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Soft power in times of the plague: the winners and losers of first wave of COVID-19 (winter–summer 2020)

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zwycięzcy i przegrani pierwszej fali COVID-19 (zima–lato 2020)*

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The aim of the article is to identify the soft power winners and losers of the first wave of the global health crisis caused by COVID-19 (Winter–Summer 2020); to analyse the factors which have contributed to such outcome; and finally, to extract examples of the best practices, which can serve other states in the next stages of the pandemic. The article argues that there is a correlation between the quality of a country's response to the global health crisis (both domestically and abroad) and a change in international public perceptions of that state. Moreover, the states that gained the most soft power in 2020, have not done so based solely on their political system or past performance. Instead, a key factor was the existing domestic and foreign policy collaborative culture, which resulted in the ability to get everyone behind a common response to the crisis at home, but also to promote global solutions to the crisis abroad.

**Soft power w czasach zarazy:
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Celem artykułu jest wyłonienie zwycięzców i przegranych *soft power* w pierwszej fali światowego kryzysu zdrowotnego wywołanego przez COVID-19 (zima–lato 2020); analiza czynników, które przyczyniły się do takiego wyniku; i wreszcie wyodrębnienie przykładów najlepszych praktyk, które mogą służyć innym państwom w kolejnych etapach pandemii. W artykule argumentuje się, że istnieje korelacja między jakością odpowiedzi kraju na globalny kryzys zdrowotny (zarówno w kraju, jak i za granicą) a zmianą międzynarodowego postrzegania tego państwa przez opinię publiczną. Ponadto państwa, które uzyskały największą miękką siłę w 2020 r., nie zrobiły tego wyłącznie w oparciu o swój system polityczny lub wyniki z przeszłości, ale kluczowym czynnikiem była istniejąca kultura współpracy w polityce wewnętrznej i zagranicznej, która zaowocowała możliwością poparcia wszystkich wspólnymi odpowiedziami na kryzys w kraju, a także promowaniem globalnych rozwiązań kryzysu za granicą.

Introduction

Understood as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment”¹, soft power considerations remain one of the drivers of 21st century state foreign policy. In a world where hard power (military might, economic sanctions), can only get you so far, finding ways to project influence on the international stage through attracting others to one’s cause, has been at the heart of diplomatic efforts of many countries. Deploying soft power has never been an easy task however. This is because it requires from governments a unique set of collaborative skills – both domestically and internationally. On the one hand, policy-makers need to accept the fact that the state cannot and should not control many of its own soft power’s resources (such as education, culture, business and innovation). Instead it should find ways to engage its own society in foreign policy practices through information, collaboration and identity-defining². On the other hand, where governments do control soft power resources (foreign policy, institutions), they should pursue international policies that do not only defend their respective national interest, but help deliver “global public goods” such as peace, security, human rights or sustainable development³.

Both the abovementioned abilities prove to be even more relevant in the context of the ongoing global public health crisis caused by COVID-19. From a state perspective possessing collaborative skills differentiates the soft power winners from the soft power losers of the pandemic. From the global perspective, the ability to effectively deploy soft power by key international players – among others through building consensus and forging a co-ordinated global effort in the fight with the health crisis – will determine how quickly the virus will be brought under control and how fast the global economy recovers. In sum, how countries have approached

- 1 J. S. Jr Nye, *Soft power – the means to success in world politics*, Public Affairs, New York 2004, p. 94.
- 2 K. Pisarska, *The domestic dimension of public diplomacy. Evaluating success through civil engagement*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills 2016.
- 3 F. Proedrou, C. Frangonikolopoulos, *Refocusing public diplomacy: The need for strategic discursive public diplomacy*, “Diplomacy & Statecraft” 2012, vol. 23, issue 4, p. 734.

the COVID-19 crisis, both at home and internationally, will have lasting implications for their ability to project soft power in the future.

The aim of the article is to identify the soft power winners and losers of the first wave of the global health crisis caused by COVID-19 (Winter–Summer 2020); to analyse the factors which have contributed to such outcome; and finally, to extract examples of the best practices, which can serve other states in the next stages of the pandemic. The article argues that there is a correlation between the quality of a country's response to the global health crisis (both domestically and abroad) and a change in international public perceptions of that state. Moreover, the states that have enhanced their soft power resources in the first part of 2020, have not done so based solely on their political system (democracies vs. autocracies) or past performance. Instead, a key factor was the existing domestic and foreign policy collaborative culture, which resulted in the ability to get everyone behind a common response to the crisis at home, but also to promote global solutions to the crisis abroad.

The primary method used in the article is comparative analysis. The discussion is grounded upon empirical evidence gathered from articles and classification of real-life political phenomena. The established hypothesis is being tested by collecting and comparing such data from four different countries (cases) – the United States, China, Germany and South Korea.

The article has clear time limitations (Winter–Summer 2020) and assesses the performance of these four state in a specific timeframe. The author believes however, that the developed model can serve well in assessing state performance in the next waves of the pandemic, in which these states might do a better – or worst – job on the proposed scale.

Soft power resources in times of COVID-19

What are key sources of soft power? For states, just as for people, a key ingredient, which determines meaningful cooperation is trust. The perceptions of trustworthiness of a given partner, shape other countries' behaviour and have very real implications for a that partner's economy, international influence, as well as security. As written in a recent British Council Report on soft power "perceptions influence behaviours (and) behaviours influence

reality”, which in turn manifests itself in the state’s ability to attract investments, business partners, students and tourists and most importantly forge security alliances⁴.

