

## FROM STATE IMAGE TO NORMATIVE INFLUENCE: THE EVOLUTION OF SOFT POWER STRATEGIES ACROSS REGIONS

**Valentyna Babina**

PhD in Political Science, Associate Professor,  
Odesa Polytechnic National University, Ukraine  
e-mail: v.o.babina@op.edu.ua, orcid.org/0000-0003-2796-5024

### Summary

The article examines soft power as an instrument of political and legal positioning of states in contemporary international relations with particular attention to regional dimensions. The study aims to analyse the transformation of soft power strategies in different geopolitical contexts and to determine their role in shaping international influence. The research applies comparative, systemic and institutional analysis to examine the mechanisms through which states construct international image and normative influence.

The findings demonstrate that soft power has become a key element of foreign policy strategies, particularly under conditions of global competition and digital transformation. The European Union represents a normative model of soft power based on regulatory influence, legal standards and value promotion. The Asia-Pacific region illustrates an adaptive model combining technological leadership, cultural diplomacy and digital communication strategies. The Middle East demonstrates a modernisation-oriented model focused on economic diversification, global branding and international investment attractiveness.

The study argues that contemporary soft power is increasingly hybrid in nature, integrating cultural, technological and regulatory instruments. Regional political environments significantly influence the selection and effectiveness of soft power tools. The scientific novelty of the research lies in identifying regional patterns of soft power transformation and in conceptualising soft power as a dynamic instrument of geopolitical competition. The results contribute to the development of theoretical and practical approaches to international political communication and state image formation.

**Key words:** soft power; normative power; regional models; political strategy; legal instruments; public diplomacy; international relations.

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### 1. Introduction

In contemporary international relations, the capacity of states to construct and sustain a positive international image has increasingly evolved into an autonomous resource of political influence. Processes of globalization, digital transformation, and intensified geopolitical competition have substantially reduced the effectiveness of purely coercive instruments, while amplifying the role of non-material sources of power related to legitimacy, reputation, and normative authority. In this context, soft power has emerged as a central mechanism through which states advance political objectives, consolidate international credibility, and shape global governance frameworks (Nye, 2004; Anholt, 2010).

The growing relevance of soft power is inseparable from structural changes in the international system, marked by multipolarity, fragmented authority, and heightened strategic rivalry. States are no longer confined to traditional diplomatic or military instruments; instead,

they increasingly deploy public diplomacy, cultural engagement, digital communication strategies, and regulatory influence to enhance their international positioning. Contemporary research emphasizes that soft power today operates through hybrid configurations that combine cultural appeal with institutional capacity, technological innovation, and governance practices (Melissen, 2005; Pamment, 2013). As a result, attraction-based influence is progressively embedded within formal structures rather than relying solely on symbolic or cultural projection.

Importantly, the implementation of soft power strategies demonstrates significant regional differentiation. The European Union represents a distinctive normative model, in which influence is exercised through regulatory standards, legal harmonization, and the promotion of democratic values and rule-based governance (Manners, 2002; Farrell & Newman, 2020). In contrast, many Asia-Pacific states integrate cultural diplomacy with technological development, innovation-driven branding, and digital governance instruments, reflecting the region's competitive economic environment and rapid modernization. Middle Eastern countries, in turn, increasingly employ selective soft power strategies centred on economic diversification, global branding, investment diplomacy, and symbolic international visibility, often combined with traditional hard power tools.

Despite the extensive scholarly literature on soft power, several analytical gaps remain. A substantial share of existing research focuses on individual national cases or isolated policy instruments, while comparatively fewer studies systematically examine soft power transformation across regions under shared conditions of global political change. Moreover, the accelerating development of digital communication technologies, artificial intelligence, and platform-based governance has profoundly altered the mechanisms of attraction and influence, creating new channels of international power that remain insufficiently conceptualized in mainstream soft power theory (Zeng, 2020; Edelman, 2024). These dynamics call for a more integrated analytical framework that captures the institutional, legal, and technological dimensions of contemporary soft power.

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to analyse the evolution of soft power from state image-building toward normative and institutional influence in contemporary international relations through a comparative examination of regional models. The research seeks to identify key mechanisms through which soft power is formed and operationalized, to assess how regional political environments shape the selection of soft power instruments, and to evaluate the growing role of hybrid communication and governance strategies in international positioning.

Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative comparative approach that combines conceptual analysis with region-focused case studies. The research design integrates comparative, institutional, and systemic analytical perspectives, enabling the identification of structural patterns and contextual variations in soft power strategies across different geopolitical settings. Empirical material is drawn from contemporary academic literature, international analytical reports, and policy documents published predominantly within the last three to five years, ensuring both analytical relevance and temporal validity. The Asia-Pacific region, the European Union, and the Middle East are selected as comparative cases due to their contrasting political systems, levels of institutionalization, and strategic priorities, which together provide a robust basis for examining diverse trajectories of soft power development.

The article is structured as follows. The second section develops a theoretical framework that reinterprets soft power as an institutional and legal phenomenon, critically engaging with both classical and contemporary approaches. The third section examines soft power strategies in the Asia-Pacific region, with particular attention to developmental and cultural-institutional

models. The fourth section analyses the European Union as a case of normatively embedded and legally institutionalized soft power. The fifth section explores selective and hybrid soft power strategies in the Middle East. The sixth section offers a comparative analysis of regional models, identifying key patterns of convergence and divergence. The final section summarizes the main findings, discusses their theoretical and practical implications, and outlines directions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Soft Power as an Institutional and Legal Phenomenon

The concept of soft power has occupied a central position in debates on power and influence in international relations for more than three decades. Its analytical value lies in its capacity to capture forms of influence that cannot be adequately explained by material capabilities alone. However, the transformation of the international system—characterized by legal globalization, institutional density, digitalization, and intensified normative competition—requires a reassessment of soft power beyond its original formulation. This section develops an analytical framework that conceptualizes soft power as an institutional and legal phenomenon embedded within governance structures and regionally specific contexts (*Melissen, 2005; Pamment, 2013*).

Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power as an alternative to coercive and material forms of influence dominant in realist and neo-realist traditions. He defined soft power as the ability of an actor to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or inducements, identifying culture, political values, and foreign policy legitimacy as its primary sources (*Nye, 2004*). In this framework, soft power operates when a state's practices and values are perceived as legitimate, morally authoritative, and worthy of emulation.

Nye's contribution was transformative in several respects. First, it expanded the analytical scope of power by integrating ideational and normative dimensions into international relations theory. Second, it challenged materialist assumptions by emphasizing legitimacy and consent as sources of influence. Third, it provided a conceptual link between power politics and public diplomacy, enabling systematic analysis of how communication, culture, and values shape international outcomes.

At the same time, the classical formulation of soft power was deeply embedded in the post-Cold War context, marked by liberal optimism, U.S. dominance, and the expansion of liberal democratic norms. Soft power was largely conceptualized as an attribute of states possessing attractive cultures and liberal values operating within a relatively stable international order. This historical context explains both the explanatory power and the limitations of the original theory.

Subsequent scholarship has subjected Nye's concept to substantial critique. One major line of criticism concerns its conceptual ambiguity. Soft power has often functioned as an umbrella concept encompassing diverse and sometimes contradictory phenomena, ranging from cultural exports and diplomatic narratives to institutional participation. This analytical elasticity complicates empirical operationalization and risks conflating resources, instruments, and outcomes.

A second critique highlights the implicit liberal bias of the classical framework. Nye's emphasis on democratic values presupposes a normative hierarchy in which liberal norms are inherently attractive. However, contemporary international relations are characterized by normative pluralism and contestation. Authoritarian and hybrid regimes increasingly deploy soft power strategies without adhering to liberal democratic standards, challenging the assumption that attraction necessarily aligns with liberal values.

Third, classical soft power theory underestimates the role of institutions and law. By focusing primarily on voluntary attraction generated by culture and values, it overlooks how influence is embedded in formal rules, regulatory regimes, and organizational practices. As a result, the theory struggles to explain cases in which influence operates through conditionality, compliance mechanisms, or structural incentives rather than spontaneous admiration.

These critiques suggest the need not to abandon soft power, but to reconceptualize it in line with contemporary global conditions. Rather than viewing soft power as a diffuse and informal resource, it is increasingly productive to analyse it as a structured and institutionalized form of influence operating within governance and legal frameworks.

The institutionalization of soft power represents a key transformation in its contemporary evolution. Soft power is no longer confined to symbolic image-building or cultural diplomacy; it is increasingly designed, managed, and embedded within formal policy architectures. Governments establish specialized agencies, legal mandates, and strategic documents to coordinate public diplomacy, educational exchange, cultural outreach, and international communication. This institutional turn reflects the recognition that legitimacy and attraction can be cultivated through sustained organizational efforts rather than relying on organic cultural appeal alone.

