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EU Soft Power and the Capability-Expectations Gap

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Abstract

The European Union has in the past ten years frequently emphasised its soft power as its primary currency in international affairs. Yet a systematic analysis of the EU's foreign policy performance, through the prism of the classic 'capability-expectations gap', suggests that soft power in itself does little to address the weakness of the EU as a foreign policy actor. This article elaborates on the soft power concept and on the interplay between hard and soft power as seen in the EU's foreign policy. It argues that in few of the roles the EU seeks to fulfil does soft power in itself bridge the gap between the expectations and the capabilities. Rather, soft power, when it is present, widens that gap even further by adding to expectations, thus leading to even greater eventual disillusionment when the EU's hard power capabilities do not match.

Keywords

External Relations; Soft Power; EU international roles; Capability-Expectations Gap; foreign policy effectiveness

...the EU has soft power with a hard edge – more than the power to set a good example and promote our values. But less than the power to impose its will.
(Catherine Ashton, Budapest, 25 February 2011)

Although our range of "hard power" is limited, our "soft power" should not be underestimated. But the "hard truth about soft power" is that it is not easy and by no means automatic. Soft power is not about just being soft and handing out money. The effective use of soft power requires a consistent and comprehensive game plan addressing our objectives, our means, and the ways we apply them.
(Herman van Rompuy, Zurich, 9 November 2011)

The EU's shortcomings as an effective foreign policy actor are a well-trodden subject, famously conceptualised by Christopher Hill (1993) as a "Capability-Expectations Gap" – a discrepancy between the expectations the EU engenders, and its limited ability to pursue the actual policies needed for fulfilling its envisaged roles in world politics. At the same time, comments such as those quoted above show the fondness of senior EU officials to speak of soft power – primarily derived from 'European' norms and values – as one of the European Union's preferred ways of influencing its external environment. Others again, like NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, have lamented that EU soft power "... is no power at all" (Rettman 2013). It all begs the question whether and to what extent soft power compensates for shortcomings in other, more traditional means of foreign policy? And whether having soft power, and knowing how to make it count, enables the EU to meet the expectations held of it by both itself and its external interlocutors?

I approach these questions through the prism of the capability-expectations gap. The question is not entirely new; a previous treatment (Tulmets 2007) focused on the specific soft power discourse prevalent while Benita Ferrero-Waldner was DG RELEX Commissioner, and was guarded in its conclusions as to its potential. Attempts at treating soft power as an analytical concept, on the other hand, have generally been few and far between. Haaland Matlary (2006) considered the role of the EU's military policies in boosting its soft power and the connectedness of hard and soft power, while Hill (2010) showed how the EU has sought to tailor its foreign policies towards expanding its soft power. My approach is slightly different: Like Haaland Matlary and Hill I also hold to the original, basic definition of soft power – as the ability to make others want the same as you want, through attraction rather than coercion – but I examine the importance and

relevance of EU soft power across the several roles the EU seeks to perform. In doing so, I also intend to demonstrate the usefulness of the original soft power concept for understanding the EU's foreign policy - not least as a means for EU foreign policy research better to engage with mainstream IR scholarship - and, implicitly, suggest avenues for more detailed case-based research. My conclusion on the main question of this article, however, is emphatically negative. No amount of soft power, or discourses to that effect, make up for lacking capability and for the near-complete absence of effective hard power in the EU's foreign policy. Indeed, my argument in this article is, paradoxically, that rather than bridging the capability-expectations gap, the EU's soft power will, if anything, tend to widen it further.

In the article, in the first sections I elaborate the main concepts, the capabilities-expectations gap and soft power. I then discuss the Union's attempts to fulfil the various roles it has imagined for itself in international politics, and whether and how EU soft power contributes to this. Lastly, I discuss the way that soft power is not in fact a solution to the capabilities-expectations gap, but may actually exacerbate it.

THE CAPABILITIES-EXPECTATIONS GAP

A classic adage holds that the EU is 'an economic giant, a political dwarf and a military midget', somewhat less than the sum of the parts ought to suggest. From its inception the European Community had a significant foreign policy dimension in several economics-related fields, while classic diplomatic functions were less prominent, and the military dimension virtually absent. This peculiarity gave rise, in the 1970s, to notions of the EC being a new form of 'civilian power', emphasising economic means over military power, 'domesticating' relations between states through legal norms and contractual politics (Duchêne 1973:19-20). While some dismissed civilian power out of hand as "a contradiction in terms" (Bull 1982), others have more recently sought to expand on the concept, emphasising the cooperative and multilateral aspect (e.g. Maull 2005). Others again argue that whatever merit the concept once had, it just cannot describe the EU's foreign policy as it has developed since the end of the Cold War (Smith 2005).

The general expectation in the 1990s was of a more active international role for the EU, talked up not least by proponents of closer political union. During this time, the union became a major focal point for the newly-free countries of central and eastern Europe and a conduit for transition assistance. At the same time, the civil war in the former Yugoslavia cruelly exposed the EU's and its member states' limited capacity for actual intervention in conflicts, underscoring the need for a more active and capable foreign policy. The Petersberg Tasks, formulated in 1992, listed potential missions the EU could/should undertake, ranging from peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance to crisis management and actual peace-making interventions by combat forces. Starting with the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 and through to the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, the continuous development has been towards giving the EU more of a traditional foreign policy presence under the headings of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and, since 1999, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP, so named since Lisbon). The creation of a High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) have also set the EU on course for greater horizontal coherence. The Petersberg tasks informed the development of the Battle Groups, while the establishment of the European Defence Agency was for the purpose of greater coordination between national military establishments. Several strategy documents, most importantly the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), have also sought to provide overarching frameworks for EU foreign policy.