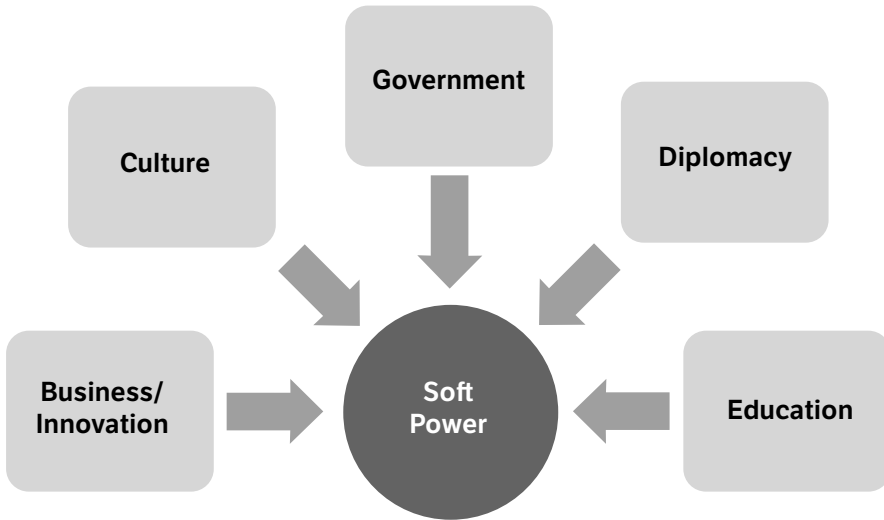
But what are the drives of international trustworthiness and thus country’s attractiveness to others? What are the soft power resources which most states have at hand? In a report entitled *The Value of Trust. How Trust is Earned and Why it Matters* Alice Campbell-Cree and Mona Lotten argue that the key state qualities that most strongly drive trust of others are openness, contribution to aiding development in poorer countries, a free justice system, world-leading arts and culture, working constructively with other governments and treating people fairly⁵. These largely match the three core elements of soft power indicated by the author of the entire concept, Professor Joseph Nye. In his book *Soft Power. The means of Success in the World of Politics* Nye argues that soft power rests on three core elements: a country’s culture, its political values and its foreign policies⁶. The most quantifiable taxonomy of soft power resources has been presented however by the Monocle – a global briefing covering international affairs, business, culture and design. In its annual Soft Power Index the magazine looks at five different sources of soft power, which states possess. These are: education, diplomacy/foreign policy, government/political institutions, culture, and finally business/innovation (Scheme 1).

How is then the COVID-19 global health crisis affecting soft power of states? Although it might be too early to make a final judgement, preliminary research and polling suggest a strong **correlation between the quality of a country’s response to the global health crisis** (both domestically and abroad) **and a change in international public perceptions of that state**. As underlined by Jonathan McClory “perceptions of the competence and effectiveness of governments will be more important than at other

4 A. MacDonald, *Sources of soft power. How perceptions determine the success of nations*, British Council, February 2020 [accessed: 28 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/sources-soft-power-report-perceptions-success.pdf>>.

5 A. Campbell-Cree, M. Lotten, *The value of trust. How trust is earned and why it matters*, British Council Report, June 2018 [accessed: 21 VIII 2020], available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/the_value_of_trust.pdf>.

6 J. S. Jr Nye, *Soft power...*, p. 11.



Scheme 1: Component parts of soft power

Source: J. McClory, *The new persuaders. An international ranking of soft power*, The Institute of Government, December 2010, p. 3, [accessed: 28 VIII 2020], available at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/The%20new%20persuaders_0.pdf>.

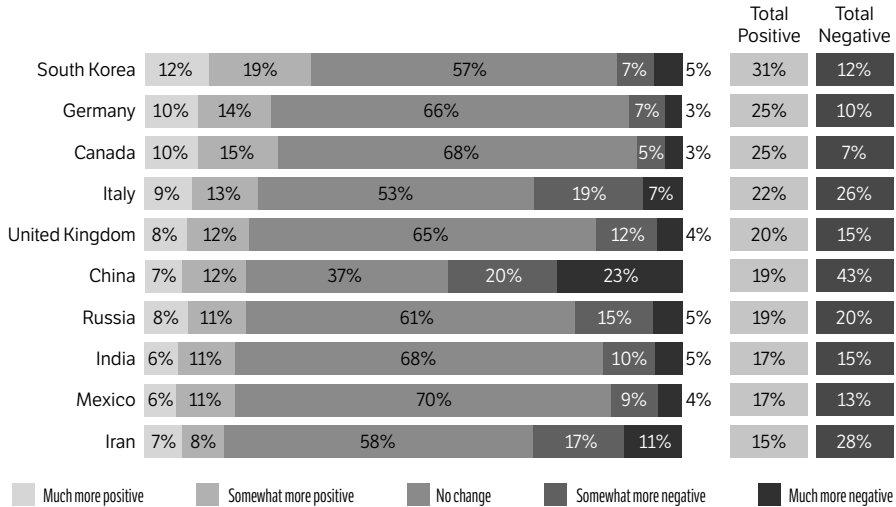
times. Those who have dealt well with significant outbreaks of COVID-19 are likely to see their soft power rise⁷.

This hypothesis can be tested by analysing the first public opinion polls conducted in the United States and Europe after the pandemic outbreak. An April 2020 APCO worldwide survey, measuring the perceptions of Americans towards other countries, have shown a net 20% raise of positive feelings towards states such as South Korea, Canada and Germany (+19, +18, and +15, respectively) which have dealt relatively well with the first wave of the pandemic⁸. At the same time countries, which were perceived as having at that time serious problems with the disease such as Italy or China saw a net negative change of impressions among general publics (Scheme 2).

In another public opinion poll – this time in nine EU countries – carried out for the European Council on Foreign Relations in late April

7 M. Lotten, *Soft power and COVID-19*, Policy Insight, British Council, May 2020 [accessed: 28 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/soft-power-COVID-19>>.

8 A. Snyder, M. Sindyukov, *How COVID-19 is changing the soft power game*, "Diplomatic Courier" [online], 16 IV 2020 [accessed: 22 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts/how-covid-19-is-changing-the-soft-power-game>>.