International and regional institutions play a central role in amplifying soft power. By setting agendas, defining standards, and coordinating collective action, institutions extend the reach of influence beyond bilateral interactions. Participation in institutional frameworks enhances legitimacy and enables actors to shape norms indirectly. In this sense, institutionalization transforms soft power from a supplementary instrument into a core component of foreign policy strategy.

Institutionalized soft power also exhibits path dependency. Once norms and practices are embedded within institutional arrangements, they shape expectations and behavior over time, often independently of short-term political preferences. This temporal dimension distinguishes institutional soft power from short-lived image campaigns and underscores its strategic importance for long-term influence.

The legal dimension constitutes one of the most significant yet underexplored aspects of soft power. Law serves as a powerful vehicle for norm diffusion by translating values into binding or semi-binding rules. Compliance with legal standards frequently occurs not through coercion, but through incentives, reputational considerations, and the desire for integration into valued institutional frameworks.

Legal soft power operates through several mechanisms. First, regulatory standards generate de facto global norms when market access or institutional participation depends on compliance. Second, legal conditionality links adherence to norms with tangible benefits such as trade preferences, financial assistance, or membership prospects. Third, legal discourse shapes perceptions of legitimacy by framing certain practices as “modern,” “responsible,” or “acceptable.” These mechanisms demonstrate how influence can be exercised through governance structures without overt coercion (*Manners, 2002; Farrell & Newman, 2020*).

The relationship between soft power and normative power is central to understanding contemporary influence. Normative power refers to the capacity to shape conceptions of what is legitimate, appropriate, and desirable in international relations. While soft power emphasizes attraction, normative power highlights authority in defining standards and rules. Analytically distinct, these concepts are empirically intertwined. Soft power facilitates norm acceptance through legitimacy, while normative power institutionalizes those norms through legal and governance mechanisms.

Governance structures—both formal and informal—constitute the arena in which this interaction unfolds. Through governance, norms are operationalized, monitored, and internalized over time. This perspective shifts analytical attention from isolated acts of persuasion toward systemic patterns of influence and reveals soft power as a contested process shaped by institutional access, power asymmetries, and strategic competition.

Digitalization has profoundly altered the mechanisms of soft power. Digital platforms enable rapid dissemination of narratives and norms, expanding influence beyond traditional diplomatic channels. Strategic communication, data governance, and algorithmic regulation have become integral components of contemporary soft power strategies (Edelman, 2024). At the same time, digital environments intensify competition and vulnerability. Disinformation, reputational attacks, and information warfare undermine trust and complicate efforts to project legitimacy.

The digital dimension reinforces the need to conceptualize soft power as embedded within regulatory and institutional frameworks. Control over digital standards, platforms, and governance rules increasingly shapes the distribution of influence in the global system.

Finally, soft power must be understood as a regionally differentiated phenomenon. Regions vary in institutional density, normative coherence, and strategic priorities, producing distinct soft power models. The Asia-Pacific region emphasizes developmental success and innovation; the European Union relies on legal and normative institutionalization; the Middle East combines selective attraction with strategic rebranding under security constraints. Regionalization underscores the pluralization of soft power and challenges universalist assumptions, making comparative regional analysis essential for understanding contemporary influence in international relations.

### 3. Regional Models of Soft Power Implementation

#### 3.1. Asia-Pacific Region

The Asia-Pacific region constitutes one of the most dynamic arenas for the evolution of soft power strategies in the contemporary international system. Rapid economic growth, technological transformation, demographic diversity and intensifying geopolitical competition have created conditions in which influence is increasingly exercised through non-coercive and hybrid mechanisms (Nye, 2004; Melissen, 2005). Unlike regions where soft power is primarily grounded in legal or normative authority, Asia-Pacific soft power has largely emerged through developmental success, cultural production, educational outreach and innovation-driven governance (Pamment, 2013). These elements together form developmental and cultural-institutional models of soft power.

The region demonstrates significant structural heterogeneity, encompassing advanced industrial economies, emerging middle-income states and rapidly developing technological hubs alongside persistent inequalities and diverse political systems (Dent, 2023; Levyts'kyi, 2023). This diversity has produced distinctive pathways of soft power formation. Rather than relying on universal normative claims, many Asia-Pacific actors project influence by demonstrating economic performance, social stability and adaptive governance capacity (Nye, 2004; Dergachov, 2018). Developmental credibility therefore functions as a key source of attraction, particularly for states seeking alternatives to Western models of modernisation (Anholt, 2010).

