

Strategic Coherence and Distributed Influence

Rethinking EU Soft Power Through the Assets-Infrastructure-Outcomes Framework

Stuart MacDonald, London (UK)

Imprint

AIA Discussion Paper 2026#13

Publisher: Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie
für Internationale Politik gGmbH

Executive Director: Maysoun Zein Al Din
Chairman of the Supervisory Board: Harald Hemmer
Commercial Register Court: Amtsgericht Bonn
Company registration number: HRB 25581

Editorial Team: Manuel Becker, Katja Freistein

Editorial address:
Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie
für Internationale Politik gGmbH
Rheinallee 24 ▪ 53173 Bonn ▪ Germany
Telephone: +49 228 50 43 12-60
E-mail: info@aia-nrw.org ▪ www.aia-nrw.org

ISSN: 2944-2036

Funded by:

Minister for Federal, European,
International Affairs and Media
of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia
and Head of the State Chancellery



Preface

How can the European Union strengthen its international influence in an increasingly fragmented and geopolitically contested world? This paper is the result of extensive research and events conducted by AIA Associate Fellow Stuart MacDonald here at the Academy. He argues that the ongoing review of the EU's strategy for international cultural relations should be much more than a mere adjustment of existing instruments. Instead of a narrow understanding of culture as a means of public diplomacy, Stuart MacDonald advocates an integrated approach to European soft power that strategically links culture, education, science, development cooperation and the international role of regions and cities. Using a five-test framework, the paper examines whether such an approach is suitable for increasing the EU's global influence, contributing to the management of climate, migration and security issues, making foreign policy more effective, and deepening the connection with European citizens. Stuart MacDonald concludes that the EU's greatest strength lies not in centralised projection, but in its pluralistic, decentralised and relationship-oriented structure. From this, concrete recommendations are derived for the further development of EU policy in the field of international cultural relations and soft power. We hope all readers find this an informative read!

Wie kann die Europäische Union ihren internationalen Einfluss in einer zunehmend fragmentierten und geopolitisch umkämpften Welt stärken? Dieser Beitrag ist das Ergebnis umfangreicher Forschungsarbeiten und Veranstaltungen, die AIA Associate Fellow Stuart MacDonald hier an der Akademie durchgeführt hat. Er argumentiert, dass die derzeitige Überprüfung der EU-Strategie für internationale Kulturbeziehungen weit mehr sein sollte als eine bloße Anpassung bestehender Instrumente. Anstelle eines engen Verständnisses von Kultur als Mittel der öffentlichen Diplomatie plädiert Stuart MacDonald für einen integrierten Ansatz für die europäische Soft Power, der Kultur, Bildung, Wissenschaft, Entwicklungszusammenarbeit und die internationale Rolle von Regionen und Städten strategisch miteinander verknüpft. Anhand eines Fünf-Punkte-Rahmens untersucht das Papier, ob ein solcher Ansatz geeignet ist, den globalen Einfluss der EU zu stärken, zur Bewältigung von Klima-, Migrations- und Sicherheitsfragen beizutragen, die Außenpolitik effektiver zu gestalten und die Verbindung zu den europäischen Bürgern zu vertiefen. Stuart MacDonald kommt zu dem Schluss, dass die größte Stärke der EU nicht in einer zentralisierten Außenwirkung liegt, sondern in ihrer pluralistischen, dezentralen und beziehungsorientierten Struktur. Daraus leiten sich konkrete Empfehlungen für die Weiterentwicklung der EU-Politik im Bereich der internationalen Kulturbeziehungen und der Soft Power ab. Wir wünschen allen Leserinnen und Lesern eine instruktive Lektüre!

Manuel Becker

Head of Scientific Programme, Academy of International Affairs NRW

Abstract: *This paper contributes to the European Commission's review of its 2016 Joint Communication on international cultural relations. Drawing on a comparative study of soft power governance across twenty-five jurisdictions (British Council, 2026), which applies an Assets-Infrastructure-Outcomes framework, and on a practitioner-academic workshop convened in Brussels in March 2026, it argues that the review requires a more fundamental reconsideration than an institutional refresh would provide. The paper advances four arguments: that EU-level coordination should extend beyond culture to education, science, and development cooperation through strategic alignment rather than structural unification; that the updated Communication should arrive as a genuine strategy with binding commitments, a dedicated budget line, and an accountability framework; that European regions with genuine assets should be recognised as active contributors to EU soft power; and that credibility, resting on authenticity and reciprocity, is the variable that most consistently distinguishes effective from ineffective systems. Applying a five-test evaluative framework, the paper concludes that the EU's soft power challenge is fundamentally a strategic conversion problem: it holds major assets across education, research, culture, development finance, and regional networks, but lacks the machinery to convert them into trusted relationships in the geographies where its interests are most directly contested.*

Abstract: *Dieses Paper leistet einen Beitrag zur Überprüfung der Gemeinsamen Mitteilung der Europäischen Kommission aus dem Jahr 2016 über internationale Kulturbeziehungen. Auf der Grundlage einer vergleichenden Studie zur Soft-Power-Governance in 25 Ländern (British Council, 2026), die einen Rahmen aus „Assets-Infrastructure-Outcomes“ anwendet, sowie eines im März 2026 in Brüssel abgehaltenen Workshops für Praktiker und Wissenschaftler wird argumentiert, dass die Überprüfung eine grundlegendere Neubewertung erfordert, als eine institutionelle Aktualisierung bieten würde. Das Paper entwickelt hierzu vier Argumente: dass die Koordinierung auf EU-Ebene über den Kulturbereich hinaus auf Bildung, Wissenschaft und Entwicklungszusammenarbeit ausgeweitet werden sollte, und zwar durch strategische Ausrichtung statt struktureller Vereinheitlichung; dass die aktualisierte Mitteilung als echte Strategie mit verbindlichen Verpflichtungen, einer eigenen Haushaltslinie und einem Rahmen für die Rechenschaftspflicht vorliegen sollte; dass europäische Regionen mit echten Ressourcen als aktive Mitwirkende an der Soft Power der EU anerkannt werden sollten; und dass Glaubwürdigkeit, die auf Authentizität und Gegenseitigkeit beruht, die Variable ist, die wirksame von unwirksamen Systemen am konsequentesten unterscheidet. Unter Anwendung eines Bewertungsrahmens mit fünf Kriterien kommt der Beitrag zu dem Schluss, dass die Herausforderung der EU im Bereich der Soft Power im Grunde ein strategisches Umwandlungsproblem ist: Sie verfügt über bedeutende Stärken in den Bereichen Bildung, Forschung, Kultur, Entwicklungsfinanzierung und regionale Netzwerke, aber es fehlt ihr an den Mechanismen, um diese in vertrauensvolle Beziehungen in den Regionen umzuwandeln, in denen ihre Interessen am unmittelbarsten in Frage gestellt werden.*

Glossary of Acronyms

The following EU programme acronyms are used in this paper. AIO (Assets-Infrastructure-Outcomes) is the analytical framework, developed by ICR Research, that treats soft power as a production process across three dimensions: assets, infrastructure, and outcomes. Creative Europe is the EU programme (2021–2027) supporting the cultural and creative sectors through its Culture and MEDIA strands. AgoraEU is the Commission’s proposed consolidated programme for the 2028–2034 MFF (COM(2025) 550), which would merge Creative Europe’s Culture and MEDIA strands with the CERV programme. CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values) is the current programme supporting civil society, democratic participation, fundamental rights, and EU values. MEDIA+ is the audiovisual and media strand within the proposed AgoraEU architecture. Erasmus+ is the EU programme (2021–2027) for education, training, youth, and sport, encompassing student and researcher mobility, vocational training, and international partnerships, including through the European University Alliances and the Erasmus Mundus scheme. Horizon Europe is the EU framework programme for research and innovation (2021–2027); the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) are its researcher mobility and training component. Global Gateway is the EU’s external investment initiative, launched in 2021. MFF (Multiannual Financial Framework) is the EU’s long-term budget framework, currently covering 2021–2027 and under negotiation for 2028–2034.

The following institutional and treaty acronyms are used. AU-EU refers to the partnership between the African Union and the European Union, formalised through a series of summits and joint frameworks including the Joint Vision for 2030; it is the primary institutional architecture through which EU external engagement with Africa is coordinated, and the vehicle for the Global Gateway Investment Package for Africa. DG EAC is the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. DG INTPA is the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (formerly DG DEVCO). DG NEAR is the Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. DG RTD is the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. EEAS (European External Action Service) is the EU’s diplomatic service, established under the Lisbon Treaty. EPRS (European Parliamentary Research Service) is the research body of the European Parliament. EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture) is the network of member state cultural institutes operating internationally. NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) is the EU’s hierarchical classification of sub-national territorial units; NUTS2 corresponds broadly to the regional tier. TFEU refers to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The Strategic Compass is the EU’s security and defence strategy adopted in March 2022, which provides the hard security framework within which EU soft power coordination must operate; it emphasises strategic autonomy, resilience, and positioning the EU as a security provider in response to Russian aggression and systemic rivalry with China.

1. Introduction

The European Union's approach to international cultural relations is at a point of formal reassessment. The European Commission's Culture Compass for Europe, adopted in November 2025, commits to updating the 2016 Joint Communication Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations (JOIN(2016) 29 final) and to launching a new phase of the Cultural Relations Platform (European Commission, 2025a). That commitment brings nearly a decade of accumulated institutional experience to bear on a policy framework widely judged by academic commentators and practitioners alike to have been conceptually ambitious but operationally under-resourced. As Badell (2021) has argued, the 2016 Joint Communication represented a genuine conceptual advance, particularly in its emphasis on cultural relations over cultural diplomacy and on reciprocity and co-creation over unidirectional projection, but its implementation was hampered from the outset by the absence of a dedicated institutional home, inadequate funding, and persistent tensions between the European External Action Service and the Commission's Directorates-General. Figueira (2017) was more direct still, contending that the document's ambitions significantly outran its institutional foundations and that the absence of a binding strategy or dedicated budget line fatally limited its practical impact. The review process now underway thus inherits both a real conceptual legacy and a set of structural problems that were never resolved.

The context in which the review is taking place is, however, fundamentally different from the one in which the original document was drafted. The 2016 Joint Communication was issued, by a coincidence noted at the time, two weeks before the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union; it arrived alongside the EU Global Strategy, which introduced 'principled pragmatism' and placed strategic autonomy at the centre of the Union's self-understanding as a global actor (European Union, 2016). In the years that followed, the geopolitical environment deteriorated further and more rapidly than the drafters of either document could reasonably have anticipated. The intensification of Chinese and Russian information operations, the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the active retrenchment of United States public diplomacy infrastructure have together created a competitive landscape in which attraction and persuasion, the currencies of soft power, are simultaneously more consequential and more contested. The Culture Compass itself acknowledges that culture is increasingly weaponised as a strategic domain of influence and that the EU must reinforce its value-driven approach in response to this shift (European Commission, 2025a). The review is therefore not a routine administrative exercise but a question of whether the EU's framework for international engagement is fit for a world in which, as Joseph Nye first argued in 1990 and has consistently elaborated since, the ability to attract rather than coerce remains a durable form of power, but one that requires institutional architecture capable of converting assets into outcomes (Nye, 1990; 2004). This paper was developed in that context. It is an output of a fellowship at the Academy of International Affairs North Rhine-Westphalia (AIA NRW) in Bonn, an institution whose model of practitioner-academic collaboration is itself an argument for the approach the paper defends. The 'pracademic', working simultaneously inside and across the research-policy divide, is, this paper contends, a necessary rather than incidental figure in the development of effective EU soft power governance.

The case for a fundamental rather than incremental reform of EU soft power governance has acquired additional urgency from developments since 2022 that were not yet visible when the 2016 Joint Communication was drafted. The EU's Strategic Compass, adopted in March 2022, repositioned the Union explicitly as a security provider in a geopolitically contested order, placing strategic autonomy at the centre of EU external action in a way that reshapes the context for soft power coordination (Council of the European Union, 2022). The acceleration of EU enlargement (the 2025 Enlargement Package documented substantive progress for Ukraine, Moldova, the Western Balkans, and Georgia) creates priority geographies where the EU's cultural, educational, scientific, and development instruments are directly implicated in accession processes that represent, in institutional scope and depth, the EU's most consequential soft power instrument. The United States' shift under the current administration from 'retrenchment' to active hostility towards multilateralism has fractured transatlantic consensus on China, Ukraine, and climate in ways that create both greater pressure on EU soft power capacity and, potentially, a wider international space for the EU's model of cooperative, rules-based engagement. And the Global Gateway, launched as an explicit response to China's Belt and Road Initiative, has become a major strategic instrument whose soft power value depends entirely on whether 138 or more flagship projects, the majority in Africa, are experienced by partner countries as co-owned development or as European strategic investment in European interests. Together, enlargement acceleration, Global Gateway competition with China in Africa, Strategic Compass repositioning after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the fragility of transatlantic alignment create an unprecedented combination of pressures and opportunities that give the Joint Communication review a geostrategic urgency it did not have in 2016.

