

# The art of soft power

A study of cultural diplomacy  
at the UN Office in Geneva







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► **Food festival on the occasion of the International Day of Nowruz**  
Springtime Festival on 21 March 2017,  
Salle des pas perdus, Palais des Nations, Geneva, Switzerland.  
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# FOREWORD



**Deborah Bull**

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In 2015, I spoke at the World Economic Forum in Davos on art's role in social, political and global concerns. In response to the questions that followed, I highlighted studies demonstrating impact on issues like ageing, conflict and health but had to report a dearth of evidence to back

up what may be the most frequently made claim for art: its contribution to soft power.

*The Art of Soft Power* has its origins in that conversation. It struck me as odd that a subject that inspires so much discourse has, largely, escaped the critical gaze of academic scrutiny and, with King's positioned at the interface between research, cultural practice and policy, soft power seemed a natural subject for our next Cultural Enquiry. The United Nations Office at Geneva provided an ideal focal point: a microcosm of world politics whose contained environment creates a laboratory for investigation. I'm grateful to those people who made this project possible: Rytis

Paulauskas (at the time, Lithuanian Ambassador to the United Nations at Geneva), whose question sparked the Enquiry; Francesco Pisano, Director of the United Nations Library Geneva and his staff; and the authors, Dr Melissa Nisbett and Dr James Doeser.

*The Art of Soft Power* reveals how and why art is deployed by diplomatic Missions alongside the formal business of the United Nations. It displaces existing assumptions and clarifies two distinct intentions: reaching out and standing out. While the holy grail of a credible measurement framework remains elusive, the findings represent important steps towards a deeper, more

empirical engagement with soft power.

Artists have long been deployed – consciously or not – as instruments of diplomacy, from the Bolshoi's 1956 Covent Garden season to the annual tours abroad during my career at The Royal Ballet. Having been on the front line over many years, I have a personal interest in understanding the mechanisms of soft power. But for me, the important question is this: if art really can build bridges and promote understanding between nations, might now – as long-held international alliances shift and evolve – be a timely moment to try to find out how?



**Francesco Pisano**

*Director, United Nations  
Library Geneva*

Building a peaceful community of states is one of the highest priorities for diplomatic activities taking place at the United Nations. The Palais des Nations, home to the UN in Geneva, is one of the main centres of multilateral diplomacy in the world, and the significance of international affairs

negotiated here goes beyond political relations between nations.

Cultural pluralism is by definition a central feature of the UN, and one of the fundamental principles of multilateralism is that dialogue among civilisations is conducive to mutual understanding, tolerance, peaceful coexistence and international cooperation and security. Cultural diplomacy at the UN contributes to building bridges and facilitating cooperation and partnership. As such, it is increasingly used by member states not only as a vehicle for soft power, but also to promote United Nations values of dialogue, democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression.

One of the tangible benefits of cultural diplomacy is bringing people together, thereby enlarging the cultural landscape and creating new artistic and linguistic bonds. By promoting understanding between countries and peoples, cultural diplomacy helps bridge divides and create respect among cultures. For this reason, it is important to maintain a space for cultural activities at the Palais des Nations, accessible to all member states. Our work is a modest yet relentless contribution towards a more peaceful, more inclusive world, based on respect for different cultural identities, a constant reminder of the will of the majority to reject extremism and embrace diversity.

Academic research that could help design better multilateral programmes in support of cultural diplomacy remains scant, so we were pleased to facilitate this study which is both encouraging and timely. Its conclusions are an initial mapping of a still understudied dimension of soft power as it relates to multilateral actions. It has provided us with stimulating elements and raised some key questions that we will factor into our multi-dimensional approach to cultural diplomacy. Decades have passed since the first baby steps of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War, but the need to embrace diversity and share our common humanity through art and culture has never been more justified than today.





▲ **Portrait Gallery of UNOG  
Directors-General**

*A worker positions a portrait  
of Michael Møller, Director-  
General of UNOG, alongside  
those of his predecessors,  
at the Palais des Nations.*

25 February 2014

Geneva, Switzerland

Photo # 581052

© UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré



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▼ **Palais des Nations at dusk**  
*A view of the Palais des Nations, seat of UNOG, at dusk.*  
6 November 2014  
Geneva, Switzerland  
Photo # 611326  
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Violaine Martin



# INTRODUCTION

Art and culture can change the way people think, feel and behave. When set in the context of international relations, this is often talked about as Cultural Diplomacy or Soft Power. This enquiry explores how art and culture are deployed by diplomats to influence the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of others in the negotiations that take place at the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG). It is a study of how diplomats use art and culture in the service of Soft Power. It presents findings and insights that explain how and why Permanent Missions at UNOG use a variety of cultural forms to improve the standing of their countries, to enhance the quality of debate and to build alliances.

In contrast to the somewhat depoliticised view of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy offered by the academic literature, this enquiry shows how the use of art and culture is intensely political. This leads to all sorts of interesting scenarios, as uncovered in the many conversations that this report is based upon. Diplomats at UNOG described a range of artistic and cultural activity when asked about the role and effect of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy. One participant spoke of highly choreographed events, where attendees were carefully selected and seated on particular tables, to encourage and facilitate dialogue between specific individuals, with a view to forming strategic alliances at subsequent negotiations. There were convivial occasions, frequently centred on food and drinks, often referred to as 'gastrodiplomacy', where guests broke bread together, an ancient form of social bonding, and where wine, cocktails or tea lubricated the discussion.

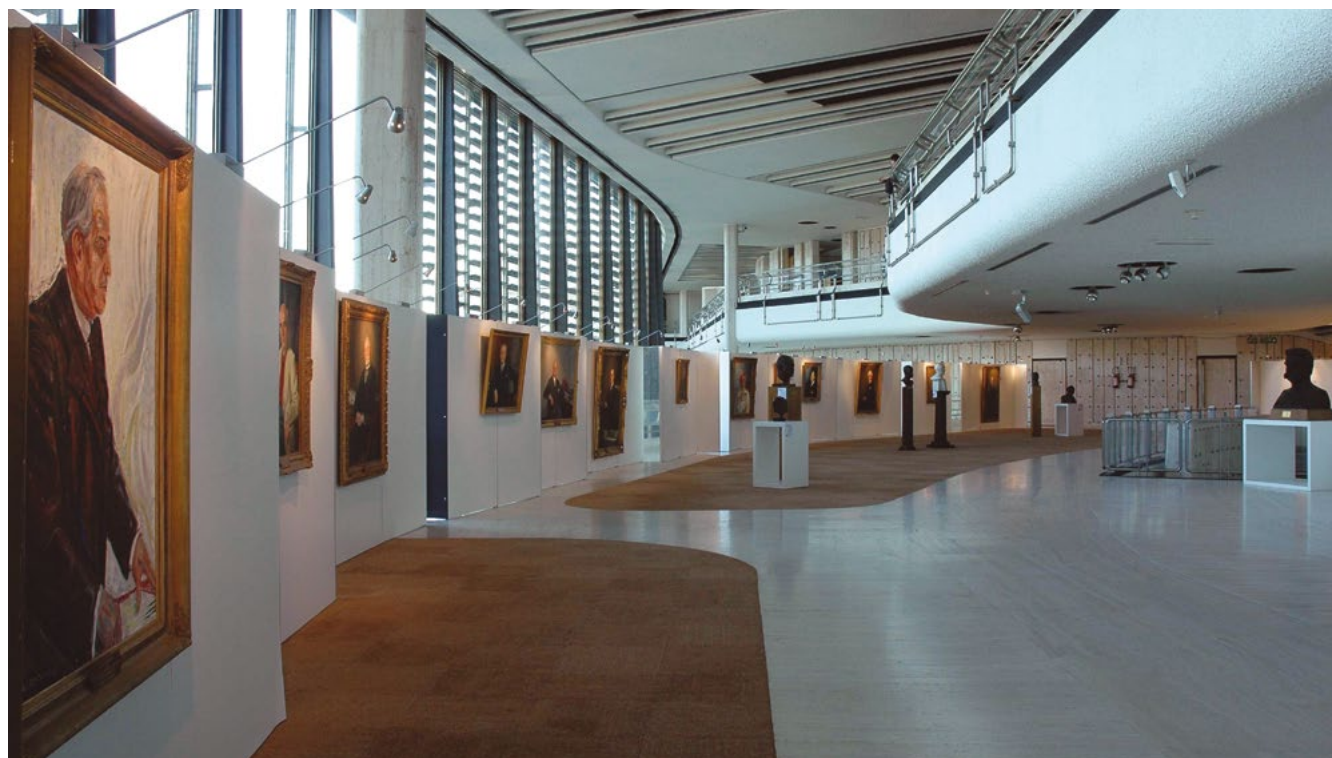
There is widespread acceptance that this sort of activity works. Memorably, one of the interviewees described how, after attending a particular exhibition in Geneva arranged by one of the Missions at UNOG, they decided to visit that country for the first time to find out more. They took a holiday with their partner and visited several cities. The diplomat said that they had 'picked up a lot of precious information' and explained how 'that exhibition had a very, very concrete impact on me and it led to a very nice vacation!' Deeper interrogation revealed that it was too early to say whether this had had any impact on their negotiations and dealings with the country in question. This enquiry takes such anecdotes and attempts to systematically and critically analyse what they represent.

