

UK Cultural Diplomacy in Europe 1989-2025: Lessons and Implications for Future UK Soft Power

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Context

Soft power¹ is high on the government's agenda, as evidenced by the launch of the UK Soft Power Council in January 2025 and the development of a new Soft Power strategy. The Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee has also launched an inquiry into the extent and effectiveness of the UK's soft power. Its chair, Dame Emily Thornberry, has pointed out that competitors such as China, Russia and India are investing increasingly in soft power tools including educational and cultural exchanges and that the UK cannot afford to be complacent if it wants to maintain its leadership in this domain.

A recent report by University of Bristol historian Dr Charlotte Faucher examines UK cultural diplomacy in Europe, identifying long-term trends; what has worked and what hasn't. Assessing persisting policy challenges and opportunities in light of the past offers evidence-based domestic and international policy recommendations with the aim of providing applicable insights for policymakers. It is also a way to measure the impact of cultural diplomacy and cultural relations beyond metrics that sometimes fail to capture markers of success.

Historically, UK culture, science, and the arts have enjoyed high esteem across Europe. After the Cold War, British cultural diplomacy embedded collaboration and projected the UK as a leading European voice. However, this progress has been weakened by declining budgets for cultural diplomacy and aid coinciding with geopolitically challenging moments for the UK.

In today's fragmented and uncertain world—marked by conflict, war, and renewed Russian aggression—cultural diplomacy is more than symbolic; it is strategic. To reset relations with Europe and secure its position as a trusted partner, the UK must elevate cultural relations to the forefront of its foreign policy. This requires sustained investment in soft power institutions and actors, ensuring Britain's voice and values remain influential across the continent.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked a surge in UK cultural diplomacy across Eastern and Central Europe. The EU itself played an important role in sustaining British cultural diplomacy during this period. However complacency towards countries in Europe among some UK leaders and cultural organisations weakened the UK's reputation in the region in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In the early 2000s government strategy also shifted towards the Middle East, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific, with funding redirected accordingly. The research suggests this reorientation reduced the UK's influence in Europe.

This briefing provides a summary of key findings and highlights recommendations, grounded in past experience, to give concrete form to the current government's priority of resetting relationships with Europe.

Access the full report here:

www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristol/policy-engagement-projects/soft-power-uk

¹ See rear for definitions of soft power and cultural diplomacy.

Key findings

Successes

1. Non-governmental practitioners of cultural relations add a high value to UK cultural diplomacy due to their ability to straddle the political sphere and spaces of cultural policy (often perceived as politically neutral by foreign and domestic audiences). The arm's-length status of the British Council enables it to build trust more effectively than official UK government representatives, who may be perceived as engaging in propaganda. For the FCDO the British Council can be a conduit to valued and respected intelligence.
2. Large-scale schemes such as the Know How Fund or bilateral programmes such as Cultural Seasons have a positive impact on the UK's reputation and economy that can be well evidenced through surveys with partners and through comparative analysis.
3. Practitioners at the British Council and in non-governmental cultural organisations working in European countries value guidance from the FCDO about what foreign policy objectives they should prioritise.

Challenges

4. The cuts to funding streams related to cultural relations and cultural diplomacy have detrimental consequences on the UK's ability to coordinate and mobilise some of its key soft power assets and to maintain a presence overseas among different communities, including at grassroots level.
5. The decrease in the budget for UK cultural relations in Europe before the UK's withdrawal from the European Union has weakened partnerships with Europe and the reputation of Britain in Europe and the world.
6. In the period spanning the 1990s to the early 2000s, prior to the UK's departure from the EU, the official line of UK foreign policy was to prioritise Europe, yet some departments showed complacency towards Western Europe. This contrasted with cultural practitioners (British Council staff, academics, artists) who actively valued EU cooperation but felt that their job was guided by several often-conflicting HMG policy lines about Western Europe.
7. Ignorance of foreign languages in the UK has negatively impacted British business and the reputation of Britain in Europe and the world. A strong soft power, and the economic and political influence it supports, can only be sustained through investment in foreign language skills.
8. Enhanced focus on revenue generating activities for cultural relations since the early 2000s and the danger of a top-down model with 'producers' and 'consumers', risks alienating foreign audiences and rendering them less receptive to British values and culture.
9. There is a mismatch between the long-term nature of soft power and aid strategies and the (often short-term) way an elected government approaches its term in office. Trust is acquired slowly but can be lost quickly. It is hard to build and easy to lose.