Scheme 2: How a country responds to COVID-19 is changing how Americans perceive that country

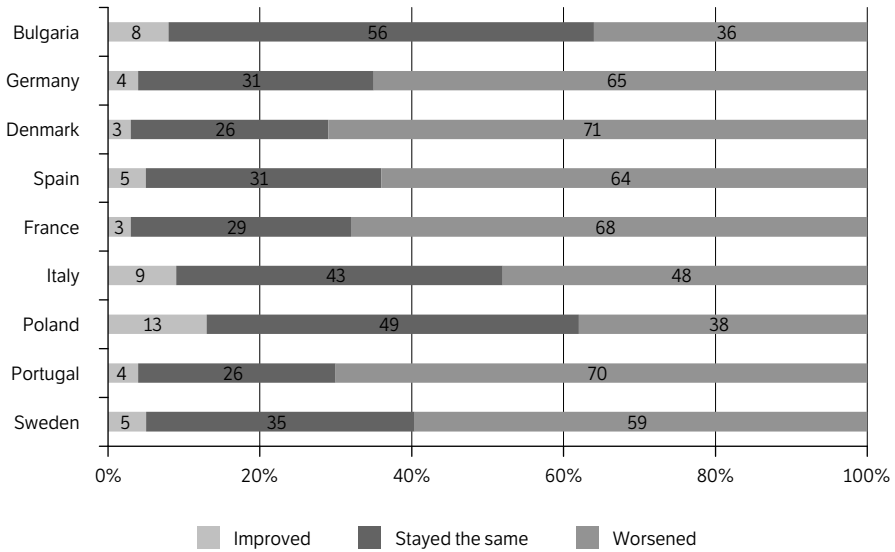
Source: Snyder, M. Sindyukov, *How COVID-19 is changing the soft power game*, "Diplomatic Courier" [online], 16 IV 2020 [accessed: 22 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts/how-covid-19-is-changing-the-soft-power-game>>.

and early May 2020, we can observe a sharp decline in positive views both towards the United States and China (Scheme 3). On the one hand the perceptions of Europeans were clearly influenced by the disastrous U.S. response to the virus at home, the lack of American global leadership and finally its isolationistic policies (closing borders, withdrawing from the WHO). On the other Europeans seem unimpressed by China's "mask diplomacy", clearly punishing the country's lack of transparency at the outbreak of the pandemic⁹.

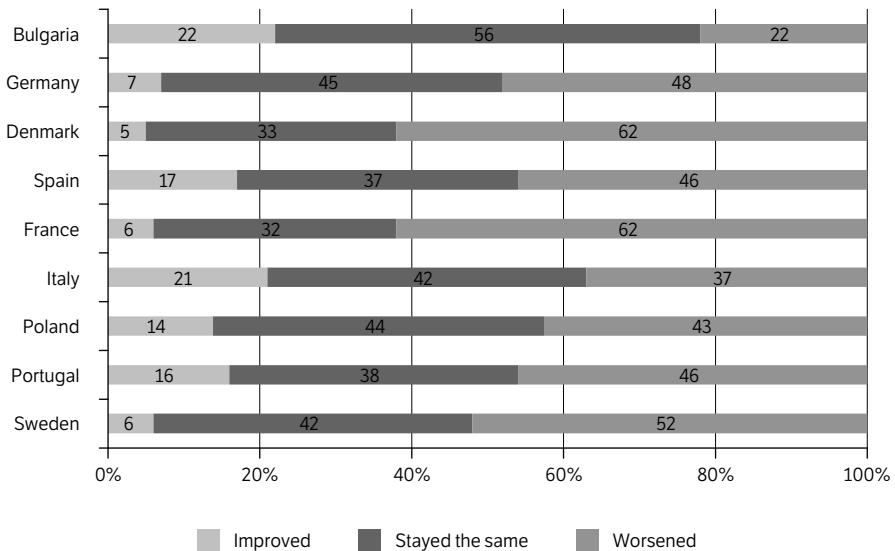
Before we move to analysing individual performance of states in the first stage of the COVID-19 global health crisis (Winter-Spring 2020), it is important to indicate the type of scale on which the countries will be assessed. For the research purpose the author has decided to utilize three out of five Monocle Soft Power Index sources of soft power, which are of particular relevance for the evaluation of state activity during a pandemic. These are: government (domestic response to the crisis), diplomacy/foreign policy (international response to the crisis) and business/innovation (non-state

9 S. Dennison, P. Zerka, *Together in trauma. Europeans and the world after COVID-19*, European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy Brief no. 328, June 2020, pp. 8–10.

How has your view of the US changed during the coronavirus crisis? (%)



How has your view of China changed during the coronavirus crisis? (%)



Scheme 3: Change of perceptions of US and China during the coronavirus crisis in 9 European states (April/May 2020)

Source: S. Dennison, P. Zerka, *Together in trauma. Europeans and the world after COVID-19*, European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy Brief no. 328, June 2020.

response to the crisis)¹⁰. The other two resources – culture and education – have been considered as having little or no impact on soft power perceptions related to how states handled the global pandemic.

In terms of country selection, the author has decided to choose four states which by the Spring 2020 have experienced a significant change of the way they are perceived by international publics. These are: the United States, China, Germany and South Korea.

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, we will look at some of the following questions directly related to the use of soft power resources:

- **Government:** How quickly did the state react and how efficient was it in preventing the spread of the virus at home? While using technology to stop the spread of the virus, has the government respected human rights and assured personal information protection? Has it been able to effectively collaborate with non-state actors, including NGOs, business and others?
- **Foreign Policy:** Has the state contributed to the global response to COVID-19 by supporting multilateral efforts to stop the spread and by delivering assistance to countries which were in most need of equipment and medications?
- **Business and Innovations:** Is the country an active participant of the collective effort to find a vaccine or cure for the disease? How willing is the country to share other innovations which might have helped in dealing with the pandemic with the rest of the world?

Overall, soft power success will be assessed on two levels: **how the state managed the crisis domestically and how it has contributed to the global response to COVID-19**. This is because both trust and resource-sharing are important factors influencing the changes in state soft power.

