WORKING PAPER

Beyond the Battle of Narratives: Global soft power dynamics and the EU's strategic approach on international cultural relations in the context of the emerging new world order

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Executive Summary

This paper argues that global soft power dynamics and the key actors' behaviour in the battle of narratives positions the EU's strategic approach on international cultural relations beyond this battle. Even though this approach originally counted on a well-functioning liberal democracy guided by the rule of law, its open and inclusive nature complemented by its readiness to engage in dialogue and focus on the relational process aiming to build trust renders it a useful asset in the emerging multipolar world.

For the success of the EU approach collaborative partners are essential and their level of genuine engagement matters. At the positive end of the global spectrum are the democracies of the Global West and Ukraine, while its war of aggression put Russia firmly on the opposite end. Russia`s soft power has in fact (almost) always been reliant on the instrumentalisation of culture, clearly attempting to disrupt the exisiting system of international relations and to reconstruct the Cold War-era balance of power politics, dividing the world into spheres of influence. Russia's soft coercion efforts are pivotal in its colonial war aimed at the destruction of not just the Ukrainian state, but also of Ukraine's national and cultural identity, language and history.

Ukraine's response to this "weaponisation of cultural identity" was the direct opposite of Russia`s approach. With active EU support, a full scale cultural renewal embraced democratic values, butressing Ukraine's Western orientation and contributing to a wider societal transformation that reinforces its anti-colonial resistance. China presents a conundrum. Its huge cultural potential and exceptional global significance make a strong case for the EU to develop a specific cultural relations strategy with the Asian superpower. On the other hand, China's regular interference with cultural freedom within Europe, its internal restrictions on artistic freedom, cultural and religious rights as well as its increasing alliance with Russia on Ukraine and on disrupting the current rules based world order renders this difficult to envisage.

Given such a scenario, combined with the importance of trust building, dialogue, co-creation, and seeking equity and fairness to address collective challenges in cultural relations, the Global South holds the biggest potential for a reinforced implementation of the EU strategic approach. In the Global South, the EU is generally seen as an attractive and "capable actor," performing well in culture and sport in particular. It is already actively engaged in cultural co-creation and intercultural dialogue with many countries, and supports initiatives to protect and promote cultural heritage, successful European Spaces of Culture projects have been rolling out on all continents (except Australia) since 2019.

My paper contends that a reinforced cultural relations approach, complemented by conventional forms of cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy, should be used in a balanced manner. This would require targeted, concrete flagship projects in each domain with "differentiated implementation", adjusted to specific needs with full involvement of local actors and stakeholders. This could improve coordination among institutional actors. Such an approach also implies moving beyond the rigid application of conceptual approaches, as instead of competing with other methods, this new multi-factor approach would offer a scale of choices for concrete actions on the ground which would be adapted to local circumstances. Engaging in genuine dialogue, meaningful co-creation and mutually beneficial collaboration with local partners resonates well not just with the basic principles of the cultural relations approach. It also meets the clear message coming from the Global South in the wake of Russia`s war and their search for their own place in the new world power constellation. The countries of the Global South are diverse, have their own histories and identities, and are rejecting geopolitical binaries in favour of multi-alignment and interest-based dialogues.

The EU and its Member States, acting collectively, have by far the largest cultural network to engage effectively in third countries across the globe in terms of reinforced cultural relations approach, conventional forms of cultural diplomacy, and public diplomacy. The paradigm shift in international relations due to the Russian invasion and due to the way culture is used by other prominent global actors would fully justify continuing the implementation of the Joint Communication with high ambitions. This implementation should be based on a coherent vision in terms of the overall objectives of the EU`s international cultural relations approach, supported with strong political commitment, leadership, and personal involvement from the top level of EU institutions.

Beyond the Battle of Narratives: Global soft power dynamics and the EU's strategic approach on international cultural relations in the context of the emerging new world order

This paper will examine the perspectives of the EU's strategic approach on international cultural relations in the context of global soft power dynamics, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the emerging new world order. First, the radical deterioration of the geopolitical environment, and especially Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine threatens the current international rules-based order and security architecture. The EU`s actions should be evaluated in the context of how soft power and narratives are used by other key global actors with special regard to China, Russia, and Ukraine, as well as to the perceptions of the Global South. Second, the emerging new world order will have implications on the perspectives of the EU's cultural relations approach, raising several challenges. Wh*ile recognising the progress made so far,* a more coherent policy implementation would be needed.

My analysis is based on reviewing recent assessments concerning Russia's war of aggression and the emerging new world order, and the implementation of the *Joint Communication Towards an EU Strategy for international cultural relations by the European Commission (EC) and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign and Security Policy (European Commission, 2016*) in the context of the multiple crises since its adoption. I will examine to what extent these have guided the *European Parliament's Report* ("Yenbou Report"*) on the Implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations* (European Parliament, 2022) as well as the *EU Council's new Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026* (Council of the European Union, 2022), and what conclusions can be drawn from these.

To set the scene, I will recall that while the adoption of the Joint Communication was the result of a lengthy preparatory process and currently remains the valid overall strategic framework for the EU, it marked the beginning, not the end, of a cumulative effort of a diverse set of European institutional, cultural, and civil society actors which actively participated in its implementation and are determined to continue to do so. The multiple crises hampering these efforts and the mounting challenges ahead call for reshaping the strategic approach.

The next section will attempt to disentangle the terminological labyrinth comprised of soft power, smart power, sharp power, public diplomacy (PD), strategic communication, cultural diplomacy (CD), cultural relations, international cultural relations (ICR), and EU international cultural relations. All these terms are relative newcomers in academic literature, and none of them have a universally accepted precise definition. This has led to tensions and artificial rivalries. A balanced approach with "differentiated implementation", together with the EP's Report`s and the Council's latest Work Plan`s suggestions may offer a solution to overcoming these tensions in a broader framework.

The third section will argue that the civilisational soft power approach, the further rise of authoritarianism outside and within Europe, and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have all hampered the implementation of the Joint Communication. These developments are closely interlinked, and all have global implications. I will review the global soft power dynamics in the context of the emerging new world order, starting with a succinct account of the actions and positions taken by key actors in the battle of narratives. In addition to China, Russia, and Ukraine, the perceptions and expectations of the Global South will be considered. First, I will turn our attention to the conduct of Brazil, India, and some other emerging powers, before offering a special lens on Africa. In all these cases I will demonstrate the institutional mechanisms and concrete means of cultural cooperation with the EU. I will also investigate the perspectives of the EU's strategic approach on international cultural relations.

The <u>fourth section</u> will highlight the specific nature of the EU's approach, its limits and biggest potential, and its resonance with the Global South. Given the tectonic shift in European history constituted by Russia's war of aggression and the emerging new world order, a reinforced international cultural relations approach, conventional forms of cultural diplomacy, and public diplomacy should be used in a balanced manner. This would require targeted flagship projects with differentiated implementation and could improve coordination among institutional actors. The need for a global vision in terms of the overall objectives supported with strong political leadership and personal involvement at the top level in EU institutions will also be identified.

<u>Finally,</u> the paper will assess what kind of preliminary conclusions can be drawn at this stage based on the most recent institutional positions adopted towards the end of last year. The EU Council decided to strengthen the cultural dimension of the EU's external relations in its new *Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026*. Moreover, the EP encouraged the EC and the EEAS to develop coherent EU ICR strategies in third countries in collaboration with EUNIC, and the EESC called for a fully-fledged multiannual strategic action plan on cultural diplomacy. These initiatives reflect a political will to move forward with ambitious implementation plans. In addition, they also highlight the great commitment to support Ukraine also in the cultural domain, and to take a clear stand against the misuse of culture by Russia trying to justify its military aggression, and by authoritarian governments that attempt to redefine international rules and values.

1. Milestones in a nutshell

The adoption of the *Joint Communication* (European Commission, 2016) was the result of a lengthy preparatory process. Yet, as its title indicates: <u>Towards</u> *an EU Strategy for international cultural relations*, it marked the beginning, and not the end of a cumulative effort of a diverse set of European institutional, cultural, and civil actors. The strategy is rooted in the efforts of the European Communities to use culture in the aftermath of World War II to reconcile public opinion among its founding countries. The desire to Europeanise national public discourses and to find a common European narrative have driven the *Declaration on European Identity* (EU Declaration, 1973), the *Tindemans Report* (Tindemans, 1976) and the *Adonnino report* (Commission of the European Communities, 1985) leading to the adoption of the European flag and anthem as culturally based political symbols of the European Communities (and later of the European Union) at the European Council in Milan in 1985. Various elements of these documents have also reappeared in subsequent years in the cultural policy discourse as revealed by Isar (2015), Shore (2000), Sassatelli (2009) and others.

The next major step to occur followed the historical Eastern enlargement and came in the wake of the negative referendums on the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands in 2005. At this historical juncture, policymakers and stakeholders started to renew their reflections on how to move a much bigger and more diverse European Union forward, and turned again to the transformative power of culture for inspiration. This led to the 1st <u>milestone</u>: the *European Agenda for Culture in a globalising world* (European Commission, 2007), which was followed up rapidly by two Council Conclusions of the Ministers of Culture. These documents called for strengthening the transversal role of culture, increasing the coherence and visibility of European action (Council of the European Union, 2007), and for "drawing up a European strategy for incorporating culture consistently and systematically in the external relations of the Union" (Council of the European Union, 2008).

Prompted by the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty and the establishment of the European External Action Service, the European Parliament, "always one of the most ardent supporters of cultural initiatives" (Duke, 2013), launched a *Preparatory Action on Culture in EU external relations* which produced a comprehensive final report, the 2nd <u>milestone</u>; titled *Engaging the World: Towards Global Cultural Citizenship* (European Union, 2014) covering 54 countries. The report earned immediate unanimous acclaim from cultural stakeholders and emphasised that cultural relations

must be based on mutual outreach, as the huge potential of EU soft power can only be fulfilled if Europe itself becomes ready to learn from other cultures. EU institutions quickly followed suit, embracing both its spirit and recommendations in the *Council's Work Plan for Culture 2015-2018* (Council of the European Union, 2014) and initiating numerous actions as well as a formal request by the Ministers of Culture addressed to the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to "present a more strategic approach to culture in external relations" (Council of the European Union, 2015).

The 3ʳᵈ milestone: the resulting Joint Communication in June 2016 reflected a comprehensive approach, presenting cooperation initiatives and financing mechanisms in a coherent way. Based on mutual respect, it suggested *a* new model of enhanced cooperation with Member States, third countries, other international organisations, and all cultural stakeholders. Highlighting cultural diversity, the need to create synergies and to respect local sensitivities, the Joint Communication was promptly welcomed both by the Foreign Affairs Council (Council of the EU, 2016b) and by Cultural Ministers (Council of the EU, 2017a). Moreover, the Leaders' Meeting in Gothenburg in November 2017 (European Council 2017a) called for revamping the European Agenda for Culture to promote the cultural dimension of the Union to strengthen European identity through culture and values, which was also confirmed by the Rome European Council in December 2017 (European Council 2017b).

Following requests from EU leaders a 4ᵗʰ milestone was created: the *New European Agenda for Culture* (NEAC) was adopted 2018 (European Commission, 2018) to give strategic guidance and to set out the new overall framework for cultural policy cooperation at the EU level. Out of its five pillars: social, economic, and international dimensions of culture, cultural heritage, and Digital4Culture, a wide range of projects were implemented by the responsible European Commission services (DG EAC, NEAR, DEVCO/INTPA) and by the European External Action Service (EEAS). These initiatives were launched in priority regions and in coordination with strategic partner countries.

In the Western Balkans (cc EUR 15 million) this meant taking action to fight illicit trafficking of cultural goods (jointly with UNESCO), a regional programme on culture and creativity, and a call for proposals for cultural cooperation projects. In Eastern Partnership countries the EU4Culture Programme (cc EUR 8 million) aimed to strengthen the links between culture, economic growth and the promotion of intercultural dialogue. In the Southern Mediterranean (EUR 6 million) a programme targeting the region's youth supported culture as a vector for employment, democratisation, tolerance, and resilience. In Africa, Asia and in ACP countries a new generation of cultural cooperation projects were rolled out amounting to nearly EUR 200 million, focusing mainly on cultural heritage, empowering young people and women, strengthening the cultural and creative industries, inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, peace-building efforts, conflict prevention, and social cohesion. In addition, the High-Level EU–China, and EU-Japan policy dialogues on culture and education were also continued, as well as the sessions of the EU-Korea Cultural Cooperation Committee.

In line with the overall orientations of the NEAC the Council adopted its *Work Plan for Culture 2019-22* (Council of the EU, 2018), and reflecting also on the NEAC's international dimension detailed Council Conclusions were adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council (Council of the EU, 2019) establishing the 5ᵗʰ milestone: a *Framework for Action*. This was prepared by the specific Friends of Presidency Group set up for this purpose. The framework forcefully demonstrated for the first time that Member States rallied behind the joint EC/EEAS approach to international cultural relations and formally agreed to make it an integral part of EU foreign policy. They also committed to develop local strategies together with EU Delegations and the Commission, thereby supporting—among others— the "European Houses (later changed to Spaces) of Culture" preparatory action implemented by the EU National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC). At the same time, the new *Framework for Action* emphasised the need for stronger cooperation with relevant Council bodies, especially in the context of enlargement, development and strategic partnerships, and appropriate expertise in the field of cultural relations.