Since the early 2000s, the Asia-Pacific has become a major engine of global economic growth, reinforcing perceptions of regional governance models as effective and pragmatic. Soft

power in this context often operates through emulation rather than persuasion, as policy practices and institutional arrangements become reference points for external actors (*Dent, 2023; Sliusarenko, 2020*). At the same time, intensifying strategic rivalry has transformed soft power into a contested field of influence, where major powers compete over narratives, standards and institutional leadership (*Levyts'kyi, 2023; Dent, 2023*).

Japan and South Korea represent illustrative examples of cultural-institutional soft power. Both states have transformed cultural production into strategic assets by embedding cultural diplomacy within broader economic and foreign policy frameworks (*Kim, 2011; Melissen, 2005*). Cultural appeal in these cases is supported by institutional coordination, long-term policy planning and cooperation between state and non-state actors (*Pamment, 2013*).

Japan's soft power has traditionally been associated with cultural distinctiveness and technological sophistication. Popular culture, including anime, manga, design, cuisine and fashion, has significantly shaped Japan's global image (*Anholt, 2010*). Government-supported initiatives promoting cultural exports, combined with public-private partnerships and international cultural exchange programmes, have enabled Japan to convert cultural popularity into sustained symbolic and diplomatic capital (*Dergachov, 2018; Melissen, 2015*).

South Korea's soft power demonstrates a highly institutionalised model centred on the global expansion of Korean popular culture, commonly known as the Korean Wave. Music, film, television and digital content have been integrated into national branding strategies and supported through targeted investment and international promotion mechanisms (*Kim, 2011*). Cultural industries in South Korea function not only as sources of attraction but also as instruments for projecting narratives of technological advancement, creativity and modernity (*Anholt, 2010*). The credibility of these strategies is reinforced by relatively open institutional environments that allow creative industries, universities and civil society actors to participate in soft power projection (*Melissen, 2005*).

Education and innovation represent additional pillars of Asia-Pacific soft power. Educational exchanges, international academic partnerships and research cooperation programmes contribute to the formation of elite networks, professional standards and epistemic communities (*Pamment, 2013; Gavrylova, 2021*). Educational soft power operates through long-term mechanisms in which individuals trained within particular institutional environments internalise governance practices and policy preferences that influence future international cooperation (*Nye, 2004; Shaigorodskyi, 2022*).

Technological innovation further strengthens Asia-Pacific soft power. The region has emerged as a global leader in digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, consumer electronics and smart manufacturing. Technological standards and digital platforms increasingly function as instruments of influence by shaping compatibility and long-term systemic dependence (*Zeng, 2020*). Such influence operates through widespread technological adoption rather than coercion, reflecting broader patterns of structural power diffusion (*Farrell & Newman, 2020*).

China represents the most complex and contested case of soft power development in the Asia-Pacific. Unlike Japan and South Korea, whose strategies rely significantly on decentralised cultural industries and market-based frameworks, China has developed a hybrid model combining economic outreach, state-led cultural diplomacy and expanding technological and regulatory influence (*Zeng, 2020*).

Economic initiatives constitute a central component of China's soft power strategy. Infrastructure investment, development financing and trade integration projects have expanded China's global presence while reinforcing narratives of modernisation and economic partnership (*Levyts'kyi, 2023; Anholt, 2010*). Cultural diplomacy complements economic engagement

through language promotion, educational exchanges and international media expansion. However, the strong role of state coordination often raises concerns regarding authenticity and instrumentalisation, which may limit normative resonance (*Melissen, 2005; Zayani, 2015; Edelman, 2024*).

A distinctive feature of China's contemporary strategy is its emphasis on digital governance and technological influence. Advances in artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure and data governance enable China to shape technological ecosystems domestically and internationally, thereby influencing regulatory preferences and governance practices (*Zeng, 2020*). Nevertheless, concerns regarding political transparency, information control and human rights frequently complicate the conversion of economic and technological success into normative legitimacy (*Edelman, 2024; Shaigorodskiy, 2022*).

Institutionalisation remains a defining feature of Asia-Pacific soft power, although its forms vary significantly across political systems. Japan and South Korea benefit from dense institutional ecosystems linking culture, education, innovation and diplomacy within relatively open governance structures (*Melissen, 2015*). In more centralised systems, stronger coordination may enhance strategic coherence but may also reduce flexibility and credibility (*Pamment, 2013; Sliusarenko, 2020*).