Covid-19 soft power winners and losers

Based on the data available and after a throughout assessment of the three soft power indicators, it becomes clear why countries such as the USA and China have seen a large decline of positive views around the world,

10 J. McClory, *The new persuaders. An international ranking of soft power*, The Institute of Government, December 2010, p. 3, [accessed: 28 VIII 2020], available at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/The%20new%20persuaders_0.pdf>.

while states such as South Korea and Germany enhanced their soft power resources in the first two quarters of 2020. Table 1– prepared by the author based on the questions above – confirms the unravelling consensus among scholars and practitioners that China and the United States are both likely to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis with significantly diminished soft power¹¹.

Table 1. Performance during the first stage of COVID-19 pandemics (January–September 2020), on a scale 1–5, where 1 is very poor and 5 is very good

	USA	China	South Korea	Germany
Government	2	3	5	5
Foreign Policy	2	3	4	4
Innovations	5	4	4	4
TOTAL	9	10	13	13

Source: Author.

The poorest performer among the group – in the analysed period – was the **United States of America (USA)**. A traditional soft power outlier – more importantly – ranking 1st in the 2019 Global Health Security Index¹², the U.S. has disastrously underperformed during the first stage of the 2020 pandemic on almost all counts. Firstly, the government has reacted sluggishly, often denouncing medical expertise. It was not able to deliver a large-scale program of testing and contact tracing, which could have stopped the virus and allow the economy to remain open¹³. Insufficient preparation and capacity, poor leadership and coordination, slowness, and regulatory failures¹⁴, together with the chronic underfunding of the health care system has led to 200,000 excess deaths from the start of the outbreak

11 K. Rudd, *The coming post-COVID anarchy. The pandemic bodes ill for both American and Chinese power – and for the global order*, “Foreign Affairs” [online], 6 V 2020 [accessed: 03 IX 2020], available at: <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-05-06/coming-post-covid-anarchy>>.

12 G. Yamey, C. Wenham, *The U.S. and U.K. were the two best prepared nations to tackle a pandemic – what went wrong?*, “Time” [online], 1 VII 2020 [accessed: 03 IX 2020], available at: <<https://time.com/5861697/us-uk-failed-coronavirus-response/>>.

13 D. Allen, *A more resilient union. How federalism can protect democracy from pandemics*, “Foreign Affairs”, July/August 2020, pp. 26–32.

14 P. A. Wallach, J. Myers, *The federal government’s coronavirus response – Public health timeline*, The Brookings Institution, 31 III 2020 [accessed: 23 VII 2020], available at: <<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-federal-governments-coronavirus-actions-and-failures-timeline-and-themes/>>.

up to 11 July, around which the first wave of COVID-19 was ending¹⁵. Despite having just 4% of the world's population, America had already by then had a quarter of all confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths. The health crisis was coupled with two other serious crises which have become an additional blow to American soft power. This was the ongoing economic crisis marked by 14.7 percent unemployment, a 43.0 percent rise in bankruptcies, eye-watering public debt¹⁶ and US economy contracting at a 32.9% annual rate from April through June 2020 – its worst drop on record¹⁷. This was also a social crisis which is reflected by a decline of public trust, growing polarization and flourishing conspiracy theories about the virus. The final blow was presented by the government's response to the killing of George Floyd and the resulting global protests known as "Black Lives Matters" (BLM)¹⁸. All these factors contribute to the final assessment of U.S. government's performance to the health crisis and result in marking it as "poor" (2).

The same number of points has been given to the U.S. foreign policy effort in dealing with the global health crisis. This is because – despite great global expectations and pressures – the United States administration has made little effort to lead a coordinated international response to the pandemic. Instead, the U. S. President's first impulse was to harden borders against what he called "foreign" or "Chinese" virus and to withdraw funding from the World Health Organization (WHO) in the middle of a global health emergency. This included rejecting the invitation to join COVAX – an international coalition to find and distribute a COVID-19 vaccine worldwide – due to the initiative's association with the WHO¹⁹.

15 J. Horton, B. Dale, N. Stylianou, *Coronavirus: Is the US the worst-hit country for deaths?*, BBC News [online], 23 VIII 2020 [accessed: 03 IX 2020], available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53780196>>.

16 K. Rudd, *The coming post-COVID anarchy...*

17 *US economy posts its worst drop on record*, CNN Business [online], 31 VII 2020 [accessed: 12 IX 2020], available at: <<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/30/economy/us-economy-2020-second-quarter/index.html>>.

18 D. Litt, *The coronavirus crisis in the U.S. is a failure of democracy*, "Time" [online], 20 V 2020 [accessed: 07 IX 2020], available at: <<https://time.com/5839195/coronavirus-democracy-failure/>>.

19 T. Beer, *U.S. won't join global coronavirus vaccine effort because it's led by the WHO*, "Forbes" [online] 1 IX 2020 [accessed: 16 IV 2021], available at: <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2020/09/01/us-wont-join-global-coronavirus-vaccine-effort-because-its-led-by-the-who/?sh=9ccf5d858769>>.

It seems that the primary audience of U.S. foreign policy of 2020 was domestic rather than international. As Steward Patrick writes “President Trump has followed his ‘America First’ instincts and adopted a nationalist response to the pandemic, framing COVID-19 (...) not as a threat to global public health but as an assault on the sovereignty of the United States and the safety of its citizens”²⁰. Although this approach might have been effective in gaining support among his core constituencies, it was absolutely damaging for America’s reputation abroad, thus its soft power. In addition, despite being historically a leader in global public health crisis and with around \$1.5 billion annual spending in foreign development assistance to health emergencies such as COVID-19, Donald Trump administration’s budget for 2021 proposed to cut global health funding to its lowest levels since 2008²¹. Such an inward approach to the pandemic sends a clear message to the world that the United States either cannot or will not step in to help other states.

