

POLITICKÉ VEDY / POLITICAL SCIENCES

Journal for Political Sciences, Modern History, International Relations, security studies / Časopis pre politológiu, najnovšie dejiny, medzinárodné vzťahy, bezpečnostné štúdiá

URL of the journal / URL časopisu: <http://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk>

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Article / Článok: International Scientific Conference: Soft Power, Ethics and Interests / Medzinárodná vedecká konferencia: Mäkká moc, etika a záujmy
Publisher / Vydavateľ: Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations – MBU Banská Bystrica / Fakulta politických vied a medzinárodných vzťahov – UMB Banská Bystrica
DOI: <http://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2018.21.4.231-238>

Recommended form for quotation of the article / Odporúčaná forma citácie článku:

GURA, R. – ROUET, G. – ROŠTEKOVÁ, M. 2018. International Scientific Conference: Soft Power, Ethics and Interests. In *Politické vedy*. [online]. Vol. 21, No. 4, 2018. ISSN 1335 – 2741, pp. 231-238. Available at: <http://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2018.21.4.231-238>

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INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE: SOFT POWER, ETHICS AND INTERESTS

Radovan Gura – Gilles Rouet – Mária Rošteková*

In the field of international relations, the expression "soft power", first thought and described in 1990 by American analyst and theorist of international relations **Joseph S. Nye** in his book "Bound to lead", is used to generally designate the power of influence and persuasion over an entity, for example, a State over another actor, like another State. An influence that is done by non-coercive means, without any constraints.

The notion of power in general occupies a central place in the analysis of international relations, both theoretically and politically. It can be glorified or rejected as a defining concept for structuring and understanding the international agenda and the behaviour of international actors, but it is undeniably one of the key concepts around which political readings or theoretical developments in the international system are being articulated.

Nevertheless, the definitions of power are variable in time and according to point of view. Depending on international events, power struggles and the states' will to power, the criteria for defining the notion of power are subject to permanent changes. There is sometimes, in this respect, a clear discrepancy

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2018.21.4.231-238>

between the way the notion of power is theorized, and the conditions under which the exercise of power takes place. Parallel to the different schools of thought are added multiple constraints that disrupt political orientations.

The conference “*Soft power, Ethics and Interests*” was held on 8th and 9th November 2018 on the premises of the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. It took place a year after having dealt with the topic of “*Plural diplomacy*” in October 2017: the field of diplomacy has diversified because new actors have emerged in the international system, especially non-state actors. Following the logic of globalisation, everything is or becomes diplomacy; diplomacy is in evolution, dynamic: economic, cultural, climatic, touristic, sporting, spatial, culinary, research, religious, digital, health, etc. New actors have emerged, new methods, new practices and new concepts: parliamentary diplomacy, diplomacy 2.0, public diplomacy, etc. During the conference in 2017, the organizers and the researchers understood that it was necessary to examine more deeply certain aspects mentioned during that conference.

This year, the ambition was to organize exchanges on soft power and to study several articulations, because the debates are oriented towards the problems of global governance, of how civil society is seen as being part international relations, which is therefore not restricted to the realm of the states and that also includes the networks of information and communications that have transformed the stakes in terms of transparency. The conference was an opportunity to debate about the sources of EU Soft Power whose development increases the influence, but whose credibility is linked to its internal and external coherence. Special attention was given to Soft Power as an effective tool for the foreign policy of small states, which can thus increase their impact on international affairs.

The expression “Soft Power” thus covers a set of activities that are justified by an orientation of traditional diplomacy and by the establishment of a public diplomacy, with an enlargement of the actors. Indeed, in recent years, many organisations, companies, NGOs, lobbies or political groups have also claimed a diplomatic activity, generally with a Soft Power approach.

This evolution should be articulated with the extension of the public diplomacy, a diplomacy targeting a wide variety of non-institutional audiences, which brings together a range of propaganda practices aimed at “manipulating the perception of foreign audiences to foster national interests” (Heller & Persson, 225). The digital age, social media and *Big Data* amplify the ethical dilemmas inherent in public diplomacy practices.