When coining the concept of the capability-expectations gap, Christopher Hill sought to move beyond abstract debates over 'EU actorness'. This mirrored the growing trend of increasingly moving towards examining the EU's *effectiveness* in foreign policy, and thus

bridging some of the old theoretical debates (Ginsberg 1999: 430). Hill focused on the roles the EU already played on the international stage, and those it could somehow be expected – by others and/or itself – to play in the Post-Cold War era. The former he grouped around the following notions: 1) the stabilising of Western Europe; 2) managing world trade; 3) being the developed world's principal voice in relations with the south; 4) being a second western voice in international diplomacy. The expected future functions Hill listed as: 1) the EU as a superpower, replacing the USSR in the global balance of power; 2) a regional pacifier; 3) a global intervener; 4) a mediator of conflicts; 5) a bridge between the rich and the poor; 6) joint supervisor of the world economy (Hill 1993: 310-314). With only a few minor updates, such as explicitly incorporating global environmental policy, these envisaged roles by and large remain an adequate description of EU ambitions, as evidenced in numerous strategy papers.

The EU's difficulties when trying to actually step into these roles was what Hill ascribed to a gap between the expectations placed on the EU and its actual capability to meet these expectations. The gap was accounted for by the EU's limited ability to agree on policy, its sparse resources and the lack of instruments at its disposal. The danger of the gap was it leading to both "excessive risk-taking by suppliant states and/or unrealistic policies on behalf of the [EU]" (Hill 1993: 315), and to "debates over false possibilities both within the EU and between the Union and external supplicants. It would also be likely to produce a disproportionate degree of disillusion and resentment when hopes were inevitably dashed" (Hill 1997: 8).

Hill's concept from the 1990s has since been expanded and refined by others. The weak capacity for consistent action and the difficulties of incorporating all its different policies across institutions has been a major barrier for the EU (Delcour & Tulmets 2007: 5). The EEAS was meant to help improve the EU's capacity for action by enhancing horizontal cohesion, and, through stronger coordination, also the capacity for collective action. However, the continued salience of foreign policy to EU member states has set clear limits to both vertical and external cohesion, and the insistence on consensus has often meant a collective reluctance to using the resources actually available in a purposeful way, and hence meeting the expectations held of the EU (Toje 2008).

Despite the continuous development of the EU's foreign policy dimension over the past twenty years, the Union is still a long way from being like a state, or from having a truly 'common' policy. Significant shortcomings remain and the change of pace is slow. EU foreign policy-making is still diffuse, lacking many of the basic constitutional powers that states enjoy, and with limited scope for autonomous action. Against this background, the notion that soft power would be the remedy for the capability-expectations gap has seemed attractive.

WHAT IS SOFT POWER?

The soft power concept has over time appeared in several contexts in Joseph Nye's work. He first coined the term in the late 1980s, disputing the then-dominant discourse of American decline. US soft power, he argued, accrued through its cultural appeal and leadership of the free world during the Cold War, would ensure the country's continued place at the apex of world politics. Nye returned to the topic of soft power in 2001 (just before the events of 9/11), this time warning against US triumphalism and feelings of omnipotence in its moment of uni-polarity. That warning was delivered even more starkly in 2004, at the height of the neo-conservative ascendancy, as the USA was conducting regime change in Iraq – illegitimately, in the eyes of many – and upsetting old alliances. The softer sides of diplomacy should never be underestimated, Nye cautioned, as they would, if nothing else, greatly reduce US costs "in carrots and sticks". More recently (2011), he has refined the topic further, once more in a context of pessimism.

The IR student could occasionally wish that Nye had called it something other than 'soft power'. The term itself leads to no end of conceptual confusion. When is power hard or soft? Economic power must surely be softer than military power, which is unambiguously hard; sanctions, after all, do not have quite the same sting as a cruise missile. What of positive conditionality and other financial inducements? Such confusions abound, in academic as well as policy orientated literature, and soft power has become a term more used than understood. For Nye, "power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes one wants" (Nye 2004: 2). The means for achieving such influence are what Nye divides into hard and soft power. The former is tangible, either coercive or based on inducements; the latter is persuasive. Hard power certainly encompasses military might, but also refers to economic suasion in the form of sanctions, payments, bribes, aid, and preferential trade agreements, as well as both negative and positive conditionality (Nye 2004: 31). Such policies are the carrots and sticks that actors use to make their influence count.

Soft power is defined as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye 2004: x). Whereas hard power is about bringing others into line, soft power is about co-option; not because partners are forced to align, but because they *want* to share the same goals, values and visions, due to their perceived attractiveness (Nye 2004: 5). Sources of soft power are cultural appeal, insofar as popular culture conveys a positive image of a country and a society; political norms and values, when seen as desirable and applied without hypocrisy; and policies, if they are seen as embodying a society's values, and if the larger goals pursued are seen as legitimate and desirable (Nye 2004: 11). The means for making effective use of soft power in foreign policy are public diplomacy, agenda-setting and framing international issues.

The soft power concept does not assume novel ways of exerting influence – after all, even E.H. Carr, in *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, spoke of 'power over opinion' (Carr 1939: 132-146) – but is a way of theorising non-tangible power and its relation with more traditional forms, underlining the importance of image and credibility, and how these can become power assets. Soft power can help melt old antagonisms, and solidify existing relations, and may be particularly helpful when states pursue milieu shaping goals in their external environments (Nye 2004: 16-17; Wolfers 1962: 74-77). It offers little, though, for concrete action in pursuit of tangible objectives, possession goals.