A number of prominent American scholars agree that the poor performance of their country in the area of government response and foreign policy was due first and foremost to inadequate leadership of President Donald Trump. As Francis Fukuyama wrote “Having spent his term at war with the state he heads, he (President Trump) was unable to deploy it effectively when the situation demanded”²². The President’s strategy of denial (assuring Americans that “the coronavirus is very much under control,” and “like a miracle, it will disappear”), blame-shifting (to China or WHO), late response and propaganda have all contributed to the very poor response of the administration to the crisis. The U.S. has however sustained some of its soft power thanks to the indicators which were more dependent on non-state actors and collaborative approaches. For example, in Table 1, in the area of “business and innovation” the U.S. received a “very good” (5)

20 S. Patrick, *When the system fails: COVID-19 and the costs of global dysfunction*, “Foreign Affairs”, July/August 2020, pp. 40–50.

21 D. F. Runde, C. Savoy, S. McKeown, *COVID-19 has consequences for U.S. foreign aid and global leadership*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1 V 2020 [accessed: 23 VII 2020], available at: <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/covid-19-has-consequences-us-foreign-aid-and-global-leadership>>.

22 F. Fukuyama, *The pandemic and political order. It takes a state*, “Foreign Affairs”, July/August 2020, pp. 33–38.

mark for its performance. This is because during the pandemic the United States was willing and able to enter a number of public/private partnerships – both with American and international stakeholders. Only the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) have partnered with more than 18 biopharmaceutical companies to accelerate development of drug and vaccine candidates for COVID-19. Moreover the American tax-payer money of over \$2.2 billion have contributed immensely to the most promising vaccine trails – including one being developed by an American company Moderna and the other by Oxford University in the United Kingdom and AstraZeneca in Sweden. Both of these vaccines would be one of the first to receive authorizations of the U.S Food and Drug Administration (F. D.A) and the European Medicines Agency for widespread use.

Overall however, among the four countries analysed in this article, between late winter and early summer of 2020, the United States proved to be the weakest soft power performer having received only 9 out of 15 points for its performance during COVID-19.

To some extent counterintuitively, the **People's Republic of China** was also not a soft power winner of the first wave of COVID-19 – regardless of its impressive ability to quickly suppress the virus at home and to deliver an orchestrated “mask diplomacy” effort abroad. Indeed, at the preliminary stages of the pandemic (January–March 2020) the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has assured a prompt and effective response to the outbreak by providing centralized policy-making and a swift execution²³. It has done so, using the lessons-learned from the previous 2002–2004 SARS outbreak first identified in Foshan, Guangdong, China, on 16 November 2002²⁴. As a result, on February 2020 World Health Organization report noted: “China has rolled out perhaps the most ambitious, agile, and aggressive disease containment effort in history”²⁵. By the summer 2020, the majority of China

23 D. Allen, *A more resilient union...*, p. 33.

24 *China's latest SARS outbreak has been contained, but biosafety concerns remain – Update 7*, World Health Organization, 18 V 2004 [accessed: 16 IV 2021], available at: <https://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_05_18a/en/>.

25 *Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*, World Health Organization, 14–16 II 2020 [accessed: 28 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-covid-19-final-report.pdf>>.

was virus-free, with the country quickly moving back to normal functioning. Why then has this huge domestic policy success not sparked more admiration and contributed to a growth of trust and attraction towards China?

The reasons are twofold. Firstly, having been the initial epicentre of the coronavirus pandemic, China was slow to report the outbreak and share transmission data and biological samples with the WHO and the outside world. It has also rebuffed early offers from WHO and the United States to provide scientific expertise and refused to work with the G20 on a shared response. It has been this delay, coupled with the lack of transparency and credibility of data delivered by the Chinese government, which is mostly credited for COVID-19 to spread beyond the Chinese borders²⁶. China's soft power was further weakened by the government declining to take any responsibility for the outbreak and instead choosing to spread disinformation about the virus and its origins, which led even to a direct spat with the European Union²⁷. Secondly, the price paid by Chinese citizens in order to contain the virus often seems too high for international publics. Soft power relies on wanting to emulate others and not many countries were able or willing to go down the CCP's path in battling the coronavirus. This is because the success was a result of brutal efficiency of the Chinese authoritarian model, which included enforced quarantine in external detention centres, seal-shutting citizens in their houses while tests were conducted, or using – on a mass scale – artificial intelligence big data to track people's movements and stop them from travelling^{28 29}.

26 D. Cyranoski, *What China's coronavirus response can teach the rest of the world*, "Nature Research Journal" [online], 17 III 2020 [accessed: 21 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00741-x>>.

27 A. Legucka, M. Przychodniak, *Disinformation from China and Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic*, The Polish Institute of International Affairs Bulletin, no. 86 (1516), 21 IV 2020.

28 E. Graham-Harrison, L. Kuo, *China's coronavirus lockdown strategy: brutal but effective*, "The Guardian" [online], 19 III 2020 [accessed: 17 IX 2020], available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/chinas-coronavirus-lockdown-strategy-brutal-but-effective>>.

29 L. Kuo, *Xinjiang residents handcuffed to their homes in Covid lockdown*, "The Guardian" [online] 25 VIII 2020 [accessed: 07 IX 2020], available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/25/xinjiang-residents-handcuffed-to-their-homes-in-covid-lockdown>>.

The Chinese Communist Party left nothing to chance, hardly ever trusting their citizens to act responsibly³⁰. From an international public's point of view, efficiency is not the only measure to judge whether something is a good public health control measure. Social controlling and intrusive surveillance is not a model most societies would like their governments to emulate at home when dealing with a pandemic. Even if circumstantial evidence and reporting suggest that many Chinese agreed with these tactics and showed a renewed faith in their government³¹, on the global level of soft power these actions have often been seen as extreme. For this reason, when assessing the government's impact on China's soft power resources gains during the first wave of COVID-19, the country ranks only a point higher than the US and receives a 3 ("average"). This means that its domestic response to COVID-19 contributed neither to the increase or significant decrease of soft power.