This discussion paper contributes to that review. It draws on two primary sources of evidence: a comparative study of soft power governance across twenty-five jurisdictions, published by the British Council in March 2026 and applying an Assets-Infrastructure-Outcomes (AIO) analytical framework (MacDonald and Murray, 2025); and a practitioner-academic workshop convened at the NRW Representation in Brussels on 5 March 2026. Both sources are described in detail in the AIA NRW fellowship report (MacDonald, 2026). The paper advances four arguments, concerning the scope of EU-level coordination, the character of the updated Joint Communication, the recognition of European regions as strategic actors, and the centrality of credibility as the variable distinguishing effective from ineffective systems, developed in Sections 6, 5, 7, and throughout the paper respectively.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework, engaging the literature on soft power governance, normative power Europe, and multi-level governance as it applies to the EU's distinctive position as an international actor. Section 3 describes the AIO methodology. Section 4 presents comparative evidence from the twenty-five-jurisdiction study. Section 5 examines the 2016 Joint Communication, its institutional architecture, and the implementation record now documented in the literature. Section 6 addresses the strategic conversion argument: why the EU's soft power challenge is fundamentally one of converting dispersed assets into trusted influence in priority geographies, and how extension to education, science, development cooperation, and enlargement serves that purpose. Section 7 develops the regional dimension, drawing on the NRW case and connecting regions to the EU's geostrategic delivery capacity. Section 8 applies a five-test evaluative framework to the integrated argument, including geopolitical stress tests on

Global Gateway, Türkiye, and AU-EU implementation. Section 9 sets out conclusions and sequenced recommendations.

2. Theoretical Framework: Soft Power, Multi-Level Governance, and the EU as a Distinctive Case

2.1 Soft Power: The Foundational Concept and Its Limits

The concept of soft power, as developed by Joseph Nye in *Bound to Lead* (1990) and systematised in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), rests on a fundamental distinction between coercive and co-optive forms of influence. Where hard power compels through military force or economic sanction, soft power attracts: it operates through culture, political values, and foreign policies that others find legitimate and credible, inducing the preferences of third parties without resort to coercion. Nye argued that a country's ability to shape the international environment depends substantially on whether those sources generate genuine attraction rather than mere compliance (Nye, 2004). In *The Future of Power* (2011), Nye extended the framework to account for the diffusion of power in the digital age, recognising that influence was spreading both vertically, to sub-national actors, and horizontally, to non-state entities, a development that anticipated later debates about what has been described as 'dark soft power' and the weaponisation of communications infrastructure by state and non-state actors alike.

Nye's framework is, however, constructed around the nation-state as its principal unit of analysis, and its treatment of the European Union is correspondingly underdeveloped. EU scholars rapidly identified this gap and responded by developing specifically European conceptual frameworks rather than simply adopting Nye's American formulation. This is not merely a matter of disciplinary parochialism: the EU's constitutive character as an international actor differs in ways that are analytically significant from the nation-states for which soft power theory was originally designed. As MacDonald and Murray (2025) found in their comparative study, the national soft power model does not apply straightforwardly at either the multilateral or sub-national level. At the EU level, the most significant cultural assets are held at the member state level rather than by EU institutions; infrastructure is shared across the Commission, the European External Action Service, national cultural institutes, and regional bodies; and attributing outcomes to any single level of the system is correspondingly difficult. The paper therefore treats Nye's framework as a necessary starting point rather than a sufficient analytical tool and supplements it with theoretical traditions developed more directly from the European experience.

2.2 European Theoretical Traditions: Civilian Power and Normative Power

The intellectual lineage through which European scholars have theorised the EU's international role predates Nye's formulation of soft power by two decades. Françoise Duchêne's development of the 'civilian power' concept in the early 1970s argued that the

European Community was a political entity long on economic resources and short on armed force, and that this character gave it a distinctive and potentially constructive role in international affairs: capable, in Duchêne's terms, of domesticating relations between states through civilian rather than military means (Duchêne, 1972; 1973). The civilian power debate developed in parallel in the German-language literature through Hanns Maull's concept of *Zivilmacht* (Maull, 1990), which framed civilian power as a matter of political choice, an internalised orientation towards multilateralism and the renunciation of military instruments, as much as of material circumstance. The concept was explicitly normative as much as analytical, constituting an argument about what Europe should aspire to be. Hedley Bull's sharp realist rejoinder (1982) contended that European civilian power was a contradiction in terms, conditional entirely on the American military umbrella and therefore incapable of independent existence. Bull's challenge, though overstated in its absolute form, identified a tension in European power theory that has never been fully resolved: the relationship between the EU's normative self-presentation and the material conditions that sustain it.

Ian Manners' normative power Europe framework, developed in the 2002 article that became the most cited work in the history of the *Journal of Common Market Studies*, took a different approach. Manners argued that the EU's treaty-based legal order gave it an identity fundamentally different from those of traditional state actors, predisposing it to act in world politics in ways that sought to shape conceptions of what is normal in international relations (Manners, 2002). He identified, through analysis of the EU's treaty base and the declaratory *acquis*, five core norms embedded in EU treaties (those of peace, liberty, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights) and four secondary norms, including social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, and good governance. The normative power concept is importantly not simply a European synonym for soft power: where Nye's framework treats attraction as an instrument in the service of national interest, Manners was making a constitutive claim about the EU's nature as an international actor. As Sjusen (2006) observed in a searching critique, however, the concept is analytically underdetermined: European rhetoric of normative purpose does not of itself constitute normative action, and the gap between the EU's stated values and its operational conduct in external relations remains a persistent source of tension in both the academic literature and in policy practice.

For present purposes, normative power Europe and soft power theory are most usefully treated as complementary rather than competing frameworks. Normative power theory helps explain the sources of the EU's claim to international attraction, grounded in its values, its model of governance, and its record of peaceful integration. Soft power theory, particularly as refined through the AIO framework, provides the analytical tools for asking whether those sources of attraction are effectively converted into institutional infrastructure and, in turn, into measurable outcomes. The gap between the two framings (one concerned with what the EU is, the other with what it produces) is precisely the gap that a review of EU international cultural relations policy needs to address.

2.3 Multi-Level Governance and the Institutional Architecture of EU Soft Power

The multi-level governance (MLG) framework developed by Hooghe and Marks (2001) provides the third principal theoretical building block for this paper. Hooghe and Marks

distinguished between two ideal types: Type 1 MLG, in which authority is distributed across a limited number of general-purpose jurisdictions at distinct territorial levels, and Type 2 MLG, in which authority is dispersed across a larger number of task-specific, potentially overlapping jurisdictions. The EU's governance architecture combines elements of both types, distributing authority across EU institutions, member states, and, in the relevant constitutional orders, sub-state entities with legislatively grounded international competences. Hocking (2005) applied the MLG framework specifically to public diplomacy, arguing that state-centric models inadequately capture the reality of contemporary soft power projection, in which multiple actors simultaneously engage diplomatically through networked rather than hierarchical governance arrangements.

The MLG framework is directly relevant to the EU soft power context for three reasons. First, the constraint on EU-level coordination in international cultural relations is not simply legal, though the restriction of culture to a supporting competence under Article 167 TFEU is real and consequential; it is also institutional and political. Culture remains primarily a member state domain, member states guard their cultural sovereignty, and national cultural institutes operating under EUNIC operate under distinct mandates and professional cultures that sit uneasily with the concept of a unified EU soft power strategy (Carta and Higgott, 2019). Second, the distribution of soft power assets across governance levels creates an attribution problem that is both technical and political. As MacDonald and Murray (2025) found, at the EU level the absence of a common measurement framework reflects a deeper ambiguity about whether the Union's international cultural relations activity constitutes a coherent collective endeavour or a loosely coordinated aggregation of member state interests; at the sub-national level, regions and cities seek better evidence largely because they lack formal standing in soft power governance architectures rather than because they lack impact. Third, the MLG framework suggests that the appropriate response to the EU's governance complexity is not to seek a single unified strategy, which would compress the diversity of the system into a lowest-common-denominator outcome, but to design coordination mechanisms that work with the grain of multi-level architecture rather than against it.

2.4 Paradiplomacy and the Sub-National Dimension

The sub-national dimension of EU soft power requires its own theoretical grounding. The concept of paradiplomacy, developed by Soldatos (1990) and Hocking (1993) to describe the foreign policy activity of non-central governments, has accumulated a substantial empirical literature demonstrating that sub-state entities in Europe are active international actors. As Skoutaris (2012) demonstrated in a comparative analysis of European multi-level constitutional orders, sub-state entities in federal and regionalised systems (including Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom) have been progressively accorded 'subnational constitutional space' (Williams and Tarr, 2004) enabling the regional tier to engage internationally. The Belgian case is the most permissive: Communities and Regions may conclude international treaties in areas within their competence without federal tutelage, with Flanders alone having concluded dozens of exclusive treaties by the early 2010s (Skoutaris, 2012). The overall conclusion is that the constitutional frameworks of European states collectively question the traditional notion that states enjoy a monopoly over foreign affairs.

The fellowship's own research refines this picture in a way that is consequential for the paper's argument. The Brussels workshop and the AIA NRW colloquium both raised persistent questions about whether 'soft power' is the right conceptual vocabulary for what European regions actually do, internationally. Regional engagement tends to be more relational than broadcast, more networked than hierarchical, and more focused on specific policy challenges (such as climate action, innovation ecosystems, and higher education partnerships) than on projecting a general image of the kind that national soft power frameworks typically envisage. This reflects the fact that regions lack the diplomatic apparatus and symbolic statehood that organise national projection, so their international engagement is driven by specific functional interests and pursued through partnership rather than broadcast. This observation does not invalidate the application of soft power theory to the sub-national level; Nye himself confirmed that the concept extends beyond states to organisations and other actors (Nye, 2017). It does suggest, however, that the national model requires modification before it can generate either analytically reliable findings or operationally useful prescriptions at the regional level. The AIO framework's potential for multi-level adaptation is discussed further in Section 3.

2.5 Conceptual Vocabulary: Soft Power, Cultural Diplomacy, and Cultural Relations

A further theoretical issue concerns the vocabulary through which the EU's international engagement is conceptualised. The Brussels workshop surfaced a tension that the academic literature has long identified but that policy documents tend to elide: the concepts of soft power, cultural diplomacy, and cultural relations are not synonymous, and the distinctions between them have operational consequences. Cultural diplomacy, in its classic formulation, is state-directed and instrumentalised, oriented towards projecting a favourable national image and serving defined foreign policy goals. Cultural relations, as articulated in the 2016 Joint Communication and as championed by institutions such as the Goethe-Institut and the British Council, is grounded in reciprocity, mutuality, and partnership, treating international engagement as genuinely two-way rather than as a form of projection. Soft power, in Nye's formulation, is competitive and interest-serving, concerned with the conversion of attractive resources into political influence. As participants at the Brussels workshop noted, the Goethe-Institut's self-understanding centres on cultural relations and partnership rather than on an instrumentalised concept of power; and this is not merely an institutional preference but a reflection of the evidence that systems grounded in credibility, authenticity, and reciprocity consistently outperform those oriented towards state-directed projection (MacDonald and Murray, 2025).

This paper follows the 2016 Joint Communication's own usage in treating cultural relations as the appropriate model for EU international engagement, while arguing that soft power theory provides the analytical framework within which the effectiveness of that engagement can be assessed. The distinction matters practically: a review of the 2016 Joint Communication that conflates cultural relations with cultural diplomacy risks importing the logic of projection into a framework whose normative strength depends on its departure from that logic. The EU's credibility as an international actor rests precisely on its capacity to demonstrate that multilateral cooperation and genuine partnership work; and that credibility, as the comparative evidence makes clear, is the variable that most consistently distinguishes effective from ineffective soft power systems.

2.6 Summary: The Paper's Analytical Position

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is therefore a composite one: Nye's soft power framework provides the dominant analytical vocabulary, supplemented by the normative power and civilian power traditions to account for the EU's constitutive distinctiveness, the MLG literature to frame the governance architecture, the paradiplomacy literature to ground the sub-national dimension, and the cultural relations tradition to identify the normative commitments the EU's approach requires. Section 3 applies this framework empirically through the AIO methodology.

3. Methodology: The Assets-Infrastructure-Outcomes Framework

3.1 The Framework and Its Rationale

The empirical foundation of this paper is a comparative study of soft power governance across twenty-five jurisdictions, conducted for the British Council and published in March 2026 (MacDonald and Murray, 2025). The study applied an Assets-Infrastructure-Outcomes (AIO) analytical framework developed by ICR Research, which treats soft power not as a property that actors simply possess but as a production process: what does a jurisdiction possess that has potential value in international engagement, how does it deploy those assets through institutional arrangements, and what measurable results follow? This tripartite structure reflects a methodological position that distinguishes the framework from composite indices of the Soft Power 30 variety (McClory, 2010 onwards), which tend to conflate resources, mechanisms, and results within a single aggregated score and thereby obscure the governance questions that matter most for policy.