The danger of soft power lies in the "... faulty inferences that careless or unwary observers draw from it" (Gray 2011: 29), such as treating it as a general panacea or replacement for hard power. In fact, the two must always work in a symbiotic relationship, reinforcing each other. The proper balancing of these two is what Nye calls 'smart power' (Nye 2011: 23). Strategic presence is thus the necessary quality for soft power to be effective. Without it, soft power will only be consequential to the extent others will allow it. States with much hard but little soft power may often exert great influence. But such strategies mostly rest on coercion and will in the long run prove prohibitively costly. Soft power on its own, however derived, may make an actor attractive, but also leave it without either power or influence if aligning with it carries prohibitive risks for its potential partners. Credibility of an actor's hard power policies is thus essential for its soft power to matter (Gray 2011: 38). Deterrent, supportive or reassuring hard power policies in pursuit of legitimate objectives, such as humanitarian interventions, or in defence of certain widely shared fundamental values can in fact be significant sources of soft power. The real key is having effective power conversion strategies, so as to make the most use of the power resources at a state's disposal (Nye 2011: 10).

Speaking of soft power therefore does not imply any grander claims about transformative effects on international politics; seeking to strengthen one's soft power is about increasing one's influence, not promoting universal goods. Moreover, it is recognised that soft power is not static, but in flux. It can ebb and flow, increase and

decrease. It is context-dependent, cannot easily be switched on and off and therefore "... does not lend itself to careful ... calibration" (Gray 2011: 30). What is a source of soft power in some contexts may be the opposite in others. But when present, and reinforced through consistent policies that express desirable values, it may significantly reduce an actor's costs in both carrots and sticks (Nye 2004: 11).

EU SOFT POWER

As Portela (2007: 9) notes, soft power was not a concept "tailor-made" for the EU, unlike 'civilian power' and 'normative power', both of which are more prevalent among EU scholars, but have found little application beyond EU studies. Civilian power, as noted above, is primarily about the means of power, not the ends; nothing precludes purposeful pursuit of self-interest using civilian means (Smith 2005: 75). And while acting as a civilian power may both incorporate and be a source of soft power, the two concepts are not necessarily describing the same thing at all.

Normative power and soft power are more alike in several ways, in that both consider the impact of norms and values. But normative power connotes not only what power the EU *has*, but also the kind of power it *is*, in that it diffuses norms and values to those it comes into contact with, and changes perceptions of 'normal' in international politics (Manners 2002). The EU's source of such power is its inherent traits as a supranational entity, "different to pre-existing political forms, and ... [pre-disposed] to act in a normative way" (Manners 2002: 242), as evidenced by the several international human rights conventions that have become part of the treaty base. Although Manners considers the use of conditionality - essentially a coercive measure - a diffusion mechanism for the EU's normative power, he explicitly rejects "... the assumption that normative power requires a willingness to use force in an instrumental way" (Manners 2002: 242). It has been argued (Diez 2005) that Normative Power Europe is an attempt at identity construction with both a descriptive and prescriptive element to it (something which could also be said of EU officials' frequent mention of EU soft power during the Ferrero-Waldner era, see below). But Manners's claim goes further than that. In his view, the EU's very difference is the key to understanding it: A normative power goes beyond Westphalian conventions, exercising influence not by "what it says or does, but what it is" (Manners 2002: 252). The claims behind soft power are not quite that bold and ambitious.

Although both soft and normative power are about oozing and diffusing, the ways actors come to their powers are markedly different. Soft power is neither derived from intrinsic features, nor through the mere act of being; it is something you have, not something you are. Or, to turn the Manners's argument on its head; what that actor *is*, is very much a function of what they *say* and *do*, and on the two being congruent. A benevolent disposition is the result of willed action, as are policies that further benevolent norms and values. Likewise, norms of acceptable behaviour in international politics, or in a subset of the international community, are primarily created through willed action, although soft power can be a contributing factor to strengthening such shared norms and making them more attractive (Nye 2004: 20). Moreover, soft power is a descriptive concept (Nye 2011: 23), not an ideational one. It does not imply the same kind of value judgment that the normative power concept does, i.e. that some norms are more 'right' than others (even if Manners dresses this bias up in cosmopolitanism). What constitutes attractive values is context-dependent, a subjective matter in the eye of the beholder, and not dependent on supposed inherent traits or predispositions.

Compared to civilian and normative power, soft power is, Haaland Matlary's and Hill's contributions notwithstanding, sadly neglected as an analytical lens. Scholars of a constructivist bent did, however, notice that the term held favour with former DG RELEX Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner (2004-2009), who frequently referred to it as a

special trait of the EU, arguing that the EU's "... principal source of power ... is 'soft' rather than 'hard' ... but ... no less potent" (Ferrero-Waldner 2006a). Ferrero-Waldner's understanding of soft power was shown to stray frequently from Joseph Nye's (Portela 2007; Tulmets 2007). The emphasis seemed to be more on the 'soft' rather than 'power', reflecting more on the persuasive means used, and on the gentleness of the EU's approach to international affairs, than on soft power itself. In this, Ferrero-Waldner's conceptualisation seemed more in line with Duchêne's and Maull's ideas of civilian power (Portela 2007: 10). Less charitably, one might say that to Ferrero-Waldner soft power seemed to be whatever the EU was successful at, since, implicitly, that would mean without resorting to military coercion. Yet valuable as they were, these analyses of Ferrero-Waldner's usage and understanding of the term did not fully cover the topic, nor did they fully bring out the ways the original soft power concept could help our understanding of EU foreign policy. Moreover, there are numerous other examples, such as those at the beginning of this article, of EU officials using the term in ways that show a more refined and classic understanding.