At the regional level, institutional fragmentation limits the consolidation of Asia-Pacific soft power into a unified collective model. Unlike the European Union, the region lacks a common normative or legal framework capable of amplifying influence through shared governance mechanisms (*Manners, 2002; Fisun, 2019*). Regional organisations primarily prioritise economic cooperation and security dialogue, resulting in a pluralistic but fragmented soft power landscape (*Dent, 2023*).

Soft power strategies in the Asia-Pacific operate within an environment of intensifying geopolitical competition. Narratives of development, governance efficiency and technological leadership are increasingly politicised, while standards-setting and digital ecosystems have become central arenas of influence (*Farrell & Newman, 2020; Nye, 2004*). The Asia-Pacific experience demonstrates that soft power has evolved into a multifaceted strategy grounded in development, innovation and governance performance rather than universal normative claims. Cultural industries, education and technological leadership function as key sources of attraction, while economic success provides developmental legitimacy (*Anholt, 2010; Gavrylova, 2021*). At the same time, the region illustrates the limitations of soft power in the absence of normative coherence and institutional integration, offering important insights into contemporary geopolitical competition (*Levyts'kyy, 2023*).

### 3.2 The European Union Region

The European Union occupies a distinctive position in the global system of international relations, challenging traditional assumptions about power, sovereignty and influence. Unlike classical state actors, the EU lacks a unified military force and a single foreign policy authority, yet it exercises substantial influence through norms, regulatory standards and institutional practices. This configuration has positioned the EU as a paradigmatic example of post-Westphalian power, where legitimacy and attraction derive primarily from governance capacity and regulatory reach rather than coercion.

Scholars increasingly conceptualise the EU as a non-traditional power actor whose influence is rooted in its ability to define standards and shape expectations across borders (*Manners, 2002*). The EU's external impact is therefore most effectively understood through the interaction of soft and normative power, where persuasion, conditionality and institutional

diffusion replace direct force. This model reflects the historical evolution of the EU from a peace-oriented integration project into a regulatory and normative hub in global governance.

The concept of Normative Power Europe remains central to understanding the EU's soft power strategy. According to this approach, the EU shapes international understandings of political and legal norms, particularly in areas such as democracy, human rights, rule of law and sustainable development (*Manners, 2002*). These norms are not limited to rhetorical promotion but are embedded in policy instruments, agreements and internal compliance mechanisms, which enhance their credibility and external attractiveness.

The EU's soft power is closely linked to its regulatory capacity. Through the externalisation of internal legal standards, the EU influences global governance processes and establishes international benchmarks. The extraterritorial effects of EU law illustrate how regulatory institutionalisation transforms soft power into a durable and often unavoidable form of influence. The General Data Protection Regulation represents a prominent example, establishing global data protection standards that multinational corporations and third countries frequently adopt in order to access the European market.

Similarly, climate governance initiatives, particularly the European Green Deal, demonstrate the EU's capacity to project normative influence through regulatory alignment, trade conditionality and financial instruments. Such initiatives illustrate how legal frameworks translate normative aspirations into practical governance mechanisms and reinforce the EU's global environmental leadership.

Enlargement and neighbourhood policies further demonstrate the EU's use of conditionality as a soft power instrument. By linking access to markets, funding and institutional cooperation to compliance with democratic and legal standards, the EU incentivises reforms without direct coercion. Although the effectiveness of conditionality varies across regions, it remains a central component of the EU's external engagement.

Institutional diplomacy constitutes another core dimension of EU soft power. Bodies such as the European External Action Service, the European Commission and the European Parliament perform complementary roles in shaping external relations. This multi-level institutional structure strengthens policy continuity, enhances credibility and supports the EU's role as a global norm entrepreneur. However, internal divergences among member states and overlapping competences may occasionally limit strategic coherence, particularly in foreign and security policy debates.

Recent discussions on strategic autonomy illustrate the evolving nature of EU soft power. By strengthening internal capacities and reducing technological and economic dependencies, the EU seeks to preserve its ability to act as a global rule-setter. Strategic autonomy therefore complements normative power by reinforcing regulatory authority in fields such as digital governance, climate policy and health regulation.

Despite structural challenges, including internal political fragmentation and external geopolitical competition, the EU demonstrates that soft power can be effectively institutionalised through law, governance and regulatory standards. The EU model illustrates a distinct transformation of soft power in the twenty-first century, where legal norms and institutional mechanisms become central instruments of international influence.