The same number of points was assigned to China for its foreign policy performance. Yet again there is a large dichotomy between the scale of actions and the international public's response to these actions. Through so-called "mask diplomacy" China has provided coronavirus-related aid to hundreds of countries, which included among others tens of millions of masks, millions of testing kits, and ventilators³². Some states, such as Pakistan, saw up to 80% of foreign COVID assistance come from China³³. The CPP has with no doubt made a strategic decision to engage and

- 30 K. Kupferschmidt, J. Cohen, *China's aggressive measures have slowed the coronavirus. They may not work in other countries*, "Science Magazine" [online], 2 III 2020 [accessed: 17 IX 2020], available at: <<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/03/china-s-aggressive-measures-have-slowed-coronavirus-they-may-not-work-other-countries>>.
- 31 H. Hessler, *How China controlled the coronavirus. Teaching and learning in Sichuan during the pandemic*, "The New Yorker" [online], 17 VIII 2020 [accessed: 27 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/17/how-china-controlled-the-coronavirus>>.
- 32 P. Wen, D. Hinshaw, *China asserts claim to global leadership, mask by mask*, "The Wall Street Journal" [online], 11V 2020 [accessed: 21 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-asserts-claim-to-global-leadership-mask-by-mask-11585752077>>.
- 33 *China provided \$15mn aid to Pakistan to fight COVID-19: envoy*, Geo News [online], 23 VII 2020 [accessed: 11 IX 2020], available at: <<https://www.geo.tv/latest/299447-pakistan-china-institute-hosts-webinar-on-cpec-post-coronavirus-relations>>.

support countries in their response to COVID-19³⁴ and justified its actions as wanting to try to fill the global leadership vacuum left by the United States – both in Asia and China³⁵. A particularly successful effort was made in Europe where China has send both doctors and supply to Italy at a time when its EU neighbours were closing borders and blocking the sale of medical equipment to its fellow member state. This resulted in a massive shift in public attitudes, with 52% of Italians (up from 10% a year earlier) claiming that China was a friendly country³⁶. Around the world however Chinese aid has significantly improved the country's standing only in Brazil. As we have seen earlier in Scheme 3, the majority of European countries and the US have seen an increase in negative views about China. As noticed in a recent British Council report "Brazil and Italy are outliers against an apparent significant reversal in perceptions of China around the world in the last few years"³⁷.

So why have China's foreign aid efforts not been assessed more generously? The problem with Chinese soft power is that already before the outbreak of COVID-19 it had a number of "pre-existing conditions" related with the general direction of CCP's foreign policy. Among the undertakings of China's "Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy", which have found little acceptance internationally were: sparking territorial conflicts with its neighbours (India, Vietnam, Taiwan), employing military and paramilitary assets in the East China Sea, cyber-espionage and finally supressing protest in Hong-Kong³⁸. Most of these policies have been actively pursued by China throughout the Spring of 2020 and have overshadowed any pos-

34 D. F. Runde et al., *COVID-19 has consequences for U.S. foreign aid...*

35 L. Patey, *COVID-19 pandemic is no soft power victory for China*, Danish Institute for International Studies, 23 IV 2020 [accessed: 03 IX 2020], available at: <<https://www.diis.dk/en/research/covid-19-pandemic-is-no-soft-power-victory-china>>.

36 F. Bechis, *Se gli italiani preferiscono la Cina agli Usa (e alla Ue)*, "Formiche" [online], 20 IV 2020 [accessed: 17 VIII 2020], available at: <[https://formiche.net/2020/04/italiani-preferiscono-cina-usa-ue/?fbclid=IwAR0AWsenKE1-\(SNHB2cJCK2eyxs4L7X4ZjSBWH5YxEXcLgId-EuVAF5COHPFE\)](https://formiche.net/2020/04/italiani-preferiscono-cina-usa-ue/?fbclid=IwAR0AWsenKE1-(SNHB2cJCK2eyxs4L7X4ZjSBWH5YxEXcLgId-EuVAF5COHPFE))>.

37 *Sources of soft power...*

38 J. Dettmer, *China's 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy prompts international backlash*, Voice of America [online], 6 V 2020 [accessed: 03 IX 2020], available at: <<https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy-prompts-international-backlash>>.

itive effects the country's "COVID-19 charm offensive" might have had. They have also fuelled scepticism over the real intention of China's "mask diplomacy", with some openly claiming that it serves only as a smoke-screen designed to cover up China's culpability in the coronavirus crisis and its real foreign policy agenda in South East Asia³⁹. As Luke Patey underlines: "Beijing's refusal to admit its mistakes in not halting the virus early on and self-defeating propaganda ensure that despite its medical assistance it will not emerge from the coronavirus crisis as a global champion"⁴⁰.

Finally, when assessing China's performance in the area of "business and innovations" two factors have been taken into account and contributed to the countries "4" ("good") mark in this area. First, at the beginning of 2020 China has been indeed one of the leaders of the race to find a COVID-19 vaccine – with 4 out of 8 of the most progressed trials by March 2020 financed by China⁴¹. Second, it has pledged to share the vaccine worldwide including forging first partnerships in this area with Brazil, Indonesia and Turkey⁴². At the same time however China was slow to join global vaccine initiatives such as COVAX, only doing so in the Fall of 2020 and as a result of criticism over its handling of the pandemic, which has contributed to a growing unfavourable view of China in advanced nations⁴³.

Overall thus, on our soft power chart China has scored only one point higher than the United States, receiving a total of 10 out of 15.

Although in 2020 both China and the United States will most likely experience soft power setbacks, there are a number of states which

39 J. W. Hornung, *Don't be fooled by China's mask diplomacy*, "Los Angeles Times" [online] 5 V 2020 [accessed: 03 IX 2020], available at: <<https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/05/dont-be-fooled-by-chinas-mask-diplomacy.html>>.

40 L. Patey, *COVID-19 pandemic is no soft power victory...*

41 A. Winkleman, G. Debinski, *The graphic truth: The COVID vaccine race*, GZERO [online], 11 VIII 2020 [accessed: 27 III 2020], available at: <<https://www.gzeromeia.com/the-graphic-truth-the-covid-vaccine-race>>.