To understand EU soft power, it is necessary first to cast a glance at its hard power. As already noted, the military dimension remains the least developed aspect of EU foreign policy, and is primarily geared towards humanitarian intervention and not towards power projection in the classic, coercive sense. The economic means have been more prevalent, in the form of trade agreements and development assistance, both typically accompanied by conditionality clauses. By these means, the EU has sought to pursue normative milieu goals (Hyde-Price 2006: 222). In this, the EU has often relied on its stronger economic position vis-à-vis partners, or indeed on the regional hegemony it enjoys over most of the European continent. The financial inducements and positive conditionality that Ferrero-Waldner regarded as the EU's soft power (Delcour & Tulmets 2007: 509) are fully in keeping with the notions of civilian power, in that negotiation, contractual relationships and economic incentives are central elements. But conditionality, whether positive or negative, and the sanctions implied, are, on a more rigorous understanding of power, clearly at the lower end of what can be termed hard power (Nye 2004: 8). At the same time, the EU's extensive trade ties with many parts of the world and its relatively generous development policies provide it with some important building blocks for developing soft power.

The EU's soft power appeal is not, despite Europe's immense contribution to science and 'high culture', primarily cultural. The EU has little cultural identity of its own – only member states have that, and these tend to be intensely national in character. There is no European equivalent to Hollywood and European popular culture (save perhaps that of the UK) does not travel as easily as that of the USA, nor offer the same kind of easily comprehensible 'window' on to its societies as America's does. Member states' individual cultural diplomacy – whether through language programmes, promotion of high culture, or educational exchange programmes – remains very important, but as sources of soft power for the EU the effect is indirect at best. But soft power can still be derived without a strong cultural identity.

The EU's historical narrative of peaceful integration between previously warring states is a significant source of soft power – and one for which it received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. The reordering of relations between nations based on the rule of law, and the elaborate balancing of interests between larger and smaller members, makes the EU attractive in the eyes of outsiders; similarly, the prosperity that has sprung from that recasting of relations and some of the concrete achievements of European integration, such as the Single Market and the Schengen zone. Also, the EU's enlargement policy has helped promote democratisation and political reform in candidate states, and stable, peaceful relations between them, thereby showing the potential effects when properly balancing hard and soft power to the particular context. The 2004 enlargement in particular is often cited as a triumph for EU diplomacy and its soft power. Eneko Landaburu, formerly Director-General of DG RELEX, has described the EU as a "pole of

attraction" to its external milieu, leading neighbours to want to align with it (Landaburu 2006: 32). Similar arguments based on EU soft power have been made for both the European Neighborhood Policy (Ferrero-Waldner 2006b) and the Eastern Partnership (Runner 2008).

Another potential source of soft power is the EU's stated commitment to certain normative principles, particularly democracy and human rights, including a strong emphasis on women's rights, which shows in the incorporation of several international human rights conventions into the *acquis*, and in the monitoring of potential members' performance under the Copenhagen Criteria. The rhetorical premium placed on values can be gleaned from the word appearing three times in the 2003 European Security Strategy, similarly in the 2008 update, and no fewer than 22 times in the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy Strategy Paper. Soft power rests on the attraction of shared values and on others wanting to share them effectively (Nye 2004: 7; EU Commission 2004: 3). The challenge for the EU has been turning this rhetoric into concrete and consistent foreign policies; something made all the more important by the EU's limited cultural identity. For soft power is dependent on espousing its stated values through actively doing.

Landaburu (2006) argues that the EU has done this by assuming global leadership in a number of policy areas, thus both utilising and enhancing its soft power. As evidence he cited the EU's leadership, in both rhetoric and deeds, on global climate change. Being the world's leading force, and largest donor, in the field of Third World development gives similar status, especially when coupled with the EU's advocacy for human rights improvement. Moreover, argues Landaburu, the EU has been a firm and consistent advocate for multilateralism and respect for international law. It has thus carved out for itself a distinct profile in international politics.

Worthy as such policies are, they do also lend themselves to a more realist argument that the EU is a vehicle for collective action by the member states, acting as the repository for their shared second-order concerns (Hyde-Price 2006: 222-223). In this analysis, the EU takes positions on a number of 'values' issues, but not if it interferes with more earthly concerns of first-order importance. Persuasive as this argument is – and the EU's commitment to its values can indeed be questioned, as also shown below – it does miss one point: namely that acting *effectively* as a civilian power can in itself be a source of soft power. In terms of identity building, talking of soft power also serves a purpose by playing up those aspects of foreign policy that obscure the EU's weakness in traditional resources, thereby becoming an argument for the EU's international legitimacy and for Europe still having something to offer. Additionally, the latter appeals to those EU members still sensitive to charges of imperialism and feeling a need to live down their colonial pasts. For all these reasons, the EU's soft power emphasis has sought to cast the Union as an attractive and different kind of actor. At the same time, Landaburu concedes that trees do not grow into the heavens: only by "paying the extra cost ... in institutional and political reforms" can the EU ever hope to be a fully independent and effective actor able to punch its weight properly (Landaburu 2006: 33).

Chris Patten has described EU soft power as a "weapon of mass attraction" (cited in Tulmets 2007: 206). But just like WMD, it does not lend itself to careful calibration. What makes the EU immensely attractive to some may also make it attractive to others it is not necessarily trying to woo. Soft power, which cannot easily be switched on and off, can have unintended effects, and be something of a mixed blessing. The EU's rhetoric and touting of its own history of successful integration may therefore also engender expectations in others, and implicitly impose obligations on EU policies.