Throughout the whole strategy formulation process, cultural stakeholders, civil society organisations and scholars have played a very important role in collaborating constructively with the European Parliament and the European Commission (Isar, 2015 and More Europe, 2017). On a parallel track, development experts and stakeholders have been cooperating in a similar manner to harness the potential of culture for international development (Helly, 2017). This has contributed to the adoption of the *European Consensus on Development* (Council of the European Union, 2017b) in response to the UN's 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. The large diversity of so many agents working for the same objective has proven that "the strategy's formulation process had a distinctive polyvocal, bottom-up character" (Isar, 2015; see also Sassatelli, 2009) which has had a positive impact on its reception as well as on its follow up.

The positive feedback concerning the Yenbou Report and the Council's latest Work Plan at the end of 2022 demonstrate that this large and diverse "culture - driven stakeholder and scholarly community" is more than ready to continue the same type of cooperation among its members as well as with the various EU Institutions to reach the next, 6th-milestone, set out in the *EU Council`s new Work Plan 2023 - 2026*: "an EU strategic framework aiming to mainstream the cultural policy perspective and the assets of culture into all relevant EU policies" (Council of the European Union, 2022).

2. Terminological labyrinth

Cultural diplomacy, cultural relations, international cultural relations, public diplomacy and soft power are all relative newcomers to academic literature, and none of these terms have universally accepted precise definitions. In fact, these terms do overlap, and their blurred boundaries allow each of them to take on meanings beyond their original conception (Isar, R 2021). They are all part of the same broad semantic field, but—in a nutshell—while cultural relation practitioners aspire to genuine reciprocity and mutual understanding, CD, PD, and soft power may bear connotations of instrumentalism and self-interest (British Council, 2018). Given the many uncertainties, several assessments of the Joint Communication point out the need for further clarifications to guide its implementation towards an optimal scenario. (Trobbiani & Pavón-Guinea, 2019 & 2020; Carta & Higgott, 2020; Murray & Lamonica, 2021; Mafalda, 2021; Abratis, 2021; Serodes, 2022).

2.1. What is in a term?

Cultural exchanges and cross-cultural interactions have a long history stretching back to ancient civilisations. These forms of interaction have always had an important influence on different societies, but it was only in the nineteenth century when these rather sporadic and dispersed forms of contact took on a more strategic character (Grincheva, 2023; Clarke, 2020). The use of CD terminology in its current sense however began in the late 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, and became widespread in Western scholarship from the 1970s.

During this period, the EU's founding fathers, US politicians and prominent intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic considered cultural diplomacy as a key vehicle to persuade public opinion of the need for the West to shed its hostilities and to bring historical enemies closer to each other (Hewitson & D'Auria, 2012). On the other hand, cultural diplomacy was also used and "weaponised" by the same circle in their anti-communist struggle against the Soviet Union (and vice versa). Meanwhile in major regions of the Global South "culture became a vehicle for exchange and solidarity among states who sought an identity for themselves beyond the bipolar confrontation" (Clarke, 2020). This development has not yet received sufficient attention in mainstream scholarship, even though it would be an important subject to recognise when designing and implementing EU actions in these regions. As a result, section three of this paper will explore this question further.

After this period, cultural diplomacy remained nationally focused and cultural institutes almost solely represented their own countries' interests and values both within and outside the European Union. This form of diplomacy was characterised primarily by the one-way dissemination of national cultural influence. While today this is still the main mission national cultural institutes, around the last decade of the twentieth century a gradual shift began. Embedded in the process of the erosion of state sovereignty, the rise of non-governmental actors, and accelerating with "the new globalization" (Baldwin 2016) driven by information technology, this change has led to the emergence of the notions of cultural relations and international cultural relations.

The emergence of these notions coincided with the appearance of the term: <u>soft power</u>, coined by Joseph Nye in his influential book of 1990 (Nye, 1990). The original formulation simply referred to the ability of a state, or any other entity "to attract others to want what it wants". Its core components were defined as persuasion and attraction to be used in public and cultural diplomacy alike, mainly in inter-state relations via supranational actors. Furthermore, it was emphasised that the general public could also be targeted both by governments or civilian agents either with positive or negative intentions (Nye, 2006).

Nye himself refined his approach in 2003, introducing the term '<u>smart power</u>' (Nye, 2003), and in subsequent publications (2011a, b) arguing that effective action requires states to deploy smart power stemming from a carefully constructed combiniations of soft and hard powers. Nye originally advocated for the use of soft power not based solely on culture but also on democratic values and human rights, thus complementing rather than replacing hard military and economic power. Even more recently, following his footsteps, the term "sharp power" appeared on the scene (The Economist, 2017; Walker & Ludwig, 2017). In a nutshell, "<u>sharp power</u>" is "the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes" (Nye, J in Melissen & Wang, 2019) and quickly became one of the the favourite manipulation tools by Russia, China and others (further details in section 3).

In parallel, within the same framework, a rapid rise of the theory and use of <u>cultural relations</u> and <u>international cultural relations</u> has taken place, primarily focusing on two-way national and international cultural activities with non-coercive, reciprocal characters. These can be conducted by private and public entities alike, aiming at a deeper understanding with better connectivity enabling sustainable dialogue among all actors involved. Certain authors consider, however, that cultural relations is, by definition, a bottom up process and as such is not compatible with public diplomacy (Ang *et al*., 2015, pp. 366-368). Nevertheless, most assessments (British Council, 2020; Murray & Lamonica, 2021; Damaso, 2021) agree that a "relational approach" would be the best approach for the EU to achieve its objectives.

This was also the reasoning behind the Joint Communication's decision to opt for using "<u>EU international cultural relations</u>" (ICR) in its title, instead of simply following the earlier vocabulary of the Preparatory Action: "culture in EU external relations". At the same time, this decision was intended to signal the clear distinction of the new plan from cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, this assertion was strenghtened by the fact that the term "soft power" does not even appear in the text of the Joint Communication, allowing it to focus on its new strategic objectives: moving beyond "European projection" towards the establishment of a new spirit of dialogue, joint capacity-building, and global solidarity (European Commission, 2016).

<u>Public diplomacy</u> (PD), the "last piece of the terminological puzzle", was seen by Nye as an instrument to implement soft power (Nye, 2008). According to a more comprehensive definition, public diplomacy can be understood as "an instrument used by states, associations of states, some sub-state and non-state actors as well as by international organisations to understand cultures, attitudes, and behaviour, build and manage relationships; and influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values" (Melissen, 2013; Davis Cross & Melissen, 2013).

Complementing many other definitions (Cull, 2013 & Melissen 2005 probably being the most influential) Melissen offered a simplified description of public diplomacy in 2019: "a country's efforts to create and maintain relationships with publics in other societies to advance policies and actions" in order to stimulate new thinking with an inspiring collection of PD essays. Within the overall framework of "new public diplomacy" (two-way and relational process, as opposed to one-way, state focused "old public diplomacy") the editors observe here the increasing prominence of PD for diplomacy in general, which requires a reconceptualization of diplomatic practices and a progressive mainstreaming of public diplomacy's principles within governments and their foreign affairs services (Melissen & Wang, 2019). Several analysts also note the growing role of culture in public diplomacy and most of them consider cultural diplomacy as one of public diplomacy's subsets (Goff, 2013., British Council 2018). The EEAS shares this view and in its own public diplomacy definition introduced a further element: underline strategic communication. This element contributes to overall public diplomacy efforts, and is led and practised by communication specialists mostly with a sharp, short-term focus, therefore complementing the long-term PD view (Interview 3, 2023).

The emphasis on mainstreaming, dialogue, networks, greater exchange, and so on, (all frequently used in the definitions of new public diplomacy) in fact moves PD closer to the ICR domain to the extent that even a "theoretical bridge" is established between them (Cull, 2013 p 124-126 & Damaso, 2021, p19). Following this line of scholarship raises not only the question of the theoretical compatibility between ICR and PD, but also how these terms are employed firstly, in official EU documents, and secondly, how concrete projects are devised, labelled, and implemented in the Brussels headquarters and by EU Delegations on the ground.

2.2 The choice of terms in EU documents

The choice of terms for use in EU documents is always decided on with painstaking attention to detail. These decision processes take into account the competencies, expectations, and constraints of each institution as well as the overall political circumstances at the time of their adoption. The *EU's Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS)* is no exception, and in June 2016 had an important reference to culture and inter-cultural dialogue, mainly in the context of countering violent extremism following major terrorist attacks in Europe. EUGS confirmed the need to live up to the EU`s values internally and externally (Council of the European Union 2016a, p24). The EEAS also wanted to highlight the need to enhance its strategic communication efforts and investment in and joining-up of public diplomacy initiatives across different fields. The Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions that followed EUGS in October 2016 mentioned "cultural diplomacy as an additional, valuable tool to achieve the Strategy`s goals, and stressed the need of joining up efforts in the field of public diplomacy including strategic communication, inside and outside the EU, to speak with one voice and ultimately promote its core values".

The constellation of the Joint Communication and the Global Strategy gave an opportunity to develop EC / EEAS coordination further to address challenges identified during the first phase of the implementation of the EU strategic approach as well as to enhance the coherence of terminology. Accordingly, in April 2019 the Foreign Affairs Council established a *Framework for Action* to conduct EU international cultural relations (EU Council 2019), while the EUGS` first review: *The EU`s Global Strategy Three Years On, Looking Forward*, confirmed the direction chosen in both domains and devoted two separate sections to public and cultural diplomacy, listing selected achievements (EEAS 2019).

There was legitimate expectation that the <u>*Strategic Compass For Security and Defence*</u> (EEAS, 2022) and the <u>*Global Gateway*</u> (European Commission, 2021) would follow suit and would elaborate further on the potential role of culture and public diplomacy in EU external relations. However, this has not materialised, despite a number of specific calls, such as the one during the hearing of the EESC`s opinion on the strategic approach: "In an increasingly divided world…culture can play a vital role in re-establishing communication…the new cultural action plan to be developed (as suggested in the EESC report)..requires political agreement, guidance, and deep refection, including as part of the Strategic Compass" (EESC, April 2022).

As for devising, labelling and implementing concrete projects in the Brussels headquarters and by EU Delegations on the ground we should recall, that in reality, public diplomacy and international cultural relations have essentially been developed and practised in parallel. To provide practical guidance, a detailed study was issued by the EC's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI) entitled *Analysis of the perception of the EU and the EU's policies abroad*, which was specifically designed "to contribute to the EU public diplomacy outreach activities" to fine-tune messages and themes to local conditions, "facilitating a more meaningful and effective EU engagement globally" (European Commission, 2015). With a bit of simplification one can argue that in Brussels PD (and strategic communication) has been the main focus of the EEAS, while ICR has been that of DG EAC, with DG INTPA (former DEVCO) and DG NEAR falling somewhere in between, depending on their own changing priorities. The unique role of EUNIC Global in Brussels and its clusters across the globe must also be mentioned here, as they have become key players during the last years (more details on this in section 4).

In a somewhat similar vein, at the Delegations, the Political Sections tend to focus on international cultural relations engaging in political dialogue with host governments and cultural stakeholders. Meanwhile, the Press teams focus on public diplomacy and strategic communication to project EU values and fight disinformation, occasionally also with traditional cultural diplomacy projects (for example, film festivals). The Cooperation Section concentrates on development related cultural actions, always taking into account local specificities. The Head of Delegations must always play a key role to ensure complementarity between short- and long-term initiatives, appropriate financial and human resources, as well as to decide on the right balance between international cultural relations and public diplomacy (Interview 3, 2023; EP, 2017). In this context, some argue that ICR may gradually take over or replace PD, while strategic communication is emerging as a parallel priority (Damaso, 2021; Arbritis, 2021). The most recent developments do not seem to support the first part of this argument, but the strengthening of strategic communication is a solid fact, not least due to the undeniable and forceful "return of power politics in a contested multipolar world", as set out in the *Strategic Compass* (EEAS, 2022).

Notwithstanding efforts to improve the internal coordination of EU diplomacy strategies, complex and ambivalent terminology along with the multitude of potential agencies and the deteriorating geopolitical situation have led to occasional tensions, discord, and unnecessary rivalries among the various actors involved in EU initiatives. Such discords have resulted in often suboptimal outcomes. To advance from this state of affairs, the *Yenbou Report* (EP, 2022) made an important contribution by recognizing the need to move beyond the conventional soft power framework, and by outlining the different nature and purpose of EU cultural diplomacy and EU international cultural relations (EP 2022, section 2.2 & point 60). The Report also acknowledges the role of strategic communication (point 61) and encourages Member States and the EEAS to raise awareness among diplomats of international cultural relations as a key, independent field within public diplomacy (point 70). Together with its proposition to use cultural diplomacy and cultural relations in a complementary fashion and to leave sufficient space for public diplomacy projects, the Yenbou Report responds to the arguments formulated by scholars and cultural stakeholders in their assessments and should facilitate the further development of the EU's strategic approach.