The success of the Soft Power formula and its trivialisation may suggest a broad consensus on its conceptualisation. The often-proposed articulation (Hard/Soft/Smart Power) does not make it possible to clarify the concept. First, the Soft Power is the “intangible dimension of power” (Lord, 2005, p. 63) and is clearly different from Hard Power, which is based on the use of military or economic means. But none of this is obviously new, and the Soft Power aims to organize a co-optation diplomacy thanks to resources that are often difficult to control, such as the image or reputation of a country, the prestige induced by the mediatisation of performances, the attractiveness of its culture or ideas, scientific outreach, etc.

In a context of defence of national or multinational interests, many countries are now developing their international policies in Soft Power; that is, for China in particular, a diplomatic doctrine, accompanying a massive economic interventionism in Africa in particular. In addition, what about the European Union now and the activities of the European Service for External Action?

However, the expression Soft Power covers different meanings that can be classified on a scale ranging from a rather narrow sense of diplomacy to cultural influence, as in the case of Germany or French diplomacy, for example, up to quite a moving delimitation of everything that is not military. In relation to a logic of objectives of diplomacy, in practice, it would only be different ways of acting to bring other countries to the positions supported, from coercion to co-optation, through the incentive. The difference between the Soft and the Hard Power would be at the level of the acceptance, the form of the consent: the soft power would allow influencing the targeted people by modifying their social, economic, cultural, ideological context, trying to realize the evolution of their “preferences”. Obviously, the Hard Power would achieve the same result, but by changing more radically the situation of the targeted people. However, between coercion and co-optation, between adaptation and seduction, between interest and desire on the part of the people concerned, and even between corruption and ideological conviction, it is difficult to make fine distinctions of the different political behaviours implemented.

The model is therefore ambiguous. For example, is it possible to consider the economy as a Soft Power and not a Hard Power? The articulation between the culture and the economy, the declared objective of certain diplomacy, can be conceived by remaining in the Soft, that is to say, to use the dichotomy proposed above, in seduction rather than in persuasion. The economic could thus not be only a coercive force. It is also possible to propose differentiation

between the diplomacy of companies that act without the support of the State, for example that offers cultural products, and companies that develop a diplomatic activity in concert or in symbiosis with the State. In the first case, it would be Soft Power, in the second, Hard Power. Historically, commercial companies during the colonial period have erected political and commercial domains that have served as a basis for States or parts of States. Today, when China finances, builds and manages vital infrastructure abroad through companies like the Djibouti-Ethiopia railway, it is Hard Power.

Another limitation of this model, the idea of Soft Power has often been misunderstood and misused, not only because of the relative weakness or vagueness of the conceptual tool and because the confusion is great and persistent between power, behaviours and resources. Indeed, since the measurement of resources is possible (and relatively easy), it is often used as an indicator of power (more difficult to evaluate). Even if no power can be exercised without resources, it is not the extent of the latter that can assess the power or even specify it. The resources are certainly not neutral but are nonetheless linked to the use that is made of them. For example, the army can be used, in particular contexts, for a diplomacy of influence, if it has a positive, reassuring image, in the same way that it can be, as it is most often the case, used as a tool of coercion. It is the same with the economic, as previously noted, and, perhaps, with the cultural.

Axis 1: Diplomats, Deontology and Ethics

What is the evolution of the profession of a diplomat in the context of soft power? Where do ethics belong in these new forms of diplomacy? This also begs the questions of the relations between means and ends, between the state duties and the probity of actors.

New interactions are emerging between political, economic, cultural and geopolitical interests. However, who is in whose services, finally? Diplomats in the service of a State try to build networks of actors, non-constrained by democratic rules and constrained in “non- democracy”.

The questions of “control” of the states’ diplomatic activities, and their evolution, also need to be approached in a context of demands for transparency and accountability by citizens.

The use of soft power resources of a state also raises the question of responsibility for foreign decision makers in relation to their own society and ethics must play a major role in this area. Indeed, if diplomats and/or policy

makers do not respect national standards recognized in their international transactions, this may affect the effectiveness of the soft power activities in which they are engaged.

Axis 2: General and Special Interests (States vs. Organisations)

Does modern diplomacy, multi-actors, multiform, plural, reconcile different interests, private, public, general? Diplomacy must defend national or transnational interests (for example of the EU) of various nature: economic, cultural, geopolitical, etc. But these interests are not always compatible and a hierarchy, explicit or not, must be established, and, probably such hierarchy will not be perceived in the same way by all the actors concerned, either within the country where business operations are conducted or in the home country.