Most importantly, soft power is a resource which in order to be useful needs to be reinforced through consistent action in keeping with those values and policies that brought it about in the first place. Concretely, in the case of the EU, this means utilising the building blocks for developing its soft power, by consistently placing central

emphasis on its distinctive international economic policy agenda; being a provider of security in keeping with its liberal political values; promoting peaceful, rule of law-based relations; and insisting on the protection of human rights. Failing to do so may well invite suspicions of weakness or charges of hypocrisy, either of which would prove very damaging for soft power were they to stick. Developing soft power therefore requires proactive policies of conflict management, of integration towards countries that want to share the EU's norms and values, and firm policies towards those who do not. Not only would such stances be in the EU's interest if it wants to maintain soft power; they will actually be expected by those outsiders seeking closer ties with it.

SOFT POWER AND THE EU'S ROLES

The various roles Hill considered the EU as either expecting itself and/or being expected by others to fulfil remain as good a guide as any for gauging the impact of soft power, as these roles are also largely expressed in the EU's own strategy papers. Hill (2010) has further argued that in its foreign policies the EU has sought to incorporate soft power maximisation to the fullest extent possible. The following necessarily cursory overview discusses whether and how soft power has an observable impact on the success (or lack of) with which the EU performs in these roles, and whether its performance enhances or diminishes its soft power.

Stabilising Western Europe/Regional pacifier

Of all the sources of EU soft power, its prominent role in stabilising and pacifying the European continent, highlighted in the very first paragraph of the ESS, ranks highest. The processes that led to the 2004/7 enlargement are rightly hailed as a success in norm diffusion and integration. To many, both inside and outside the Union, the EU became virtually synonymous with 'Europe', fostering discourses in Central and Eastern European countries of a "return to Europe" (Sjursen 2002). In short, the EU's attractiveness was such that many non-members wished not just to get closer to the EU, but to become part of it. The EU's openness to enlargement in the 1990s furthered its soft power, and lent substance to the rhetoric of erasing the continent's old dividing lines.

Looking beyond the 2004/7 intake, the record is patchier. The EU failed dismally in first preventing and subsequently ending the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, eventually needing the USA and NATO to do the heavy lifting. Such failures did little at the time to bolster the EU's soft power or credibility as a regional pacifier. Its image has only gradually recovered through long and patient efforts at post-conflict stabilisation, through peacekeeping and support for nation building processes, backed by the promise of eventual membership for all Balkan countries. Even then, the record so far is ambiguous. One major criticism of EU efforts in Bosnia has been the disempowerment of local political elites in favour of EU external governance (e.g. Chandler 2006). Moreover, whatever the attraction of EU membership, Bosnian politicians still find it difficult to overcome their differences sufficiently to work together. Most of all, such influence as the EU has through its soft power could only be made felt after no small amount of (non-EU) hard power had been expended bringing Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia to heel.

Looking beyond the EU's eastern borders, the picture becomes murkier still. The continual failure to offer a clear membership perspective to the western CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries, offering only very limited integration on the EU's own terms, goes somewhat against the idea of the EU being an open and inclusive force for good. Instead, the ENP has primarily aimed at papering over the EU's internal disagreements, and served more towards addressing EU needs than the aspirations of the partners. Although Ukrainian efforts at pursuing a westward

orientation following the Orange Revolution were always troubled, the EU's unwillingness to be more forthcoming, thus denying itself the full use of its soft power, was hardly helpful. That the ENP tends to be a bureaucratic and slow-moving process, not always offering the sort of 'carrots' that the partner countries most want, such as visa-free travel, has been an additional source of frustration (Popescu & Wilson 2009). The Eastern Partnership (EaP), which Commission President Barroso claimed would show "... the power of soft power, the ability of the EU to attract others and bring about changes in societies" (Runner 2008), also failed to provide a real step-change for most partner countries. As the 2004/7 enlargements fade into memory, instead giving way to entrenched discourses of 'enlargement fatigue', the EU's failure to extend membership prospects may come to diminish its soft power in the region. In fact, in the run up to the November 2013 EaP summit in Vilnius, the policy received several blows, as first Armenia and then Ukraine, both under heavy Russian pressure, backed off from signing Association Agreements with the EU. That development would seem to underscore the limitations of soft power when that is the core component of policy, and not backed with something more tangible (Nielsen & Vilson, forthcoming 2014).

Mediator of conflicts

When originally outlining the EU's potential in the role of a mediator, Hill (1993: 313) mentioned its ambition to solve the Israel-Palestine conflict, which the ESS (European Council 2003: 8) called a "strategic priority". The EU has indeed attempted to engage in a humanitarian role, with the Arab side in particular, but with little to show for it. Against a backdrop of continuing violence and repeated US failures at mediation, the overall lack of success can hardly be ascribed to a particular EU failing, but does show the limits of its capability. The EU sought to mediate in the conflict over Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, the trio of France, Germany, and the UK taking the lead on behalf of the Union. The attempt at a softer approach of negotiation and economic incentives yielded precious few definite results, and eventually gave way to punitive sanctions (Patterson 2013). Soft power did not make carrots without sticks a winning formula.