3. Soft power and geopolitics

This part will argue that the civilisational soft power approach, the further rise of authoritarianism outside and within Europe, and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have all hampered the implementation of the Joint Communication. These developments are closely interlinked, and all have global implications.

3.1. From the end of history to raw power politics

As early as last March, the Strategic Compass painted a very bleak picture of the external environment: "Russia`s war of aggression constitutes a tectonic shift in European history…The crisis in multilateralism is leading to more and more transactional relations among states… Interdependence remains important, but it is increasingly conflictual and soft power is weaponised…We returned to raw power politics where we face a competition of governance systems accompanied by a real battle of narratives." (EEAS, 2022).

One year on, this state of affairs has only deteriorated further. The end of the brutal war in Ukraine is still in no sight of end the latest China–Russia summit (20-23 March 2023) confirmed their common objective to accelerate the decline of the West, doubling down on their infamous "friendship with no limits" joint statement made in February 2022, just a few days before Russia's attack on Ukraine (Lehne, 2023). The real intention of China`s deceitful "peace plan" is to back up Russia`s narrative and to gain allies in the Global South by pretending to act as a pragmatic peacemaker and presenting the US as an ideological warmonger (Financial Times, 22/03/2023). Such pretentious positioning is more about improving China`s deteriorating relations than altering the course of the war which it hopes will end with Russia`s victory (Financial Times, 21/03/2023).

Twenty years ago the world looked entirely different, as the EU's first ever security strategy testified: "Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure, nor so free. The violence of the first half of the 20th century has given way to a period of peace and stability unprecedented in European history." (Council of the European Union, 2003). The role for culture in EU external relations was originally developed in this spirit as described in detail in the first section. Back then, the EU's approach was based on its belief in the rule of law and the existence of a strong liberal world order, which put cosmopolitan thinking on centre stage. It is ever more urgent to understand and define how best to cope with the still evolving changes to the world order.

Therefore, today we must evaluate the EU's actions and perspectives, together with those of its rivals, in the current context. Just a year after the publication of the first *European Agenda for Culture* in 2007 the financial crisis hit, and since then the EU has been in permanent crisis mode (Lehne, 2023). This has been coupled with a gradually worsening geopolitical environment, stimulated by Russia's attack on Georgia in 2008, China`s Xi coming to power in 2012, Russia's illegal occupation and annexation of parts of Ukraine from 2014 onwards, Brexit, and the election of President Donald Trump in 2016. At the same time, cracks within the EU also appeared, Poland and Hungary being signalled most often as the victims of democratic backsliding and the spread of authoritarianism (Proud, 2020). According to the 2nd Annual Review of European Democracy Support (Democracy Report, 2023), the decline of democracy is a global phenomenon which shows no signs of abating, despite efforts at the latest Democracy Summit in March 2023. The digital revolution has aggravated the situation further. The reduced cost combined with dramatically increased speed and reach led to an explosion of information producing a "paradox of plenty" (Herbert A. Simon, 1999, quoted in Nye, 2019) resulting in a scarcity of attention (Nye, 2019), which in turn reinforced the search for and reliance on strong narratives.

3.2. Key actors in the battle of narratives

This section will review global soft power dynamics in the context of the emerging new world order, starting with a succinct account of the actions and positions taken by key actors in the battle of narratives. In addition to China, Russia, and Ukraine, the perceptions and expectations of the Global South will be considered. First, I will turn to the conduct of Brazil, India, and some other emerging powers, before then applying a special lens to the case of Africa. In all these cases I will demonstrate the institutional mechanisms and concrete means of cultural cooperation with the EU. Moreover, I will investigate the perspectives of the EU's strategic approach to international cultural relations.

China and Russia are leading autocratic proponents of civilisational discourse and are determined to challenge liberal democratic values and Western hegemony, but with diverging scope, means and cultural backgrounds (Higgott, 2022). Both countries use soft power and sharp power instruments simultaneously across the globe, spending billions of euros to do so. They do this to a varying degree of success, depending on the receptiveness of their target regions which are influenced to a significant degree by their historical legacies, cultural narratives and political embeddedness. Both superpowers employ a full array of tools ranging from traditional soft power relying on the attraction of culture and values to sharp power which is maliciously designed to penetrate and pollute—increasingly also by digital means and social media—the information environment of their target entities, and in reality, is already a specific type of hard power.

Overall, China has, so far, been more inclined towards the traditional soft power line, not least by building on its vast Confucius network and narrative of being a "5000 year-old-ancient civilisation." Russia, on the other hand, has been pursuing much more smart, sharp power initiatives from the very beginning, though the country still maintains some soft power actions. Of course, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine opened a new chapter: the clear dominance of sharp power combined with brutal hard power. This approach physically destroyed cultural heritage and monuments, and embodied Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine's cultural identity.

While the war tightened general cooperation between Russia and China, it nonetheless led to a huge decoupling between the two countries in terms of their global soft power ranking. According to the 2023 Global Soft Power Index (Brand Finance, 2023 March) Russia was the only country to see a decline in all 35 attributes (except one "affairs I follow closely") across the 8 Soft Power Pillars. Russia's dramatic fall (from 23 to 105 out of 121 countries in the reputation ranking, down by 74 places in the "easy to do business with" category, down by 61 places in "future growth potential", and down to 119th in the "People & Values" pillar) resulted in the country sliding out from the top 10 to 13th in the overall Index. At the same time, China was overtaken by Japan in the top 5, but still remains 5th after the US, the UK and Germany. It is worth noting that Ukraine saw the strongest soft power improvement among all 121 nation brands, driven mainly by steep increases in the "familiarity and influence, respects law and human rights, and tolerant and inclusive" pillars (up by 14, 69 and 63 places respectively) and in several other categories too.

3.2.1. Russia

The main distinctive feature of Russia`s soft power policy has always been its instrumentalist nature in general, and to support Russia`s quest to return to a Cold War-era balance of power politics, dividing the world into spheres of influence (Snigyr, 2023). This drive to fight US hegemony and unilateralism has been a cardinal principle of Russian foreign policy towards the Global South and was pursued with greater confidence as US hegemony wained. Its challenge to Western international legal norms and sanctions aims to shift the centre of global power away from the West and boost nostalgic domestic perceptions of its great power status during Soviet times (Ramani 2023).

Of equal importance is that Russia's actions have rarely been about attraction or cultural exchange; instead Russia mostly deploys non-military instruments to manipulate, undermine and weaken opponents to complement the army's hybrid warfare artillery (Sheiko, 2023; Meister, 2022; Ukrainian Institute, 2022 September). In fact, Russia's official hybrid warfare doctrine published in the mid-2010s clearly states that the ratio of non-military to military measures when waging a war should be 4:1. In addition to disinformation campaigns, classical and contemporary artists and cultural leaders are therefore routinely weponized to advance Russia's imperial geopolitical objectives (Shaipov, 2023).

Such an approach is deeply rooted in Soviet–era thinking and practices which have almost one hundred years of history. It requires a highly centralised state-based institutional structure essentially run by administrators closely integrated to the top tiers of government. The first Russian agency (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) to manage cultural diplomacy was established in 1925 with the primary objective of whitewashing the image of the Soviet Union by organising cultural events with well known Soviet artists abroad, and to bring carefully selected foreign artists and intellectuals (Andre Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and so on), mainly from Western Europe, on "cultural journeys" to the Soviet Union. These figures were expected to relay positive messages concerning Russia's communist system on their return to the West (Stern, 2009).

Under the Khrushchev era, five years after Stalin's death in 1958, the agency was rebranded, and the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries expanded its scope, primarily targeting the current Global South during the Cold War. Up to 1992, 600,000 foreign students enrolled in Russian language classes from these countries and many other long-lasting connections were created, which offers us a partial explanation for the receptivity of these countries to Russian propaganda today.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the predecessors of Russia's main cultural diplomacy actor since 2008, the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent State Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo) enlarged their competencies to also include research, technical, and development aid. These actors were put under the direct authority of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Although technically remaining under the direction of the Foreign Ministry, Rossotrudnichestvo reports directly to the President of Russia and commands the network of Russian Centres of Science and Culture and Russian Houses. These two institutions comprise 97 offices across 80 countries.

Rossotrudnichestvo was set up in September 2008, just one month after Russia's invasion of Georgia, to counterbalance the "aggressor image" of Russia that became dominant in the international media as a result of the war. The Kremlin reacted by revising Russia's foreign policy doctrine, officially incorporating soft power into its strategy to actively promote positive views and news about Russia in general, and with the specific objective of relativising and justifying Russia's armed and hybrid aggressions against other states (Ukrainian Institute, 2022 September).

The new institution was designed to strengthen the soft power and attractiveness of Russia in the world, but especially among its neighbours who were becoming tempted by Western development models. Its funding is not transparent, the latest available indication points to EUR 54 million in 2020. Collaborating with a wide mix of other (semi-)governmental organisations in similar fields, the institution employs almost 900 staff. Its top management, including Heads of Russian Houses, consists almost exclusively of fully loyal political figures appointed directly by Russia's President. By now, Rossotrudnichestvo has become the best funded organisation in Russia, with the largest network dealing with cultural diplomacy and development aid. It has been used very actively to back up Russia's military aggression around the globe.

However, at least two other major actors must also be mentioned to grasp the scale and intensity of Russia's "soft power framework" and its struggles to legitimise its foreign policy: The Russkiy Mir (Russian World) Foundation (established in 2007) and the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund (established in 2010). Formally, all three have an independent status but in reality all operate under the Kremlin's close watch, belonging—together with Rossotrudnichestvo and many others—to the same cultural and public diplomacy ecosystem whose main task is the widest possible dissemination of pro-Russia narratives abroad. Due to their active support of Russia's illegal, genocidal war against Ukraine all three are sanctioned by the EU and its allies.

The Russkiy Mir Foundation is legally registered as an NGO and its stated mission is the study and promotion of Russian language, culture and history in foreign countries. For "Western consumption," the Foundation claims similarities to the Goethe Institute, or the British Council. In reality it was set up by Presidential Decree and in cooperation with the Orthodox Church as a key tool in Putin's efforts to institutionalise the *Russkiy Mir* ideology advocating that Russia is not a mere nation state, but a unique civilisation with an important role in world history. According to this ideology, Russia has a sacred duty to restore the (ex-Soviet) Russian sphere of inluence, protect traditional, conservative values from cosmopolitan, immoral principles, and to fight against the international liberal order. This distorted vision considers Russia, Ukraine and Belarus as the geographic core of the "Russian World," which is artificially extended to also include ethnic Russian or Russian speaking diasporas and "admirers"of Russian culture across the globe in concentric circles. Consequently, combined with Alexander Dugin's theory, which puts Sea Powers (Atlanticists, mainly the US & UK) against Land Powers (Euraisanists, such as Russia) in a competition to shape the world order (Dugin, 1997), the Foundation has been used to justify Russia's invasions of Georgia in 2008, and of Ukraine in 2014, as well as the ongoing war. Obviously, the *Russkiy Mir* concept is vehemently rejected by Ukraine and the West, but the exclusive appropriation of the Russian language generated an opposition movement by the young Russophone literature scene even in Kazakhstan (ROAR, 2022).

The Russkiy Mir Foundation has a large network consisting of 104 Operating Centres and 128 Cabinets in more than 50 countries. Recently, the foundation has increasingly focused on Africa and Asia where its messages are expected to find the most fertile ground. In practice, the organiation operates under the tight control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its senior management has been appointed by Presidential decree since 2021 (Ukrainian Institute, 2022 July). Being an integral part of Russia's 'hybrid warfare' artillery (Political Capital, 2017), the foundation is one of the most visible manifestations of how cultural diplomacy is actually integrated into Russia's foreign policy. Due to its design and special purpose, its cultural programmes propagate well known nineteenth century classical writers and composers (world wide Pushkin competition, Romance songs, and so on) disregarding the contemporary art scene and avoiding real dialogues with citizens and artists of host countries (Modern Diplomacy 2021). The Foundation regularly appears on the screen of a regular "disinformation monitor"—launched by three CEE research institutes—to draw public attention to how easily-digestible pro-Kremlin content built on fake news, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and anti-Western sentiment is being spread by Russian propaganda (Political Capital, 2017).

The role of active disinformation through traditional, digital and social media is beyond the scope of this paper, but it must be recalled that Russian (and Chinese) state-run media have been aggressively spreading their own narratives in an increasingly coordinated fashion, blaming NATO, Washington and Europe for the war, food shortages in the developing world and for a wide range of other issues. These accusations have strong resonance in the Global South (Semafor, 2023 March; Foreign Policy, 2023 March). The two key actors in Russia; Sputnik, and Russia Today, are obviously also part of the same "soft power framework" and cooperate closely with the Russkiy Mir Foundation and Rossotrudnichestvo (more details in 3.2.4.).