### 3.3 The Middle East Region

The Middle East represents one of the most complex and contested regional environments in contemporary international relations. Persistent armed conflicts, authoritarian governance structures, geopolitical rivalries and external interventions have traditionally framed

the region as dominated by hard power dynamics. However, during the past two decades, and particularly since the 2010s, several Middle Eastern states have increasingly incorporated soft power instruments as complementary tools to enhance international legitimacy, diversify foreign policy strategies and reshape global perceptions.

Unlike the European and Asia-Pacific contexts, soft power in the Middle East develops under conditions of chronic insecurity and normative contestation. Regional actors operate within a fragmented political order characterised by competing governance models, weak regional institutions and limited normative convergence (*Ulrichsen, 2016; Marets'kyi, 2020*). Consequently, soft power strategies tend to be highly selective, state-centred and closely connected to regime stability and political survival.

The absence of a strong regional normative framework comparable to the European Union or ASEAN significantly restricts collective soft power initiatives. Influence is therefore pursued primarily at the national level, often through symbolic, reputational and media-oriented strategies designed to counterbalance negative associations related to conflict, human rights concerns and regional instability (*Dergachov, 2018; Teleshun, 2020*).

A central dimension of Middle Eastern soft power is deliberate national image transformation. Several states, particularly in the Gulf region, have invested extensively in national branding initiatives aimed at repositioning themselves as modern, innovative and globally integrated actors. These initiatives reflect a broader shift from security-dominated foreign policy toward economic diversification and reputational diplomacy (*Almezaini & Rickli, 2020*). Branding campaigns frequently target international investors, tourists and strategic partners by emphasising narratives of modernisation, tolerance and reform while minimising references to domestic political constraints (*Gavrylova, 2021; Sliusarenko, 2020*).

Nevertheless, such image-building strategies often encounter credibility challenges. Sustained reputational influence requires consistency between external narratives and domestic governance practices. Discrepancies between projected modernisation narratives and political realities frequently undermine long-term soft power effectiveness (*Sharpatyy, 2020; Teleshun, 2020*).

Cultural diplomacy and sport diplomacy have become visible instruments of Middle Eastern soft power (*Shevchenko, 2021*). Hosting international exhibitions, cultural festivals and global sporting events enhances visibility, normalises international presence and signals global integration. These initiatives embed regional actors into transnational cultural and media networks while generating symbolic legitimacy (*Manzhos, 2021*). However, critics note that such strategies sometimes function as reputational buffering mechanisms rather than channels of normative influence. Cultural diplomacy in the region is predominantly state-driven and top-down, limiting societal participation and reducing authenticity compared to more pluralistic cultural soft power models (*Zayani, 2015*).

Media diplomacy constitutes another core component of regional soft power strategies. Transnational broadcasting networks and digital platforms allow Middle Eastern states to shape international narratives, influence public discourse and frame regional conflicts beyond traditional diplomatic channels. Simultaneously, digital communication technologies introduce new vulnerabilities, as networked publics can rapidly challenge and reinterpret state-driven narratives, particularly during political crises (*Zayani, 2015*).

Education and knowledge diplomacy have emerged as additional instruments of reputational transformation. Investments in international universities, research centres and academic cooperation programmes aim to position several Middle Eastern states as emerging hubs

of innovation and intellectual exchange. While these initiatives expand international engagement, their academic autonomy and normative credibility remain subject to political constraints (Lisnychenko, 2022).

Despite extensive financial and institutional investments, Middle Eastern soft power strategies face structural limitations. Legitimacy deficits related to governance transparency, political participation and human rights remain major constraints, as international audiences increasingly evaluate soft power through normative expectations (Fisun, 2019). Ongoing conflicts and geopolitical rivalries further complicate soft power projection, as military engagement frequently contradicts narratives of peace, cooperation and modernisation (Ulrichsen, 2016).

The lack of regional institutionalisation also limits norm diffusion and long-term influence. Unlike the European Union's regulatory model, Middle Eastern soft power remains episodic and leadership-driven, dependent on political priorities and resource allocation (Levyts'kyi, 2023).