When considering the EU's success as a conflict mediator closer to home, it is striking that of the world's ten disputed states, a full six are either within the EU's borders or within the Eastern Partnership group of countries. When allowing a still-divided Cyprus to accede in 2004, the EU essentially became a party to the conflict instead of a mediator. While EU soft power may play a role in keeping Northern Cyprus at the negotiating table, finding a solution has not become easier by the EU having lost its main leverage on the Greek side. In fact, a solution may have come to hinge even more on the EU credibly keeping accession negotiations with Turkey going - by no means a sure thing at the time of writing. EU soft power seems more capable of influencing and de-escalating the conflict over Kosovo. The attraction of deeper integration and eventual membership is what underpins the EU's continuing push to normalise relations between Serbia and Kosovo, which saw some success during 2013. If it remains a credible prospect, the membership perspective will hopefully in time induce Serbian recognition of Kosovo and the final settlement of the Yugoslavian conflicts. In both the Cyprus and the Serbia/Kosovo cases, though, the potential efficacy of EU soft power seems to depend on a number of other, tangible variables, not least the prospect of further integration.

The frozen conflicts in the western CIS and South Caucasus (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria) have all festered for more than twenty years. This is not the place for a complete overview of EU activity (or lack thereof) in these conflicts. However a few observations on the South Ossetia conflict are instructive, showing the EU failing at precisely the kind of "preventive engagement" the ESS (European Council 2003: 7) calls for. In the years prior to the 2008 war, the EU rejected entreaties by the Georgian government to place either unarmed monitors or peacekeeping forces in the conflict zone. That the EU was looked to for this can be viewed as indicative of its soft

power; its involvement was sought due to its perceived attractiveness as a possible mediator and as an actor espousing different values than those of Russia. It also serves as a prime example of the dangers of the capability-expectations gap; of expectations towards the EU rising to the point where the EU was not *willing* to meet them. As it turned out, EU soft power was no foil for Russian power politics, and the EU-brokered ceasefire in the Russian-Georgian war ultimately amounted to little more than refreezing the conflict, but with Russia now more firmly entrenched in the separatist regions (Asmus 2010). The EU's role was hardly flattering, nor was the outcome or aftermath much in keeping with its professed norms and values. To some extent, in the former USSR the EU enjoys its soft power in spite of itself.

Global intervener

Obviously, as already discussed, soft power is not in itself a tool for direct intervention; it is influence over opinion. However, the interplay between hard and soft power is an intricate one in the context of intervention. How an actor uses hard power, and where and how intervention takes place can determine the image the actor enjoys, and hence influence perceptions of credibility. Instrumental usage of military force is entirely consistent with the soft power concept, if in pursuit of legitimate ends, such as humanitarian interventions, peacemaking and peace support operations. In the right circumstances, expending "hard power for soft purposes" might bolster the EU's soft power with outsiders (Matlary 2006).

However, if the EU's record in conflict mediation is patchy, as a global intervener it is all but non-existent, although not for absence of rhetoric. The EU has consistently framed itself as a liberal power, with a value-based foreign policy, able to pursue "... a policy of resolving other people's conflicts by military means if necessary, but without violating international law" (Rynning 2003: 486), and, theoretically, with the development of the CSDP Battle Groups, the EU today possesses the means for doing so.

In reality the question is whether the EU has come very close at all to achieving the unity of purpose, or strategic culture, necessary actually to conduct the kind of policies required of a global intervener (e.g. Howorth 2007; Matlary 2006; Rynning 2003). Apart from speaking of the need to "... develop a strategic culture that fosters early, rapid, and when necessary, robust intervention" (European Council 2003:12), the ESS is rather quiet on the exact circumstances in which the EU might intervene with force. Even more telling, the much vaunted EU Battle Groups have not been activated even a single time in their existence. As actual first interveners, the EU can only claim the Chad operation of 2008-2009; in all other instances, others have gone before, or, as with France in Mali in 2013, a member state went in alone. Most missions under the CSDP banner have either been cases of the EU assuming responsibility from NATO for long-term UN-authorized peacekeeping and nation building missions (e.g. Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia), or they have been short-term, small-scale, and, Operation Artemis in the DRC apart, civilian in nature, directly supporting existing UN missions. Moreover, no missions of significant scale have been launched since the anti-piracy Operation Atalanta in 2008.

The cases of intervention to stop the genocide in Darfur, discussed internally between 2003 and 2008, or the 2011 Libya War, both conflicts which seemed ideally suited to the EU's self-perception, showed two not very flattering traits. In the former case, a constant lowering of internal expectations, to the point where military action was off the table due to lack of consensus (Toje 2008:135-138). The latter conflict, although spearheaded by several EU members and encompassing several of the key threats described in the ESS, had to be managed through NATO, with a sizeable US contribution, due to internal EU disagreements on what action to take. The EU thus fumbled the initial intervention, but it also failed to build soft power and influence in the war's aftermath by addressing its own normative concerns rather than the new Libya's urgent security

problems. As Libyan PM Mahmoud Jibril lamented in March 2012, the EU was now "... looking at what it wants to do and is ignoring needful priorities ... Engaging women is a good thing, but doesn't touch the real problems [of getting weapons off the streets]" (Marquand 2012). At the very least, the value-based soft power's long-term efficacy rests on other short-term difficulties being overcome. Most problematic, of course, is what these instances say about the credibility of the EU as an actor. For lack of credibility undermines soft power.

The principal voice in relations with the South/ Bridge between rich and poor

In as much as anyone can really be a bridge between the world's rich and poor, the EU is filling this function by default, since the USA offers no competition for it. The EU is a leading proponent of the UN Millennium Development Goals, and remains the world's largest donor of development funds. The Cotonou Agreement between the EU and the ACP countries provides a highly developed framework for cooperation, mixing positive inducement with conditionality clauses. The agreement targets both economic development and trade, and progress on the EU's normative agenda (gender equality, human rights, children's rights, health and education, sustainable development, civil society etc.) as well as political developments in the field of democracy and good governance (Cameron 2007: 164).