A third entity, the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund (established in 2010), is less powerful and expansive than the previous two, and of a somewhat different nature, but still an important element of the same ecosystem that tries to promote Moscow's foreign policy narratives. Primarily, the fund has a rather long-term focus, and attempts to engage young international relations researchers both from Russia and from the West by providing grants and organising conferences and summer schools dedicated to studying the perspectives of a potential "common Eurasian geopolitical space", or to specific countries and regions that have a high priority in Russia's foreign policy doctrine.

The objective is to create close links between promising researchers at the beginning of their careers, well-known experts, and carefully selected members of political elites to shape their views in line with pro-Kremlin narratives. The fund thus hopes to impact the sympathies of future leaders both in Russia and in foreign countries. Among its high-level events, the so-called "Potsdam Meetings" were the most well-known and entailed regular discussions between Russian and German Members of Parliament on global post-Cold war security architecture. The meetings had to be suspended after Russia's invasion due to the withdrawal of all Western participants in March 2022. The immediate withdrawal of Russia from the Potsdam Meetings, and the fact that the fund is also on the EU sanctions list as a result of its strong support of Russia's war indicates, that similarly to Russkiy Mir, the fund's activities may turn towards the Global South in the future (Khmilevskaya, E. & Klomegah,K. (2021).

Akin to other parts of the "soft power framework" the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund's legal NGO status mainly serves to keep its financial situation and internal structures non-transparent. Roughly half of its resources are received from the federal budget, while the rest is provided by private citizens, widely assumed to be, or to be closely connected to, Russian oligarchs. With limited reporting obligations on its expenditure, and active liaising with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Russian International Affairs Council, various institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and other fellow organisations, the fund plays a useful role in developing and advocating for the Kremlin's narrative under strict governmental control (Ukrainian Institute, 2022 May).

As such, together with its peers, the Gorchakov Fund has been used by Russia to encourage ethnolinguistic identities to increase its influence over Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus by nurturing "Slavic Russian-speaking" minorities in these regions. Kazakhstan, Georgia, Belarus, and of course Ukraine have always had a special significance for Russia's efforts to employ ethnocultural factors concerning these target communities with similar cultural identities. This has led to the creation of a new mechanism of socio-political influence that could be termed as "identity warfare" (Mahmoudian, 2022).

The historical developments of these processes clearly show the true nature of Russia's cultural and public diplomacy. What has been called soft power has always in fact been "sharp power" (see section 2 on the terminology). Sharp power initiatives have prepared the restoration of the ex-Soviet space following an imperial logic. With the invasion of Ukraine, this sharp power dramatically turned into brutal hard power deployed at a scale not seen on European soil since World War II. Russia's illegal war aims to destroy the Ukrainian state and nation. Indeed, President Putin and his elites explicitly state that both are artificial constructs (Sasse, 2023). It is a war against Ukraine's national

and cultural identity, language and history (Sheiko, 2023).

3.2.2 Ukraine

Looking at the global developments of cultural policy in the last 10 years, there cannot be a sharper contrast than the one between Russia and Ukraine. Contrary to the rigid, state led, fully centralised, manipulative environment in Russia that relegates art and culture to the status of becoming an element in the Kremlin's hybrid warfare arsenal, as described above, Ukraine has been systematically engineering a major renewal both in terms of its cultural policy and across the whole cultural scene following the Euromaidan revolution of 2013-14. A first attempt for this had already been made a decade earlier, in the wake of the Orange Revolution of 2004-05, but due to the lack of sustained political will and much needed structural changes this attempt remained a declaration of intent. That said, the Orange Revolution of 2004-05 indirectly helped the birth of Ukraine's independent, innovative cultural scene which had become an important actor by the mid-2010s.

During this period (2005-14), starting from the declaration of a reformed cultural policy in the "Law About State Cultural Policy" in 2005, several art projects and critical cultural initiatives were developed without state support, funded by private sources complemented by strong financial and institutional backing from the EU itself as well as from the British Council and the Goethe Institute (Olzacka, 2023). The EU's European Agenda for Culture in 2007 opened this possibility for non-member states, followed by the Lisbon Treaty's provision for cultural cooperation between the EU and third countries in 2009 (Pesenti, 2020). The Eastern Partnership Cultural Programme in 2011 provided further momentum, assigning EUR 10 million for the six countries (Ukraine among them) concerned.

However, the real "watershed moment" resulted from the Euromaidan "Revolution of Dignity" and Russia's subsequent hybrid attack and annexation of Crimea in 2014. In the cultural field, Ukraine decided to respond to the annexation, and Russia's "weaponization of cultural identity," in an innovative manner. Building on the new wave of critical creativity arising from the independent cultural scene, the government, together with NGOs, civil society and political reformists, started to dismantle the paternalistic Soviet style state management of culture, replacing this with a decentralised system based on European liberal democratic values, and strengthening local cultural industries. These principles and detailed action plans were included in the government's new cultural strategy (Olzacka, 2023) aimed at promoting artistic creativity, national unity, and countering Russia's divisive efforts.

A key element was the development of a new institutional network consisting of four main building blocks: the Ukrainian Book Institute (2016), the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, the Ukrainian Institute (both established in 2017) and the major restructuring of the Ukrainian State Film Agency (founded in 2006, renewed in 2014). All these groups have been operating according to the new cultural governance principles and have closely followed the models of their European counterparts ever since with a competitive management selection, providing transparent public funding to the creative sector under full media scrutiny (Pesenti, 2020; Olzacka, 2023.

The whole process of the creation of these organisations was accompanied by constant EU support. In 2014 the EU – Ukraine Association Agreement dedicated a chapter to culture leading to various additional cultural creative and mobility projects starting with "Culture Bridges" (EUR 1,2 million for 2017 – 2020), while Ukraine also joined the Creative Europe Programme in 2016 enabling the country's cultural and audio-visual sectors to benefit from funding via 23 projects as partners or coordinators until 2020. In the current Creative Europe Programme in 2021, Ukrainian organisations already received almost EUR 400.000 via eight projects as partners or coordinators.

In addition, the largest cultural programme the EU has ever implemented in a country outside its territory, the "House of Europe" (EUR 12,2 million) was launched in 2019 to run until 2023. This programme was intended to become a model of European cultural foreign policy in a strategically important neighbouring state, and until Russia's attack on 24 February 2022, 139 calls for proposals were launched, benefiting 4500 successful applications out of 15000 submissions. Going well beyond the cultural and creative fields, the "House of Europe" project also supported critical reform areas like education, health, youth, and so on. Furthermore, 75% of the funding was spent across the country in a decentralised manner, outside Kiev. Russia`s attack forced a shift to provide emergency aid to these sectors and to the project's more than 900 alumni. In addition, a crisis aid package helped to evacuate art and cultural heritage from more than 30 museums, to document Russian war crimes, and to assist with the restoration of damaged cultural institutions (Diemer, 2023).

Immediately after Russia's attack in February 2022, the European Commission provided a support package of medium- and long-term action to Ukrainian artists and cultural organisations. In addition to extending the deadline of applications for the 2022 call for cooperation projects, a special action of EUR 5 million was designed under the Creative Europe Programme's 2023 annual work programme to provide flexible funding to grass-root projects on the ground. This action intended to help Ukrainian artists and organisations to create and showcase their art, to facilitate the integration of displaced Ukrainians through culture, and to support the post-war recovery of Ukraine's cultural sectors. In line with the *EU Work Plan for Culture 2023 – 2026* the EC will also set up an expert group to preserve and reconstruct cultural heritage, and to empower local cultural and creative sectors (Interview 1, 2023).

An equally important "wartime development" was the acceptance of the Ukrainian Institute application for the status of Associate Member by EUNIC at the end of 2022. The acceptance confirmed that Ukraine shares EUNIC's broader understanding of culture and its approach to cultural relations, based on building partnerships and advocating an increased role of culture in international relations by mainstreaming culture. The Ukrainian Institute has already implemented more than 300 cultural relations projects and programmes in a dozen countries since its establishment. The associate membership will facilitate its further expansion and project-based cooperation with other EUNIC members with the overall objective of creating a stronger foundation for the social, political, and legal integration of Ukraine into the EU family (Interview 4, 2022).

All this has resulted in unprecedented levels of cultural output and activism, contributing to a wider societal transformation and to the formation of an inclusive, pluralistic cultural space which, similarly to other conflict settings, fosters community engagement, inclusive development and social cohesion (Balta, 2021; British Council, 2019). Therefore, it increased the ability of Ukraine to counter the distorted cultural and historical narratives pushed relentlessly in Russia's permanent "sharp power" campaigns as well as during its full-scale invasion. At the same time, this cultural renewal facilitated a gradual shift away from Ukraine's split national identity towards an identity that embraces liberal democratic values, thus strengthening Ukraine's Western orientation (Pesenti, 2020; Ryabchuk, 2019; Olzacka, 2023). Russia's imperial war reinforced this process, giving rise to an effective, if desperate, anti-colonial resistance. Ukrainians are more united than ever before (Sunny, R, 2022).

It should be noted that the post-Maidan cultural policy reforms were based not solely on the progressive international cultural relations approach deeply anchored in European cultural management principles as described above, but also on the more conservative and prescriptive concept of "securitising" Ukraine's national identity and culture, designed specifically to fight against Russia's imperial narrative, its attempts to undermine Ukraine's distinct national culture, to appropriate its cultural heritage and its sustained attack on Ukraine's soft power legitimacy with all the available tools of traditional cultural diplomacy. Despite fundamental differences between the two concepts and their promoters, both advocated common goals: a complete break with the Soviet legacy of cultural management, deconstruction and decolonisation of Russia's narrative, the removal of illusions and wishful thinking in the West concerning the real nature of Russian culture,

and to create a modern, attractive Ukrainian culture with strong local creative industries and cultural communities (Olzacka, 2023; Shaipov, 2023; Euractive, 2023; Pesenti, 2020; Sheiko, 2023).

Thus, the two seemingly contradictory approaches have gradually become combined through the construction of a new, postcolonial cultural policy framework in which the concrete measures have been implemented mainly by the four newly created and radically reformed institutions (see above) which have become a "real space of postcolonial hybridity". This long and inevitably conflictual process gathered new momentum after Russia's full-scale invasion and is still ongoing, with tensions remaining between conservative and liberal agendas and actors responsible for shaping and implementing the new policy, as well as with further legal and financial reform needed to catch up with the systemic cultural reforms. Notwithstanding the persisting tasks and conflicts, by now it is clear that the radical overhaul of the cultural policy framework has led to solid results both in terms of the effectiveness of the new institutions within and outside the country, and in terms of mobilising Ukrainians as a political community to stand up against the invasion with an asserted, distinct identity (Olzacka, 2023; Tornquist-Plewa and Yurchuk, 2019).

A wide range of cultural diplomacy events organised at the world's premiere artistic venues (Carnegie Hall, Venice Biennale, Festival d'Avignon, Cannes and Berlin Film Festivals, and so on) with Ukrainian participants have created a positive image of the country and have led to wider international acknowledgement of the Ukrainian art scene on its own, decoupled from Russia. Important cultural relations projects were implemented within the House of Europe framework and many other formations jointly with international artists. Such efforts have resulted in mutually fruitful cooperations and in raising international awareness (best example: reaching 20 million people in 20 countries by the "Postcards from Ukraine" initiative) about the existential threat that Russia's destruction poses to Ukraine's rich and unique cultural heritage (Sheiko, 2023).

How Ukrainian cultural policy will develop, depends primarily on the final outcome of the war, and will be embedded in the upcoming socio-political and economic post-war reform and reconstruction process. So far, there is no doubt that Ukraine's heroic self-defence and value-based narrative—substantially nurtured by its new cultural diplomacy—has found resounding sympathy and (almost) unified support in the "Global West". But this has not been shared by the rest of the world. While consolidating the West, Ukraine's decolonising struggle against the Russian/ex-Soviet coloniser, fully backed by a West struggling to maintain a rules-based global order, is confronted with the still ongoing decolonising struggle of the Global South. Here, many countries are still battling against the colonial legacy of the same West that is backing Ukraine, and are more preoccupied with their own economic development, the threat of climate change, and other vital issues. Added to this, we must not forget that China is currently trying to seize the opportunity to change the current rules-based global order (Walt, 2023; Ngoc, 2023; Dubenko, 2023; Event 1, 2023; Balfour, 2022). This crucial dichotomy will be explored further in section 3.2.4.

