

# **EUROPEAN UNION: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE “SOFT POWER”**

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The European Union plays an important role in the international scene. Its political decisions have huge influence on the rest of the countries and it is, along with the US, one of the biggest economic powers in the world. It is undoubtedly a force to take in account, but what makes it different from the rest of the world's powers is the way of acting in the international arena, the so called soft power.

The term "soft power" was first introduced by the Harvard University scholar Joseph Nye in his book "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power" in the early nineties. Soft power is the ability to obtain what you want through co-option and attraction. It is in contradistinction to 'hard power', which is the use of coercion and payment. From that time the term has been stretched and twisted but mainly it refers to the power based on an actor's Values, Culture, Policies and Institutions, and it can describe the State's actions in the fields of diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance and economic development.

The European Union's "soft power" is based on its negotiation, conviction and dialogue capacities more than on its military force and the power of coercion. And this position is not so odd due to the Europe's wide history of continuous wars and military confrontations. The first and the second World Wars have been devastating for the European countries with a dramatic balance of more than 50 millions dead. In fact, the main purpose of the European Union's creation was not to allow the new war, as only the integration could bring the prospect of a stable peace. So it is not strange at all that the EU countries bet for a pacific conflicts resolution, and are one of the most diplomatic in the today's world.

The foundation of the European Union had clear objectives and a consequent political strategy, but the EU of today is very different to the one it was fifty years ago. And it is different not only because of the number and origin of its integrating countries. The main challenge of today is a new global environment, in which the threats are different and the answers to them must be adapted to the new circumstances. The problems like climate change, migration and international terrorism, the threats that have non-military nature and no relations to the national borders are questioning the efficacy of the both soft and hard power strategies of EU and US.

As the recent history has proved, the hard power has clear limitations in solving the contemporary political problems. But what about soft power, does it fare any better? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

From my point of view, the European Union has two main weaknesses due to its soft power strategy: the EU military weakness and the division inside the EU on the key issues with the consequent lack of effectiveness.

According to many experts, the European Union's greater failure consists in its foreign and defence policy. The EU is lack of strong army and clear military strategy, it is too much used to entrust the safety questions to the USA and it is very passive on the military field. In the important international problems like Afghanistan, Pakistan or North Korea, the EU is either invisible or absent. And lately the fragile balance USA - Europe in the military topics is breaking, as the USA feels little supported and every day more disappointed with Europe. Very soon the EU will need to take difficult decisions as US will no longer be interested in this unequal collaboration.

In terms of security, a strong military state is more attractive than the weak one. As well, for such military powerful countries as Russia, India and China having a big and well prepared army means to have bigger international power. For most of the "old school" countries the huge military force is one of the instruments of political pressure, so they cannot avoid seeing Europe's weakness in this field.

Moreover, the strong military power leads to enforce the soft power, as for example the military-to-military cooperation and training programs can establish transnational networks, or the humanitarian work in case of big natural disasters can contribute to the military attractiveness.

But looking at the question from another point of view, the bad use of the military force can easily undercut the soft power, by inefficient occupation or the brutal use of the force. The US case can serve as an example for that, as the Vietnam War and the recent occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan has damaged greatly its international prestige. So while hard power can win wars, it is not adequate to the task of building peace. It is true that a well-run military can be a source of admiration and that the hard power can bring down regimes, but it is also true that only the soft power can rebuild countries and set up truly democratic regimes.

Moreover, in my opinion, the lack of the military power is a power on its own. The truly democratic society doesn't need a big army to defend and implant its ideas. We are no longer in the middle age, the 21st century politics need to be free of weapons and military threats, as the modern society is mature enough to build the international relations on the pacific bases.

The second big weakness of the EU soft power consists in its huge inefficiency and bureaucracy. There is not only an inefficiency in the decision making process, but also in its external representation (the EU is over-represented in all main international institutions). The constant disagreement between European countries in the basic issues damages the EU credibility and its disability to streamline the unique external representation provokes that other countries can't take EU seriously.

The power of the European Union is greatly harmed by its internal disagreements and the lack of coordination as it gives a very bad external image. Its structural weaknesses are not getting better with the time and have no visible solution in the short term.

It is also necessary to mention the EU enlargement problems, specially referring to Turkey and the definition of the "European nation". And related to the national identity theme there is another important manifestation of the jealousy that each European country shows regarding to its national identity and its severe opposition to loosing it. However, from my point of view, these problems will solve itself in the natural way. The Turkey joining to the EU is only a matter of time and the growing globalization will naturally resolve all the internal cultural problems and differences.

In any case, the above mentioned weaknesses are minor, compared to the strengths of the EU soft power. The union of such a big number of different countries culturally and economically, its pacific model that it was able to provide, the huge R&D and technological development, the rise of science, art and culture - all of this can be considered as the greater success of cooperation and collaboration ever achieved between countries.

The European Union has taken a great advantage from its promotion of democracy and human rights, increasing in a few decades the number of the countries from 6 to 27 and promoting unprecedented peace and prosperity on the European continent. The magnetism of the EU has attracted all of this 21 countries along with a lot of other that are still in the queue looking for the entrance.

The soft power is also the key to strengthening alliances with international partners, especially with the BRIC countries, that provide it with the natural resources. Russia, China, India and others are highly interested in the good relations with the EU due to its economic and political importance and the international trade relations. The economic interests have substituted the military pressures.

And it is true that one of the biggest European problem consist in the difficulty of the decision making process. But this problem can also be interpreted from the positive point of view: every country in the European Union has its own voice and can expose its views and desires freely. The equilibrium between the democracy and efficiency is still a difficult question, but we need to take in account that the patience is needed in order to elaborate the functional and efficient system.

It is true that by now Europe has successfully used its soft power to obtain outcomes it wanted. It has widely used the attraction of its successful political and economic integration, but it is also necessary to take in account the rising difficulty of the challenging international problems. It can be a mistake for the EU to rely only on its soft power and probably it is time to try to solve its major weaknesses.

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