One would expect such policies to boost EU soft power, in turn increasing the policies' chances of success. But a number of problems complicate this, and have done so for many years. The insistence on conditionality links between development aid and the imparting of liberal norms and values has not only been inconsistent over the years, it has often also been perceived as overbearing. It has left the door open to other powers less preoccupied with normative concerns: "the Chinese build bridges for us, the EU supervises our elections", is an African commonplace, suggesting that the EU's priorities are not universally appreciated, and its soft power not always in evidence. While this may partly be an issue of style, other policies contribute to an image of a selfish and hostile EU. The Common Agricultural Policy's harmful effects on developing countries' economies likely chips away at EU soft power faster than any development policies can enhance it. Not least since the latter are as much tailored to meet EU security needs as the real needs of the recipients (Faust & Messner 2005). Nor has the increasingly hostile rhetoric adopted in most European countries towards immigrants from the developing world gone unnoticed; neither has the development of 'Fortress Europe'.

In the global climate change talks to replace the Kyoto Protocol, EU soft power proved insufficient to convince the G77 countries of the EU's good intentions, the legitimacy of its position, or that they should follow its lead. At the 2009 UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen, even as the USA and the BRICS countries were busy ruining the prospects of a meaningful agreement, it was the Europeans finding themselves accused of seeking "the destruction of Africa" (Philips 2009). Such an image hardly came out of nowhere.

Managing world trade/Joint supervisor of the world economy

Given the sheer size of its economy, the EU remains a major player in the world economy and in all multilateral bodies managing it (WTO, IMF etc.). But the G20's emergence in the wake of the financial crisis suggests that the EU, along with other major Western economies are, relatively speaking, declining forces, as other powers increasingly assert themselves. The moves towards an EU-US free trade agreement would, however, tie the two largest economic players together, and thus enhance their ability to jointly shape trade and regulatory standards in the world economy.

But what of soft power? For the EU to influence opinion in the world economy through its example, its own economic success would have to be conspicuous, and a few starry-eyed observers (e.g. Rifkin 2004) do indeed extol the virtues and desirability of the 'European economic model'. To many others, it must look increasingly past its sell-by date. In the current climate of crunching recession or tepid growth rates, high unemployment, sovereign-debt crises and on-going bail-outs, it is hard for Europe to claim leadership. Instead, it is now the BRICS who help Europe weather the global economic crisis, while Europe is losing voting power at the IMF. The failure to undertake the necessary reforms envisaged in the much-vaunted *Lisbon Strategy* (2001), which should have turned the EU into the "most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world", or those of the successor document *Europe 2020* (2009), calls into question the European model's sustainability. The knock-on effects of the Eurozone's financial meltdown on the credibility of the EU's foreign policy ambitions can hardly be underestimated and will not be easily contained. Even the 'green economy', Europe's strongest claim to leadership, does not seem to catch on. The EU exerted no small effort getting countries to sign on to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, led on cutting carbon-dioxide emissions, and unilaterally set the most ambitious targets for reductions. Yet at the 2009 Copenhagen Summit that soft power could not translate into actual influence, with the EU ending up watching from the sidelines as Brazil, China, India and the USA scuppered the prospects of a binding agreement. In any case, the EU's collective will to continue taking the lead in this field seems increasingly in question.

Europe's relative decline in the world economy is partly happening due to material factors and partly due to inadequate economic policies. Soft power is not offsetting this relative slipping of influence, but is suffering under the EU's economic underperformance. The EU's example does not look sufficiently like the way of the future, and too much energy is spent defending out-dated policies like the CAP. For soft power to become a useful tool in this EU role, fundamental policy changes need to take place to make the European model once more seem attractive and sustainable. Soft power is yet again dependent on the success of substantive, tangible policies.

Global superpower/A second western voice in international diplomacy

Of all the scenarios sketched in Christopher Hill's original article, the EU graduating from being a second western voice to being a new pole in the international system, replacing the USSR, has proved the least accurate. As the above overview has shown, the EU is far from capable of fully performing in the various roles expected of it. Its relationship with the United States is not one of genuine partnership, but will remain deeply asymmetric for a long time to come (Witney & Shapiro 2009). This is determined by material factors; Europe still depends on the USA for its security and relies on it for support in military interventions. Soft power cannot be used to 'balance' against hard power, and given the USA's greater capacity for political leadership and action, as well as its greater world-wide cultural appeal, American soft power is anyway likely to outshine the EU's.

In the more plausible scenario, of the EU remaining a second western voice in international politics, the Union does have a number of things going for it in terms of soft power. As already mentioned, the EU has carved out distinct positions on a number of second-order issues: international law, multilateralism through the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto Protocol, support for the Millennium Development Goals, democracy promotion, championing of human rights etc. By emphasising these themes the EU can stand somewhat distinct from the United States, and can plausibly claim to be pursuing a policy in keeping with the norms and values it expects of itself, while remaining within the capabilities available to it. But such stands and the soft power potentially derived from them will not truly empower the EU to the extent that it can take and maintain similarly separate positions on anything of first-order importance.