3.2.3 China

China embraced the concept of soft power relatively late, but during the last two decades accomplished rapid progress both in terms of its complexity and infrastructure. Notionally, among the three sources of soft power originally identified by Nye—culture, values, foreign policy—China prioritised the cultural dimension, but "culture is understood as a very open-ended concept" with significant political and ideological connotations (Repnikova, 2022a, p 4). By expanding and reinterpreting Nye's original deifinition, China has developed a set of distinctive characteristics. Instead of a clear separation between hard and soft power, adopting a cultural dimension led to a fluid "Chinese model" that became more inclusive and more ambivalent, facilitating its adaptability to various contexts. While Western soft power discourse has a decisive external focus, Chinese scholars and politicians also emphasise its domestic significance too. Internationally, these figures believe that soft power is essential to demonstrate China's "peaceful rise" and to achieve a stronger voice in the global system. This voice should equal the country's growing economic weight, thus leading to the symbolic confirmation of the country's status as a great power (Bassam, 2021). Domestically, the importance of the cultural dimension of soft power was highlighted at several Party Congresses in an ideological context and linked to China's development. Here, it was associated mainly with political stability and social cohesion.

The term was first pronounced at the highest level in 2007 by President Hu Jintao who declared the importance of strengthening China's cultural soft power and called on his country to build a "socialist cultural super-power" in 2011. President Xi Jinping followed suit in an even more ideological and decisive manner, advocating China's unique cultural and moral values in contrast to the West's "hollow" values, and elevating soft and hard power to the same level. Furthermore, the Chinese understanding of soft power is linked to the ideas of "cultural confidence" and "cultural security", signifying social cohesion and pride in China's culture. It should also be underlined that while Western interpretations place democratic values and ideals at the heart of their soft power promotion, China prioritises pragmatism, fusing its cultural and commercial appeal. It argues that providing access to economic opportunities is a basic human right, and therefore, that people's livelihoods should be improved through development across the globe (Repnikova, 2022b; Event 3, 2023).

Another distinctive feature of Chinese academic and political discourse in this field has been the creation of the term: "cultural soft power" which often replaces soft power and/or cultural diplomacy. This is the expression used also in the Chinese government's latest five year plan adopted in 2021 in the title of chapter 10: "Develop advanced socialist culture and enhance national cultural soft power". The rhetoric of both Presidents and high level policy makers as well as a range of academic papers frequently refer to China's 5000 year-old traditional culture as being at the heart of its soft power, thereby reappropriating the Confucian principles and presenting the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the carrier of China's traditional values and civilisation. (Silva and Menechelli, 2019; Plamenova Kokinova, 2021).

It is in this spirit, that China—together with Greece—initiated the establishment of the Ancient Civilisation Forum which had its first session in Athens in 2017 and involved ten countries, all of which represented major ancient civilisations: China, Bolivia, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Mexico, Peru, Greece, and Italy. This forum represented more than 40 per cent of the global population across four continents (Xinhua, 2017a). All participants signed the Declaration of Beijing at the Forum's third ministerial meeting in 2019 which highlighted that "the heritage and wisdom of ancient civilizations transcend time and boundaries, remain vivid and relevant in today's globalized world, and are of vital importance. All civilizations form a common heritage for humanity. No civilization is judged superior to another." It also declared support for "an international multilateral system with the United Nations at its core" (Beijing Declaration, 2019).

The forum complements the work of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations which was set up in 2005 to advance intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and the simple fact that the forum was held in Bagdad last December with high level UN participation, and will reconvene in Teheran in 2023, is a targeted message to the "West", which speaks for itself. Equally, it is a message to the public at home: China's ancient culture is a source of pride, and a widely acknowledged solid basis for the "Chinese Dream". It is through the narrative of China's historic legacy that the country demonstrates its values and identity to the whole world.

Even though the Beijing Declaration has limited practical consequences, this line of argumentation and the composition of the forum clearly demonstrate further particularities of Chinese soft power (Xinhua, 2017b). These include: the centrality of state actors, blurred lines between different types of powers, cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy, and the drive to compete against and be protected from hostile hegemonic powers. Consequently, the US is identified as the primary opponent to Beijing's endeavours, followed by Europe, and neighbouring countries. At the same time, China has been actively developing its "cultural soft power presence" and influence in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East primarily via its Confucius network, complementing its burgeoning trade relations with these regions according to a different logic. Instead of using the more defensive narrative of protection from and competition against hegemonies, China has provided development aid and luring countries to adopt successful Chinese economic practices.

Out of the many different facets of China's huge and diversified soft power mechanism to implement its cultural diplomacy, here I will focus on the best known and most contentious flagship instrument: the Confucius network. The first Confucius Institute was opened in 2004 in Seul, and by 2022 it had become the largest worldwide national cultural network. This network consists of more than 500 Confucius Institutes integrated into and co-sponsored by host universities, and more than 1200 Confucius Classrooms targeting high schools and primary schools in 162 countries/regions. While Europe has the highest concentration of Institutes (184), the majority of Confucious Classrooms are located in the US and the Global South. In theory, these Confucious Classrooms all focus on language teaching, to "enhance understanding" of China's culture, but while Chinese officials and scholars emphasise their educational and cultural mission, external observers highlight their malicious political objectives. Benign interpretations present the development of the network as an attempt to influence global cultural discourse. Since the mid 2010s, critical views have gained strength, arguing that the network is part of China's "sharp power arsenal," endangering academic freedom, implementing ideological indoctrination, and suppressing debate on politically sensitive topics.

The speed and scale of this expansion, combined with the special management structure of the Confucius network has raised doubts first in the US, and later in Europe and Australia. The fact that these establishments are teaming up with local universities and schools means that they are more dispersed and more deeply embedded than Western institutes centred mostly in big cities (Holden, 2013, p. 26). However, until 2020, Confucious Classrooms were directly managed by the Office of Chinese Language Council International, known as Hanban, affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education, and thus under the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 2014, the Chicago University Petition and the Amercian Association of University Professors (AAUP) claimed that the network functions "as an arm of the Chinese state" and called for a rethink concerning their relationship to US universities (Xin, 2019). In 2019 a NATO Strategic Communication Center of Excellence Report identified the institutes as a potential "hybrid threat," arguing for more transparency and advising caution (NATO, 2019). The US Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations reached a similar conclusion (US Senate, 2019). In March 2021, the Senate also voted to deny US funding for Confucious Classrooms, unless they meet specific oversight requirements (Horsely, 2021). The pushback resulted in closures of a number of the institutes not just in the US, but also in Australia and several European countries (Repnikova, 2022a; Yanwei Wang et al, 2021). Confucius Classrooms were never allowed to open in Canada due to public protest, and a significant number of

them were closed down in the US and Australia (The Conversation, 2019; BBC World News, 2019).

China decided to deal with the backlash by rebranding its Confucius operation. In 2022, Hanban was renamed within the Ministry as Center for Language Exchange and Cooperation, and a new organisation was created as a spin off to oversee the institutes and Classrooms: the Chinese International Education Foundation. Technically, this organisation is a registered NGO, and cooperates with universities, companies and cultural organisations. Indeed, its chairman tried to distance the new entity from politics by describing it as philanthropic. So far, there is little evidence on how the new entity will actually operate, as of April 2023 its website did not contain any meaningful data and there is now even less transparency concerning the exact number of institutes and classrooms, or their budget, than before. Critics call the rebranding a typical example of camouflage, arguing that in reality the CCP has retained control and influence while making this harder to track by the authorities of host countries, where suspicion is unlikely to be lifted (Peterson, 2020; Horsely, 2021; Global Times, 05 July 2020; Taiwan News, 06 July 2020; Newsweek, March 2021).

Nevertheless, despite setbacks in the West, there is high demand for Chinese language learning in the Global South, especially in Africa and Latin America where double digit percentage growth has been recorded in this regard each year since 2012 (Zhao, 2018). To a significant extent, this trend is due to growing Chinese economic and political influence in these regions, and leads to concrete practical advantages, outweighing lingering ideological concerns and reservations. Arguably, the "pragmatic gravitation may also fuse with admiration or enchantment with Chinese culture" (Repnikova, 2022a).

The Confucius network is also complemented by Chinese Cultural Centres (CCCs), an initiative that dates back to the 1980s (first in Mauritius and Benin in 1988), but that gathered momentum only recently, partly as a reaction to the network's controversial reputation and partly from President Xi's personal support. There are almost 40 such centres all over the world. Through these, China intends to participate in the global cultural governance system (Yanwei Wang et al, 2021; Plamenova Kokinova, 2021). These are self standing centres, and do not infiltrate domestic structures, following the traditional model of other countries' Cultural Centres. The idea is to divert attention from, and to arouse less controversy than, the Confucius Institutes. Their focus is on cultural and public diplomacy activities, but as they are run by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, their ideological commitment is the same. This is especially visible abroad in cities like Tokyo, where one of the 15 Taiwanese Cultural Centres are also present. Similarly to their "Big Brother," most of the CCC's detailed arrangements and relevant budget figures lack transparency (Economist, 09 February 2019).

Of course, one of the most contested issues is the effectivenes of China's soft power mechanism in general, and the Confucius (and to a lesser extent the CCC) Network in partiular. Overall, it seems clear that while its impact on the "Global West" in the large majority of countries is rather limited, or in several cases even counterproductive, the Global South looks at these initiatives through a different lense. In Western minds (and hearts), China's decline in the rankings is partly due to the increasingly assertive "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy of President Xi and the existent negative sentiments about its autocratic, communist state system, reinforced by its stance on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. For the Global South, these considerations are less important, as their focus is more on practical enticements, ranging from educational opportunities to large infrastructural projects. China's influence was seen as positive by two thirds of Africans across 34 countries and by 50% of respondents in Argentina, Brasil and Mexico. It should be noted that the pragmatic, less-ideological approach also means that the broader "Southern public" finds both China and the West attractive and is reluctant to take sides. Therefore, what is intended and envisaged as a competition by both sides, is considered as complementary by the South (Repnikova, 2022b). Beyond soft power, a somewhat similar pattern appears on a larger scale concerning Russia's war against Ukraine.

As for the institutinal EU-China cultural relations, a High Level People to People Dialogue (HPPD) was established in 2012 as part of the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership which had its fifth round online in 2020. Despite the ambitious goals and hopes, so far this process stayed at the level of rather cautious joint declarations and general statements by both sides, without leading to substantial results. The difference in objectives—China perceived that the EU wanted to promote European values and cultural diversity, while China aimed to deepen Europeans' understanding of Chinese culture and history (Dewen, 2017)—largely remained, even though a pilot project was implemented in 2022 within the European Spaces of Culture (ESC) scheme managed by EUNIC. This pilot project followed the original spirit of the HPPD: the promotion of real people-to-people exchanges in a creative shared space. But this International Festival of Inclusive Culture – "Diverse as we are" — had to be organised outside the HPPD framework in a "semi-clandestine manner", without official contact with Chinese authorities and any official opening/closing ceremony, while participants (artists and creatives with and without disabilities) were under surveillance and occasionally intimidated by state forces (Event 4, 2022). Additionally, another ESC project (More Than Human) was selected in 2022 to be implemented in the second half of 2023. It remains to be seen how this will be rolled out.

The EU's current position on China set out in the Strategic Outlook, Joint Communication of 12 March 2019 (European Commission, 2019) does not cover culture, and so far, the EU has not adopted a specific strategy on cultural relations as advised by the Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions back in 2019 (Council of the European Union, 2019). The latest EU China Summit in April 2022 noted that bilateral relations have deteriorated, but the EU hasn't changed China's status as "partner for cooperation and negotiation, an economic competitor and a systemic rival". The EC introduced the term "de-risking" instead of "de-coupling" in spring 2023, and both the informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers on 15 May and the G7 summit on 22 May 2023 supported this, but no revised official documents have yet followed (EC President Von der Leyen, 2023; HRVP Borrell, 2023).

Concerning the impact of Chinese soft power in Europe, the most comprehensive recent assessment was published in 2021 by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), gathering China experts from 21 European research institutes from 21 European countries. The report analyses China's soft power initiatives along four main axes in 16 EU Member States, the UK, and in EU Institutions, based on contributions from 18 leading think tanks. It identifies the promotion of Chinese culture and exchange programmes in science and education as being the most prominent and most widespread tool, followed by soft power aspects of economic cooperation, and most recently the use of traditional and social media, and political messaging (ETNC, 2021).

As for the first category, similarly to other regions of the world, the Confucius Institutes are China's flagship projects in all countries (except Sweden who closed them down) with their strengths and weaknesses as described above. The level of controversies surrounding these institutes varies from country to country. However, during the last decade, their number has either stabilised or is decreasing in almost all cases, in contrast to the situation in the Global South, especially in Africa, where demand seems to outpace supply (Repnikova, 2022), and numbers are still increasing.

China's economic cooperation with significant secondary soft power effects is mainly channelled by two frameworks, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the 17 (14 after the 3 Baltic States' departure in 2021 - 2022) +1 grouping mainly composed of Central – and Eastern European Countries (CEECs). Unlike the first category, here in both cases soft power activities are implemented and adjusted to the particular situation of the participating countries with individual measures and a varying degree of success. The 14+1 cooperation had high publicity at the beginning but has been generating internal political controversies in several CEECs with negative spill overs at EU level. China's stance on Russia's war alienated most EU participants and the cooperation seems to be losing importance.