The three components of the framework can be described as follows:

- **Assets** encompass the tangible and intangible resources a jurisdiction can draw upon in international engagement: cultural institutions, universities, creative industries, diaspora communities, and cultural heritage, alongside less tangible resources such as linguistic reach, historical relationships, and reputational capital. The AIO framework treats assets as operating across six domains (namely language, culture, education, science and innovation, sport, and heritage) reflecting the comparative evidence that jurisdictions which rely on a single asset class generate less resilient influence than those whose engagement is distributed across multiple domains.
- **Infrastructure** refers to the institutional arrangements through which assets are converted into actual programmes: the mandates, funding mechanisms, coordination structures, and strategic frameworks that determine whether soft power resources are deployed coherently or remain latent and fragmented. This is where strategic coherence becomes observable and measurable. Two jurisdictions may hold similar assets and yet achieve substantially different outcomes depending on how effectively their institutional infrastructure channels and directs them.

▪ **Outcomes** refer to measurable results, ranging from near-term outputs such as student mobility figures, co-production agreements, and audience reach, through to longer-term results such as shifts in international perception, changes in bilateral policy positions, and the development of durable people-to-people networks. The Phase 1 study assessed outcomes across fifteen methodologically reliable indices, synthesised through Principal Component Analysis to produce a multi-dimensional account of soft power performance (MacDonald and Murray, 2025).

3.2 Strengths and Acknowledged Limitations

The AIO framework's principal analytical strength lies in its diagnostic character. Rather than generating a single ranking, it maps the relationships between the three components, surfacing where assets are held but not effectively deployed, where institutional infrastructure is fragmented across competing mandates, and where investment in coordination rather than additional resources would yield the greatest improvement in outcomes. This diagnostic orientation makes it well suited to the EU context, where the governance question is precisely whether dispersed assets are being converted into coherent influence, and where the answer to that question is not self-evident from aggregate data.

The framework has acknowledged limitations that the study's authors have been explicit in recording, and intellectual honesty requires that they be noted here. Asset data proved the most difficult component to assemble comparably across jurisdictions, and incomplete asset data constrained full implementation of the three-way analysis connecting capabilities to deployment mechanisms to results in the Phase 1 study (MacDonald and Murray, 2025, Appendix B). The causal chains between specific cultural engagement activities and demonstrable diplomatic or economic outcomes are long and contested, and the indices used to assess outcomes capture observable results but provide limited insight into the mechanisms generating them. The framework was developed at national level and extending it to the EU's multi-level governance architecture introduces additional attribution challenges: when the Commission, member state cultural institutes, and regional governments are simultaneously engaged internationally, isolating the contribution of any single level of the system is methodologically difficult. As the literature review conducted in support of this paper concluded, no consensus methodology currently exists for analysing how soft power operates across nested governance structures. For policymakers who reasonably ask how the AIO framework drives choices rather than describing gaps: it identifies where the EU should invest coordination attention, align fragmented instruments, build relationship depth below contested state-to-state diplomacy, or acknowledge that credibility is currently too weak to generate claimed outcomes. The framework is therefore not primarily a measurement tool but a decision tool, focusing reform on the infrastructure dimension where EU governance is most improvable without treaty change or the political unification of assets that member states will not surrender.

3.3 Application in This Paper

This paper applies the AIO framework in two distinct but related ways. At the level of the EU as a whole, it uses the framework diagnostically to assess where the EU's international cultural relations architecture holds assets, how effectively its institutional infrastructure channels them, and where the principal gaps between the two are located. The comparative

evidence from the twenty-five jurisdiction study provides the reference points against which the EU's current model is assessed: Germany's integration of cultural, educational, and development cooperation within a shared strategic framework, achieving among the strongest outcome efficiency of any jurisdiction in the sample, is the benchmark against which the EU's fragmentation across separate institutional logics appears most clearly anomalous (MacDonald and Murray, 2025).

At the sub-national level, the paper applies the framework more tentatively. The fellowship's own research established that the AIO framework's internal logic holds when applied to regions and cities, but that applying it in practice is harder than applying it in principle: sub-national data are patchier, institutional boundaries are less legible, and attributing outcomes to specific activities is more difficult to establish. Whether the framework can generate findings that are both academically rigorous and operationally useful for regional governments remains an open question, and this paper treats it as such rather than asserting a settled answer.

A further methodological point concerns the relationship between measurement and politics. One of the fellowship's substantive findings was that the demand for measurement at different levels of the European governance architecture is shaped less by a disinterested desire for knowledge than by the institutional positions of the actors commissioning it. At the EU level, the absence of a common measurement framework reflects a deeper ambiguity about whether European international cultural relations activity constitutes a coherent collective endeavour or a loosely coordinated aggregation of member state interests. At the sub-national level, regions seek better evidence largely because they lack formal standing in soft power governance architectures rather than because they lack impact: the evidence gap is a symptom of exclusion from the architecture rather than of absence from the field. This finding has a methodological implication for the paper as a whole: it suggests that the AIO framework should be understood not only as a tool for measuring what exists but as a device for making visible what governance arrangements either enable or prevent.

4. Comparative Evidence: Governance Models, Institutional Arrangements, and Outcomes

4.1 The Principal Findings of the Twenty-Five Jurisdiction Study

The comparative study on which this paper draws examined how twenty-five jurisdictions develop and deploy soft power, assessing their performance across the assets, infrastructure, and outcomes dimensions of the AIO framework. Four findings from that study carry direct implications for EU soft power governance and are developed in the subsections that follow: the primacy of strategic coherence over resource scale; the importance of integrated ecosystems linking multiple asset domains; the centrality of credibility as the variable that most consistently distinguishes effective from ineffective systems; and the limits of the national soft power model as a template for either the EU or its regions.

4.2 Strategic Coherence Matters More Than Resource Scale

The study's headline finding is that strategic coherence (understood as the alignment of objectives, institutional mandates, and delivery) matters more than the scale of resources deployed. This finding has a direct bearing on the EU review because it challenges the assumption that more coordination, more programmes, or more funding will of themselves produce better outcomes. What the comparative evidence demonstrates is that it is the quality of the relationships between objectives, institutions, and delivery that determines performance, not the quantity of any single element.

Germany provides the most instructive case. It achieves among the strongest soft power outcomes of any jurisdiction in the study, not because it outspends its competitors, but because its three principal institutions (the Goethe-Institut, the DAAD, and the GIZ) operate under clear mandates and in close strategic alignment, integrating cultural, educational, and development cooperation within a shared framework (MacDonald and Murray, 2025). The contrast with China is instructive. China's investment in soft power infrastructure is substantially larger than Germany's on most measures of institutional and programme scale, yet the study finds that it achieves significantly weaker outcomes. The Republic of Korea demonstrates a third model: it stands out as a high-performing outlier relative to its size, channelling the commercial success of the Korean Wave through a lean state apparatus and demonstrating that the relationship between resources and results is mediated at every point by the quality of institutional design.

The implication for the EU is uncomfortable but important. The EU already commands a substantial portfolio of soft power assets; the problem is not the absence of resources but the absence of a framework capable of aligning them. A review that focuses primarily on expanding programmes or increasing budgets without addressing the coordination deficit will repeat the pattern that characterised the 2016 Joint Communication's implementation decade. The study's evidence suggests that the desired outcome of the review is 'minimum viable coherence': not a unified national-style strategy, which neither the legal framework nor the political landscape permits, but enough alignment across instruments to produce visible strategic outcomes in priority geographies. Specifically, the review should deliver an updated strategic rationale, strengthened procedural mechanisms for alignment across institutional boundaries, a clearer accountability and evaluation framework, and, critically, an explicit connection between the Joint Communication's coordination ambitions and the priority geographies where the EU's credibility and interests are most directly contested.

4.3 Integrated Ecosystems Outperform Single-Domain Approaches

A second finding of the comparative study is that integrated ecosystems linking culture, education, and development cooperation generate more resilient and durable influence than reliance on a single asset class. The AIO framework treats soft power as operating across six domains, and the study's evidence is consistent in showing that jurisdictions that develop and connect assets across multiple domains achieve better outcomes than those whose engagement is concentrated in a single area. This is not simply a matter of resource diversification: it reflects the fact that different domains reach different audiences, generate different kinds of relationships, and build different forms of credibility and trust.

This finding has a particular resonance for the EU. Its confinement of soft power coordination to the cultural domain is, when viewed against the comparative evidence, anomalous. Erasmus+ is among the EU's most powerful instruments of international engagement, yet it operates under a different institutional logic from the EEAS-coordinated cultural relations agenda. Horizon Europe, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, and the network of European University Alliances represent further assets of considerable scale that remain disconnected from the EU's formal international cultural relations framework. Evidence presented at the Brussels workshop by a European Commission official underscored the scale of the gap: global student mobility is projected to reach around eight to nine million by 2030 on leading OECD and UNESCO estimates, sixty-five European University Alliances already comprise over 600 institutions, and a Council Recommendation on Science Diplomacy has framed science explicitly as a core element of EU soft power (MacDonald, 2026). These assets exist; what is absent is the strategic alignment framework needed to recognise their contribution to a common purpose.

4.4 Credibility as the Critical Variable

The study is emphatic that credibility is the variable that most consistently distinguishes effective from ineffective soft power systems. Resource scale alone cannot guarantee influence; without credibility, the conversion of assets into outcomes is blocked at the point of reception regardless of the sophistication of the delivery infrastructure. China's substantial investment in international engagement illustrates the point: the scale of its resources and institutional presence is not in question, but the gap between investment and influence reflects a credibility deficit that institutional expansion cannot resolve. Gulf state public diplomacy faces analogous reception challenges despite considerable resources (MacDonald and Murray, 2025).

The EU's credibility proposition rests on a different but equally demanding foundation. It depends on demonstrating that multilateral cooperation works; that the EU's values of democratic pluralism, the rule of law, and respect for cultural difference are not merely proclaimed but practised; and that its international engagement is genuinely reciprocal rather than projective. This proposition acquires particular urgency in the current geopolitical environment. The Brussels workshop identified what participants termed 'dark soft power' as a reinforcing set of threats to trust-based engagement: Russian hybrid warfare extending to cognitive campaigns, political interference aligned with the current United States administration, and an emerging Silicon Valley ideological project characterised by anti-democratic commitments, all amplified by artificial intelligence (MacDonald, 2026). In this environment, soft power operates as what workshop participants described as 'slow power', dependent on presence, continuity, and reliability rather than campaign-driven initiatives. Durable city partnerships and decentralised cooperation provide a counter-model to the accelerating political and media cycles on which dark soft power depends.

The comparative evidence also identifies a dimension of the credibility question that points directly to the EU's domestic politics. The British Council's Global Perceptions survey of nearly 21,000 young people across the G20, presented at the Munich Security Conference fringe event in February 2026, found that approximately 30 per cent of young people in Europe are attracted by authoritarian models (MacDonald, 2026). The implication drawn from the comparative evidence is that the most effective response to this is not counter-

messaging but delivery on the democratic social contract. Credibility in international engagement ultimately rests on the authenticity of what is being projected, and that authenticity depends on whether European societies can demonstrate the appeal of democratic governance in practice, not merely in communication.

4.5 The Limits of the National Model

The fourth finding of the comparative study relevant to the EU context is that the national soft power model does not apply straightforwardly at either the multilateral or sub-national level, and that applying it uncritically risks generating the wrong analytical questions and therefore the wrong policy responses. At the EU level, the most significant soft power assets (including creative industries, higher education networks, cultural heritage, and development cooperation capacity) are held predominantly at the member state level rather than by EU institutions. The EU's situation is therefore structurally different from that of any of the twenty-five nation-states in the study: assets are dispersed across twenty-seven member states, infrastructure is shared among the Commission, the EEAS, national cultural institutes, and regional bodies, and attribution of outcomes to any single level of the system is correspondingly difficult (MacDonald and Murray, 2025).

This structural difference has two analytical consequences for this paper. First, it reinforces the argument that the EU should be assessed on its own terms rather than against criteria developed for nation-states. The relevant question is not whether the EU can replicate Germany's model of unified strategic management but whether its distinctive mode of coordination is optimised for the kind of entity it actually is. The EU's decentralised, plural character may itself be a soft power asset in the current geopolitical environment, projecting pluralism, diversity, and respect for cultural difference in ways that a more centralised model could not. Second, it directs attention to the infrastructure dimension of the AIO framework as the principal lever for improvement: given that assets are broadly available but dispersed, the governance question is how to design the institutional arrangements, procedural mechanisms, and evaluation frameworks that allow those assets to be channelled towards coherent strategic purposes without the structural unification that the legal, political, and institutional constraints on EU external action make impossible.