There is no consensus on the precise meanings of the terms Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power. The participants in this study used them interchangeably, as do academics who research and write about these concepts. The political scientist Milton C. Cummings defines Cultural Diplomacy as 'the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding'.<sup>1</sup> This definition of Cultural Diplomacy incorporates a sense of reciprocity, openness and willingness to learn from others, although it is strikingly apolitical. By contrast, political scientist Joseph Nye defines Soft Power as the ability 'to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants'.<sup>2</sup> It is the ability of agents from one country to shape the preferences of agents in another, and to do so through attraction and influence, rather than coercion.<sup>3</sup> It stands in contrast to 'hard power', the traditional tools of which are weapons, munitions, armies and economic sanctions: the muscle and might of foreign policy. Nye formulated three pillars of Soft Power: political values, foreign policy and culture, all used to charm, persuade and befriend, whether by foreign aid and humanitarian relief, or teaching languages and showcasing culture.

The use of art and culture to further Cultural Diplomacy or Soft Power persists despite an evidence vacuum. Neither artists nor politicians have robust empirical data to substantiate their claims that the endeavours they call Soft Power have the effects they attribute to them. Measuring their impact is notoriously difficult. Yet 'evidence-based policy' is a common feature of political discourse in the arts,<sup>4</sup> and public policy must conform to standardised processes of evaluation for politicians to be accountable to taxpayers and the wider public.

Despite the lack of robust evidence for their effectiveness, many governments continue to support all manner of Soft Power interventions. The UK government recently announced a new £700 million Soft Power Fund<sup>5</sup> and the European Union declared the need for new





▲ Painting exhibition,  
Mezzanine, Palais  
des Nations, Geneva,  
Switzerland  
© UN Photo

strategies that place culture at the very heart of international relations.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, China is moving towards its goal of building 1,000 Confucius Institutes by 2020.<sup>7</sup> Soft Power continues to be taken very seriously and attracts ongoing endorsement and resources.

This enquiry focuses on the work of diplomats at UNOG. Its approach is predicated on the belief that diplomats are key agents in the service of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy. They are both the delivery channel for their government's policies, as well as the embodiment of national culture and values, regardless of where they happen to be located or which country they serve. Although the activities of diplomats do not command the same attention or resources as conventional cultural levers of Soft Power (typically language schools or the export and promotion of film, music, publishing, education and other cultural forms) and their work is not always in the public eye, they offer a tantalising glimpse into the realities of how Soft Power is practically manifested and how its objectives are achieved.

This enquiry is an account of observations made during five fieldwork visits to Geneva over the course of 2016. At the core of the enquiry are 20 interviews with diplomats and Secretariat at UNOG, supplemented by other relevant data and observations of cultural events that took place in and around the Palais des Nations (the main UNOG campus).

### Soft Power in the UK

In the UK, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office is responsible for formulating foreign policy. When it comes to Soft Power, the UK government has historically relied on two key bodies: the BBC World Service and the British Council.<sup>8</sup> The BBC World Service, the world's largest broadcaster, with a global presence on television, radio and online in more than 30 languages and with a global reach of 269 million people each week,<sup>9</sup> is frequently cited as a vital Soft Power asset. The British Council is the UK's international cultural relations agency. It works in over 100 countries promoting the English language; encouraging cultural, scientific and educational cooperation with the UK; and providing access to UK education, qualifications, culture and society.

These vehicles have served the country well over the years, with the UK widely recognised for its considerable Soft Power capabilities.<sup>10</sup> However, conventional Soft Power tools and channels are changing. New initiatives are being supported, such as the flagship GREAT campaign. At an initial cost of £114 million, the campaign operates in 144 countries and aims to encourage the world to think differently about modern Britain. It seeks to attract inward



investment and tourism, boost exports and generally foster a positive attitude towards UK citizens, institutions, goods and services.

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power can be controversial, with their connotations of cultural imperialism and propaganda. ‘Hearts and minds’ have long been territory that foreign governments have sought to capture via music, film and other media. In a world that seems increasingly characterised by proxy conflicts, ‘post-truth’, ‘fake news’, ‘alternative facts’, disinformation and propaganda, culture is an increasingly utilised tool. Yet, despite the extensive use of Soft Power and the continued investment in it, its precise mechanics and effects remain something of a mystery. Policymakers worldwide are grappling with remarkably similar challenges, with many asking one deceptively simple question: what works?

### **The evidence gap**

There is little published academic research that critically analyses the effectiveness or impact of Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power. The evaluations that do exist tend to rely on statistics from fairly small-scale cultural activity programmes and rarely account for the difference they made upon their intended audiences. Scholars have persistently shown little interest in examining the many claims made for Soft Power interventions, despite bold assertions that they can reduce the risk of terrorism,<sup>11</sup> enhance national security,<sup>12</sup> facilitate peace and reconciliation<sup>13</sup> and reverse the erosion of trust.<sup>14</sup> Outside academia, much policy-oriented research is generated for advocacy purposes<sup>15</sup> and avoids critical empirical engagement.<sup>16</sup> It accepts Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy as unwaveringly positive.<sup>17</sup>

Much of the research on Soft Power focuses on the Cold War, often with a focus on the US. This reflects the origins of the term, coined by Joseph Nye in response to claims that the US had overstretched its resources during the Cold War, which would lead to a decline in its position on the world stage.<sup>18</sup> Discussions of Cultural Diplomacy in the Cold War involved the harnessing of American art and culture, such as jazz and the avant-garde Abstract Expressionism movement, which was covertly funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)<sup>19</sup> and exported for global consumption, promoting the values of intellectual freedom and, more broadly, liberal modern democracy, through self-expression, individualism and creativity. This was thought to be the antithesis of the alternative offered by the communist Soviet Union. This historical perspective is in need of a radical update.

Measurement in cultural policy is fraught with problems. The theory that underpins Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy is often based on achieving intangible effects, such as trust and influence, which can involve seemingly indeterminate processes, mechanisms and techniques such as personal and convivial encounters. While it might be relatively straightforward to measure the immediate impact of a cultural intervention (for example, how many people attended a particular activity), capturing and isolating the diffuse impacts over a longer time period is challenging. Due to a lack of baseline data, it is difficult for policymakers to ascertain whether a change in influence, affinity or likelihood to cooperate (however defined; however measured) has been achieved by any one intervention. Even if such interactions could be tracked over time, the challenge of establishing causality is a fundamental issue. Am I more likely to visit your country because of a cultural encounter, or was that cultural encounter a result of my already-heightened likelihood of visiting your country?

