

Политические проблемы  
международных отношений,  
глобального  
и регионального развития

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## French “soft power” in the context of the pandemic: Limiting traditional ways of influence

This research is dedicated to the analysis of the specifics of implementing the “soft power” strategy in the context of the restrictions imposed as a result of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper presents the case of France – a country with a historically established tradition of “soft power”, which has repeatedly faced a decline in the effectiveness of this type of “power” as a result of external or internal problems. In all the cases France has skillfully restored its “attractive influence”, mainly based on cultural resources and practices. It is concluded that in the context of new challenges, the use of traditional mechanisms is no longer relevant and needs further revision.

**Key words:** “soft power”, cultural practices, COVID-19 pandemic, inter-state relations, France

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# Французская «мягкая сила» в условиях пандемии: ограничение традиционных путей влияния

Данное исследование посвящено рассмотрению специфики реализации стратегии «мягкой силы» в условиях введенных ограничений в результате стремительного распространения пандемии COVID-19. В работе представлен кейс Франции – страны с исторически сложившимися традициями «мягкой силы», которая неоднократно сталкивалась со снижением эффективности такого вида «силы» в результате внешних или внутренних проблем, однако умело восстанавливала свое «притягательное влияние», преимущественно основанное на культурных ресурсах и практиках. Делается вывод о том, что в условиях новых вызовов использование традиционных механизмов более не является релевантной и нуждается в дальнейшем пересмотре.

**Ключевые слова:** «мягкая сила», культурные практики, пандемия COVID-19, межгосударственные отношения, Франция

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the socio-political sphere of life. The spread of the virus not only limited social interaction, but also had a negative impact on international relations, significantly reducing the opportunities for building inter-state contacts through meetings, negotiations, exchanges of delegations and other traditional channels. The new environment in which all states have been placed has demonstrated that long-tested and steadily developing practices of inter-state interaction are ineffective when confronted with modern challenges. This problem has

become particularly evident in the area of soft power mechanisms used by states to build authority and expand spheres of influence.

The theory of “soft power” was proposed by the American political scientist J. Nye and, despite its controversial nature, [11] has since the early 1990s gained wide popularity not only in the academic, but also in the political environment. This is explained by the fact that the ‘soft’ version of influence met the demands of the times: with the end of the Cold War the emphasis in international politics shifted from the ‘arms race’ and open confrontation to strengthening cooperation between states and a desire to resolve conflicts through negotiations. The situation in the international arena required actors to work out “the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants” [13, p. 2], while remaining within the mainstream of liberal discourse, i.e. in line with the basic principle of “soft power” – getting others to want what you want through attraction and co-optation rather than coercion and payments [Ibid, p. 5–7]. However, the complication of interaction between the leading powers since the mid 2010s has raised the question of a new round of open struggle for spheres of influence. The spread of the pandemic, which has significantly limited contacts between peoples as well as between political actors, may lead to a greater chilling effect and, as a consequence, to a worsening crisis in international relations. “Soft power”, which could have had a positive impact on the establishment of inter-state contacts at various levels, has suffered significant losses as a result of the restrictions imposed under COVID-19. In these circumstances, it is particularly relevant to identify the problems faced by states that had previously successfully implemented soft power strategies.

The phenomenon of “soft power” existed long before its conceptualisation: J. Nye pointed out that “soft power” is “as old as history” [14, p. 81]. Russian scientist E.M. Kharitonova also points to the significant role of historical development in the formation of state “soft power”, considering the case of Great Britain, which used to be one of the largest world empires that managed to preserve some of its former power due to the resource capital accumulated over the centuries [7, p. 181]. A similar experience distinguishes France: for several centuries the country was among the most powerful powers in the world, standing out not only for its military, economic and diplomatic potential, but also for its attractive culture for foreigners, but by the early 20th century it gradually began to lose its significance as a “spiritual beacon of Western civilization” [1, p. 116]. However, for the time being, France is an influential player on the world stage, thanks to a long period of accumulated resources that form the country’s soft power. For example, according to the influential Soft Power 30 index, France is in the lead, ahead

of the UK, Germany, the US and other leading countries, [16] which is due to the success of its diplomatic and cultural missions [17].

The purpose of this article is to investigate the specificity of the French case of soft power in the context of the pandemic's limitations. Meanwhile, a risk analysis of this challenge is not possible without a retrospective review to identify already established soft power practices.

The history of French "soft power" is heterogeneous: for example, it is possible to identify periods when the state had great "soft power" and actively built up resources to strengthen this influence, and then lost them as a result of internal or external conflicts (for example, the era of the Bourbon dynasty from 1589 to 1792 ended with two years of terror, which was the result of the Great French Revolution, and characterized by numerous death sentences, often carried out in the absence of fair trial) [8, p. 87–88]. However, in this context it is also worth noting the paradoxical characteristic of French "soft power": in some cases its influence remained quite pronounced even during periods when France's "hard power" played a major role (the 'domestic' gallomania was observed during the Napoleonic wars, when the Russian aristocracy, even with the strengthening of conservative-nationalist tendencies, [2] continued to speak French, hire French cooks and governesses and introduce French manners) [4].

As J. Nye noted, the soft power of the state is based on three key factors: culture, foreign policies and political values promoted within the state and abroad [13, p. 11]. In assessing French "soft power" in the light of these conceptual constructs, it should be emphasized that, in the case of France, the most significant factor in the formation of attraction was culture, whose influence was not only felt in the Russian Empire. Periods of enthusiasm for the French way of life were observed in the 16th–19th centuries in practically all European countries [4]. It is important to note that along with 'domestic' gallomania there was also 'political' gallomania: thus the Enlightenment ideas expressed by leading humanist philosophers influenced the views of Catherine II, and the civic values of the French influenced the views of young noblemen who saw France during the Russian campaign abroad in 1813–1814. At the same time, the influence of political culture invariably proved to be less stable than that of domestic culture [Ibid].