At the sub-national level, the comparative evidence from the study is thin but directionally clear: depth of engagement matters and operating beyond capital cities enhances the quality of international relationships. The study's evidence on sub-national presence suggests that regions and cities contribute to soft power outcomes in ways that aggregate national data cannot capture, but that the available data are insufficient to support confident conclusions. The implication for policy is that the EU's current framework, which neither formally recognises regional contributions nor provides mechanisms for integrating them into a common assessment of European international engagement, is operating with a systematically incomplete picture of its own assets and their deployment.

4.6 From Comparative Evidence to the EU Case

These four findings provide the analytical frame through which Section 5 assesses the 2016 Joint Communication's design and implementation record and the comparative benchmarks against which the reform arguments in Sections 6 and 7 are developed.

5. EU's Current Model: The 2016 Joint Communication, Its Implementation, and Its Limitations

5.1 The Document and Its Institutional Moment

The 2016 Joint Communication Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations (JOIN(2016) 29 final), issued jointly by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on 8 June 2016, was the most significant formal expression of EU commitment to international cultural relations prior to the adoption of the 2025 Culture Compass. The document proposed a framework organised around three strands: supporting culture as an engine for sustainable social and economic development; promoting culture and intercultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations; and reinforcing cooperation on cultural heritage. It proposed a new cooperative model involving EU Delegations, national cultural institutes through the EUNIC network, and a newly established Cultural Diplomacy Platform (European Commission and EEAS, 2016).

The document arrived at a specific institutional moment that shaped both its ambitions and its limitations. The EEAS, established under the Lisbon Treaty in 2011, was still consolidating its cultural diplomacy capacity. High Representative Federica Mogherini had made international cultural relations one of her personal priorities and described Europe as a 'cultural superpower' at the document's launch. The simultaneous publication of the EU Global Strategy provided the broader foreign policy framework, introducing 'principled pragmatism' and placing strategic autonomy at the centre of EU external action. Both documents reflected an optimism about EU external ambition that subsequent events did not fully vindicate. The Council Conclusions of June 2017 on an EU Strategic Approach to International Cultural Relations endorsed the Joint Communication's framework, and the European Parliament's resolution of July 2017 broadly welcomed it while calling for stronger implementation machinery, an endorsement whose durability proved greater than the operational progress that followed (Council of the European Union, 2017; European Parliament, 2017).

A preliminary observation on terminology is necessary because it is substantively important. The 2016 document is correctly described as a Joint Communication rather than a strategy: it is a policy paper setting out intentions and a framework for action, not a binding commitment with dedicated implementation machinery or budget lines. The document's own title, which described it as 'Towards an EU Strategy', acknowledged this explicitly. Most evaluators have judged that the strategy it pointed towards was never fully arrived at in the nine years before it was superseded by the Culture Compass, and this foundational design choice accounts for several of the most persistent weaknesses in its implementation record.

5.2 Conceptual Contributions

Before addressing the implementation failures, it is important to acknowledge what the 2016 Joint Communication genuinely achieved at the conceptual and institutional level, since the review process now underway inherits those achievements and should build on rather than discard them.

The document's most significant conceptual contribution was the adoption of a cultural relations rather than cultural diplomacy vocabulary, reflecting a deliberate normative choice in favour of reciprocal, people-to-people, co-created engagement rather than state-directed projection of European culture. This distinction, which had been argued for by civil society and practitioner communities over the preceding decade and was articulated influentially in the 2014 Preparatory Action report *Culture in EU External Relations: Engaging the World* (European Commission, 2014), embedded itself in subsequent policy and has been carried forward into the 2025 Culture Compass. As Badell (2021) argued, this represented a genuine advance in normative clarity, even where implementation fell short of the document's stated model. The Joint Communication's emphasis on co-creation with partner country actors, on people-to-people rather than showcase approaches, and on the equal dignity of partner cultures provides the normative foundation on which any credible EU international cultural relations framework must continue to rest, a foundation confirmed by the comparative evidence, which demonstrates consistently that systems built on credibility, authenticity, and reciprocity outperform those oriented towards projection.

The document also created the institutional basis for a more formalised EU approach by proposing the EUNIC-EEAS-Commission relationship that was formalised in the 2017 Administrative Arrangement, and by establishing the Cultural Diplomacy Platform as a project-based implementation vehicle. In doing so, it created a shared vocabulary, a set of institutional relationships, and a programme of pilot activities that accumulated, over nine years, sufficient evidence to inform the more substantial policy reset represented by the Culture Compass.

5.3 The Three Structural Problems

The academic literature converges on three structural problems that consistently limited the 2016 Joint Communication's implementation effectiveness. Higgott (2019) provides the most analytically rigorous account of these constraints, identifying them as structural, ideational, and agential in character and as generating, in operational terms, a competence problem, a coordination problem, and a funding problem. These are adopted here as the organising framework for the implementation assessment.

The competence problem is the most fundamental. Culture is designated a supporting competence under Article 6 TFEU, meaning that the EU can only support, coordinate, or supplement member state actions rather than legislate or adopt binding measures. This constraint also explains the limits of EU influence over the national institutes themselves: bodies such as the Goethe-Institut and the DAAD operate under national mandates and at arm's length from government, and the EU exercises no direct authority over them, engaging them only through voluntary coordination mechanisms such as EUNIC. Germany's strong performance is therefore a product of coordination at the national level rather than of EU direction, which reinforces this paper's argument that the EU's available lever is strategic alignment rather than control. This constraint was not created by the 2016 Joint

Communication and cannot be resolved by it; it reflects a settled political settlement in which member states guard their cultural sovereignty. Its practical consequence is that EU-level international cultural relations is permanently dependent on member state willingness to coordinate, and that the leverage available to EU institutions to ensure coherent delivery is limited. Carta (2019) identifies this as the deepest structural constraint on the development of EU cultural diplomacy, and it remains unchanged in the transition to the Culture Compass. The implication for the current review is not that this constraint can be overcome but that the framework for coordination must be designed around it rather than attempting to circumvent it.

The coordination problem operated on multiple dimensions simultaneously. The exclusion of DG DEVCO and DG NEAR from the drafting of the 2016 Joint Communication created a deficit from the outset that was never adequately repaired: the document's cultural relations framing and development cooperation programming remained institutionally disconnected throughout, as Helly and Rocca (2020) documented. The 2017 Administrative Arrangement formalised the EUNIC-EEAS relationship but was not legally binding, contained no dedicated budget, and depended entirely on individual EU Delegations and EUNIC cluster members. The 2018 audit of EUNIC-EU Delegation cooperation found genuine progress alongside persistent challenges: uneven engagement from EU Delegations lacking specialist cultural staff, capacity asymmetries between EUNIC members, and difficulties translating the framework into joint projects (EUNIC and EEAS, 2018). That the 2019 Joint Guidelines required detailed guidance on basic coordination procedures confirms that cooperation was not occurring naturally at the operational level. The coordination problem also extended inward to the tension between the document's normative model (genuinely relational, reciprocal, and co-created) and the institutional incentives of the EEAS and member state cultural institutes, which tend towards diplomatic instrumentalisation and national projection. This tension was identified by workshop participants at the Brussels workshop as unresolved in practice (MacDonald, 2026), and Kaunert and Della Giovanna (2022) have documented how the EU-ACP cultural cooperation framework reproduced power asymmetries despite its stated commitments to equal partnership.

The funding problem was perhaps the most operationally consequential of the three. The absence of a dedicated budget line meant that programming remained fragmented across Creative Europe, the Partnership Instrument, the European Development Fund, Horizon Europe, and Erasmus+, making it impossible to establish how much the EU spent on international cultural relations and driving programming by the logic of individual instruments rather than the Joint Communication's strategic framework. Civil society assessments consistently identified this as the principal operational gap throughout the implementation period (Culture Action Europe, 2025).

5.4 Programmatic Outputs and the Limits of Piloting

The most substantial programmatic output of the implementation period was the European Spaces of Culture initiative, a Preparatory Action initiated by the European Parliament and implemented through EUNIC in three phases between 2019 and 2023. Twenty-five pilot projects were implemented across more than twenty countries, involving over eighty local partners and seventeen EU Delegations. The programme's commitment to the co-creation model, its monitoring and evaluation toolkit, and its demonstrated capacity to

build trust at local level were genuine achievements. Its limitations were equally instructive. Individual project awards of up to sixty thousand euros represent a modest investment relative to the Joint Communication's ambitions, the programme depended on Preparatory Action funding rather than a structural budget line, and no clear pathways from pilot to scale were established (EUNIC, 2019-2023). European Spaces of Culture is, in this sense, an emblem of the implementation period as a whole: genuinely innovative in its approach and genuinely constrained in its reach.

5.5 Formal Evaluations and Their Findings

The 2022 EPRS European Implementation Assessment, authored by Serodes and commissioned by the Parliament's Ex-Post Evaluation Unit, provides the most systematic formal assessment of the implementation record (Serodes, 2022). Assessed against the Joint Communication's three original strands, Serodes found a pattern of genuine but limited progress in each: cultural cooperation with third countries had expanded but the prioritisation of culture as a foreign policy tool had inadvertently marginalised sustainable development dimensions; intercultural dialogue programming had engaged genuinely but outcomes remained largely undemonstrated; and heritage cooperation had produced the most concrete and measurable outputs, particularly through the UNESCO partnership. The most significant shortcoming identified was the systematic failure of monitoring and evaluation: after six years of implementation, it was not possible to state with precision what had been achieved, at what cost, or through what mechanisms. The 2016 Joint Communication made no serious provision for monitoring and evaluation, an absence that the 2016 Goethe-Institut practitioner guide *Culture Works* had already identified as the most significant operational gap in comparable cultural relations systems (Goethe-Institut, 2016). The subsequent European Parliament implementation report and resolution of December 2022 drew on Serodes' findings in calling for updated strategic objectives, strengthened evaluation, dedicated funding, and specialist cultural capacity in EU Delegations.

5.6 The Culture Compass: Continuity and Change

The 2025 Culture Compass frames itself as replacing and updating the 2016 Joint Communication, committing explicitly to revising it under the Compass's fourth strategic priority. It is a more overtly strategic document with a clearer political mandate, is designed to guide cultural investment across the forthcoming 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework, acknowledges the geopolitical context explicitly, and proposes specific flagship actions rather than aspirational frameworks. In these respects, it represents a genuine advance on its predecessor. Its fourth strategic priority, strengthening international cultural relations and partnerships, commits to updating the 2016 Joint Communication and launching a new phase of the Cultural Relations Platform, acknowledging implicitly that the original document's implementation fell short of its stated ambitions (European Commission, 2025a).

However, the Culture Compass also reproduces several of the 2016 document's structural limitations. The competence constraint is unchanged. The coordination problem is not structurally resolved: the Compass proposes a structured dialogue and a Team Europe approach for culture specifically, which the updated Joint Communication has the opportunity to give operational content through the alignment mechanisms proposed in Section 6, but

does not establish a single institutional home for EU cultural diplomacy. The funding problem is partially addressed by the MFF anchor but the absence of a dedicated budget line for international cultural relations remains. As civil society assessors immediately noted, the Compass is again not itself the binding strategy that evaluators and practitioners have consistently called for; it is a strategic framework document that proposes to develop that strategy, and in doing so it repeats the structural pattern of 2016 (Culture Action Europe, 2025). The EPRS briefing of January 2026 offers a measured early assessment, noting the Compass's advances while recognising the continuities that limit its transformative potential (European Parliament Think Tank, 2026). Whether the updated Joint Communication whose development the Compass commits to will break the pattern (by arriving with binding commitments, dedicated resources, implementation machinery, and evaluation frameworks) is the central institutional question that the current review must answer.

The urgency of that question is compounded by the Commission's parallel proposal for AgoraEU (COM(2025) 550), which would consolidate Creative Europe's Culture and MEDIA strands with the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme under a single funding envelope of approximately €7.6 to €8.6 billion for 2028 to 2034, sitting alongside a reinforced Erasmus+ within the 'Competitiveness, Prosperity and Security' heading of the next MFF. The legislative process for AgoraEU is already well advanced in the European Parliament's Committee for Education and Culture; and, as presently drafted, the emerging text contains little substantive engagement with international cultural relations. Only Amendment 45 faintly echoes the alignment arguments advanced in this paper. A review of the Joint Communication that fails to connect its conclusions to the AgoraEU legislative process risks arriving too late to shape the very programme that will govern EU international cultural relations funding for the following seven years (European Commission, 2025b).