The global BRI ("New Silk Road") project was launched in 2013 and so far, covers 147 countries accounting for two-thirds of the world's population, focusing on infrastructure development, primarily designed to serve China's efforts to change the current global order to its advantage (European Council of Foreign Relations, 2023). The EU's response, the Global Gateway announced in 2021, is described by critics as a "drop in the ocean" compared to the magnitude of the BRI (Barbero, 2023), despite envisaging a mobilisation of 150 billion Euros by 2027 and the EU remaining the world's leading donor, providing 43% of global Official Development Assistance in 2022 (European Sting, 2023, Event 2, 2023). On European soil, the BRI has been fraught with difficulties from the start, and Russia's onslaught on Ukraine and the ensuing aggravation of East-West relations in general are likely to generate a regional shift away from Europe towards further strengthening the BRI initiatives in Africa and South-East Asia (Duarte & Ferreira-Pereria, 2021; Taube, 2022).

The third part of China's toolbox is the most recent and most dynamic. Over the last 10-15 years, China has been setting up national branches of its media outlets in Europe, establishing institutional cooperation between its press agencies and European media outlets and has started to reach out more actively to the European media. In the last few years this has been complemented with a surge in social media activity by Chinese diplomats in Brussels at China's mission to the EU as well as at its embassies across European capitals. All these elements have been integrated into a comprehensive communication strategy planned and orchestrated by the CCP in Beijing, assertively trying to project China as a reliable economic partner ready to engage in multilateralism, to de-securitise narratives on its geopolitical objectives, and to legitimise its domestic policies on human rights and other contentious issues. Overall, this narrative and mechanism seem to reflect more China's global competition with the US and the West in general, rather than a soft power strategy specifically targeting individual EU Member States.

Even though the ETNC Report only covers 17 countries, its conclusions seem to be relevant for the other EU Member States as well, especially regarding the impact of this approach. Four groups were established according to the patterns of soft power projection. In the first group of five countries (A, HU, PL, P, SK) China aroused little or no public interest, and relations were rather non-conflictual. As a result, specific soft power efforts were not needed. In the second group, both in Italy and Greece, China's positive image started to decline despite intensive soft power projections aimed at damage limitation. In the third group (D, LV, NL, RO, ES, UK) the decline was more pronounced, and China's frenzied efforts were not able to stop this, while in the last group (CZ, F, DK, SW) the deterioration was so dramatic that China resorted to aggressive campaigns which only worsened the situation. It must be added that since the publication of the report, the composition of these groups has changed, and by mid-2023 negative perceptions of China have become dominant and keep growing across Europe.

China's increasingly assertive image projection has generated stronger pushbacks at EU level as shown in the language of successive strategic documents on EU-China relations (Strategic Outlook, 2019; Strategic Compass, 2022) and in reinforced EU actions to counter disinformation, comparing the country to Russia (Veriter, 2021). At the same time, the mapping of China's manifold soft power initiatives demonstrates that they have become increasingly ineffective towards the EU due to their lack of credibility fuelled by ever escalating tensions on a wide range of issues from human rights to seeking unfair economic advantages. All this raises the question of whether China is still interested in increasing its appeal, or if by now its priority has moved on to gaining coercive power.

3.2.4. The Global South

3.2.4 /a General tendencies

The 'Global South' is a widely used, catch-all phrase that is gaining prominence, and the scope of this paper obviously does not allow a detailed examination of all actors of this hugely diverse group, many of whom have reservations about the term itself. For the sake of analysis, we build on the categorisation as presented by Alexander Stubb from his forthcoming book at the EUI/TSG Roundtable: "The world we share" in April 2023 (Event 1, 2023) in the context of exploring the emerging shape of a Post-Ukraine new global order. By and large, the Global South covers all the circa 125 countries from the UN system outside the "democratic Global West" (cc 50 states – Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea) and the "autocratic Global East" (cc 25 states – Russia and its allies).

With power in general becoming ever more diffuse and shifting globally towards the East and South from the late twentieth century, research has shown that soft power started to rise faster in North America and Asia than in Europe in the first decade of the twenty-first century. While the Pew Soft Power Index's 'top 30' in 2016 was clearly dominated by the West (15 EU Member States among them), South Korea, Singapore, New Zealand, Argentina, Brazil, China and Russia also made the grade, but representation from the African continent was still missing. was still missing (USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2016). This observation was in line with several other analyses (Holden, 2013; House of Lords Select Committee on Soft Power, 2014) which pointed to the fact that in contrast to major BRICS investments with the long-term goal of gaining cultural influence, most Western governments were cutting back on culture-related funding under the pressure of economic crises. In part to compensate for this trend, 'European countries have been shifting their strategic focus by reducing their activities in other European countries and strenghtening their presence in the Middle East and Asia' (Holden, 2013, p. 27).

The tendency to pay more attention to the Global South has continued in recent years and was reinforced by Russia`s onslaught against Ukraine. Even though the Global West`s dominance remained, Brand Finance`s Global Soft Power Index (using a more comprehensive methodology) already listed 4 African states (South Africa, Egypt, Algeria and Nigeria) on its top 60 list in 2020 (Brand Finance 2020; Tella, 2021), and 4 (South Africa, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco) in 2023, while several Gulf nations have risen to the top 30, and the huge growth potential of Sub-Saharan Africa was emphasised despite the region as a whole staying still close to the bottom of the full 121 country list. Singapore, India and Brazil have remained in the top 30 list in the last few years (Brand Finance 2023).

3.2.4/b The positions of India and Brazil relating to Russia's invasion of Ukraine

India and Brazil are defining powers in the Indo-Pacific and in Latin America with a shared deep, historic commitment to non-alignment and non-aggression. Each share strong economic ties to the West, Russia and China. They epitomise the view of many developing countries that considers "Russia's war and the West's rivalry with China as distracting from urgent issues, such as debt, climate change, and the effects of the pandemic" (Miliband, 2023). In a similar vein, India's foreign minister stated that Europe thinks that "Europe's problems are the world's problems, but that the world's problems are not Europe's problems" (Financial Times 17.04.2023). While they deplore Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the Western narrative of the war being an epoch-making battle between democracy and autocracy, a unique event requiring a unique response is perceived as myopic and hypocritical. As a result, neither India nor Brazil has followed up with economic sanctions. Both are leading members of the large - and growing - camp of "hedgers" who want to avoid the pressure of having to choose between Russia, China and the West, and crave for a new, multipolar world (Spektor, 2023; Rao, 2023).

In a sense, their position now recalls the one they—and again, many others—had at the end of the Cold War when bipolarity ended, and many nations were trying to understand and find their place in the new world. Between 1990 and 2015, Brazil and India have both become major proponents of "soft-power internationalism," which has enabled emerging powers to mobilise their cultural resources to project influence. Soft-power internationalism offered a new framework wherein each actor brought its own distinctive civilisational resources and could challenge a unipolar US led international order through nonmilitary means. It created a new kind of interdependence among state and nonstate entities, the promotion of mutual benefits and shared values, and a strengthening South-South solidarity. The fast evolution of hyperconnectivity has accelerated the circulation of narratives and has raised the importance of public diplomacy and strategic communication in the global media space to unseen levels (Baykurt & De Grazia, 2021).

Russia has also sensed this opportunity, but after some "clumsy attempts to be liked in the West in the early 2000s," started an assertive cyber campaign to justify its attack on Georgia in 2008, and continued with an "aggressive push to disrupt and divide the Western narrative following Putin's return to presidency in 2012 and especially with the beginning of its war against Ukraine already in 2014 using also the internet and cultural programs to sow suspicion and disarray, thereby challenging the legitimacy of dominant global communication channels." (Baykurt & De Grazia, 2021). This decade long practice switched into an even higher gear since Russia's full-scale attack in 2022, and "soft-power internationalism has given way to bellicosity as more countries have started gravitating towards authoritarian styles of domestic governing and adopting inward looking foreign policies" (Baykurt & De Grazia, 2021).

While Russia's invasion of Ukraine—against Moscow's expectations—clearly consolidated the "Global West", and apparently brings China—at least tactically—closer to Russia, it also gave a new momentum, similarly to the post-Cold War situation as indicated above, for smaller, but still major or emerging powers to re-position themselves in the multipolar global framework evolving in front of our eyes. India and Brazil are the most influential, but Indonesia, Turkey, and in the longer-term Nigeria, South Africa, and some others all may well have such aspirations. Even though they are regularly treated under the "Global South heading," they do not form a single block and increasingly refuse to be defined only in opposition or in relation to Eastern or Western poles. They want to be acknowledged on their own right as independent, important actors, and want to maintain good relations with the largest powers according to their own specific interests without taking an ideological stance in favour of one or the other (Ash, et al, 2023; Event 2, 2023).

While the roots of India's belief in soft power and peace go back to its rich culture and religion, as well as to the era of Gandhi and Nehru, Brazil's foreign policy makers have long sought to define its role in the world by embracing international law, which has been pursued consistently through most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is evidenced by the history of Brazil's borders, which were agreed on with its 10 neighbours without conflict, as well as its very active role in the League of Nations, especially its part in standing up for the principle of the legal equality of nations (Stuenkel, 2021). This approach earned Brazil significant credit in various multilateral fora. Both countries are urging a peaceful settlement to end Russia's war against Ukraine, but President Lula's recent controversial statements blaming both sides for the war have dented its image in the West. Prime Minister Modi's narrative on the need "to move beyond greed and confrontation and cultivate a universal sense of one-ness," which he has been using to prepare for the G20 summit where he will offer India's help to "catalyze such a new global mindset" (Rao, 2023), avoids accusations, but ultimately points in the same direction.

3.2.4 /c Africa as a sovereign agency and as a theatre of narratives

Scholarship on Africa`s own soft power has only recently started to emerge, responding to the need to challenge the perception of Africa as an economically less developed continent. One of the first steps was to include specific African philosophies in the conceptualisation of soft power to reflect their own national orientations, and it should be noted that most of them tend to emphasise collectivism—in a sense similar to some of the core concepts of Confucianism—as opposed to the Western primacy of individualism. Case studies on the key players in the four main African regions; Kenya, Nigeria, Egypt and South Africa have shown that Africa started to develop its own agency around the notion of African solutions to African challenges, which in fact found a concrete expression in the African Union`s Agenda 2063 strategic framework document. The increasing global popularity of African cultural productions, primarily music, fashion, literature and film also demonstrate the huge potential of the continent's soft power, notwithstanding the numerous obstacles facing the continent on its long road forward (Tella, 2021).

In parallel to the development of Africa's own agency, the world's second largest continent has also become the primary theatre for competing narratives from different parts of the world (Zaytsev, 2023).

Europe

From the Global South, Africa is Europe`s closest and largest neighbour and embodies immense common challenges and opportunities. Institutionally, the 6th EU-African Union Summit adopted "*A Joint Vision for 2030 for a renewed Partnership*" in February 2022, just a few days before Russia's invasion. This renewed partnership reflects the full complexity of EU-AU relations and is "founded on geography, acknowledgment of history, human ties, respect for sovereignty, mutual respect and accountability, shared values, equality between partners and reciprocal commitments" (6th EU-AU Summit, 2022). At the Summit an Africa-Europe Investment Package of at least EUR 150 billion was announced to "support common ambitions" for the Joint Vision for 2030 and for the AU's Agenda 2063, composed of three items: Investment, Health, and Education in the framework of the Global Gateway project. The text also commits to supporting scientific cooperation and to encouraging youth exchange with an expanded Erasmus+ programme. Moreover, it "strives to facilitate cultural exchanges and the movement of artists and artworks between the two continents and encourage mutual undertaking for the restitution of cultural assets and promote access to and protection of cultural heritage" (6th EU-AU Summit, 2022).

While the Joint Vision 2030 does not contain further details on cultural cooperation, the EU`s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Borrell, highlighted at the beginning of 2021 that the EU-African partnership should not be limited to economic and political issues, and that culture should become a key part of it.[1] Borrell argued that beyond its unique role in building our identities, culture is an important economic resource and should help us to find solutions to foreign policy challenges where traditional policy tools fall short. He also listed several concrete examples that included protecting cultural heritage, fighting illicit trafficking of works of art by terrorist organisations to finance their attacks, showcasing African cinema on the world stage, and the need to strengthen the European Houses/Spaces of Culture project (HRVP Borrell, 2021).

In practice, the EU`s focus has been gradually moving towards the establishment of long-term partnerships based on mutual interests with partner countries to respond to the many challenges. In this context, culture can play an important role to achieve several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The new financial tool of the current multiannual EU budgetary cycle (2021-2027), the Neighbourhood Development International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), therefore applies an integrated approach whereby the need for and modalities of cultural projects will be decided at country level closely involving partner countries, EU Delegations and Member States under the "Team Europe" label. According to first indications, more than 50 countries from Africa, Asia and

Latin America included culture in their national programmes (Interview 2, 2023).