Recommendations

The UK's relationship with Europe in the post-pandemic, post-Brexit, and security-conscious era requires a renewed focus on cultural diplomacy as a key soft power tool. While the government has signalled a commitment to soft power, its actions—particularly cuts to funding for the British Council and the BBC World Service—undermine its stated ambitions. Cultural diplomacy serves not only economic and diplomatic goals but also supports broader objectives such as sustainability and trust-building. Trust, in particular, remains a cornerstone of UK foreign policy, and cultural dialogue is essential to foster it.

The recommendations aim to address issues identified during the research and data analysis phases and are intended for the UK government, the British Council and other stakeholders involved in cultural diplomacy and soft power.

Recommendation 1: The centralisation and coordination of efforts among UK organisations that further cultural diplomacy needs to be sustained through a clear soft power strategy.

Recommendation 2: FCDO, the Soft Power Council and the British Council should articulate well-defined UK soft power and cultural diplomacy objectives for Europe, in particular Western Europe (as these are currently less clear than in Eastern and Central Europe) ensuring alignment with broader UK foreign policy goals while also considering the region-specific context.

Recommendation 3: The UK Soft Power strategy should also account for the temporality of soft power and ought to include investment in long-term, sustainable programmes.

Recommendation 4: The UK and EU should agree new arrangements for creative workers, who are at the heart of UK soft power, and youth mobility in the upcoming implementation review of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA).

Recommendation 5: The UK government should take steps for UK arts, cultural and educational organisations to have the possibility to participate in a much broader range of EU programmes, including Erasmus+ and Creative Europe. Collaborations across Europe are key to mobilising UK soft power to ensure that the UK remains attractive to and trusted by Europeans.

Recommendation 6: Cultural diplomacy continues to support the UK's defence agenda and the Ministry of Defence should acknowledge its soft power needs. If soft power is understood as a diplomatic tool to help fight against disinformation and undemocratic attitudes, agencies such as the British Council should benefit from increased funding in line with recent rise in the defence budget.

Recommendation 7: In a context where populism is rising and media literacy is weak among groups that fall prey to disinformation throughout the world, UK soft power must continue to connect with these transnational disenchanted groups. This ambition should build on trusted, long-standing relationships and on an established in-country and digital presence, such as that of the British Council.

Recommendation 8: The UK government should cooperate with other like-minded European nations to address disinformation and promote democratic values. Existing networks such as EUNIC – European Union National Institutes for Culture – might provide relevant avenues for cooperation.

Recommendation 9: The UK government should invest in the learning of foreign languages and acknowledge that foreign languages capability (including among the government and in the business sector) is an important element of the UK's soft power.

Methodology

The report combines insights from international relations, history, and cultural policy studies, using a qualitative approach to examine cultural diplomacy. Archival research drew on British Council records at The National Archives and in Manchester, alongside documents from DCMS and the FCDO. Over 30 interviews were conducted with current and former staff from the British Council, DCMS, FCDO, and DfE; testimonies were cross-checked against written sources.

Key actors

UK soft power strategy is being developed by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), supported by its Soft Power Hub. This team also supports the UK Soft Power Council and liaises with the UK's independent soft power assets, including the British Council and the BBC World Service. Other government departments also have influence in soft power matters, in particular the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) which engages closely with the cultural sector on international cultural exchanges and raises awareness of the UK through international events. The Department for Education (DfE) also has a dedicated international education strategy that supports the growth of British education overseas and increasing access to British education in the UK.

Definitions

Soft power refers to the processes through which persuasion and the search for influence and power help attain foreign policy objectives. The American political scientist Joseph S. Nye, who coined the phrase in 1990, stressed that soft power relied on attraction rather than coercion or payment.

Cultural diplomacy is one of the central pillars of soft power. It relies on the promotion of languages and cultural relations among nations to further a country's soft power. This is undertaken by foreign ministries and other government departments that have an international strategy (culture, trade etc.). It is also supported by non-state actors and arm's-length bodies in so far as some of their programmes align with government strategy. In the UK context, such bodies include the BBC World Service and the British Council.

Further information

This Fellowship was funded through Research England's Policy Support Fund.

Access the full report:

www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristol/policy-engagement-projects/soft-power-uk

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