42 C. Campbell, *'We will share our vaccine with the world.'* Inside the Chinese biotech firm leading the fight against COVID-19, "Time" [online], 27 VII 2020 [accessed: 28 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://time.com/5872081/sinovac-covid19-coronavirus-vaccine-coronavac/>>.

43 C. Qian, S. Nebehay, *China joins WHO-backed vaccine programme COVAX rejected by Trump*, Reuters [online], 09 X 2020 [accessed: 16 IV 2020], available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-covax-idUSKBN26U027>>.

might actually benefit from the crisis and emerge as soft power winners of 2020. Among the most likely candidates are: the **Republic of Korea** and **Germany** – both having received widespread recognition for their prompt and apparently effective response to the coronavirus⁴⁴. The reason is that they were able to prove that Chinese-style measures are not necessary to contain the virus. Instead a system based on social trust and public-private partnerships, with screening, testing, contact tracing programs, as well as social distancing can also yield quick results. South Korea for example has delegated the management of the pandemic to a professional health bureaucracy, which was responsible for the Trace-Test-Treat Strategy⁴⁵. Already by the end of February, the country was making headlines around the world for its drive-through screening centres⁴⁶, which made it possible to test more than 1.8 million Koreans by the end of August 2020⁴⁷. The country has also built hundreds of innovative, high-capacity screening clinics and worked closely with the private sector to ensure an adequate supply of tests. The government was able to scale up technological solutions which helped trace infected citizens because – as underlined by Ariadne Labs – “culturally and legally, South Korea is more tolerant of personal data-sharing”⁴⁸. As a result the South Korean government has succeeded in flattening the epidemic curve quickly – without closing businesses. That in turn resulted in a small economic contraction (only 1%

44 *Sources of soft power...*

45 P. Beaumont, K. Connolly, *COVID-19 track and trace: what can UK learn from countries that got it right?*, “The Guardian” [online], 21 V 2020 [accessed: 25 VII 2020], available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/21/covid-19-track-and-trace-what-can-uk-learn-from-countries-got-it-right>>.

46 C. Terhune, D. Levine, H. Jin, J. L. Lee, *Special report: How Korea trounced U.S. in race to test people for coronavirus*, Reuters World News [online], 18 III 2020 [accessed: 28 VIII 2020], available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-testing-specialrep/special-report-how-korea-trounced-u-s-in-race-to-test-people-for-coronavirus-idUSKBN2153BW?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=twitter>.

47 *Testing in Korea – data aggregated from January 3*, Ministry of Health and Welfare of the Republic of Korea, 3 I 2020 [accessed: 26 VIII 2020], available at: <<http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/>>.

48 A. Labs, *Emerging COVID-19 success story: South Korea learned the lessons of MERS*, Our World in Data, 30 VI 2020 [accessed: 26 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-exemplar-south-korea>>.

while the average contraction of GDP expected for OECD countries is 7.6%)⁴⁹. As summarized by Aftan Snyder and Michelle Sindjukov “South Korea’s capable mitigation techniques have transformed the country’s brand from tech know-how into exemplary public health and citizen cooperation”⁵⁰. For this reason, in terms of soft power projection in the area of “government” South Korea has received a solid 5 (“very good”).

A “very good” (5) score for its government’s handling the first wave of COVID-19 was also awarded to the Federal Republic of Germany. There are a number of reasons responsible for the relative success of Germany in managing the virus. First, the country has traditionally had a good health care system, which was built over the course of many governments and was able to withstand the pressures of a pandemic. Second, Germany was hit by the virus relatively late in the process, which left enough time to learn from others and prepare itself better⁵¹. Third, both the central and federal leadership took the threat very seriously, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel bluntly stating in March 2020 that the coronavirus is Germany’s greatest challenge since World War II⁵². Finally, Germany’s health policies were based on collaboration – both with its citizens and with the local governments. As written by Federal Health Minister Jens Spahn “No democracy can force its citizens to change their behavior – at least not without incurring high costs. In pursuing a coordinated, collective response, transparency and accurate information is far more effective than coercion”⁵³.

49 S. Kim, *Korea economy shrinks just 1% in 2020 on exports*, Bloomberg [online], 26 I 2021 [accessed: 26 II 2021], available at: <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-25/south-korea-growth-beats-estimates-amid-export-recovery>>.

50 A. Snyder et al, *How COVID-19 is changing...*

51 *How Germany got coronavirus right*, “Financial Times” [online], 4 VI 2020 [accessed: 21 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.ft.com/content/cc1f650a-91c0-4e1f-b990-ee8ceb5339ea>>.

52 *Merkel: Coronavirus is Germany’s greatest challenge since World War II*, Deutsche Welle [online], 18 III 2020 [accessed: 23 VII 2020], available at: <<https://www.dw.com/en/merkel-coronavirus-is-germanys-greatest-challenge-since-world-war-ii/a-52830797>>.

53 J. Spahn, *How Germany Contained the Virus*, World Economic Forum [online], 23 V 2020 [accessed: 21 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/how-germany-contained-the-coronavirus/https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/how-germany-contained-the-coronavirus/>>.

The result was easy to predict. In comparison to the majority of Western European countries Germany has relatively limited transmission in long-term care facilities and a death rate of just 4.7%⁵⁴. This in turn raised further the public's confidence in its government, with Chancellor Merkel seeing through much of 2020 her best public approval numbers since July 2017 (average 60% approval)⁵⁵.