At the same time, regional programmes also envisaging cultural cooperation will remain essential. The best-known example, the new ACP-EU Culture Programme, is implemented by the Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS), and is financed fully by the EU with a budget of EUR 40 million for the period of 2019-2026. This follows up on two previous generations of cultural programmes for the ACP countries between 2008-2017 which had a global budget of EUR 45 million and provided useful lessons learned and inspiration for designing the new programme. Culture`s transversal dimension is recognised in the overall development framework and therefore it is taken into account in all development policies.

The new programme aims to strengthen the cultural and creative sector, and together with creating jobs with an increased income, encouraging youth participation, and promoting the distribution of quality productions, it wants to ensure a better perception of the economic and social role of culture. In practice, this is done via a decentralised, innovative sub-granting system which will set up six regional hubs for Eastern, Western, Central and Southern Africa + the Caribbean and the Pacific. Each of these hubs are managed by consortia of international, regional and national organizations launching regular calls for projects to all cultural and creative sectors tailored to respond to local needs and specificities (ACP-EU Culture, 2022). Encouraging first results, together with experiences and recommendations are already visible in most regions which could be used in the process of setting up and implementing the EC's forthcoming new culture programmes. The reinvigoration of public and cultural spaces, such as the McMillan Library in Kenya, are managed with a contemporary post-colonial approach aimed at engaging local communities with wider cultural participation through literature and targeted actions with an emphasis on young people (EUNIC Report, 2023).

On the one hand, projects like these reflect the EU`s inclusive approach and narrative, standing in sharp contrast to Russia's exclusionary vision, based primarily on hybrid warfare. They also prove that the solemn rhetoric in official documents is matched by concrete actions on the ground and raise hope to dispel any lingering post-colonial shadows. On the other hand, this type of close personal collaboration and these palpable results are especially important in Africa where proper cultural infrastructure is almost non-existent (except in some large cities), and while the creative sector is considered important, cultural participation levels (reading, live performances, and so on) remain very low (Africa`s Soft Power, 2022).

China

Just a few months before the 6th EU-African Union Summit adopted its "Joint Vision for 2030 for a renewed Partnership" in February 2022, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) had its own summit meeting in Dakar, Senegal in November 2021. On this occasion China`s State Council Information Office adopted a White Paper entitled "*China and Africa in the New Era, A Partnership of Equals*" (White Paper, 2021) and the FOCAC adopted a joint "*China-Africa Cooperation Dakar Action Plan 2022-2024*" (Dakar Action Plan, 2021). These documents set out an emotional narrative of two rising giants, highlighting that "China is the largest developing country in the world, and Africa is the continent with the largest number of developing countries", destined to grow even further in a "Community of Shared Future" (White Paper, 2021).

This special "Partnership of Equals" is built on the "long-lasting friendship between Chairman Mao and African statesmen from the older generation who fought together for national liberation and independence", pursuing the principles of "Sincerity, Real Results, Amity, Good Faith and Shared Interests" (White Paper, 2021). They complement other, more recent Chinese initiatives, like the Global Development Initiative promoting China`s practice of providing aid to autocratic states without any conditions, and the Global Civilisational Initiative arguing that the West`s advocacy of universal human rights is a new kind of colonialism (Economist, 23/03/2023; Financial Times 31/03/2023), and fit well into President Xi`s overall strategy to reshape the current world order.

In concrete terms, the White Paper and the Action Plan focus on economic, social, and political issues, but both contain a full section on cultural cooperation. Under the heading: People-to-People and Cultural Exchanges a series of conservative, traditional cultural diplomacy actions are outlined, and should technically be implemented within the framework of bilateral intergovernmental agreements. As of December 2020, almost 350 such agreements have been signed, hundreds of Chinese art troupes performed in Africa and artists from more than 30 nations were invited to China. The two sides committed to establishing more cultural centres on each other`s territory, and to further strengthen their cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as in the various Silk Road mechanisms such as the Silk Road International League of Theatres, the Silk Road International Museum Alliance, the Network of Silk Road Art Festivals, and others.

Alongside the Confucius Institutes` activities (see section 3.2.3) and the expansive BRI project through which China provided 2.5 times more finance for Africa`s infrastructure than all other bilateral entities combined (Tomic, et al, 2022), Beijing has been investing heavily in building up a "joint social and human capital" by using exchange programmes, scholarships, joint research schemes, training programmes and seminars to establish direct, personal connections with Africa`s political, security, business and cultural elites as well as with students and future leaders. Combined with the regular FOCAC meetings gathering leaders and high officials from all 54 nations, these serve the same purpose: to improve Beijing`s image, and by presenting success stories, to showcase China`s development model emphasising the importance of South-South solidarity, promoting its potential applicability beyond China`s borders (Benabdallah, 2021; You, 2022).

China already supports satellite TV reception to 10.000 African villages, provides program resources in 11 languages on more than 600 channels for 13 million African users and will continue its support to the development of African radio, film and television industries. At the same time, Xinhua established a permanent office in Nairobi, China`s Global TV Network, China Daily and China Radio International all have outlets mainly in East Africa. With these and other investments, as of 2020 Chinese media has established one of the largest foreign-correspondent networks on the continent and acquired the capacity to shape narratives on the continent. This soft / sharp power has prompted critics to argue that the autonomy of African media has now been put into serious question (National Review, 2021).

Russia/Ukraine

Russia's engagement with Africa has clearly been driven by its efforts to disrupt the existing system of international relations and to reconstruct a Cold War-era balance of power politics, fitting neatly into Russian foreign policy towards the Global South in general, designed to achieve the same objective. It started to expand rapidly during Soviet times in parallel to decolonisation, seeking to profit from this process and hoping to gain valuable ideological and commercial allies, vying for influence with the US, France and China. Soviet influence reached its peak in the Brezhnev era, and this is the foreign policy Putin has set out to rebuild after its dramatic collapse with the unravelling of the Soviet Union. At the first Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi in October 2019, it seemed that his ambition to raise Russia among the great powers had once again borne fruit, and participants celebrated with strong Anti-Western rhetoric and ostentatious forecasts to jointly turn Africa into the centre of world production (Ramani, 2023).

Contrary to the EU or China, Russia has achieved this without any large-scale economic or trade initiative comparable to the BRI or the Global Gateway. In fact, despite Putin's pledge at the Sochi Summit to double Russia's level of trade with Africa, this has declined each year since 2018, dropping by 30% aggregate (Siegle, 2023), and Russian investment amounted to less than 1% of the foreign direct investments reaching the continent in 2019, while its direct aid measures have also remained symbolic (Gopaldas, 2023).

Russia's traditional soft power tools (classical music, ballet, classic literature) did not play any significant role in the African context and its cultural centres established in a number of countries pale in comparison to the extensive Confucius Network (Tafuro, 2022) or the EUNIC clusters. The assertive, anti-Western image of Russia and its declared political values—multilateralism and non-interference—finds strong support among African policymakers. It is the unique combination of unconventional sharp and hard power means accepted or even welcomed on the ground that distinguish Russia from its competitors (Carbone & Ragazzi, 2022; Siegle, 2021).

The remorseless deployment of private military contractors (paramilitaries), burgeoning arms sales, opaque deals for resources, and the unscrupulous use of pro-Kremlin media are coupled with regular cajoling tours by Foreign Minister Lavrov. These have resulted in the expansion of Russia's influence, stimulated by a permissive environment where checks and balances on executive power are weak (Siegle, 2021). Russia's operations are mostly elite based, often focusing on pliable decisionmakers, embattled incumbents or coup leaders who actually request this type of intervention in order to gain or retain power, thus undermining democratic procedures. This model is a renewal of the Soviet model, and by embedding influence and bolstering patronage networks, permanent influence is acquired at a very low cost. The most glaring recent example is the Sahel region, where Mali, the Central African Republic and Burkina Faso have been fully removed from France's sphere of control. Other fragile states may well follow (Siegle, 2022; Financial Times Series, February 2023).

Of course, the big question is, to what extent will the invasion of Ukraine change Russia's relations with Africa in particular, and with the Global South in general? The series of five votes until May 2023 at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) have shown a major divide between the West and the rest of the world, as well as polarisation within Africa. Even though the invasion was swiftly condemned on 2 March 2022 by 73%, 141 states out of 193, with only 5 countries against (Belarus, Syria, North Korea, Eritrea and Russia itself), 47 nations abstained, with 28 out of 54 of these from Africa. In all other UN votes the division was much larger, with only 6 African states voting yes in all 5 votes, while an additional 19 supported at least 3 resolutions. In addition, only the "Global West" followed up with the various concrete sanctions against Russia, and according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, two-thirds of the world's population live in countries that are officially neutral or supportive of Russia (Gopaldas, 2023; Miliband, 2023).

These results reflect the grievances of the Global South beyond, but also linked to, the war, as well as the level of Russia's influence among African states. Very few from the Global South support Russia's outright aggression, but there is a widespread sentiment of perceived Western double standards and hypocrisy relating to the treatment of other wars (Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan), general frustration about the Western-led mismanagement of globalisation since the end of the Cold War, and its failure to create a more equal, sustainable global economic deal. This is coupled with strong traditions of non-alignment in Latin America, Asia, and some African countries, and with rejecting the West's narrative of Russia's war as a fight between autocracy and democracy, with the rules-based order of the world at stake (Spektor, 2023; Milliband, 2023; Murithi, 2023). In Africa, support for Russia is strongest where leaders lack political legitimacy but are kept in power through Russian arms and paramilitaries, and in countries with local elites have close Russian ties via opaque business and power arrangements. Support for Russia is weakest in Africa's more advanced democracies (Gopaldas, 2023).

Encouraged by and building on these views and the UN votes, in parallel to continuing its brutal war against Ukraine, Russia has pursued a full scale global hybrid propaganda offensive to turn the war's narrative in its favour, championing a completely false "reversed reality" using—as Timothy Snyder so eloquently elucidated in his testimony to the UN Security Council on 14 March 2023— colonial rhetoric which serves as part of a larger practice of genocidal hate speech (Snyder, 2023). In this virtual reality—instead of being the aggressor—Russia claims to be the innocent victim of "russophobia", a peaceful country "attacked by the Western global elites using Ukraine as their hostage and trying to destroy Russia with the help of the neo-Nazi scum brought together from

around the world" (Putin, 2023).

It is surreal that while being a colonial power, Russia churns out "anti-colonial" messages, portraying itself as "the bulwark against a racist US-led hegemony treating poorer countries in Africa and elsewhere as vassals" (Financial Times series, February 2023), and pretends to defend the Global South against "Western neo-colonisation". It is tragic to observe that these pervasive lies find fertile ground, especially, though not exclusively, in Africa. The Second Russia–Africa Summit and Economic and Humanitarian Forum is scheduled for July 2023 in St Petersburg, entitled "For Peace, Security and Development". So far, most African leaders seem to have accepted the invitation, despite Western advice not to. For the time being, some analysts are predicting that despite its abhorrent war crimes, Russia's influence in Africa "will weather the storm-clouds that followed after its invasion of Ukraine and it could remain an attractive partner for African countries, preserving a niche between France, the US and China, while also recalling that Russia is struggling to reconcile its growing ambitions in Africa with its increasingly limited material capabilities" (Ramani, 2023). Others point out that the nostalgia for old leaders of the Soviet times is fading away among the younger generations and argue that "in any eventuality of the war, Russia's capabilities, influence and presence is likely to be blunted, and once the risks outweigh the rewards, Russia may leave a vacuum that could be more destabilising than its presence" (Gopaldas, 2023).

Of course, the West, most prominently the US, France, and the EU, has been and will keep trying to counterbalance Russia's power projection in Africa, complemented by Ukraine's own public diplomacy efforts, led by Foreign Minister Kuleba and President Zelensky. As indicated in section 3.2.2., Ukraine's public and cultural diplomacy is the direct opposite of Russia's, in that it fully subscribes to the value based European approach. But what is a strength for its European ambitions, is considered problematic in Africa (and in certain other parts of the world). Some African experts argue that due to Ukraine's wholehearted identification with the West, embracing Ukraine may undermine Africa's partnership with China, generating doubts there on how African states would react to a conflict in Taiwan, while others are more optimistic, hoping that Ukraine's arguments might lead to a better understanding of Russia's imperial behaviour (Ramani, 2023).

Persuading the Global South that Ukraine is fighting an anti-colonial struggle against Russia akin to their own still ongoing decolonisation struggle against the West to which Ukraine now wants to join is a daunting task. Constructive critics argue that Ukraine's "civilizational and exclusionary approach has so far been self-constraining", and if its fully Europe focused wartime narrative could be reframed in a way that goes beyond Ukraine`s desire to belong to the West towards emphasising that its fight is for universal human dignity, equality and fairness, this might resonate better in the Global South. Highlighting that Russia's brutal attack is primarily a fundamental transgression of international law, and that the aggressor cannot remain unpunished, may open up the restricted democracy versus autocracy dichotomy, with a potential to generate a sense of shared struggle in many countries across the world (Ngoc, 2023; Miliband, 2023). Along similar lines, an acknowledgement of other severe conflicts (Myanmar, Libya, Yemen, and so on), and an expression of sympathy towards the victims of these wars, or stressing the huge environmental damage of Russia's war, could broaden the scope of interpretation, and lead to a more positive dialogue (Dubenko, 2023).