### **“ Art is obviously very much more elevated than any other activity ”**

One of the wonderful things about culture is that it can escape explicit instrumentalisation. However, in the case of Soft Power or Cultural Diplomacy, there must be an instrumental aim for cultural activity to take place. In other words, culture must serve a diplomatic or foreign relations purpose, or why else support it under the auspices of Soft Power or Cultural Diplomacy? This idea elicits strong reactions from those who see the instrumental use of art and culture as inherently problematic.<sup>20</sup> Can an artwork ever be separated from the person that produced it and the context in which it was created? Does art have a purpose, beyond the artistic effect that it seeks to provoke? Does politics debase art, or does it enrich it? These fundamental questions have occupied thinkers for centuries. Suffice to say that artists have always found themselves in the service of political masters, adhering (strictly or liberally) to the prescriptions of their funders. Conversely, the art of resistance and rebellion serves its





▲ **UNOG Headquarters**

*An aerial view  
of UNOG.*

12 August 2010

Geneva, Switzerland

Photo # 443402

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Jean-Marc Ferré

own political purposes. Art is rarely ‘for art’s sake’, as politics and ideology are never far away. This can induce people to resist attempts to measure the success of Soft Power endeavours (regardless of the feasibility of such attempts).

All of these challenges call for sophisticated, longitudinal methodologies that are time-consuming, labour-intensive and resource-heavy. Taken together, these theoretical and practical issues in part explain why Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy continue to elude proper evaluation. This enquiry explores these issues in a more confined and definable space, with the following case study approach.

### **Case study: the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG)**

UNOG is one of four centres for multilateral diplomacy and cooperation within the UN. The centre in Geneva specifically focuses on issues associated with human rights, public health, refugees, intellectual property, labour relations, peace and reconciliation. In this context, art and culture may seem like frivolous distractions. However, as this enquiry demonstrates, this place, with its highly charged atmosphere, its crucial conversations and its worldly and powerful delegates and visitors, is a laboratory for bigger questions about the role of art and culture in foreign policy. There are many elements that make it so:

- ♦ *Convenience:* Geneva is a ‘campus’ where a large number of active diplomats, delegates and international agencies are co-located in one city.
- ♦ *Sophistication:* The UN is a multilateral diplomatic forum where agents acting on behalf of their home capitals are highly sophisticated and strategically adept. They understand that their words and actions can have powerful consequences.
- ♦ *Cultural relevance:* UNOG is where the world debates humanitarian subjects and where art and culture are expressions of humane concerns.
- ♦ *The Cultural Activities Programme:* UNOG is home to an established programme of cultural activities sponsored by the various diplomatic Missions, facilitated by a dedicated team within the UNOG Secretariat.

This suite of cultural activity that occurs at UNOG is supplemented by external events arranged by individual Permanent Missions, private organisations and individuals.



Geneva is a major European city and has a lively cultural scene catering for residents, students and tourists in addition to the sizeable diplomatic community.

Given the evidence gap described above, this enquiry gathered new data to gain a better understanding of how diplomats think and behave in relation to Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power, and how they employ these practices within their everyday professional lives.

### Art at the UN

UNOG has a vast art collection built up over time through gifts, bequests and the remnants of temporary displays. As of 2017, there are 2,163 objects in the collection. The Palais des Nations and its grounds are full of paintings, drawings, tapestries and sculptures, including monumental works which convey the spirit and mission of the UN. In addition, there are many works of art belonging to individual Missions.

The Palais is the venue for the vast majority of the cultural activity within the programme. The offices, conference spaces, hallways, meeting rooms, atriums and gardens are used as spaces to hang paintings or host book launches or performances. The Palais sits in beautiful parkland with panoramic views of the Swiss Alps. It explicitly and intentionally generates a cultivated atmosphere, to which art and culture naturally lend themselves. It evokes honour, goodness, integrity, generosity and magnanimity. The institutional frameworks and structures at the UN and its physical building and presence engender a distinct cosmopolitanism.

### Cultural Activities Programme

The Cultural Activities Programme, facilitated by the UNOG Secretariat working with member states and international organisations, is a sustained cultural programme for the international community and visitors to the Palais des Nations. The Secretariat team organises the programme, assisting with everything from the booking and coordination of spaces through to the promotion of cultural events such as film screenings, poetry readings, concerts, conferences and exhibitions. The Secretariat is part of UNOG's Library Department. Fifty-one events took place through 2016 and the programme formed an ever-present backdrop to this enquiry.

The programme was developed in the context of the Global Agenda for Dialogue Among Civilizations (agreed in two UN resolutions).<sup>21</sup> As well as being a celebration of diversity, it provides a forum for interaction among peoples of different traditions and backgrounds. All activities must be compatible with the values, purposes and principles of the UN in both content and presentation. This emphasises international or universal relevance. Activities that focus on specific individuals, countries or non-governmental organisations are only permitted if the subject matter has a direct relationship or relevance to the goals or activities of the UN. Through the Cultural Activities Programme, the UN seeks to spread the message that we are united by our common humanity.

### Number of events held within the UNOG Cultural Activities Programme 2006–2016

	ACTIVITY TYPE			
	Exhibitions	Concerts	Film screenings	Other
<b>2006</b>	40	10	2	7
<b>2007</b>	38	9	5	3
<b>2008</b>	39	10	2	2
<b>2009</b>	32	12	2	3
<b>2010</b>	32	12	4	2
<b>2011</b>	44	13	0	3
<b>2012</b>	42	10	1	14
<b>2013</b>	44	13	11	5
<b>2014</b>	34	19	3	4
<b>2015</b>	34	23	21	5
<b>2016</b>	28	10	9	4





**International Women's Day ▲**  
*Participants at an event held at UNOG to mark International Women's Day (8 March).*  
 7 March 2014  
 Geneva, Switzerland  
 Photo # 581987  
 © UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré



# FINDINGS

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Taken together, the conversations in Geneva make for a series of rich and revealing stories about the deployment of art and culture in the service of Soft Power. The findings set out below displace widespread assumptions in the academic literature and shed new light on Soft Power as a practice and process within diplomacy. The holy grail of a consistent and credible measurement framework for Soft Power remains out of reach, but there are vital clarifications and necessary early steps towards a more empirically robust engagement with the subject.

- 1. Soft Power is ‘standing out’; Cultural Diplomacy is ‘reaching out’**
- 2. The impossibility of defining, let alone analysing, Soft Power**
- 3. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy may be immeasurable**
- 4. The unwavering faith in Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy**
- 5. Culture can be a Trojan horse for political messages**
- 6. Culture sometimes involves a clash of values**
- 7. Cultural activity at the UN is imbued with ritual and performance**
- 8. The UN buildings are the backdrop to the rituals of diplomacy**
- 9. Private spaces and private lives are important Soft Power tools**
- 10. Greater resources make for more Soft Power**
- 11. The US remains a Soft Power superpower**
- 12. Ultimately, culture is used to preserve and express hard political power**



## Finding 1. Soft Power is ‘standing out’; Cultural Diplomacy is ‘reaching out’

### “ It is sometimes difficult to separate art from the politics ”

The starting point for this enquiry was to clarify how Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy were understood, practiced and articulated by diplomats and the UNOG Secretariat. Participants were asked why they used art and culture as diplomatic tools and what purpose they thought these activities served. The expectation was that this line of inquiry would generate a handful of responses, ranging from attempts to improve the overall image of a country, to practical and tactical efforts to make connections and establish relationships with specific allies. Staggeringly, the conversations uncovered over 150 different responses. This variety demonstrated that the pursuit of strict semantic boundaries around Soft Power or Cultural Diplomacy, as seen in the academic literature, is misplaced.

### “ It helps create an atmosphere that is conducive to dialogue ”

This enquiry has clearly identified two general categories of responses: ‘standing out’ and ‘reaching out’. ‘Standing out’ relates to countries wanting to differentiate themselves. This is often through acts of leadership and displays of power, but can also be about shoring up authority, exerting influence over decision-making, increasing visibility or grabbing attention, and even foregrounding national values. This neatly maps onto the common understanding of what constitutes Soft Power. ‘Reaching out’ is about displaying unity with others, building political solidarity, bringing countries closer together and sometimes acting as a bridge between other parties. This is almost shorthand for Cultural Diplomacy.