The Middle Eastern experience demonstrates a pronounced hybridisation of soft and hard power instruments. Soft power initiatives are rarely implemented independently and are typically combined with economic, military and security policies. Such hybridity allows states to compensate for legitimacy gaps by combining attraction with deterrence, although it simultaneously blurs distinctions between persuasion and coercion (Nye, 2004; Shaigorodskiy, 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, the Middle Eastern case challenges universalist interpretations of soft power by demonstrating its strong dependence on political context, institutional capacity and normative environment. Soft power in the region represents a distinct model characterised by strategic branding, centralised control and symbolic international engagement. While these strategies may generate short-term reputational benefits, their long-term effectiveness remains constrained by legitimacy challenges and normative inconsistencies, reinforcing the broader argument that soft power operates within specific institutional and political conditions.

#### 4. Comparative Analysis of Regional Soft Power Models

Comparative analysis of soft power strategies across the Asia-Pacific region, the European Union, and the Middle East reveals substantial variation in the sources, institutional mechanisms, and sustainability of influence. Although all three regions rely on attraction-based instruments, they differ markedly in the degree of institutionalisation, normative coherence, and reliance on legal, economic, or symbolic resources. These differences demonstrate that soft power is not a universalised instrument of influence but a context-dependent phenomenon shaped by regional political and institutional environments.

The Asia-Pacific model can be characterised as predominantly developmental and cultural-institutional. Soft power in this region is closely associated with economic modernisation, technological advancement, and the global diffusion of cultural industries, particularly in countries such as Japan and South Korea (Kim, 2011; Dent, 2023). Attraction is generated primarily through societal performance, high-quality education systems, and innovation ecosystems rather than through the export of formalised legal norms. Institutional structures support soft power indirectly by strengthening national competitiveness and reputational capital, thereby reinforcing international attractiveness without explicitly imposing external regulatory standards.

In contrast, the European Union represents the most institutionalised and legally embedded model of soft power. The EU's influence is grounded in its ability to externalise internal regulatory frameworks and governance norms, transforming legal instruments into mechanisms

of international attraction and compliance (*Manners, 2002; Farrell & Newman, 2020*). Unlike Asia-Pacific strategies, EU soft power is primarily normative rather than cultural, functioning through rule-based governance structures that encourage voluntary alignment by external actors. This regulatory capacity allows the EU to exercise structural influence without relying on traditional coercive instruments.

The Middle Eastern model, by comparison, remains predominantly selective, symbolic, and state-centred. Soft power instruments are employed strategically to counterbalance security-driven perceptions and enhance international visibility. Cultural diplomacy, media outreach, and global branding campaigns dominate regional strategies; however, these initiatives remain weakly institutionalised and are heavily centralised within state apparatuses (*Almezzaini & Rickli, 2020; Ulrichsen, 2016*). The limited integration of legal and normative dimensions significantly constrains the depth and durability of influence, reinforcing the instrumental character of regional soft power strategies.

Normative consistency emerges as one of the most significant differentiating variables across regional models. The European Union benefits from a comparatively high level of coherence between declared values and institutional practices. Although internal political tensions and policy contradictions persist, the EU's regulatory framework provides external actors with a stable and predictable normative reference point, enhancing both credibility and legitimacy (*Fisun, 2019*).

In the Asia-Pacific region, legitimacy tends to be performance-oriented rather than normatively universalist. Economic success, social stability, and technological leadership function as primary sources of international attraction, enabling states to exercise influence without demanding ideological or normative alignment from partners. This pragmatic legitimacy reduces resistance to regional influence and allows Asia-Pacific actors to maintain considerable strategic flexibility (*Dent, 2023; Vasyl'yeva, 2021*).

By contrast, Middle Eastern soft power strategies face persistent legitimacy challenges. National branding initiatives and image-building campaigns frequently conflict with international perceptions related to governance standards, human rights practices, and involvement in regional conflicts. As studies of political image formation demonstrate, such discrepancies undermine long-term credibility and transform soft power into a short-term reputational instrument rather than a sustainable strategic resource (*Sharpatyy, 2020; Teleshun, 2020*).

All three regional models operate within an increasingly competitive global environment characterised by multipolarity, geopolitical fragmentation, and intensified strategic rivalry. Nevertheless, their responses to these pressures differ substantially.

In the Asia-Pacific region, soft power functions primarily as a competitive instrument in regional leadership contests. Cultural influence, educational attractiveness, and technological standard-setting contribute to shaping regional hierarchies without direct coercion (*Kim, 2011; Zhao, 2015*). This competition is largely indirect and socially embedded, relying on societal prestige and developmental success as sources of authority.