When analysing the second indicator proposed in our study – the countries' foreign policies – South Korea and Germany have both received a solid 4 (“good”). South Korea's success in suppressing the spread of a new type of virus made various countries want to ask for help and cooperation. In response, South Korea began to export its test kit to over 120 countries, prioritizing three partners of particular importance – the United States, Vietnam and Indonesia. The “COVID diplomacy” effort was largely orchestrated by South Korean President Moon Jae-in – who was standing up for April re-elections, and eased by public-private partnership with such Korean companies as Samsung and Hyundai. Meanwhile in Europe, Germany quickly reversed its initial policies of banning medical supply exports and also began a large health diplomacy effort by delivering over 400,000 face masks to Italy and treating around 300 foreign intensive-care coronavirus patients in German hospitals⁵⁶. Moreover, the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development has reallocated a sum of 1.15 billion euros to help developing countries fight the coronavirus⁵⁷. Most importantly however, Berlin has decided to take the lead in assuring a future Eurozone recovery. To save the Eurozone it has made a historical deci-

54 L. Wieler, U. Rexroth, R. Gottschalk, *Emerging COVID-19 success story: Germany's strong enabling environment*, Our World in Data, 30 VI 2020 [accessed: 25 IX 2020], available at: <<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-exemplar-germany#licence>>.

55 K.-A. Scholz, *Germans rally behind Merkel government's coronavirus response*, Deutsche Welle [online], 8 V 2020 [accessed: 21 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.dw.com/en/germans-rally-behind-merkel-governments-coronavirus-response/a-53366507>>.

56 R. Momtaz, *Germany to send face masks to Italy to help deal with coronavirus*, Politico [online], 14 III 2020 [accessed: 28 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-to-send-face-masks-to-italy-to-help-deal-with-coronavirus/>>.

57 E. Braw, *Forget Washington and Beijing. These days global leadership comes from Berlin*, “Foreign Policy” [online], 28 IV 2020 [accessed: 28 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/28/global-leadership-coronavirus-pandemic-germany-united-states-china/>>.

sion for the European integration process – namely to mutualize the debt of all Euro countries – despite its earlier opposition to the idea. It is also leading negotiations around the redistribution of a €750 billion stimulus EU Recovery Fund⁵⁸.

Finally, both South Korea and Germany have done well in the area of soft power generated by “Business and Innovations” receiving a “good” (4). South Korea invented the quick testing kit used around the world; while German bio-tech company BioNTech, partnering New-York based Pfizer became the first vaccine available to wider publics⁵⁹.

Conclusion: why do some succeed why others do not?

As underlined by Simon Anholt – the Founder of the Nation’s Brand Index – the most effective way to gain soft power is to contribute to the well-being of other countries. The willingness to undertake such an approach depends however on the type of leadership a country has and ways in which it defines its national interest (narrowly vs. broadly). In the context of COVID-19 these factors are truly the indicators which differentiate soft power winners from its losers. In his latest article “The Pandemic and Political Order”, Francis Fukuyama contributes successful responses to the coronavirus to very similar features, namely **state capacity, social trust and leadership**⁶⁰. He notices that the effective responses to COVID-19 on an average took place in states with competent state bureaucracy, where citizens trust their government and are willing to listen and follow the state effort. The countries which proved the most dysfunctional, where those with polarized societies, poor leadership and an incompetent administration. Such analysis is largely in sync with the conclusions stemming from this article.

58 *Germany can unlock the EU’s recovery fund*, “Financial Times” [online], 2 VII 2020 [accessed: 21 VIII 2020], available at: <<https://www.ft.com/content/f728d57e-bb98-11ea-a05d-efc604854c3f>>.

59 K. Thomas, S. LaFraniere, N. Weiland, A. Goodnough, M. Haberman, *F. D. A. clears Pfizer vaccine, and millions of doses will be shipped right away*, “The New York Times” [online], 11 XII 2020 [accessed: 28 I 2021], available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/11/health/pfizer-vaccine-authorized.html>>.

60 F. Fukuyama, *The pandemic and political order...*, p. 26.

Among the countries analysed in this work in the timeframe of Winter-Summer 2020, the United States failed in two key areas: government and foreign policy. With a fragmented response, polarized society and a declining social trust, this soft power-giant has not delivered an example to emulate. Meanwhile, despite an ongoing election campaign in South Korea and a pre-COVID falling support for the ruling CDU in Germany, both states responded swiftly with all key stakeholders coming together in a collaborative effort to defeat the crisis. The response was based on science, instead of ideological or electoral calculus, which has increased trust in governmental decisions and assured they were respected and followed⁶¹. Finally China has selected to pursue policies stemming from its authoritarian model (controlling quarantine by technology, human rights violations), which despite being effective in the immediate reaction (closures), have not generated admiration or the willingness to emulate these policies by other nations. And although the jury is still out which models (authoritarian or citizen-participation) brings better effects in containing the virus, it seems clear that the former model has a negative impact on soft power projection, while the latter builds trust among international partners and states. Interestingly, this is the case, even when an authoritarian country makes a much larger effort (as China did) in providing foreign aid and helping others to deal with the health crisis. As we argued earlier, in such cases “COVID diplomacy” is met with scepticism and even distrust. If a government does not respect its own citizens and their rights, does it really respect citizens of other countries?

So what are the soft power lessons-learned in the time of the plague? First and foremost, diversified, open governance guarantees sharing information, transparency and accountability, which in turn helps effectively overcome the crisis without losing a country’s soft power appeal. Secondly, a high level of social capital and developed trust between governmental institutions and non-governmental actors, stimulate collaborative practices and contribute to innovations and solutions to the global health crisis, which spark admiration worldwide. Thirdly, providing foreign aid and

61 A. V. Bruno, *How mismanaging a pandemic can cost countries their soft power*, Fair Observer, 18 VI 2020 [accessed: 25 VII 2020], available at: <<https://www.fairobserver.com/coronavirus/valerio-alfonso-bruno-covid-19-pandemic-mismanagment-us-brazil-uk-sweden-soft-power-news-15511/>>.

conducting “COVID diplomacy” is not enough if it is not followed by other foreign policies which generate trust instead of distrust among international publics. And last but not least, generating soft power in times of pandemic requires emphatic public leadership with a learning mind-set, risk-averse when it came to human lives, but less so when it comes to risking the economy. Such leadership guarantees that a given country is seen as a force for good in the world: a trusted, competent and engaged actor. And those who learn the difficult craft of soft power projection, will also find themselves having a much larger voice on the international arena.

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