6. Strategic Conversion Argument: Aligning EU Soft Power Assets with Geostategic Purpose

6.1 The Strategic Conversion Problem

The EU's soft power challenge is not primarily a communications problem or a cultural-programming problem. It is a strategic conversion problem: the Union holds major assets in education, research, culture, development finance, regional networks, and democratic governance, but lacks the machinery to convert those assets into trusted political relationships in the geographies where its security, competitiveness, and credibility are most directly contested: Global Gateway in Africa, enlargement in the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova, science and research partnerships in an era of technology competition, and the fragile but consequential relationship with Türkiye. The argument developed in this section is that the EU's confinement of its international cultural relations coordination framework to the cultural domain is anomalous when assessed against both the comparative evidence from the twenty-five-jurisdiction study and the EU's own programme

portfolio. This is not an argument for structural unification: the legal, institutional, and political constraints documented in Section 5 make a single supranational strategy for EU soft power impossible to deliver, and the attempt to create one would risk lowest-common-denominator outcomes that serve no one's interests. The argument is rather for strategic alignment, understood as the development of shared geographic priorities, joint programming mechanisms, and common evaluation frameworks that allow the EU's dispersed instruments to be recognised as contributing to coherent international purposes without requiring those instruments to be absorbed into a single institutional home. The purpose of extension, to use the older vocabulary, is not to widen cultural policy for its own sake; it is to solve the conversion problem by building the relationship architecture that the EU's current framework cannot provide.

The AIO framework's evidence is unambiguous on this point. Jurisdictions that rely on a single asset class for international engagement achieve less resilient influence than those that develop and connect assets across multiple domains. The framework identifies six domains of soft power (namely language, culture, education, science and innovation, sport, and heritage) and the comparative study found that the most effective systems, including Germany's integration of cultural, educational, and development cooperation, achieve outcomes through precisely the kind of cross-domain coherence that the EU's current architecture systematically prevents (MacDonald and Murray, 2025). The EU already possesses significant assets in each of these domains. What it currently lacks is a framework that recognises their collective contribution to international influence, coordinates their deployment around shared strategic purposes, and evaluates their combined impact in a way that makes the whole visible rather than only its fragmented parts.

6.2 Erasmus+ and the Education Dimension

Erasmus+ is among the most powerful and best-recognised instruments of EU international engagement. Established in 1987, it has grown from a European student exchange programme into a comprehensive initiative covering higher education, vocational training, schools, youth work, and sport. Its international reach extends well beyond the EU's borders: Erasmus Mundus, the international credit mobility component, and the Capacity Building in Higher Education programme together engage partners in every region of the world. Workshop testimony from a European Commission official provided evidence of undercoordinated assets at considerable scale: global student mobility is projected to reach around eight to nine million by 2030 on leading OECD and UNESCO estimates, sixty-five European University Alliances already comprise over 600 institutions, and a new Council Recommendation on Science Diplomacy has framed science explicitly as a core element of EU soft power (MacDonald, 2026).

The soft power significance of Erasmus+ is well established in the academic literature. Wojciuk, Michalska, and Stormowska (2015) applied Nye's framework directly to EU educational exchange programmes, demonstrating how student mobility builds the people-to-people networks, mutual understanding, and shared professional relationships through which attraction and influence operate over time. The Erasmus programme's particular strength as a soft power instrument lies in its long-term character: alumni networks constitute durable relational assets that continue to generate influence long after individual exchange periods have ended. Papatsiba's (2006) critical analysis acknowledges genuine

achievements while questioning whether mobility reliably produces the soft power outcomes routinely attributed to it; both perspectives confirm that Erasmus+ operates in precisely the domain where the AIO framework identifies the most durable forms of influence.

The anomaly is that Erasmus+ operates under a fundamentally different institutional logic from the EEAS-coordinated cultural relations agenda. Its budget sits with DG EAC, its strategic priorities are shaped by education and training policy rather than foreign policy, and its international dimension has grown, in a characteristically EU fashion, through incremental programme expansion rather than through deliberate integration into a coherent soft power strategy. The result is that the EU's most effective relationship-building instrument and its formal international cultural relations framework are institutionally disconnected, pull against each other in bureaucratic processes, and cannot be jointly assessed against common strategic outcomes. Closing this gap does not require merging the two institutional architectures; it requires a coordination mechanism (perhaps a shared geographic priority framework and a common alumni engagement strategy) that allows their combined impact to be understood and amplified.

6.3 Horizon Europe, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, and Science Diplomacy

The case for including science and research within the scope of EU soft power coordination is if anything stronger than the case for education. Horizon Europe, as the world's largest publicly funded research and innovation programme, generates partnerships and relationships of intellectual and scientific collaboration that are among the deepest forms of international engagement available to any actor. Science diplomacy operates through mechanisms (shared inquiry, common methodology, and the collegial culture of international research communities) that are by their nature reciprocal and trust-building rather than projective, making them intrinsically well-suited to the cultural relations model the EU has committed to.

The Council Recommendation on Science Diplomacy, noted above as cited by Commission officials at the Brussels workshop (MacDonald, 2026), represents an important formal recognition of this dimension of EU external action. The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, which fund researcher mobility across national boundaries, create precisely the kind of sustained, high-trust, person-to-person networks that the comparative evidence identifies as the most durable currency of soft power.

The absence of a framework linking Horizon Europe and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions to the EU's international cultural relations agenda is therefore not simply a bureaucratic inconvenience: it is a structural failure to recognise assets whose value in terms of international influence is demonstrably large. Addressing it requires neither that Horizon Europe be subordinated to foreign policy objectives, which would undermine the scientific integrity and credibility that are its principal soft power asset, nor that a new institutional body be created to sit above the existing ones. It requires a shared strategic narrative that recognises the contribution of science and research to European international engagement, and procedural mechanisms through which the EEAS, DG RTD, and DG EAC can identify common geographic priorities and assess their combined contribution to European soft power goals.

6.4 Creative Europe and the Cultural and Creative Industries

Creative Europe, the EU's principal instrument for supporting the cultural and creative sectors, has an explicit international dimension through its Culture strand, which funds international co-productions, touring, and cross-border cultural cooperation. The cultural and creative industries are among Europe's most visible and internationally appreciated assets: European cinema, music, design, fashion, and architecture contribute to perceptions of European cultural vitality in ways that no diplomatic programme could replicate. The AIO framework's culture domain captures these assets, and the comparative evidence confirms that cultural industries contribute to soft power outcomes when they are genuinely attractive rather than state-directed in their content and orientation.

The relationship between Creative Europe and the EU's international cultural relations framework is more developed than the equivalent relationships with Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, partly because Creative Europe sits closer institutionally to DG EAC and the cultural relations machinery. Nevertheless, the programme's international dimension remains primarily reactive rather than strategically oriented: it funds international activity when cultural organisations seek it rather than directing funding towards geographic or thematic priorities aligned with EU external action goals. The potential for greater alignment, through shared priority markets for cultural co-production and touring, and through systematic connection between Creative Europe's international activities and the EUNIC network's relationship-building infrastructure, remains largely untapped.

The implications of the AgoraEU consolidation described in Section 5 for the argument advanced here are direct. By absorbing Creative Europe into a programme that also encompasses CERV, the new legislative architecture creates a context whose relationship to the EU's external engagement framework will need to be explicitly defined in the updated Joint Communication. The risk, already visible in the parliamentary process, is that it will not be: if the updated Joint Communication fails to specify how AgoraEU's Culture strand connects to EU external engagement goals, the reactive and strategically unanchored character of Creative Europe's international dimension will be reproduced, by default, in its successor programme.

6.5 Development Cooperation and the Global Gateway

The relationship between EU development cooperation and EU international cultural relations is one of the implementation record's most persistent and consequential gaps, identified as such from the earliest assessments of the 2016 Joint Communication. The exclusion of DG DEVCO from the drafting of that document, noted in Section 5, meant that EU development cooperation, which operates at scale in partner countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America and builds relationships of the depth and longevity that the AIO framework identifies as key to converting assets into outcomes, was never integrated into the EU's cultural relations framework.

Global Gateway is the decisive stress test for EU soft power in the 2020s, and the paper's argument about strategic conversion stands or falls on whether it can pass that test. Launched in 2021 as the EU's explicit response to China's Belt and Road Initiative, Global Gateway has grown rapidly: the majority of its flagship projects (estimates suggest over 130 of some 260 total flagship projects) are located in Africa, and the May 2025 AU-EU factsheet frames the initiative as direct competition with Chinese infrastructure diplomacy

across transport, digital infrastructure, health, energy, and agriculture (European Commission, 2025c). The EU-Africa Global Gateway Investment Package promises €150 billion across energy, transport, digital, health, education, science, raw materials, and value chains, and the 3rd AU-EU Ministerial Meeting in May 2025 focused on stocktaking the Joint Vision for 2030 and preparing for the 7th AU-EU Summit, with a formal agenda spanning trade, AfCFTA, peace and security, climate, education, and multilateral reform. The stakes are substantial, and so are the risks. The central risk is this: Global Gateway generates soft power only if partner countries experience it as co-owned development, not as rebranded European industrial policy or strategic de-risking dressed in partnership language. Independent assessors have documented this tension directly, observing a shift from a development-centric approach towards a strategic investment tool serving EU economic, geopolitical, and security interests while formally preserving SDG and Paris Agreement commitments (ECDPM, 2025). Civil society organisations criticised the May 2025 AU-EU Ministerial process for giving youth and civil society only a marginal side-event role, with late invitations, weak transparency, and symbolic rather than substantive access to ministers. The Committee of the Regions' December 2025 opinion on the Global Gateway, which calls for local and regional governments to be recognised as partners in shaping, implementing, and monitoring EU external investment (European Committee of the Regions, 2025), identifies the same problem from a different angle. Development cooperation is most accurately described not as a form of international cultural relations but as credibility infrastructure: where Global Gateway delivers partner-defined economic value, local capability, skills, and institutional trust, it strengthens EU soft power; where it is perceived as European supply-chain security or market access wrapped in partnership language, it damages it. The updated Joint Communication should therefore require that every Global Gateway flagship in politically contested regions include a relationship-capital component: skills partnerships, research cooperation, cultural and civic participation, sub-national engagement, and partner-defined evaluation metrics, and should treat AU-EU delivery as a governance challenge whose credibility depends on who defines priorities, who monitors implementation, and who can hold the partnership accountable.

6.6 Enlargement as the EU's Primary Soft Power Instrument

Enlargement is arguably the EU's most consequential soft power instrument: it creates deep institutional, legal, and cultural alignment at scale and over time in ways that no programme of cultural relations, however well funded, can replicate. The 2025 Enlargement Package, published in November 2025, documented substantive progress towards EU membership for Ukraine, Moldova, the Western Balkans, and Georgia. The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans explicitly links economic integration to the accession process. The European Parliament's 2026 enlargement strategy report frames the current acceleration as geopolitical repositioning, recognising that the enlargement pipeline is not merely a technical process but a strategic instrument for anchoring neighbouring societies within the EU's normative and institutional order at a moment when the alternative - Russian, Chinese, or authoritarian attraction - is more actively promoted than at any point since the EU's eastern enlargement.

The relevance of enlargement to the argument of this paper is direct. The Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova are precisely the geographies where the education, culture, science,

and development cooperation coordination argument advanced in this section is most operationally relevant. EU Delegation presence, Erasmus+ partnerships, Horizon Europe integration, cultural relations programming, and development cooperation are all active in these countries; yet the strategic alignment framework needed to recognise their combined contribution to a coherent accession-support agenda largely does not exist. DG NEAR's formal responsibilities encompass this space, but the coordination deficit between DG NEAR, DG EAC, DG RTD, and the EEAS in enlargement contexts reproduces, in its most politically urgent theatre, the same fragmentation the paper documents for EU external cultural relations as a whole. The updated Joint Communication has an opportunity to address this gap directly by naming enlargement geographies as priority theatres for the strategic alignment mechanisms it proposes, and by establishing procedural links between the Joint Communication's coordination architecture and the enlargement process itself. Failing to do so would be to produce a document that is institutionally isolated from the EU's most consequential current external action.

This soft power value is, however, conditional rather than automatic. Enlargement attracts only insofar as the EU upholds the values it claims to transmit, and the credibility of the accession offer is weakened both by rule-of-law backsliding within existing member states and by the perception that conditionality is applied unevenly. The same gap between normative rhetoric and operational conduct that Sjursen (2006) identified at the level of EU foreign policy applies with particular force to enlargement: if accession ceases to guarantee the consistent practice of democratic and rule-of-law norms, the instrument that most distinguishes European soft power loses precisely the credibility on which its attraction depends."

6.7 Geographical Indications: An Illustrative Case

The case for extending the scope of EU soft power coordination can be illustrated through a domain that sits at an unexpected intersection of EU policy competence and international influence: food and geographical indications. The EU's system of geographical indications (protecting designations such as Champagne or Parmigiano Reggiano, is among the most developed and internationally recognised frameworks of its kind in the world. It operates at the intersection of cultural identity, agricultural policy, trade, and international relations, providing a model of how the EU can exercise influence through regulatory and normative standards that others voluntarily adopt (Lavanex and Schimmelfennig, 2009). It is a case where EU soft power is being generated without any recognition within the EU's formal international cultural relations framework; and therefore, without any strategic attempt to connect, amplify, or direct it. That is precisely the coordination failure the scope extension argument seeks to remedy.