### “ It’s not so much about art per se, it’s more about creating a congenial atmosphere where friendships can be built ”

The diagram opposite gives more detail of the variety of responses to the seemingly straightforward questions ‘why do you use Soft Power?’ and ‘what’s the purpose of it?’

Academic research has been consistently preoccupied with making distinctions between Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power. This obsession can be seen in accounts from almost 30 years ago,<sup>22</sup> right through to the most recent research on the subject.<sup>23</sup> Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy are closely associated with cultural relations, public diplomacy, cultural imperialism and propaganda. They are overlapping, blurry, contested and subjective terms.<sup>24</sup> They are used interchangeably by those who practice Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy.

The rhetorical labels of ‘reaching out’ and ‘standing out’ form an initial heuristic device to consider the concepts of Cultural Diplomacy or Soft Power. Characteristic of ‘standing out’ is the notion of competition through national projection, whilst at same time, the multilateral nature of business at the UN demands collaboration. There is a delicate balancing act to be navigated in order to simultaneously compete and cooperate. On one hand, these dual notions of competition and cooperation are at odds. The world is not a compatible and harmonious community of nations. Many would argue that cooperation and competition are not complementary aspects of global order but opposing forces.<sup>25</sup> Yet surely successful strategies for tackling human rights abuses or developing meaningful solutions to global public health challenges need both leadership and collaboration.



## ‘STANDING OUT’

### POWER

To exert influence  
To persuade  
To seduce  
To open minds  
To showcase your culture  
To be seen



### BUSINESS

To do ‘business’  
To promote national interest  
To sell  
To build a brand  
To brand a country  
To compete



### LEADERSHIP

To show leadership  
To showcase the personality  
of the diplomat  
To make a mark  
To assert status



### IDENTITY

To give a sense of identity  
To reflect your identity  
To identify you as a country



## ‘REACHING OUT’

### UNITE

To find common ground  
To promote peace  
To connect as humans  
To bring nations closer  
To share your values



### SOCIALISE

To create a friendship  
To get better acquainted  
To earn trust  
To show hospitality  
To create a community



### COMMUNICATE

To facilitate a conversation  
To tell a story  
To provide a neutral interaction  
To provide an entry point  
for discussion  
To get a voice across  
in a different way  
To soften your  
message



### EDUCATE

To increase outreach  
To educate  
To deepen knowledge  
and understanding  
To develop cultural  
awareness





## Finding 2. The impossibility of defining, let alone analysing, Soft Power

**President Barack Obama ► briefs European leaders,** including British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, European Union Commission President José Manuel Barroso, and Danish Prime Minister Lars L. Rasmussen, following a multilateral meeting at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, 18 December 2009. In the background, behind French and US presidents, French ministers, Jean-Louis Borloo and Chantal Jouanno.



When trying to define the terms Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy, the default academic instinct is to narrow and confine, in pursuit of analytical precision. Importantly, this enquiry and the conversations that it has analysed, suggests a different approach is needed. It shows the unwieldy nature of the terms, and the need for concepts that can accommodate the breadth they represent in everyday diplomatic practice. A preoccupation with semantic distinctions has overshadowed discussion and thorough analysis of the policy and practice of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy. At UNOG, diplomats use these terms without precision and in a very fluid manner. A better understanding can be gained through research led by practice rather than by abstract theorising.

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy interventions are frequently practised in arenas that are, by necessity, private, exclusive, confidential and politically sensitive. There is a palpable sense that countries are in direct competition with one another, and that, as a result, Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy are subject to the same secretive mechanisms as other forms of international statecraft. This may be unremarkable to observers of international and foreign relations, but it is not the normal approach to cultural policy, which, in spirit and delivery, tends to be strongly collaborative and internationalist. Soft Power policy interventions are devised and implemented by high-ranking individuals who are often beyond the reach of researchers. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy are not only end goals and objectives, but also processes. The specific details of these processes are not well documented, evaluated or understood. One of the intentions of this research was to make these mechanisms more visible.

The interviews and observations from UNOG suggest three possibilities as to why the mechanisms of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy are opaque. Firstly, they might not actually exist in any coherent and definable way. Alternatively, they may exist but are obscured to even the agents who conduct the activity (who operate within highly constrained circumstances and possibly with limited knowledge of their wider context). Finally, it may be in the interests of the diplomats to keep it this way. The use of private spaces, informal settings and intimate and unofficial encounters as real and effective tools to move beyond ritualised, formalised and intractable geopolitical relations is something that became increasingly important in this enquiry. Art and culture are sometimes the backdrop and sometimes the tools through which such interactions occur. It may well be that such interactions will remain hidden from the critical gaze of academic scholarship or remain difficult to access.

## Finding 3. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy may be immeasurable

Questions have persisted around whose attitudes and perceptions any Soft Power or Cultural Diplomacy effort seeks to influence. It is not clear whether money is spent and policy designed to influence foreign politicians, ordinary citizens living overseas, people or countries that are allies, or those that are perceived as a possible threat. In almost all cases the target audience for Soft Power efforts is undefined or unidentifiable.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, there is no consensus on what Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy are for and what they actually seek to achieve. Policy in this area can be framed as skirmishes in a ‘battle for hearts and minds’,<sup>27</sup> a means of gaining competitive advantage,<sup>28</sup> a way to build national identity,<sup>29</sup> to prevent wars<sup>30</sup> or tackle unilateral or multilateral policy challenges like climate change.<sup>31</sup> When does anyone know when these initiatives have served their purpose?

**“It is not easily measurable... if any measures are possible in this field”**

Interviewees were all too familiar with the difficulties of evaluation in the work of diplomacy and this partially explains why most activities (cultural or otherwise) were not systematically evaluated. Some respondents initially seemed interested in measurement, such as one who explained how evaluation was an ‘evolving conversation’, but further discussion revealed that there were no substantive plans for the future.

**“Arts and culture can be very useful aids and props but the actual influence at the end of the day is based on a whole range of things”**

One interviewee told an anecdote about a diplomat who was concerned that a Soft Power campaign had been in place for two weeks, yet it was not yielding results. It took another senior colleague to explain that the ‘pace of change is glacial’. Another described how it could take a year just to get someone to agree to have a conversation. Any positive results from Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy take time and that delay can lead to frustration. Interestingly, this does not dissuade or deter the diplomatic teams from investing money and time in these efforts. However, it does mean that measurement and evaluation is not prioritised.

**“We always have to be very clear on what is our diplomatic objective from this particular event, otherwise we’re just wasting money”**

Without a clearly identifiable objective (e.g. to secure a position on a particular UN committee), it seems impossible to even begin the exercise of gathering evidence to demonstrate a policy’s impact. None of the interviewees described tangible, clear or firm objectives during this project. That’s not to say that such work doesn’t happen, but without a precise vision of the change diplomats are seeking to achieve, identifying relevant empirical data will remain impossible.

Food festival on  
the occasion of  
the International  
Day of Nowruz  
Springtime Festival  
on 21 March 2017.  
© UN Photo/  
Ivanna Petrova





## Finding 4. The unwavering faith in Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

### World Humanitarian Day ►

Participants taking part in events to commemorate the first World Humanitarian Day.

19 August 2009  
Geneva, Switzerland  
© UN Photo/  
Jean-Marc Ferré



### “ We know that it works. We know it. We just don’t know how ”

Despite an absence of reliable evidence, all interviewees who advocated the use of art and culture held the unwavering belief that their approaches to Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy delivered results. Interviewees expressed an intuitive feeling that there was ‘something good’ about cultural activities, but noted the difficulty in demonstrating impact and a chain of causality. Even when they understood the difficulties associated with impact measurement, they maintained that Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy had a positive effect on their diplomatic negotiations.