SOFT POWER AND THE WIDENING GAP

The EU's record of building and making soft power count towards a more effective foreign policy thus seems mixed when considered through its various roles. The above overview has mainly dealt with the capability side of the EU's actorness. Not surprisingly, it shows that where the EU is strong, enjoys an uncontested hegemony, and has good policies in place, such as in the Balkans, it is met with positive responses, clearly indicating that its soft power has an effect. All the same, the overview also suggests that EU leaders seem sometimes to expect too much from it, and have not necessarily thought much about how it is accumulated. Soft power is a tool of policy, an asset supporting policy; but the means of policy cannot be separated from the overall strategy of which it is part. In fact, acquiring soft power and using it is often one and the same, and it therefore has not necessarily added much in those fields where the EU's policies and capabilities are weak. As Gray notes, "the contexts wherein [soft power] would be most useful are precisely those where it is least likely to work its magic successfully" (Gray 2011: 53). Where the EU's capabilities are weaker its soft power generally is too, and its policies correspondingly ineffective.

The real problem with soft power is in its interplay with expectations. As noted at the outset, the danger of the capability-expectations gap is that it may lead to excessive risk-taking and debates over false possibilities. Soft power, when it is present, will most likely exacerbate this risk by driving up expectations towards the EU. The enlargement process, one of the most effective sources of soft power, created false hopes in countries like Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, not least aided by an EU rhetoric that proudly touted its past record and spoke of bringing these countries closer to the EU. Thus some former Soviet states looked to the EU as a source of stability and help in solving their frozen conflicts and as an alternative to Russian domination. This speaks to the EU's soft power, but also shows that soft power cannot be easily controlled, and may indeed backfire. Russia saw the EU's activities in the Eastern Neighbourhood as encroachment and took action to balance against it. It is far from clear that the EU ever intended to live up (or down) to either side's expectations, but soft power (and adverse reactions to it) cannot be turned on and off at will. Expectations did get out of hand and could not be met; the outcome for both Georgia and Ukraine has been failure and disillusion.

The expectations, both internally and externally, that the EU, as one of the richest and most stable parts of the world, will take responsibility beyond its own borders remains in spite of the many failures in the past, and that in itself is indicative of the EU's residual soft power. But the higher the initial expectations, the bigger the eventual disappointment when the EU fails to act - whether in Darfur, the South Caucasus, Libya, and currently Syria. Thus to the extent that EU soft power engenders hopes in others, it has mostly had the effect of exposing just how wide the gap between expectations and capabilities remains. It might of course be argued that not being a military power, instead emphasising civilian/persuasive means, is a source of soft power. Yet such arguments tacitly acknowledge Hedley Bull's (1982: 151) seminal critique of Civilian Power Europe, but equally relevant in the present context, that "... the power and influence exerted by the European [Union] and other such civilian actors was conditional upon a strategic environment provided by the military power of states, which they did not control". It is not possible to build a successful foreign policy identity solely around second-order issues, which is the inherent premise of such arguments, even if one can build a successful record on them. Soft power created by success leads to higher expectations, not lower ones, and will soon enough spill over into the sort of first-order issues the EU has traditionally shown little capacity for handling. Moreover, it is not clear that the EU can marshal even its civilian capabilities sufficiently to make them count optimally. In fact, EU weakness has led to inconsistency on even those normative issues that it professes to hold dear. The seeming double standards on display when the EU picks on smaller powers over human rights issues, but soft-pedals in the face of far more flagrant abuses in China and Russia, are all the more striking since the EU has made so

much of its identity as a promoter of such norms. The soft power once accumulated led to higher expectations and then greater disappointment.

This matters profoundly. As Europe's hard power capabilities have withered, it has become increasingly reliant on its soft power – although, as noted, without having given adequate thought to what constitutes it. But image, reputation and credibility are built up over time, and will invariably be seen in the light of past deeds (or lack thereof). Tomorrow's perceptions of the EU will be based on others' experiences of its doings today. The frequently empty rhetoric and the failures to act with purpose in times of crisis shape perceptions. It is therefore not only true that the EU's existing soft power may drive up expectations beyond the capability for meeting them. It is equally the case that whenever it is exposed the capability-expectations gap itself damages EU soft power. As Nye notes, soft power is "... hard to use, easy to lose, and costly to re-establish" (Nye 2011: 83).

CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that soft power, in its original definition, is a potentially valuable asset in EU foreign policy, but not always in the way and to the extent that EU leaders had hoped for. When it is present it is positive, and there are instances where the EU has benefited from it, such as when dealing with countries entertaining a hope of eventual membership. But more often, the EU's ability to benefit from its soft power falls victim to its limited capability in traditional terms, and therefore does not in fact contribute greatly to the success of EU foreign policy in such instances. It has also been shown not to be a replacement for the hard power the EU lacks. Lastly, it was argued that the main effect of EU soft power on its external interlocutors is to raise their expectations towards the EU, as seen in several instances, thus widening the capability-expectations gap rather than bridging it.

The irony of soft power is that it so often requires hard power policies to become effective. The capability-expectations gap is therefore not being bridged by soft power, but is in itself very damaging to the EU's soft power, as the EU too frequently fails to live up to expectations and loses credibility as a result. In the end, having discarded the notion that soft power can be the solution, we therefore end up right back with Hill's old conclusion that there are only two ways of bridging the capability-expectations gap. One would be to become more capable as an actor, through political reforms and greater investment in the instruments and resources of foreign policy. However as long as dealing with the financial crisis consumes all of Europe's political energy, and military and development budgets face steep cuts, it is difficult to imagine the EU having the capacity to take any serious steps to raise its level of capability in order to meet expectations. The only alternative way out of the predicament, as Hill pointed out, is to lower expectations; to make others understand that Europe is not a "... panacea, a cross between Father Christmas and the 7th Cavalry" (Hill 1993: 322). But that route, of lowering both internal ambitions and external expectations, is the continuation of Europe's relative decline in international affairs, quite likely leading to further disillusionment and loss of credibility – and surely at a cost to EU soft power.

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