6.8 The Principles of Strategic Alignment

The preceding analysis of individual programmes points towards three operational principles for scope extension that are consistent with the legal, institutional, and political constraints on EU action documented in Section 5.

The first is that extension should proceed through strategic alignment rather than structural unification: shared geographic priority frameworks, joint assessment exercises, and common alumni engagement strategies that do not require treaty change, institutional

merger, or a single supranational strategy. The second is that strategic alignment must be grounded in what the EU can genuinely achieve that member states individually cannot. Its comparative advantage lies in bringing together resources, networks, and relationships across twenty-seven member states in ways that generate influence none could achieve alone; alignment mechanisms should realise this advantage rather than simply aggregate what member states are already doing. The third is that any extended framework must invest in the evidence base needed to demonstrate its value. Without agreed metrics, common baselines, and shared evaluation frameworks, it will be impossible to show that an extended and aligned approach generates better outcomes than the fragmented status quo. Investment in measurement infrastructure should be central to the updated strategy's operational architecture, recognising, as the AIO framework does, that measurement is as much a political as a technical challenge.

7. The Regional Dimension: European Regions and the Future of EU Soft Power

7.1 Regions as Geostrategic Delivery Capacity

The argument that European regions are active international actors rather than passive beneficiaries of national or supranational policy is no longer novel in the academic literature. As Section 2 established, the paradiplomacy literature from Soldatos (1990) and Hocking (1993) onwards, and the comparative constitutional analysis of European multi-level governance developed by scholars including Skoutaris (2012), has progressively demonstrated that the traditional idea of a state monopoly over foreign affairs does not accurately describe the contemporary European governance landscape. European regions with strong constitutional competences, including the German Länder, the Belgian Communities and Regions, the Spanish Autonomous Communities, and the devolved administrations of the United Kingdom (when it was a member of the EU, and continuing today), have developed substantial international presences grounded in constitutionally recognised competences to engage internationally in areas within their jurisdiction. Over 250 regional representation offices operate in Brussels (Skoutaris, 2012), and networks such as the Pact of Free Cities and the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy have demonstrated that sub-national actors can organise collective international action that is neither sanctioned nor directed by member state governments.

Regions and cities are not only overlooked contributors to EU soft power. They are part of the EU's geostrategic delivery capacity: they host universities, vocational systems, innovation clusters, cultural institutions, city partnerships, diaspora networks, climate expertise, and industrial ecosystems that can make EU external engagement tangible in partner societies in ways that Brussels-centred diplomacy cannot. This point connects directly to the Global Gateway and enlargement arguments of Section 6: regions can be delivery partners in skills, climate, vocational education, city diplomacy, and industrial partnerships, precisely the domains where EU external engagement needs depth, continuity, and institutional presence beyond the capital city level. What is less well established, and what this section addresses, is how this reality of regional international engagement connects to the

EU's framework for soft power coordination, what it implies for the scope and design of that framework, and what the AIO analytical tool can and cannot reveal about regional contributions to European international influence. The section draws primarily on the NRW case as developed through the fellowship's research programme and the Brussels workshop of March 2026, and supplements this with observations from the comparative literature on European regional diplomacy where those observations are supported by evidence in the project's source base.

7.2 The Limits of the National Soft Power Model at Regional Level

The fellowship's most significant theoretical finding on the regional dimension was also its most uncomfortable one: the concept of soft power, as developed for and applied to nation-states, may not travel well below the state level. Workshop discussions and the AIA NRW colloquium raised persistent questions about whether the national framework applies to regions such as NRW, Scotland, Catalonia, or Flanders, which engage internationally in ways that are more relational than broadcast, more networked than hierarchical, and more focused on specific policy challenges (such as climate action, innovation ecosystems, and higher education partnerships) than on projecting a general image of the kind that national soft power frameworks typically envisage (MacDonald, 2026).

This observation has methodological and policy consequences that are more significant than they might initially appear. If the national soft power model generates the wrong analytical questions at the regional level, then applying national measurement frameworks to regional engagement risks generating not simply incomplete but actively misleading evidence. The regional indices developed by the British Council in Scotland and Wales, which applied a modified version of the Soft Power 30 framework to sub-national contexts, represent an important methodological step, but they inherit the assumptions of the national model and require scrutiny on precisely those points where regional engagement differs most from its national equivalent (British Council Scotland, 2020; British Council Wales, 2018). Criekemans' (2010) comparative study of Quebec, Scotland, Bavaria, Catalonia, Wallonia, and Flanders identified significant variation in the nature, intensity, and legal basis of regional international engagement across these cases, suggesting that a single measurement framework applied uniformly across European regions would flatten differences that are analytically and politically important. The implication for the discussion paper's argument is not that soft power theory is inapplicable to regions but that it requires fundamental modification, and that the conceptual vocabulary of national soft power projection may need to be supplemented by or replaced with vocabulary better suited to what regional engagement actually is: relational, networked, policy-grounded, and concerned primarily with building the coalitions and partnerships through which specific governance challenges are addressed.

7.3 Applying the AIO Framework at Regional Level: Methodological Assessment

The AIO framework holds logically when applied to regions and cities: every sub-national actor possesses assets, deploys them through institutional infrastructure, and generates outcomes. The methodological challenges arise in practice rather than in principle. Sub-national data are patchier and less comparable than national equivalents, institutional boundaries are less legible, causal chains between specific cultural or educational activities

and demonstrable diplomatic or economic outcomes are longer and more contested, and the attribution of outcomes to regional rather than national activity is frequently impossible to establish from available data (MacDonald, 2026).

The infrastructure dimension is the most analytically tractable at regional level, partly because institutional presence is more directly observable than either assets or outcomes. The AIO study's Phase 1 research achieved its greatest depth in the infrastructure dimension at national level, systematically documenting institutional locations across sending countries and receiving territories; the same approach is in principle applicable at regional level, though sub-national data on institutional footprint are substantially patchier than their national equivalents (MacDonald and Murray, 2025). The asset dimension presents the most significant challenges, because the assets that matter most for regional engagement (including university research rankings, cultural institutions, innovation ecosystems, and diaspora networks) intersect with national-level assets in ways that make attribution to the regional level difficult without detailed primary data collection. The outcomes dimension is methodologically the hardest of the three: outcome measures developed for national soft power are typically national in their data collection, making it impossible to disaggregate regional contributions from the national totals in which they are embedded.

These methodological challenges do not invalidate the AIO framework as an analytical tool for regional soft power; they indicate that applying it rigorously at regional level requires more extensive primary research than was possible within the fellowship period, and that the data infrastructure for regional soft power assessment across European jurisdictions currently does not exist at the scale needed to support systematic comparative analysis. The forthcoming Horizon Europe consortium on soft power in transactional times, whose architecture was developed through the fellowship's programme, is explicitly designed to address this gap, with a dedicated stream on empirical measurement and the AIO framework that will include sub-national and city-level applications (MacDonald, 2026).

7.4 NRW as Primary Case: Assets, Infrastructure, and the Governance Gap

North Rhine-Westphalia is Germany's most populous Bundesland and one of the largest regional economies in the EU, with a population approaching eighteen million. Its international assets are substantial: a dense university landscape including institutions of international research standing, an innovation ecosystem of significant scale anchored in the Rhine-Ruhr metropolitan region, cultural institutions of European and global reach including museum complexes, opera houses, and the network of major cultural festivals associated with cities including Cologne, Düsseldorf, and Bonn, and a diaspora and migration history that has produced extensive international networks across Southern Europe, Turkey, and beyond. Its institutional infrastructure for international engagement includes a Representation in Brussels, bilateral partnerships with regions and cities across multiple continents, and a network of cultural and educational relationships maintained through the DAAD, the Goethe-Institut, and NRW's own universities and cultural bodies.

Applied diagnostically, the AIO framework reveals a characteristic pattern that the fellowship found replicated across European regions more broadly. Assets are substantial and, in many cases, internationally significant. Infrastructure exists but is fragmented across multiple institutional actors without a shared strategic framework: NRW's universities,

cultural institutions, innovation bodies, and the NRW Representation operate internationally under distinct mandates that are not aligned around common geographic priorities or common outcome objectives. And outcomes are largely invisible to the governance system because no shared measurement framework exists to aggregate and assess what NRW's international engagement collectively achieves.

The governance gap is most clearly illustrated by the exclusion of NRW, despite its scale and institutional capacity, from relevant Commission working groups on international cultural relations, because member state representatives block regional participation (MacDonald, 2026). This exclusion is not incidental: it reflects a structural feature of EU governance in which member states retain authority over external relations even in domains where the relevant competences and assets are held at the regional level. The result is that NRW's universities contribute to Horizon Europe consortia, its cultural institutions participate in EUNIC-related activities, its cities maintain climate partnerships with counterparts across the world, and its development cooperation bodies engage in programmes aligned with EU external priorities; all without any formal mechanism through which these contributions are recognised as constituting a coherent regional soft power portfolio or are aligned with EU international cultural relations goals. The AIO framework makes this invisible architecture visible; the question the review must address is whether the updated Joint Communication creates the mechanisms needed to connect it to a shared strategic purpose.

7.5 The Comparative Picture: Other European Regional Cases

The Brussels workshop drew participants from multiple European regional contexts alongside NRW, and the comparative picture that emerged confirms the general pattern identified through the AIO analysis while highlighting significant variation in how different constitutional and political contexts shape regional engagement.

Scotland provides a well-documented case of deliberate investment in regional soft power capacity. As a devolved nation no longer part of the EU following Brexit, its approach nonetheless developed substantially within the EU framework. The British Council Scotland's perceptions research (2020) found that Scotland's strongest soft power assets lie in its higher education sector, its enterprise environment, and its digital infrastructure, while its engagement infrastructure underperforms relative to comparable European regions including Catalonia, Flanders, and Quebec. As the Brussels workshop discussions noted, Scotland's approach is more relational and more issue-focused than a national soft power model would predict, anchoring international engagement in specific policy commitments rather than image projection (MacDonald, 2026).

Catalonia's case illustrates a different and more politically uncomfortable dimension of the regional soft power picture, one that the paper cannot avoid addressing directly. Its international engagement is conducted through DIPLOCAT, a consortium of public institutions and civil society organisations, and has been significantly complicated by the political contestation around the independence movement of 2017 and its aftermath. Crikemans (2010) identified Catalonia as one of the most internationally active European regions, with a significant overseas representation network and active involvement in regional networks. The DIPLOCAT Strategic Plan for 2023-2026 articulates an approach to

international engagement grounded in dialogue, projection, and capacity-building (DIPLO-CAT, 2023). The Catalan case raises a question: how does the argument for recognising regions as strategic actors in EU external relations work when those regions are themselves challenging the sovereignty of the member state whose external relations they would be joining? The answer this paper advances is that the Catalan case illustrates a boundary condition rather than a counter-argument. The argument for regional participation in EU soft power governance is grounded in constitutional competence, governance capacity, and demonstrable soft power assets, not in aspirational sovereignty claims. It does not require the EU to adjudicate contested territorial questions; it requires the EU to engage regions through mechanisms designed for actors with recognised constitutional standing and stable institutional mandates. The Catalan case is instructive precisely because it shows what happens when those conditions are absent: international engagement becomes instrumentalised in constitutional conflict, credibility suffers, and the relational depth that makes regional engagement valuable is compromised by political contestation at the member state level.

Flanders offers a third model. Its constitutional settlement grants the Communities and Regions the most extensive external relations powers of any European sub-state entities, allowing Flanders to conclude international treaties in areas within its competence without federal supervision. Its international engagement is systematic, reflects a clear strategic framework maintained by Flanders Investment and Trade and the Flemish cultural diplomacy machinery, and operates across trade, investment, cultural exchange, and development cooperation in ways that begin to approximate the integrated ecosystem model the AIO framework identifies as characteristic of effective national-level soft power systems (Skoutaris, 2012).

The variation across these cases reflects differences in constitutional settlement, political context, resource levels, and strategic choices that make comparative generalisation difficult. What they share is the pattern identified by the AIO framework: assets are available, infrastructure exists but is fragmented, and outcomes are invisible to governance systems at both regional and EU levels because no shared framework for recognition or assessment exists.

7.6 The Evidence Gap as a Political Problem

One of the fellowship's most consequential findings is that the evidence gap in sub-national diplomacy is a political problem rather than a technical one. Regions seek better evidence largely because they lack formal standing in soft power governance architectures rather than because they lack impact: the evidence gap is a symptom of exclusion from the architecture, and formal recognition of the kind proposed in the Committee of the Regions' December 2025 Global Gateway opinion would change the nature of the measurement question fundamentally (MacDonald, 2026). This finding inverts the conventional logic of evidence-based policy, in which better measurement is assumed to precede and enable better governance. At the sub-national level, the direction of causality runs the other way: it is formal recognition in the governance architecture that creates the incentive structures and institutional relationships through which useful measurement becomes both politically possible and practically achievable.