### “ You cannot measure it exactly but you can see the effect that it has ”

It was not unusual for interviewees to both believe in the concept and recognise that they had no proof to support their own viewpoint. As an example of this cognitive dissonance, one interviewee noted, in the same sentence, ‘it actually helps a country in the negotiations ... I haven’t seen any evidence’. One participant remarked that there was ‘little natural skepticism’ around the concepts of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy. It wasn’t just diplomats that thought this way. The political capitals which oversee and instruct their Missions in Geneva presumably agree too, otherwise they wouldn’t fund this sort of activity.

### “ If the room is full, if all the seats are taken, we consider it as a success ”

Some participants talked about evaluation by way of counting the number of attendees or the number of tickets sold for events. Others talked about gathering positive anecdotes that attendees had enjoyed themselves, for example ‘that was a great event, it really made me think differently and I’d never considered that’. These were described as ‘technical measures’ to ‘get a feeling of how it went’. They were used as a gauge to ‘read the temperature’ and frequently served to reinforce the belief that Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy make an impact.

## Finding 5. Culture can be a Trojan horse for political messages

**“ Once you open somebody's mind it's easier to put other stuff in there ”**

Culture was seen by the participants as a way to open people's minds, but not merely to broaden their horizons, or make them see things from a different point of view. The way in which diplomats talked about culture was sometimes more redolent of propaganda than diplomacy. This was perhaps the most explicit expression of the logic behind art as an influencing stimulus. Crucially, it is also an antithesis to the main explanatory model of Cultural Diplomacy provided by the academic literature, which says that culture acts as a neutral tool, that it foregrounds impartiality and that it creates apolitical spaces that are free from the machinations of politics.<sup>32</sup>

**“ Art and music thrown into an event can have a really positive impact on influencing ”**

One interviewee talked of the need to establish allies, either for a specific issue or for use in future negotiations, posing several questions, rhetorically: Which diplomats were the ‘most malleable?’ Who would be the easiest to influence? Who showed the most potential for having their ideas shaped? This is the very basis for Nye's definition of Soft Power. It is about shaping the preferences of another, through attraction and influence, to change their behaviour.

**“ Maybe no one is really looking at [the political message] that closely because it's art ”**

There were several stories involving overtly political messages finding their way into the Cultural Activities Programme and diplomats trying to monitor and ‘police’ activity that they deemed to be unacceptable. There were accounts of China's cultural activities and the Mission's claims that any political content that had crept into the programme was purely accidental or coincidental. There were other yet more subtle cases that were less obvious or visible, and harder to detect and interpret.

**“ Countries, while organising those events, from time to time want to somehow incorporate some political messages ”**

Despite talking about clear political objectives, diplomats also spoke of the need to disguise or obscure them. Diplomats used a striking variety of approaches when deploying the arts for political purposes. Some cultural events were, in the words of one interviewee, ‘extremely overt’, while others were intended to engender ‘more passive absorption’. In all instances, a great deal of care, caution and attention was paid to their presentation.

### World Environment Day ►

*A view of a special event held at UNOG, on the occasion of World Environment Day.*  
6 June 2017  
Geneva, Switzerland  
© UN Photo/  
Jean-Marc Ferré





## Finding 6. Culture sometimes involves a clash of values

Invitation for ►  
Russia's film  
screening as part  
of the UNOG Film  
Festival in May 2015

**4-8 May 2015**  
**Palais des Nations**  
 Room XIV (Cinema), A Building, 1st floor - Door 17

Remembering the Second World War  
 through Russian and Belarusian cinema

**Michael Moller**  
 Acting Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva

**Mikhail Khvostov**  
 Ambassador, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Belarus  
 to the United Nations Office  
 and other international organizations in Geneva

**Alexey Borodavkin**  
 Ambassador, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation  
 to the United Nations Office  
 and other international organizations in Geneva

have the pleasure to invite you to the opening of a Russian and  
 Belarusian film festival on the theme of the Second World War  
 on **Monday 4 May 2015 at 12:30 p.m.**

The festival will feature the screenings of the following films:


- **The Brest fortress** on Monday 4 May 2015 at 1 p.m.
- **Fate of a Man** on Tuesday 5 May 2015 at 12 p.m.
- **White Tiger** on Tuesday 5 May 2015 at 3 p.m.
- **Stalingrad** on Wednesday 6 May 2015 at 12 p.m.
- **They fought for their country** on Wednesday 6 May 2015 at 3 p.m.
- **The cranes are flying** on Thursday 7 May 2015 at 12 p.m.
- **In the fog** on Thursday 7 May 2015 at 3 p.m.
- **The Brest fortress** on Friday 8 May 2015 at 12 p.m.

All films will feature English subtitles. Films' synopses will be posted on  
[www.geneva.mid.ru](http://www.geneva.mid.ru) and on Twitter: @Mission\_Russian


The festival is organized in collaboration with [Nashgazeta.ch](http://Nashgazeta.ch), a  
 Russian language daily in Switzerland.


All attendees who do not have a UN badge are kindly requested to register at  
[akuchkov@hotmail.com](mailto:akuchkov@hotmail.com) before 30 April indicating the movie(s) they will attend.

Invitation valid for two people. Please bring a photo identification with you.  
 No parking available for non-accredited vehicles.  
 Palais des Nations - 8-14, Avenue de la paix - Geneva 10



INVITATION

 **United Nations**  
 cultural activities  
 Geneva



### “ Sometimes [people use art] to try to form new division lines or even confrontation ”

Controversies inevitably arise when the content of a cultural event or individual artwork is seen to breach codes of practice or impinge upon cultural sensitivities. The UN is a strictly secular institution, and its ethics and protocols are based largely on liberal western norms. One interviewee highlighted how difficult it could be to collaborate on cultural matters with countries that were not deemed progressive in terms of human rights, freedom of expression, or sexual and religious liberty. It is an obvious point to make, but in some societies religion is the primary cultural framework through which people express themselves with art. Symbolism, the human body, myth and legend, the divine and the sublime: all of these are recurrent themes in art around the world. Navigating this in a multilateral diplomatic space is a challenge, since one person's masterpiece can be another's blasphemy.

### “ [Some forms of culture] are provocative and bring forth acts of violence and extremism ”

Cultural events are experienced differently by each Mission and divergences emerge where the subject matter or setting is contentious. One example was a film festival organised by the Russian Mission as part of the Holocaust commemorations. Complaints were made to the Director-General about several of the films shown in the programme, as they were thought to aggrandise the military efforts of the Soviet Union, foreground displays of hard power and overstate the country's role in the liberation of occupied territory. The films were seen by some as a means of celebrating aggression and propagating violence, which firmly go against the work and values of the UN. These complaints were contested by the Russian Mission.

### “ It allowed us to use theatre in a way that really changes how a broader conversation is being held ”

Interviewees also reported occasions during which art and culture had been used in complex and confrontational ways, to put people into 'less comfortable' situations that acted as a means of 'constructive disruption', disturbing the status quo and encouraging attendees to think differently about an issue at stake. Not every clash of values resulted in further conflict or division.

## Finding 7. Cultural activity at the UN is imbued with ritual and performance

The ritualised aspect of negotiations at UNOG was conveyed strongly in the interviews, corroborating the thoughts of political anthropologist David Kertzer, who has said that ‘diplomacy without ritual is inconceivable’.<sup>33</sup> Even within the earliest studies of ritual, it was understood as a means of creating social bonds, establishing hierarchies, reducing hostility and appeasing aggression,<sup>34</sup> all of which correspond with many of the reasons the Missions gave for using the arts within their diplomatic work.

Ritual is identified by Kertzer as having formal qualities that are either fundamentally political or have important political dimensions. These take the form of customs, ceremonies or acts. Rituals can be performances that are meant to be observed. They involve display, but ultimately they are about much more than ‘show’, as they are designed to be affective. This is apparent in any act of ritual. The diplomatic act of gift-giving, for example, is not merely a statement of generosity; it is establishing a tacit relationship of power in which the recipient is symbolically indebted.<sup>35</sup>

**“ [With traditional diplomacy] you are not having an actual conversation, let alone a demonstration, it’s more a series of speeches or monologues ”**

The business of diplomacy is direct, highly tactical and measured. Any cultural activity, for example, a concert or exhibition, will typically begin with speeches from a UN representative and from the sponsoring Missions. These speeches are highly formulaic and are used to contextualise the cultural activity according to the objectives of the Mission and its home capital. The artistic content on display both contrasts and obscures, yet it highlights the political decisiveness inherent within diplomatic negotiations.