The European Union, meanwhile, faces external challenges to its normative influence from actors that contest liberal governance models. Despite these pressures, the EU's capacity to project regulatory norms beyond its borders—through mechanisms such as market conditionality and regulatory alignment—continues to generate a distinctive form of structural power within the global governance architecture (*Farrell & Newman, 2020; Vdovychenko, 2022*).

In the Middle East, geopolitical competition significantly intensifies the hybridisation of soft and hard power instruments. Soft power initiatives frequently coexist with military interventions, economic leverage, and security alliances, blurring the boundary between attraction

and coercion. While such hybridity reflects regional strategic realities, it simultaneously weakens the conceptual autonomy of soft power as a distinct form of influence (*Shaigorodskiy, 2022; Marets'kyi, 2020*).

Despite these structural differences, certain patterns of convergence are increasingly visible across regions. Digitalisation, strategic communication, and the expanding role of transnational media platforms have become central components of contemporary soft power strategies worldwide (*Zayani, 2015*). Governments across all three regions actively utilise digital diplomacy and media engagement to amplify narratives, influence foreign public opinion, and manage reputational risks in real time.

Nevertheless, divergence remains the dominant characteristic of regional soft power development. The European Union prioritises rule-making and legal norm diffusion; Asia-Pacific actors emphasise economic competitiveness and innovation-driven attraction; Middle Eastern states focus primarily on international visibility and symbolic reputational repositioning. These differences highlight the contextual nature of soft power and challenge attempts to conceptualise it as a uniform global strategy.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that soft power has evolved from a supplementary diplomatic instrument into a central dimension of contemporary global power redistribution. Regions capable of institutionalising attraction—particularly through legal frameworks, governance standards, and stable normative systems—tend to generate more sustainable and resilient influence. Conversely, regions that rely primarily on selective, symbolic, or reputational strategies remain vulnerable to volatility, legitimacy deficits, and geopolitical fluctuations.

This transformation confirms that soft power cannot be reduced to cultural appeal alone. Rather, it represents a multidimensional strategic resource shaped by institutional capacity, normative coherence, and geopolitical context. Recognising these regional variations is essential for reassessing power hierarchies and influence mechanisms within the twenty-first-century international system.

## 5. Conclusions

The conducted research confirms that soft power has evolved into a fundamental instrument of political and legal positioning of states in contemporary international relations. Under conditions of global geopolitical transformation, increasing interdependence and digitalisation, soft power strategies have moved beyond traditional cultural diplomacy and increasingly incorporate regulatory, technological and communication-based instruments of influence. The study demonstrates that soft power functions not only as a reputational resource but also as a structural mechanism shaping international norms, institutional cooperation and global governance practices.

The comparative analysis reveals that regional political environments significantly determine the institutional design and operational priorities of soft power strategies. The European Union represents a normative and legally institutionalised model of soft power grounded in regulatory standards, legal harmonisation and the promotion of democratic values. The Asia-Pacific region illustrates a dynamic and innovation-oriented model characterised by the integration of technological leadership, digital diplomacy and cultural projection. In contrast, the Middle East demonstrates a selective and hybrid model combining economic modernisation, global branding initiatives and investment-oriented diplomatic strategies. These findings confirm that soft power is not universal in its implementation but adapts to regional political cultures, economic capacities and geopolitical priorities.

The research contributes to the theoretical development of soft power studies by conceptualising soft power as a multidimensional and hybrid phenomenon integrating cultural, institutional, technological and legal instruments of international influence. The study expands the understanding of soft power by emphasising its regulatory dimension and its increasing interconnection with digital governance and global communication networks. The identification of regional patterns of soft power transformation provides new analytical perspectives for examining geopolitical competition and international image formation in the twenty-first century.

From a practical perspective, the results highlight the importance of integrated communication strategies and institutional coordination in enhancing the effectiveness of soft power policies. The findings may be useful for policymakers, diplomatic institutions and international communication agencies seeking to strengthen national image, international legitimacy and global competitiveness. The research also demonstrates that successful soft power strategies increasingly require the combination of cultural diplomacy with technological innovation and regulatory influence.

The study has several limitations related to the selection of regional cases and the qualitative nature of the analysis. Future research may expand the comparative framework by including additional regional actors and by applying quantitative and mixed-method approaches to assess the effectiveness of soft power instruments. Further investigation of digital diplomacy, artificial intelligence and information influence strategies may provide deeper insight into the transformation of international political communication and global governance mechanisms.

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