In principle, Ukraine has already identified a closer engagement with the Global South as a strategic priority. Its public diplomacy efforts achieved some results, particularly when the negative impacts of Russia's weaponisation of food and energy resources were demonstrated, and the common need for all small nations to take a strong stand against any aggression from big powers were explained. At the most recent and highest profile event at the G7 Summit in May 2023, President Zelensky himself called on Prime Minister Modi and President Lula to "cooperate to establish a clear global leadership of democracy" (FT, 22.05.2023.) Of course, all such attempts have been and will yet face strong headwinds from the Kremlin's global propaganda machine, and Ukraine lacks the necessary diplomatic resources, including the physical presence of embassies on the ground, to compete on a comparable scale. One way to strengthen its capacity could be to team Ukraine up with Western

diplomatic missions to co-organise local events to explain the real nature of the war. In terms of cultural relations, the Associate Member status in EUNIC could be leveraged to achieve greater influence (Sheiko, 2023; Dubenko, 2023).

4. Beyond the battle of narratives

The review of global soft power dynamics and of the key actors' behaviours in the battle of narratives in the previous section demonstrates that the EU's strategic approach to international cultural relations is in a sense, beyond this battle. Even though this approach originally counted on a well-functioning liberal democracy guided by the rule of law, complemented by a readiness to engage in dialogue and focused on the relational process, aiming to build trust renders it a useful asset in the emerging multipolar world.

At the same time, the review has also revealed that for the success of the EU approach, collaborative partners are essential and their level of genuine engagement matters. At the most positive end of the global spectrum are the democracies of the Global West and Ukraine, while its war of aggression puts Russia firmly on the opposite end and also calls into question in retrospect the credibility of Russia's attempts to forge closer cultural relations with the EU. Moreover, it brings into the fore the "wishful thinking" of actors (Valenza & Bossuyt, 2019) arguing to develop an EU-Russia cultural relations strategy.

As already indicated, China presents a conundrum in this regard. On the one hand, its huge cultural potential and exceptional global significance and perspective make a strong case for developing a specific cultural relations strategy as foreseen in 2019. On the other hand, given the deteriorating overall relationship and China's regular and serious interference with cultural freedom within Europe (de Vries, 2021) as well as its internal restrictions on artistic freedom, and cultural and religious rights, this is difficult to envisage.

In the overall context of the new emerging world order (and that of Russia`s full scale invasion) combined with the importance of trust building, dialogue, co-creation, and seeking equity and fairness to address collective challenges in the international cultural relations framework, the Global South holds the biggest potential for a reinforced implementation of the EU strategic approach. According to the latest FPI survey, the EU's image has greatly improved recently in many parts of Asia and South America. It is seen as a "capable actor" in general and performs well in culture and sport, in particular. Moreover, this perception is coupled with high expectations especially among the educated youth (EEAS, 2021). In Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Chile, and Indonesia, Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) are estimated to represent 5-10% of GDP. India and several other countries in Asia and Africa also have vibrant creative sectors, providing fertile soil for establishing a structured cooperation with the EU (de Vries, 2021). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the EU is planning to enhance cultural co-creation and intercultural dialogue with Africa as well as among African countries, and to develop and support initiatives to protect and promote African cultural heritage (Interview 2, 2023). Successful European Houses/Spaces of Culture projects have been rolling out on all continents (except Australia) since 2019.

This paper argues that given the tectonic shift in European history constituted by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the emerging new world order, a reinforced international cultural relations approach, conventional forms of cultural diplomacy, and public diplomacy should be used in a balanced manner. This requires targeted, concrete flagship projects in each domain with "differentiated implementations", adjusted to specific needs with full involvement of local actors and stakeholders. This could improve coordination among institutional actors. It also implies that we should move beyond the rigid application of the various conceptual approaches, as in reality these do not compete with each other, but rather offer a scale of choices for concrete actions on the ground which must be adapted to the local circumstances.

In fact, the FPI`s Update Study (EEAS, 2021) already signalled a move in this direction, recommending that public diplomacy cannot remain pure projection alone any longer, but should be co-created with partner countries on the spot. Equally, given the ever increasing complexity of the global communication landscape, the study recommended that the EU must consider narrators of different level and statuses. Recognising that amidst the growing multipolarity and proliferation of international actors each of them wants to be heard, it also recommended that EU Delegations should move from monologue/dialogue exchange towards genuine dialogue, meaningful co-creation, and mutually beneficial collaboration with shared leadership, creating spaces useful for both the EU and local partners. This resonates well not just with the basic principles of the international cultural relations approach, but also with the clear message coming from the Global South in the wake of Russia`s war and the search of their own place in the new constellation. These countries are diverse, have their own history and identity, and are rejecting geopolitical binaries in favour of multi-alignment and interest-based dialogue (Grieco & Kavanagh, 2023; Ash, 2023).

Concerning the perspectives of "differentiated implementation," a unique resource should be taken into account: the EU and its Member States, acting collectively, have by far the largest cultural network and would have the necessary capabilities to engage effectively in third countries across the globe in terms of the reinforced international cultural relations approach, conventional forms of cultural diplomacy, as well as of public diplomacy. In addition to the 139 EU Delegations run by the European External Action Service, EU Member States taken together have more than 900 national cultural institutes within the EU and almost 1,300 outside the EU, employing approximately 30,000 people worldwide and producing a global turnover of more than EUR 2.3 billion per year. With a clear mandate to deal also substantively with EU issues, pooling the expertise and resources of national cultural institutes should be able to work both in the interests of the EU and individual Member States. More joint activities would contribute to leveraging scale and increasing the visibility of the EU around the globe (European Parliament, 2016a).

This is complemented by the EU National Institutes for Culture, EUNIC, the European network of organisations engaging specifically in international cultural relations, with its 39 members and 136 clusters in more than 100 countries worldwide. It was established in 2006 by six national cultural institutes and is funded by proportionate membership fees. Its worldwide activities are financed by contributions of members' local branches and partners. The Cluster Fund is the network's key financial instrument, financed by the member`s voluntary contributions. Since its establishment in 2012, 169 Cluster Fund projects have been financed with a total budget of EUR 1.6 million.

Since 2014, EUNIC has been continuously funded as one of the European networks from the Creative Europe Programme, receiving EUR 2 million in total up to December 2022. In the current multiannual EU budgetary cycle, its network project, Crossroads for Europe, is supported by EUR 250.000/year to strengthen the transnational cooperation of cultural actors to enhance European influence inside and outside Europe. Since 2017, EUNIC has been involved in the implementation of the Joint Communication through an Administrative Agreement with the EC and the EEAS (EEAS, 2017) to intensify their cooperation at both headquarters and local levels in partner countries. The relationship is based on joint principles, values, objectives, and priority areas with a cross-cutting approach and a broad, inclusive understanding of culture, beyond the arts, including intercultural dialogue, education, creative industries, tourism, heritage, development cooperation and other related topics. These are set out in detail in EUNIC's Strategic Framework 2020-2024 (EUNIC, 2020) and in the Joint Guidelines (EUNIC, 2021) institutionalising the partnership with the EC and the EEAS.

In practice, joint pilot actions were developed by EUNIC Clusters and EU Delegations from early on in selected countries where conditions were the most promising, seeking complementarity with stakeholders, civil-society actors, public authorities, and international organisations, respecting the principles of co-creation, bottom-up implementation, and co-financing. In 2019, the EP initiated Preparatory action on European Houses/Spaces of Culture (2019-2023) was attributed to EUNIC and became the most visible and effective joint engagement, altogether 25 innovative cultural relations projects (6 in the first phase, 11 in the second, and 8 in the third) will have been implemented jointly with EU Delegations and local partners in three phases by the end of 2023.[2] Each of the three phases were co-financed by the European Commission with EUR 750.000 following the EP`s proposal. The 25 projects span over more than 50 countries, involving well over a 100 local partners, around 40 EU Delegations, and 50 EUNIC members in total.

This is an impressive, extensive network with an accumulated wealth of experience which would be worth preserving and nurturing for potential future action. EUNIC's activity in general, and the European Spaces of Culture action in particular, has earned praise both from the Yenbou Report (EP, 2022) and the EESC's Report (EESC, 2022) as well as by scholars and cultural stakeholders. Of course, shortcomings and challenges have also been identified (Sattler, 2021; Mafalda, 2021; Serodes, 2022; EUNIC Cluster Flash Report, 2022, Figueira & Fullmann, 2023) most of which have been taken into account during the design and implementation of the successive new calls. Notwithstanding unresolved issues, there is sufficient ground to propose that a more formalised EUNIC network could become the backbone of EU international cultural relations (EUNIC Cluster Flash Report, 2022, Figueira & Fullmann, 2023), and the European Spaces of Culture action a new basis to encourage culture-led development (Serodes, 2022). A complementary potential resource to the further development of EU international cultural relations could be the Global Cultural Relations Programme`s activities and alumni network,[3] consisting of more than 200 highly skilled cultural practitioners and promoters from across the globe.

The paradigm shift in international relations due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the way culture is used by other prominent global actors would fully justify continuing the implementation of the Joint Communication with high ambitions. Most preconditions are there, even adequate funding could be available from the EU's 2021-2027 budget, as in principle—beyond the increased Creative Europe Programme`s EUR 2,4bn—external relations cultural activities could be funded from the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, the Instrument for Pre-Accession, the Horizon Europe budget (only related research), and by the EC`s Service for Foreign Policy Instruments. However, as none of these instruments contain a specific "cultural envelope", the exact level of concrete financing is a matter of political decision. As these instruments are handled by different EC and EEAS services with different eligibility criteria and timelines, an overall figure for culture-related expenditure remains difficult to establish.

A range of operational and technical challenges have already been well identified: better definition of target groups, measurable objectives, strengthening internal coordination within the Headquarters of the European Commission and the EEAS, increasing management capacities of EU Delegations with dedicated human and financial resources, intensifying smaller Member States` participation in EUNIC, more clarity on task division among Member States, EU, and other international organisations, and so on. (Sattler, 2021; Serodes, 2022; Trobiani & Pavoa-Guinea, 2020; Carta & Higgott 2020). What is still lacking, though, is a coherent, global vision in terms of the overall objectives of the EU`s international cultural relations approach, supported by strong political commitment, leadership, and personal involvement from the top level of EU institutions. Such a basis should be able to inject new momentum into the whole process, and to resolve outstanding issues. Since the end of last year there have been informal contacts among EU officials suggesting that an official document of this nature is under preparation, led by the EEAS. While there were high hopes, no proper confirmation was available in this regard until May 2023.

5. Concluding remarks

At the end of last year, the EU *Council de*cided to further strengthen the cultural dimension of the EU's external relations in its new *Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026*. The EP encouraged the EC and the EEAS to develop coherent EU international cultural relations strategies in third countries in collaboration with EUNIC, while the EESC called for a fully-fledged multiannual strategic action plan on cultural diplomacy. The three institutions express clear political will to move forward with an ambitious implementation of the renewed cultural relations policy, highlight the need to support Ukraine also in the cultural domain, take a clear stand against the misuse of culture by Russia in trying to justify its military aggression, and reject authoritarian governments' attempts to redefine international rules and values.

However, it is equally clear that for the implementation of the new Work Plan, and to duly respond to the EP Resolution's calls, improvements of the current mechanisms and intense coordination would be indispensable for all key actors. This would require strong political commitment and leadership as well as the continuation of the fruitful collaboration with the large and diverse culture-driven stakeholder, creative and scholarly community. The series of recent crises have shown us once again that a fragmented EU stands little chance of influencing global developments, and non-Western reactions to Ukraine`s heroic self-defence raised a stark reminder, that in the emerging new multipolar world even a consolidated "Global West" will face difficulties, unless it takes into proper account legitimate concerns and expectations across the globe.

Notes

1 This echoes the statement of his predecessor, HRVP Frederica Mogherini, who also argued the need to put culture at the heart of Europe's external action (EEAS, 2016b).

2 EUNIC's website gives an excellent overview of the current state of play with key players, messages and objectives: https://europeanspacesofculture.eu/projects.

3 https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu/2021/12/15/the-global-cultural-relations-programme/.

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Academic Events and interviews with EU and Member State officials:

Event 1: EUI/STG event, 17.04.2023. The World We Share, Florence.

Event 2: SOTEU, 04-06 May 2023.

The EU's Global Gateway: from aid to partnership?

Fragmentation, disorder, and the reconstruction of Europe's global role Opening: Timothy Garton Ash, Professor of European Studies, University of Oxford.

Event 3: STG event 23.05.2023. George Yeo on "China in Europe's Future and Europe in China's Future", Florence.

Event 4: EUNIC Seminar, December 2022, Brussels.

Interview 1: EU official, European Commission, DG EAC, April 2023.

Interview 2: EU official, European Commission, DG INTPA, April 2023.

Interview 3: EU official, European External Action Service (EEAS), April 2023.

Interview 4. EUNIC staff member, December 2022.

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