The implication for the updated Joint Communication is direct. Investing in measurement frameworks for sub-national soft power before addressing the governance architecture that would make that measurement serve a purpose is to mistake the technical for the political. The priority is formal recognition of regions as strategic actors in EU external relations, through the mechanisms of active subsidiarity and structured dialogue that the Committee of the Regions has called for, and through barrier removal in Commission working groups. Better data collection is the appropriate second step, once the architecture within which data would be used has been established.

7.7 Three Roles for Regions, and the Logic of Reciprocity

A qualification is necessary before setting out those roles. Not all European regions are equally capable. The EU's NUTS2 classification encompasses over 280 regions that differ enormously in population, economic weight, institutional capacity, and constitutional authority; a sparsely populated region with a thin institutional landscape is not positioned to act as a delivery partner or strategic actor in the way that NRW, Flanders, or Scotland is. The argument is for differentiated mechanisms that engage regions which genuinely possess assets, infrastructure, and governance capacity, while avoiding coordination burdens that outweigh benefits for those that do not. Selectivity is not a compromise of the principle but a condition of its operational credibility. The following tripartite account of regional roles was developed in the companion policy brief and at the Brussels workshop (MacDonald, 2026).

As delivery partners, regions possess cultural institutions, universities, innovation ecosystems, and city networks whose international reach and relationship depth exceed what EU-level coordination alone can achieve. Connecting these assets to EU international cultural relations goals, through shared priority frameworks and joint programming, would significantly amplify the effective reach of EU engagement without requiring structural changes to the governance architecture.

As laboratories of practice, regions already model the partnership-based, co-created, and reciprocal forms of international engagement that the EU's cultural relations framework commits to in principle but has struggled to deliver systematically at scale. Decentralised cooperation between European and partner country regions, of which the Brussels workshop's examples of German-US city partnerships and the French regional partnership with Niger are illustrative instances, embodies the qualities of trust-building, continuity, and depth that the AIO comparative evidence identifies as the most durable currency of soft power (MacDonald, 2026).

As strategic actors, regions with strong constitutional competences have their own international interests, networks, and capabilities that are not reducible to the delivery of EU priorities. Recognising regions as strategic actors means engaging them as genuine partners in the design as well as the delivery of EU international engagement, which requires both formal mechanisms for consultation and the political will at member state level to permit regional participation in relevant working groups.

The logic of reciprocity is essential to all three roles. As the companion policy brief observed, 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 (MacDonald, 2026). This is not merely an ethical requirement: it is a practical one. Regions will invest in coordination mechanisms that serve their purposes; they will not sustain engagement with frameworks that extract value upward without returning visible benefit to the communities that generate it. The updated Joint Communication must address this reciprocity question explicitly if it is to build the durable regional partnerships that its goals require.

8. Discussion: The Five-Test Framework Applied to the Integrated Approach

8.1 The Purpose and Logic of the Framework

The preceding sections have developed an integrated argument for rethinking the scope, governance, and institutional design of EU international cultural relations. That argument now requires evaluation against a set of criteria capable of assessing whether the approach proposed is not only theoretically coherent but practically adequate to the political and strategic purposes a revised framework must serve. This section applies five evaluative tests drawn from the EU's own stated priorities for international engagement: increasing the EU's influence in a turbulent world; enhancing the EU's resilience in its external and internal dimensions; assisting the EU in tackling security, migration, and climate change; enhancing the EU's foreign policy; and connecting legitimately to the concerns of EU citizens. The tests are applied to the integrated approach developed in Sections 6 and 7: that is, to a broad-scope, multi-level, citizen-connected framework built on strategic alignment rather than structural unification and grounded in the cultural relations model of reciprocity and trust. They are also, implicitly, applied to the alternative of retaining the existing narrow cultural projection approach, in order to establish whether the proposed changes are not merely desirable but necessary.

8.2 The Geopolitical Stress Tests

The five tests applied in the following subsections should be read against three live geopolitical stress tests that expose the same underlying challenge: the EU does not lack instruments, but lacks the relationship architecture to align them around strategic outcomes without sacrificing credibility. Each stress test probes whether the integrated approach proposed in this paper is adequate not only as governance theory but as policy practice under conditions of political friction.

The first stress test is Global Gateway. The EU must demonstrate that strategic investment, industrial competitiveness, and partner-country development can reinforce rather than undermine one another across 130-plus flagship projects, the majority in Africa. The risk of being perceived as rebranded European industrial policy is real and documented; the credibility test is whether partner countries experience the process as co-owned. The second stress test is Türkiye. Officially still a candidate country, Türkiye is simultaneously an accession file at standstill since 2018, a migration partnership, a NATO ally, a customs union partner, a contributor to CSDP missions, and a state the Strategic Compass identifies as requiring sustained de-escalation (Council of the European Union, 2022). A soft

power strategy adequate to Türkiye would maintain principled conditionality at the formal political level while investing in durable societal, educational, scientific, urban, and regional networks below the level of blocked accession politics: not a substitute for hard policy choices, but the relationship infrastructure that makes those choices less brittle. The third stress test is the AU-EU partnership, where ambitious summit-level language will matter only if implementation mechanisms, financing, civil society participation, and African agency are made credible. The EU's credibility in Africa depends not on what it funds but on who defines priorities, who monitors implementation, who benefits from value-chain upgrading, and who can hold the partnership to account. The convergent finding from all three stress tests is that the EU's soft power problem is not primarily one of communications or programming but one of institutional architecture: the machinery to align instruments, sustain relationships, and demonstrate authentic partnership across contested geographies currently does not exist in a form adequate to the geopolitical moment.

8.3 Test One: Increasing the EU's Influence in a Turbulent World

The first and most direct test is whether the approach increases the EU's influence internationally. The turbulence of the current environment has been described throughout this paper: the retrenchment of United States multilateralism, intensifying Chinese and Russian information operations, and the growing use of economic coercion as a foreign policy instrument together constitute a landscape in which influence based on attraction and credibility is both more necessary and more contested than at any point since the EU's current soft power framework was conceived.

The comparative evidence from the twenty-five-jurisdiction study is unambiguous on what generates influence. Strategic coherence, multi-domain engagement, and credibility rooted in authentic practice are the variables that most consistently convert assets into outcomes (MacDonald and Murray, 2025). The current EU framework fails on each of these measures: its cultural relations coordination is institutionally fragmented, confined to a single domain, and chronically under-resourced. The integrated approach proposed in this paper addresses all three deficiencies directly: strategic alignment mechanisms improve coherence without requiring structural unification, extension to education, science, and development cooperation expands domain coverage, and the retention and strengthening of the cultural relations model preserves the credibility that projection-based alternatives would sacrifice. A narrow cultural approach confined to the existing framework not only fails this test; it systematically leaves the EU's most powerful assets (Erasmus+ alumni networks, Horizon Europe partnerships, and development cooperation relationships) disconnected from any coherent purpose of influence.

8.4 Test Two: Enhancing the EU's Resilience

The EU Global Strategy's emphasis on resilience, both external and internal, provides the second test. External resilience, in the strategy's framing, concerns the EU's capacity to withstand shocks, disruptions, and coercive pressures from its external environment. Internal resilience concerns the strength of the EU's own governance model, social fabric, and democratic institutions as the foundation from which external engagement proceeds.

The integrated approach enhances external resilience by building the diversified portfolio of international relationships that single-domain or single-channel approaches cannot

provide. The Brussels workshop's evidence is illustrative: over 200 German-US city partnerships continued to function across climate and citizen protection topics even when federal-level relations deteriorated under hostile political conditions, and a French regional development cooperation partnership with Niger survived multiple coups, droughts, and political crises over thirty years (MacDonald, 2026). These instances of relationship resilience at the sub-national and city level point towards a general principle: decentralised, people-to-people, multi-level engagement is inherently more resilient than centralised, top-down, state-directed projection, because it does not depend on the alignment of a single relationship at the governmental level. Connecting EU soft power coordination to this distributed resilience, by formally recognising regional and city-level engagement as part of the European international engagement ecosystem, directly enhances external resilience.

Internal resilience depends on the EU's ability to maintain the democratic social contract that is the foundation of its credibility internationally. The finding that approximately 30 per cent of young people in Europe are attracted by authoritarian models is, in this context, a resilience finding as much as a soft power finding (MacDonald, 2026). The most effective response is not counter-messaging but the demonstrable delivery of the values, governance quality, and economic security the EU claims to represent; and a broad-scope framework grounds European external engagement in what Europe actually is rather than in what its communications machinery projects.

8.5 Test Three: Assisting the EU in Tackling Security, Migration, and Climate Change

The third test addresses the EU's capacity to use its international engagement in service of its most pressing policy challenges. Security, migration, and climate change are each simultaneously domestic and international governance problems, and each requires international cooperation, shared understanding, and trust to address effectively.

The case for climate is perhaps the most direct. European regions and cities are among the most active sub-national actors in international climate governance: the Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, the C40 network, and bilateral regional climate partnerships represent a substantial architecture of international engagement that is currently entirely disconnected from the EU's formal international cultural relations framework. Connecting these forms of engagement to a broader EU soft power coordination framework (including through the recognition of regional partnerships as legitimate contributors to European external action) would both amplify their impact and strengthen the EU's position in international climate diplomacy. Migration is a domain where long-term trust-based relationships with countries of origin and transit, of the kind that development cooperation and cultural relations at their best produce, are essential to achieving durable and human outcomes. The Serodes evaluation's finding that the 2016 Joint Communication's implementation had inadvertently marginalised sustainable development dimensions by prioritising culture as a foreign policy tool identifies exactly the kind of narrow-scope failure that a multi-domain integrated approach is designed to prevent (Serodes, 2022). Security, conceived broadly, is addressed by the resilience arguments above and by the argument about dark soft power: durable, authentic, citizen-connected engagement is the most effective structural response to information operations and influence campaigns designed to undermine democratic institutions, as Walker and Ludwig (2017) argued in introducing

the concept of sharp power that subsequently informed the dark soft power discourse at the EU level.

8.6 Test Four: Enhancing the EU's Foreign Policy

The fourth test asks whether the approach strengthens the EU's foreign policy, understood as its capacity to shape the international environment in accordance with its values and interests. The EU Global Strategy's 'principled pragmatism', which explicitly acknowledged that normative and interest-based considerations cannot be neatly separated, provides the appropriate framing (European Union, 2016). The integrated approach proposed in this paper is pragmatic precisely in its recognition that the EU's most effective instruments of foreign policy influence, its universities, research programmes, cultural institutions, development cooperation relationships, and regional networks, are spread across an institutional landscape that the current framework cannot connect. Bringing them into a shared strategic framework does not compromise the EU's normative commitments; it makes them operationally real.

Specifically, the approach enhances foreign policy effectiveness in three ways. First, it enables the EU to project its values through the full range of its engagement, making the case for democratic governance, the rule of law, and sustainable development through the accumulated weight of relationships built across multiple domains rather than through the cultural relations channel alone. Second, it positions the EU to demonstrate the value of multilateralism at precisely the moment when that value is being most forcefully challenged: the EU's credibility rests on showing that cooperation works, and a coherent multi-level engagement framework is a practical demonstration of that argument. Third, it connects EU external action to the regional and city-level relationships that are often more resilient and more trusted than governmental-level relationships in partner countries, giving EU foreign policy access to networks that pure top-down diplomacy cannot reach.

8.7 Test Five: Connecting Legitimately to the Concerns of EU Citizens

The fifth test is in some respects the most fundamental: whether the approach connects legitimately to the concerns of EU citizens rather than operating as a foreign policy abstraction disconnected from the societies it claims to represent. Legitimate connection requires not merely that the EU's international engagement reflects values that citizens hold, but that it draws on assets that citizens and communities produce, generates benefits that are visible to citizens, and is subject to forms of accountability that citizens can exercise.

The integrated approach satisfies this test in ways the narrow cultural projection model cannot. By extending the scope of coordination to encompass education, science, and regional engagement, it directly involves the universities, research institutions, cultural organisations, and regional governments that are embedded in European civic life and whose international relationships are constituted by the choices of individual citizens, students, researchers, and practitioners rather than by governmental direction. By formally recognising regional and city-level contributions to European external action, it creates mechanisms through which the benefits of international engagement flow back to the communities that generate them, rather than being captured exclusively at the supranational level. And by grounding the framework in the cultural relations model of genuine partnership

and co-creation, it ensures that the authentic character of European civic culture (diverse, plural, contested, and creative) is what international partners encounter rather than a sanitised governmental projection of it. As the companion policy brief observed, the task is to create a framework that connects and amplifies the distributed creativity and institutional capacity of a continent of 450 million people (MacDonald, 2026); that connection is possible only if the framework is oriented towards citizens rather than towards state projection.