Rituals are comprised of rites. According to the religious studies scholar Barry Stephenson, ‘participating in a rite demonstrates commitment, intention, belief or solidarity with others’ and ‘in participating, the ritual actor relinquishes agency’.<sup>36</sup> These cultural activities become rituals that have the potential and power to impact on the diplomat’s ‘intentions, emotions, feelings and beliefs’.<sup>37</sup> The Cultural Activities Programme perfectly fits the description and understanding of ritual. While the Programme is politically motivated and unashamedly instrumental, enjoyment and pleasure also play a role.

**“ We can disagree on Crimea, on Georgia, but we all like Chekhov ”**

The seemingly safe and neutral space, and the ‘softness’ offered by art and culture, acts as the ideal tool for diplomacy. The UN is a place of strategic sophistication. The diplomats themselves are highly skilled in their professional roles. This is an interested community, with people who are culturally elevated, artistically proficient, with an aesthetic sensibility and high levels of cultural capital.<sup>38</sup>

Jazz pianist ►  
Yaron Herman,  
giving a lecture on  
‘Improvisation and  
Consensus building in  
Jazz and Diplomacy’  
30 November 2016  
© UN Photo/Mylène  
Della Monica





## Finding 8. The UN buildings are the backdrop to the rituals of diplomacy

A great deal of the work at UNOG resembles a stage set populated with people performing their roles. The debating chambers, with their chairs, desks, name plates and microphones, form the backdrop for individuals reading aloud their country's standpoint on a particular topic. These pre-arranged scripts are dictated by politicians back home in the national capitals. According to interviewees, this formality enabled the display of ritual by diplomats. It was about the ceremony or ritual of official negotiation. Everybody understood that this sets the context for real negotiations that take place in informal settings, among a small and selected group of individuals. Some interviewees referred to these as 'small space' or 'back room' negotiations, during which art and culture were seen to be important components.

It is difficult to escape art in and around the Palais des Nations. It is at the centre of this ritual stage set. Many delegates and diplomats pass along corridors and walkways between meetings and conference sessions, some taking time to look at the artworks, others without pausing to register what is on the walls.

**“ Some countries have never donated anything. And some countries have given a lot ”**

The Missions that have donated art to the UNOG collection usually request that their donated works are located in a space with heavy footfall. Over the years the art collection has expanded and the wall space in the Palais has become increasingly congested. As a result, the artworks can appear cramped and cluttered. Some interviewees remarked that the space looked messy, 'like a bazaar' or a 'second hand shop'. The allocation of wall space is relatively egalitarian, although this requires some diplomatic juggling by the Secretariat. Works are rotated with a view to keeping the display fresh and appeasing the Missions, but this is far from straightforward. The Missions in Geneva seemed to derive a sense of value and prestige from the mere presence of the artwork being displayed in the Palais, regardless of any perceived artistic quality of the works.

One way that Missions can make a bigger impact is to sponsor a larger room and pay for a space to be renovated. The UN is constantly struggling against funding cuts and some parts of the Palais are in need of repair and refurbishment. This process has resulted in the lavish grandiosity of the Russian Room (a meeting space bedecked with Russian décor and cultural artefacts), and the artist Marcel Barceló's spectacular sculptural painting, commissioned by the Spanish government for €20 million, and adorning the 4,600 square-foot domed ceiling of the Human Rights Chamber. Some interviewees discussed this and objected to being asked to sponsor, in other words renovate, a room. They thought it was an audacious request and did not think it was their role. This also raises questions of equity, as the wealthier countries have resources for this, thereby making their presence felt, while smaller Missions could never afford to support the UN in such a way.

When Missions use the Palais as a backdrop or venue for cultural activity they frequently do so in order to provide 'a congenial atmosphere' away from the 'cold meeting room' in order for the 'real' diplomacy to be done. Many spoke of the need for a switch of the space to 'change the vibe in the room' and to provide 'a non-threatening environment' or a 'social space'. The main motivation here was to move the location of the talks to 'get people away from the negotiating table'.

## Finding 9. Private spaces and private lives are important Soft Power tools

**“ What is a residence? That’s the tool you use to do your reception, to do private conversations, negotiations ”**

Throughout the course of multiple visits to Geneva, there was an increasing appreciation of the less apparent methods of deploying Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy. A diplomat’s home and family provide opportunities for social gatherings and form a group of assets to be strategically deployed. One interviewee intriguingly talked about the ‘strategic role of wives’ as a tool of persuasion.<sup>39</sup> Diplomats spoke about hosting dinners and parties at their residences, with live music or exhibitions, in a carefully curated space for a small selected group of invited attendees. The home lives of diplomats and workers at UNOG became increasingly important throughout the research and showed that the boundaries between work and home life for a diplomat are blurred, and culture can smoothly operate across this traditional boundary.

**“ [They] get better acquainted with each other, it helps very much when they’re discussing something serious ”**

Friendships at UNOG are carefully curated, and Soft Power mechanisms like art and culture are a powerful means of cementing them. Diplomats spoke about this in highly rational terms. In theory, an objective might be ‘to promote your national interests’, ‘to trade and sell’, ‘to build a brand’, ‘to encourage financial investment’ and ‘to make a policy’. One participant explained how Soft Power was sometimes used in instances where formal negotiation was not enough, or not sufficiently effective in achieving their desired political objectives. In some cases Soft Power was a means of influencing and reshaping communication because the ‘conversation wasn’t happening naturally’.

**“ It helps us to create social bonds that are then useful afterwards to negotiate hard policy issues ”**

Attendance at cultural events in Geneva is often a matter of great deliberation. The representatives organising events make strategic choices about who to invite and how to frame those invitations. In turn, those targeted by event organisers are strategic and selective about accepting invitations. Diplomats frequently second-guess who might be present at events, thinking ‘if he or she is going, then I will attend’. Sometimes obligation plays a part, as does loyalty or allegiance. The guest list for cultural events may come directly from a diplomat’s home capital and simply be approved in Geneva. Many interviewees gave the impression that there is often a delicate dance undertaken and these decisions are carefully considered and highly strategic.

**“ We go to receptions that have a number of people we need to speak to ”**

### World Humanitarian Day ►

*A special event held at UNOG to commemorate World Humanitarian Day, which is observed annually on 19 August. In 2014, a plaque was unveiled, in honour of 17 UN staff members who lost their lives on 11 December 2007 when a car bomb destroyed UN offices in Algiers.*

19 August 2014

Geneva, Switzerland

© UN Photo/Anne-Laure Lecha





## Finding 10. Greater resources make for more Soft Power

Some participants felt that cultural events spoke volumes about the countries hosting them. Both the resources at their disposal and the cultural forms that they supported betrayed the assumptions of the Missions and norms of the countries supporting them. For example, China has a reputation for arranging concerts of large-scale, powerful symphonies, reflecting its resources and ambitions. Interviewees explained how it focuses on classical music events because freedom of expression for contemporary artists in China remains a sensitive subject.

### “ You have to use your creativity and try to find innovative approaches to some issues ”

Missions with limited budgets face the problem of visibility: how to match ‘the capabilities’ of Russia or the US which host many events each year? Those with scant budgets obviously had fewer events, and often needed to share resources with others to stage a cultural event. Importantly, they also appeared to adopt a less strategic approach. They typically staged fairly generic activities and used more of a scattergun approach to their audience, inviting everyone and anyone. For example, an archetypal invitation list might include ‘international Geneva’ (expatriate or diasporic communities, all diplomats and their teams, the international media, the home capitals and cultural audiences both back home and in Geneva). Another way that Missions would stretch their limited resources would be to showcase artists who were passing through Geneva or who were local to the city.