The flowering of foreign enthusiasm for the French lifestyle came in the 18th–19th centuries, but from the 20th century onwards France's "soft power", built on the country's cultural appeal, began to decline [1, p. 116]. This was due to a number of factors, among which we can distinguish both external – World War I, which caused significant damage to the country, the fall of the Russian Empire, where the aristocracy supported the spread of 'domestic' French culture, the growing influence of the US, and internal –

the need for post-war reconstruction of the country, which became a priority task. The Versailles-Washington system of international relations was to strengthen France's position in a reformed world order: by the 1930s, however, it became clear that the League of Nations, which was supposed to preserve the established system and help achieve "international peace and security" [15] was failing to fulfil its assigned functions. Attempts to establish an inter-state system of engagement that would exclude the use of "hard power" and allow the development of "soft power" were not always successful. Whereas the Briand-Kellogg Pact of 1928, the result of Franco-American anti-militarist efforts, had a positive impact on France's reputation as a pacifist foreign power, the Four Powers Pact of 1933 reduced the credibility of France among the 'smaller' European states [5].

The Second World War had an ambiguous impact on the perception of France in the world: on the one hand, the country was among the victors, while on the other, it was significantly weakened. Over the next few decades, France's position on the world stage was viewed in the context of the bipolar world established by the leading powers – the USSR and the United States.

The Cold War led to the creation of blocs and organizations that predetermined the direction of further interaction between states. In 1948, the Western European Union was created to oppose any aggression policy and to promote democratic principles, human rights and cooperation in the economic, social and cultural field. In 1949, France signed the North Atlantic Treaty and became a member of NATO, while in 1951 the economic and industrial European Coal and Steel Community was formed and the European Union started to take shape. The inability to compete with the USSR and the USA, and the fears that these powers would build up a "hard power", led France to pay increasing attention to "soft power", which would encourage closer cooperation within the western European bloc. The drive to assert leadership in Europe was not only due to the loss of the United States and the Soviet Union: it was also due to the decolonization of France in the 1940s and 1960s (much of its overseas territories, most of them on the African continent, were lost).

The end of the Cold War changed the world once again. In 1990, 34 states signed the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, which established principles that became the basis for further cooperation: respect for human and civil rights, introduction of non-military mechanisms to regulate relations between countries, increased cooperation on humanitarian issues, etc. [9]. The Charter also proclaimed the high role of a common European culture and common values in bridging the "continental divide", stressing the need for such mechanisms to "improve mutual understanding" [Ibid] as cross-cultural centers and the introduction of cultural exchanges in various fields (science,

education, and the arts). Thus, a common, transnational, pan-European cultural and value base was being asserted. This trend emerged with greater clarity in 1992, when 12 countries, including France, signed the Treaty on European Union, establishing the EU. France became one of the leaders of the Union, gaining the opportunity to conduct ‘soft’ policy not only as an independent state, but also as a member of the Union, an active subject of international relations [6, p. 55].

The Lisbon Treaty adopted in 2007 established common political values (democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and freedoms, pluralism, tolerance, etc.) [10], to guide EU member states in their domestic policies and to promote them outside the Union [10]. The formation of a common axiological field has strengthened France’s position.

At the same time, in accordance with the specific resources at its disposal, France pursues its interests at the level of interstate interaction. The pillar of the country’s “soft power” is undoubtedly cultural diplomacy: [3, p. 177] its implementation is entrusted to state (Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Culture) and embassy-affiliated structures (“Alliance Française”, French Institute, cultural centers in embassies), as well as to intergovernmental organizations (“Francophonie”). In addition, a number of highly specialized institutes form a positive image of France: Campus France for education, Business France for entrepreneurship and investment, and the Future of the French Language for Francophone support. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the media, which broadcasts not only in French but also in English, Arabic, German, Spanish, Russian, Japanese and other international languages (France 24, TV5 Monde, Radio France International, etc.) are involved in the implementation of the country’s “soft power”.

In summary, France’s soft power is multifaceted, but its cultural dimension is historically the most significant. The country is characterized by a multi-layered soft power that allows it to delegate some tasks to a higher level. For example, membership of the European Union, which successfully competes with the world’s major powers, allows France to promote its values (political, economic and social) and interests above state level. At the same time, France is also using different channels and institutions of influence to build a soft power policy, already at the state level, according to the resources it has.

Despite these advantages, when faced with the pandemic challenge, French soft power has been significantly weakened. The reason for this is the reliance on institutions that require “live” interaction and the need to rapidly transform the methods used to meet the contemporary demands. Despite the extensive network of cultural and educational centers, their presence in the virtual field now often allows them to have an “attractive” impact on those who were already interested: those who studied French, those who were interested

in the culture and politics of the country. For example, in the pre-pandemic period, any tourist could visit the Louvre and be interested in French culture after listening to a guided tour in their own language, but now, even those who want to visit the museum website can only get information in French and, to a limited extent, in English, Chinese and Spanish [12]. Meanwhile, given the restrictions imposed, it is the Internet space that is becoming the venue for soft engagement, which should be taken into account by states wishing to promote their soft power strategies. In the event that countries that have traditionally been leaders in the field, thanks to centuries of accumulated resources and promotion mechanisms, fail to establish a strong presence in the virtual space, their position will be surrendered to their more successful competitors.

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