8.8 The Convergent Finding

The application of all five tests to the integrated approach yields a convergent finding: broad-scope, multi-level, citizen-connected engagement grounded in strategic alignment and the cultural relations model satisfies all five criteria simultaneously, while the narrow cultural projection model that characterises the status quo satisfies none of them adequately. This convergence is analytically significant because it means that the arguments for reform do not depend on trading off one criterion against another. Improving the EU's influence, enhancing its resilience, addressing its cross-cutting policy challenges, strengthening its foreign policy, and connecting to its citizens' concerns all point in the same direction. This is not coincidental: it reflects the underlying structural argument that the EU's distinctive character as an international actor (plural, decentralised, and grounded in values whose credibility depends on authentic practice rather than projection) fits a broad and genuinely relational model of engagement far better than it fits the nation-state model of unified cultural diplomacy. The review process now underway therefore faces a choice not between competing good outcomes but between an approach adequate to the EU's actual situation and one that is not. A demanding reader will note, rightly, that the convergence is too clean to be taken on trust. The argument faces genuine friction at four points: member state gatekeeping will limit regional participation whatever formal commitments the Joint Communication contains; partner country suspicion about EU motives, most acutely in Africa, will resist soft power framing precisely where the EU most needs it; budget pressures will force prioritisation and the case for ring-fencing international cultural relations resources will face competition from domestic and security spending; and migration politics create an asymmetry in some priority partnerships that authentic cultural relations cannot easily bridge. The integrated approach does not dissolve these frictions; it creates the institutional architecture within which they can be managed more coherently than the fragmented status quo allows.

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Argument in Summary

This paper has argued that the review of the 2016 Joint Communication presents an opportunity to reconsider not only the operational architecture of EU international cultural relations but the scope, purpose, and governance model of EU soft power coordination as a whole. That argument rests on four converging lines of evidence and analysis: comparative evidence demonstrating that strategic coherence across multiple institutional actors and asset domains is what generates durable influence; the implementation record of the

2016 Joint Communication, showing that structural problems of competence, coordination, and funding were never overcome; the regional dimension, which reveals internationally active assets entirely invisible to the EU's current framework; and the five-test evaluative framework, confirming that these deficiencies compromise the EU's ability to increase its influence, enhance its resilience, address its cross-cutting policy challenges, serve its foreign policy, and connect legitimately to its citizens.

The paper has also argued throughout that the response to these deficiencies is not to attempt what the EU's legal, institutional, and political architecture cannot deliver. A single comprehensive supranational soft power strategy in the nation-state mould is neither achievable nor, on the evidence, desirable: the EU's distinctive character as a plural, decentralised, and multi-level entity is itself a potential soft power asset rather than a problem to be overcome. The response is rather to design the coordination mechanisms, strategic alignment frameworks, and accountability structures that work with the grain of the EU's architecture rather than against it, and that enable its dispersed assets to be recognised, connected, and directed towards coherent purposes.

Recommendations for the Updated Joint Communication

The following six recommendations address the principal gaps identified in the analysis. They are ordered from the most foundational to the most operational, reflecting the paper's argument that structural and governance questions must be addressed before programmatic ones. To assist policymakers in sequencing their implementation, the recommendations are also categorised by timeframe: immediate asks for the 2026 Joint Communication review process itself; medium-term asks requiring action in the 2028-2034 MFF and AgoraEU legislative processes; and pilot geography suggestions where early implementation could generate evidence to support broader adoption. Throughout, references to 'binding commitments' should be understood as institutional, budgetary, reporting, and inter-service commitments rather than as claims to treaty-level legal force, which the supporting competence framework for culture does not permit.

Recommendation 1: A genuine strategy, not another communication. The updated Joint Communication should arrive as an operational instrument rather than a framework pointing towards a strategy. Institutional, budgetary, reporting, and inter-service commitments are what the paper means by this term; treaty-level legal force is not available under the supporting competence framework for culture. The document should include time-bound commitments, a dedicated budget line for international cultural relations, implementation machinery with clear institutional ownership (the EEAS, in close coordination with DG EAC, should hold the lead coordination role, with structured mechanisms for DG INTPA, DG NEAR, and DG RTD), and an accountability and evaluation framework with agreed metrics, baselines, and review cycles. Civil society organisations, evaluators, and the European Parliament have called for this consistently since 2016 (Culture Action Europe, 2025; Serodes, 2022; European Parliament, 2022). Immediate action (2026 review): engage the AgoraEU legislative process now to ensure the Culture strand and CERV successor contain explicit hooks for international cultural relations coordination; without this, the MFF architecture will be settled before the strategy exists. Medium-term action (2028-2034 MFF): secure a dedicated budget line within AgoraEU or as a distinct line under the EU's external action heading. The Culture Compass's intention to guide cultural investment

across the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework creates the opportunity; the AgendaEU legislative timeline makes it urgent.

Recommendation 2: Strategic conversion through scope extension. The scope of the updated strategy should extend beyond culture to encompass education, science, development cooperation, and enlargement through strategic alignment rather than structural unification. The operational expression is a framework of shared geographic priorities applying across the EEAS, DG EAC, DG RTD, DG INTPA, and DG NEAR; joint programming mechanisms allowing EU Delegations to connect Erasmus+ alumni activities, Horizon Europe partnerships, development cooperation relationships, and enlargement-support programming to a common strategic purpose; and a common evaluation framework enabling the EU's combined investment across instruments to be assessed against shared outcomes. The case for this integration is not primarily a governance argument: it is essential for countering Chinese and Russian integrated influence operations that already span culture, education, development, and infrastructure, and for demonstrating in the EU's enlargement neighbourhood that European engagement offers more than transactional conditionality. Immediate action (2026 review): name enlargement geographies (Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova) as priority theatres for coordination mechanisms, since these are the places where the argument is both most urgent and most politically legible. Medium-term action (2028-2034 MFF): develop joint programming protocols across DGs and the EEAS, with pilot coordination mechanisms in two or three priority partner countries. Pilot geography suggestion: NRW-Ukraine regional partnership and Western Balkans cultural-educational hubs as early implementation tests.

Recommendation 3: A shared strategic narrative. The updated strategy should work towards a coherent account of what Europe stands for internationally, developed through structured dialogue with sufficient candour to surface genuine disagreements rather than institutional consensus. The arm's-length principle, under which the narrative is developed with genuine civil society participation, is essential to its credibility. Member states will resist formulations that subsume national cultural identities within a European frame; that resistance must be engaged through dialogue, not overridden by decree.

Recommendation 4: Formal recognition of regions and cities as strategic actors. The updated strategy should formally recognise European regions and cities with genuine assets and governance capacity as part of the EU's geostrategic delivery capacity in EU external relations, not only as contributors to cultural relations in the narrow sense but as delivery partners in the priority geographies where state-level diplomacy is insufficient: enlargement countries in the Western Balkans and Eastern neighbourhood, AU-EU partnership contexts where sub-national and city relationships can sustain engagement below the level of fraught ministerial politics, and Global Gateway implementation contexts where regional vocational systems, innovation clusters, and city partnerships make EU external investment tangible in partner societies. Concretely, this means removing barriers to regional participation in Commission working groups under the principle of active subsidiarity; establishing structured consultation mechanisms through the Committee of the Regions; recognising decentralised cooperation as a formal modality; and creating pathways through which regions can connect their universities, cultural institutions, and innovation ecosystems to EU international engagement priorities. The differentiation noted in Section 7 is essential: not all NUTS2 regions are equivalently positioned, and mechanisms

should engage those with genuine capacity while avoiding coordination burdens for those that are not. Immediate action (2026 review): remove the barrier to regional participation in relevant Commission working groups for regions with clear constitutional standing and institutional capacity: this costs nothing institutionally and would visibly signal commitment to active subsidiarity. Pilot geography: NRW and Flanders as initial regional partners in the Western Balkans enlargement engagement framework. The basis for differentiated access should be transparent and criteria-led, resting on constitutional competence, demonstrable soft power assets, and institutional governance capacity rather than on case-by-case political selection, which would risk entrenching existing advantage and reproducing the exclusion the recommendation seeks to remedy. The precise thresholds, including what constitutes a qualifying region and what balanced representation requires, are a governance design question that the updated strategy will need to resolve and that this paper identifies rather than settles.

Recommendation 5: An evidence and evaluation architecture. The updated strategy should invest in the evidence base, including methodological development for sub-national and multi-level dimensions. Concretely: establish baseline data on activities and expenditure across all relevant instruments; develop level-appropriate indicators for regional and city contributions drawing on the AIO framework; commit to longitudinal evaluation tracking long-term relationship outcomes; and embed evaluation capacity within the EEAS and relevant Delegations. The measurement challenge is as much political as technical: the evidence infrastructure needs to be built alongside the governance architecture, not after it.

Recommendation 6: Retention and strengthening of the cultural relations model. The updated strategy should retain and strengthen the 2016 Joint Communication's commitment to cultural relations as its normative foundation, explicitly distinguishing this from cultural diplomacy and soft power projection. The comparative evidence demonstrates consistently that systems built on credibility, authenticity, and reciprocity outperform those oriented towards state-directed projection (MacDonald and Murray, 2025). The arm's-length principle underpinning national cultural institutes such as the Goethe-Institut, the British Council, and the Institut Français is essential to their effectiveness; the persistent tension between the cultural relations model and the institutional incentives of the EEAS and some member state governments towards instrumentalisation must be named explicitly and met with procedural safeguards (Kauert and Della Giovanna, 2022; Higgott, 2019).

The Wider Research Agenda

The analysis has generated three research questions that extend beyond the policy review but bear on its long-term adequacy.

The conceptual vocabulary problem raised in Section 7, whether 'soft power' is the right analytical lens for what European regions do internationally, or whether new vocabulary better suited to relational, networked, policy-focused forms of sub-state engagement is needed, requires sustained theoretical work. The fellowship's provisional finding that regions do not do soft power, but something not yet properly named (MacDonald, 2026) is an invitation to conceptual development that this paper has not had the scope to pursue. Hendrik Ohnesorge's proposal, developed at the Horizon Europe consortium planning webinar in February 2026, to reframe soft power as 'strategic attraction' to preserve its deliberate

and instrumental character while acknowledging its application beyond states, is one productive direction for this work.

The attribution problem across governance levels: that is, the challenge of establishing what specific contributions specific actors at specific governance levels make to what outcomes, remains methodologically unresolved and will not be resolved by any single study. The Horizon Europe consortium research programme currently in development, with its dedicated stream on empirical measurement and the AIO framework at multiple governance levels, represents the most promising available vehicle for the sustained comparative work needed. The fellowship's finding that the evidence gap is political rather than technical means that institutional reform must precede rather than follow measurement investment; but once the governance architecture has been addressed, the measurement work becomes both more tractable and more consequential.

The democratic legitimacy question underlying Test Five, whether EU international engagement genuinely connects to and benefits European citizens, is ultimately a political question beyond the scope of this paper. The finding that approximately 30 per cent of young Europeans are attracted by authoritarian models (MacDonald, 2026) places the burden of proof squarely on EU institutions: the most powerful form of EU soft power is the demonstrable delivery of European values in citizens' lived experience, not communication about them.

A Final Observation

The Culture Compass and the review it commits to arrive at a moment of genuine rupture in the international order. The EU will not win sustained influence in a transactional world by communicating its values more effectively. It will build credibility where it can demonstrate that its model delivers trusted, co-owned, and strategically relevant outcomes that its competitors (Russia in the information domain, China in infrastructure and economics, an inward-turning United States in the multilateral arena) cannot easily replicate. In Global Gateway, it must pass the test of partner-country co-ownership. In its enlargement neighbourhood, it must prove that accession support is more than conditionality. In Türkiye, it must maintain principled positions while sustaining the societal relationships that give those positions traction. Across all of these, it must demonstrate that its model of decentralised, plural, credibility-based engagement actually works. The updated Joint Communication should therefore be judged by a hard test: whether it gives the Union the machinery to connect its cultural, educational, scientific, regional, and development assets to the places where Europe's credibility and interests are most exposed. Whether that test is passed will be legible in the specifics of what the updated strategy commits to, what it funds, how it is governed, who is responsible for delivering it, and whether, unlike its predecessor, it arrives with the operational architecture to make those commitments real.

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The Author

Stuart MacDonald is AIA NRW Associate Fellow and Director of ICR Research, the UK's leading research consultancy specialising in Public Diplomacy, Cultural and Educational Exchange, and Data Analytics. He is a former senior policy adviser to the UK Government on a wide range of policy areas, including international relations, cultural policy, regional development, constitutional policy and education.

Stuart MacDonald is the author of this paper. Claude Sonnet 4.6, an AI assistant developed by Anthropic, assisted with drafting and editing during its preparation; the analysis, arguments, and conclusions are entirely the author's own.