Budget considerations play a role, not just in the scale and frequency of events, but in the level of sophistication in the planning and execution of cultural activity. The US’s budget for diplomacy at the UN was around £110,000 a year, compared to, say, £3,000 for one of the smaller Missions. For those with bigger budgets, funds were not necessarily expended on extravagant events but allowed for the luxury of a more thoughtful approach, with a far greater level of strategic sophistication than any other diplomatic Mission in Geneva. The US Mission explained that, whilst concerts were seen as prestigious and important events, they were also thought to restrict interpersonal interaction. Events that brought people across a table, face to face, were seen to be more valuable, more lasting, and more powerful than a concert or exhibition followed by a drinks reception.

	Highest use of Cultural Activities Programme (number of events)	2nd highest use of Cultural Activities Programme (number of events)
<b>2006</b>	China (3)	Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Congo, Croatia, France, Italy, Russian Federation and Venezuela (2)
<b>2007</b>	China (3)	Azerbaijan, France, Lithuania, Spain, Switzerland and Venezuela (2)
<b>2008</b>	Indonesia and USA (4)	Azerbaijan, Colombia and Morocco (2)
<b>2009</b>	Switzerland (4)	Spain (3)
<b>2010</b>	China and Germany (4)	Israel, Peru and Russian Federation (3)
<b>2011</b>	USA (8)	Switzerland (4)
<b>2012</b>	Switzerland (5)	USA (4)
<b>2013</b>	USA (6)	Switzerland (5)
<b>2014</b>	Switzerland (8)	USA (7)
<b>2015</b>	Russian Federation (6)	Switzerland (5)
<b>2016</b>	China and USA (4)	Russian Federation (3)

## Finding 11. The US remains a Soft Power superpower

Despite its strong rhetoric of equality, UNOG is a space that brims with manifestations and displays of power. An obvious demonstration of this is the UN Security Council, which is responsible for the high-level oversight of international peacekeeping, the imposition of economic sanctions and the approval of military action. It comprises 15 member states but it has five permanent members (the so-called P5): China, France, Russian Federation, US and UK. Political analyst, journalist and academic David Bosco has said that, in a 'rudimentary sense, the council is expected to govern'.<sup>40</sup> These are powerful global players with their own individual and divergent interests. Bosco persuasively argues that this is not about bureaucracy or democracy, rather it is about power politics.

**“ There is a clear interest for us to liaise with the countries which are seen globally as important and influential ”**

The P5 countries are extremely influential. One interviewee spoke at length about US influence both globally and at UNOG. It was in high demand as a cultural partner. It was reported that even other P5 countries looked to the US and consistently strove to partner with the American Mission. Another participant remarked that an alliance with a P5 country can act as a form of legitimisation. One cultural event that cropped up in a number of interviews was the Concert for Peace: a collaborative classical music event sponsored by the P5 countries. In one account of the concert, the US Mission had to use its powers of persuasion to get other partners to agree to work with China, as there was some reluctance to collaborate. Once the US was on board, it was easier to gain agreement from other countries. They became an important advocate for the concert.

**“ Everyone wants to associate with the US because it's a global power and it's also an important actor in the security sphere for many countries ”**

The US leads the world in terms of its brands, films, television and music, which are hugely popular around the globe. Despite there being resources and substantial effort deployed to support Soft Power through nation branding, the manufacture and export of cultural products, overseas aid and cultural exchange programmes, these are at constant risk of being undermined by a diplomatic offence, trade sanction or outright act of military aggression.<sup>41</sup>

**“ It is difficult to compete. If they want to have the space, they will have the space ”**

The US Mission was perceived to persistently get preferential treatment from the UNOG Secretariat. Numerous interviewees told us that it secured the best spaces and rooms at the Palais for its cultural events, as well as attracting the best audiences. Participants spoke of the US getting the 'best dates'. They also noted that the Director-General always attended and opened cultural activities sponsored by the US Mission yet was more often absent from others.

The Cold War power dynamics were still in existence at UNOG during this enquiry. Several interviewees spoke about the political nature of the relationships between the Missions and how the political power dynamics played out. Collaborations within the Cultural Activities Programme echoed present-day politics. For example, there is little interaction between USA and Russia in the Programme, which is historically hardwired. Russia tends not to collaborate with USA but works with Belarus, for example, due to it being a post-Soviet state with close ties to Moscow.



## Finding 12. Ultimately, culture is used to preserve and express hard political power

### High-level dialogue on ► Water Cooperation

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (right) greets Oqil Oqilov, Prime Minister of the Republic of Tajikistan, at the opening of the General Assembly's high-level interactive dialogue on water cooperation, held to mark the International Year of Water Cooperation (2013). 22 March 2013 United Nations, New York © UN Photo/ Rick Bajornas



There are many alliances that operate in treaty negotiations, voting blocs and networks of power and influence at UNOG. These can be geographical, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which promotes intergovernmental cooperation and facilitates economic integration amongst its members. They can be historical, such as the Commonwealth of Nations, formerly the British Commonwealth, which is comprised mostly of former territories of the British Empire. They can be cultural, in the broadest sense, such as Francophonie, the alliance of countries that share the French language. Some have questioned whether Cultural Diplomacy has the ability to go beyond national self-interest.<sup>42</sup> However, these global coalitions are often brought together around cultural events. They offer a range of advantages: from displaying unity and solidarity to securing allies and maximising influence, which is especially valuable for smaller countries that might struggle to stand out and reach out beyond such alliances.

### “ Naturally the countries that work together on cultural events are usually politically quite close ”

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy activities at UNOG are imbued with explicit and implicit political purpose, and are utilised in order to exert power and control. These are the ultimate aims of ‘reaching out’ and ‘standing out’. The cultural activities, their organisation, format and attendance both represent and reproduce the structural features of the geopolitical order by replicating and preserving the hierarchies and power relations of the outside world. Power is solidified and inequity is implicitly reinforced to uphold the social order. The anthropologist Edmund Leach, who regarded ritual as a non-verbal form of communication, spoke of the way that ritual acts are redolent of existing power relations.<sup>43</sup> Applying these ideas to the data collected through interviews assists in recognising who are the powerful, how the powerful enforce and reinforce their authority and how the less powerful attempt to garner influence. Within this, Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy are reflections and projections of political, economic and cultural resources.

This is in stark contrast to the Cultural Diplomacy literature, which casts the use of culture in diplomacy as something benign, informed by an almost ‘gentlemanly’ conduct and operating in a distinct realm, separate and removed from politics. A key finding in this enquiry is that cultural spaces are loaded with political meaning and they can be the site of simmering political tensions and rivalries, sometimes sparked or made apparent by cultural activity.



▼ **Broken Chair**

*'Broken Chair' is a sculpture outside the UNOG headquarters by the Swiss artist Daniel Berset, which symbolises opposition to land mines.*

