand, which is tied, not least, to our connection to the only effective alliance in this world, deserved more rationality and logic than the embarrassing attempts of German politicians to act as ethical peacemakers without any reference to the real world order.

Two percent demand could be filled with life

How about the suggestion, for example, that the government constructively define the two percent question? One hypothetical version could look like this: Of the two percent of GDP, 55 percent will be spent on defense. Not to rearm, but only to restore the operational readiness of the armed forces, which has been lost for 25 years, within eight to ten years. Ten percent will go to development cooperation, with the focus on economic cooperation with Africa. An additional ten percent is earmarked for coping with the costs of refugees arriving in Germany. Ten percent is available for humanitarian support to care for war refugees, for example, in Turkey or Sudan. Five percent is used to support allied states in support of coordinated actions, both civil and military - and possibly also for contributions the United States will no longer make to international organizations. Ten percent is available for purposes to be determined. On the basis of such a hypothetical proposal, confidence-building arguments could be exchanged both within the Alliance and with the United States.

[...]

If the (still) successful middle power Germany could bring itself to consciously assume the role of an "efficient soft power" and share this qualification for a policy of peace and order with as many European partners as possible, the EU would have a new and attractive goal: to become a good world power, a European soft power. The foundations have already been laid.

Source: Wolf Poulet, “Mehr Softpower für Europa!,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 29, 2017.

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