How to build and give meaning to national, global and local actions at the same time? How to problematize diplomatic interventions to build and maintain heterogeneous networks of actors with multiple interests while preserving humanistic values and peace?

Axis 3: Economic Diplomacy and Soft Power: Roles and Responsibilities of Businesses

Companies often “do diplomacy” without knowing it, being, by their activities abroad, de facto agents of soft power. Are the ethical problems related to the organisation and/or activity of companies (working conditions, safeguarding of cultural and biological diversity) transferrable to the diplomatic field and do they make the state of the company’s head office responsible and liable?

Business and company diplomacy is multifaceted and covers both internal business relationships when they are established in different countries and relationships between companies, between companies and governments, between companies and international organizations and between companies and NGOs. When developing, these relationships raise new challenges in terms of governance such as the emergence of new forms of corruption or new forms of transnational lobbying, through interest associations or direct lobbying in the political decision-making centres. If in the 20th Century, the large multinational companies played a role of vectors of soft power used by states, in the 21st Century these same companies often succeeded in freeing themselves from these states, moving away from attempts to find answers to state problems (and sometimes even with their consent), especially with the development of adapted practices such as arbitration and self- regulation.

These many challenges call for the following questions: How do these relationships develop? Who are the different actors? What are their goals? What means or tools are used to reach them? What are the risks for the social actors, the economic policies of the emergence of this business diplomacy at the beginning of the 21st Century? What new responsibilities with this diplomacy for the companies concerned?

Finally, what is the current trend with regard to the efforts of some governments to denounce and prohibit the corrupt practices of other countries, especially in relation to companies that may be, at times, the culprits or the victims of these actions? In addition, what impact does this have on business diplomats, on discourses and on practices?

The conference *Soft power, Ethics and Interests* was realized as part of the activities of the Jean Monnet Chair ad personam "Identities and cultures in Europe", in partnership with the Think Tank Europanova, the Center for European Studies of the University Alexander Ioan Cuza of Iasi, the Public Policy Research Laboratory of the New Bulgarian University, The International Association for Research in Public Management (AIRMAP), the Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia, the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University, the French Institute Slovakia, the French Embassy in Bratislava and LAREQUOI, Management Research Laboratory of the University of Versailles St Quentin en Yvelines.

More than thirty specialists travelled to Banská Bystrica from the universities of France, Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, the United Arab Emirates, Sweden, Germany, Turkey and of course, Slovakia. Several sessions were held on the following themes:

- 1) Diplomacy of Influence;
- 2) Economic Diplomacy;
- 3) Soft Power;
- 4) Diplomacy, Security and Human Rights.

The solemn opening of the colloquium was provided by Mr. **François-Xavier Mortreuil**, Attaché for Science and Higher Education of the French Institute in Slovakia, Mrs. **Katarína Chovancová**, Vice-Rector for International Cooperation and Public Relations of the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica and **Branislav Kováčik**, Dean of the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of Matej Bel University, with all three emphasizing the long-standing strong partnership between the institutions involved in the organisation of this event.

Mrs. **Katarína Chovancová** underlined that the Matej Bel University gives importance to scientific activities, driven by the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations and brought forward by its experts. This is notably because the “interdisciplinary think-tank” formed by this series of conferences, or by other events, is likely to continue to be heard not only in local or regional contexts but also on a European scale. She has called on researchers from the various disciplines in the field of social sciences and humanities to contribute with their individual or group scientific programs to the establishment of a solid institutional strategy in the field of the internationalisation of science that will help the university, as well as the institutions of its respective partners, to forge alliances of excellence across Europe and beyond.

The European context was also raised in the speech of Mr. **François-Xavier Mortreuil**. He emphasized that the year 2018, very important for Slovakia and for the Franco-Slovak relations, is particularly busy with events, commemorations and celebrations. The visit of President **Emmanuel Macron** at the end of October put Slovakia in the spotlight of French and international media. The organisation of a citizen consultation, the 4th for President **Macron** abroad but the first in Central and Eastern Europe, testifies to the importance given, at the highest level, to the Franco-Slovak partnership for the construction of Europe. According to the opinion of Mr. Attaché, this debate has complemented and supported the work that the French Institute Slovakia and the Embassy of the French Republic in Bratislava have been conducting with its Slovak partners, including the Matej Bel University, for several years.

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