© SAPHOTOG / Shutterstock.com

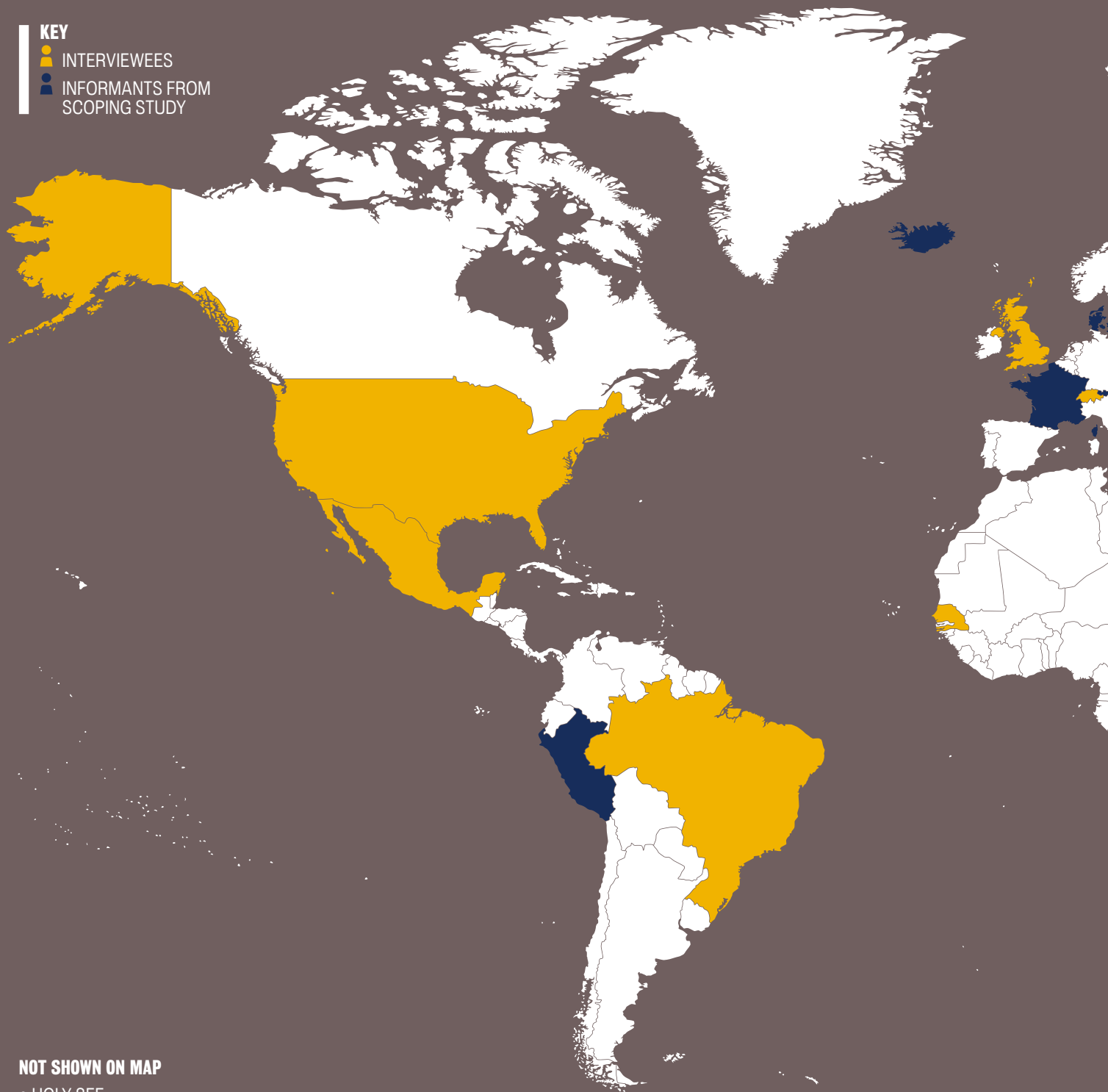




# GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THIS ENQUIRY

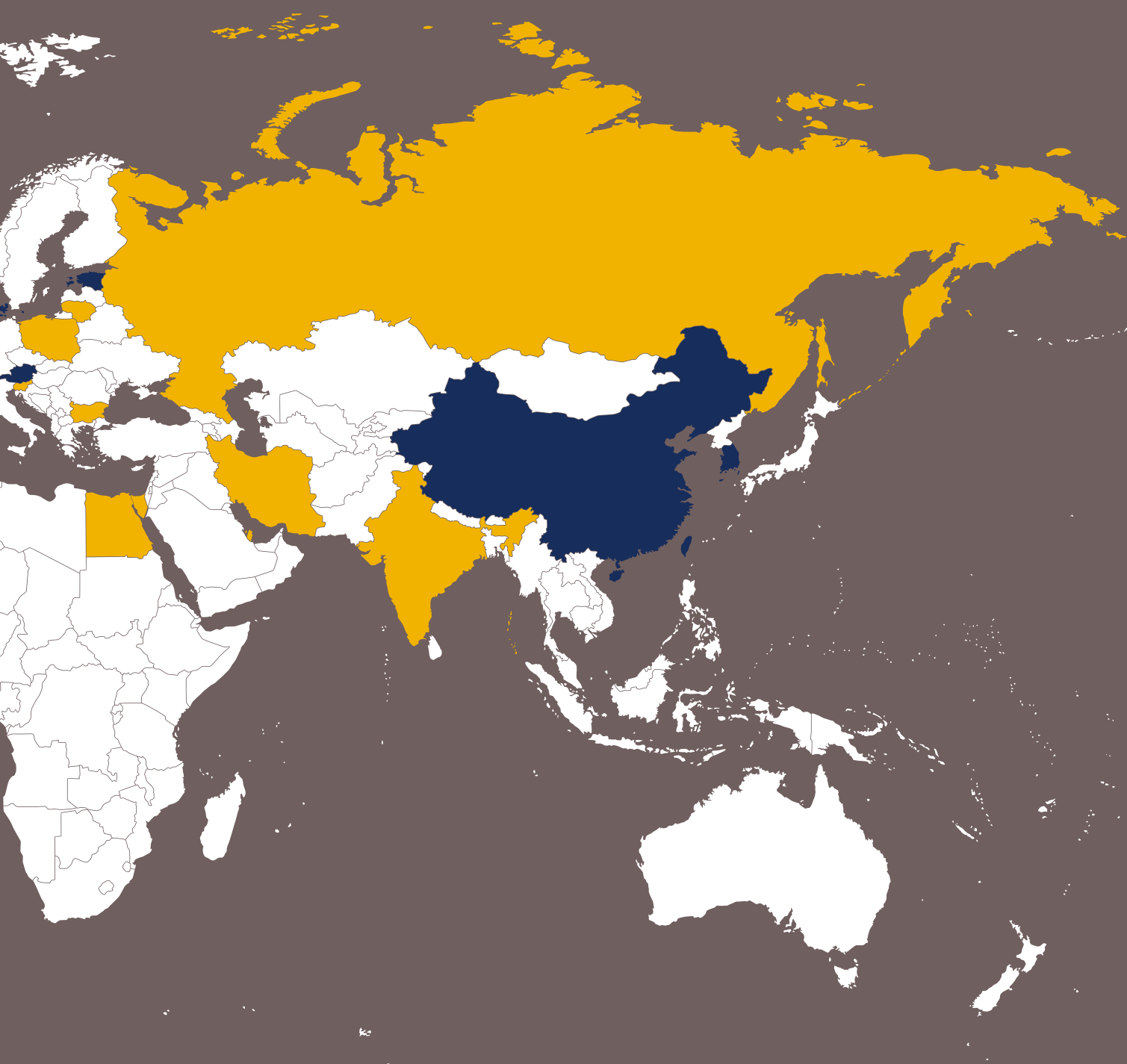
**KEY**

- INTERVIEWEES
- INFORMANTS FROM SCOPING STUDY



**NOT SHOWN ON MAP**

- HOLY SEE
- EUROPEAN UNION
- FRANCOPHONIE







▲ **Book launch**

UNOG hosted 'A Conversation with Kofi Annan and Michel Sidibé', on the occasion of the launch of former Secretary-General Annan's book, 'We the Peoples: A UN for the 21st Century'. Mr. Annan (foreground centre) signing copies of his book for participants of the event.

3 June 2014

Geneva, Switzerland

© UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré







# REFLECTIONS

## Research summary

On the whole, Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy are poorly understood, often confused, thought to be good things, lack empirical justification and are a replication of geopolitical power. This enquiry at UNOG has shown that the literature is often mistaken about the real-world operation of Soft Power at the diplomatic coalface and is, in general, preoccupied with other concerns, namely theoretical distinctions and semantics. The UN has an idealistic way of working, foregrounding notions of equality and diplomacy, which are sometimes replicated in the cultural activity at Geneva, but most often undermined by the dominance of global superpowers in the ritualised life of the UN. Nonetheless, the on-site Cultural Activities Programme is valued and valuable, and the UNOG Secretariat do their best to moderate the dominance of the global superpowers. It is in the interests of the UN more broadly that every member state is able to stand out and reach out. This project and emerging research offers hope for a better-understood framework and more considered policy and practice in the future.

## Where the research goes from here

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy are often neglected by scholars operating in the fields of foreign policy and political science, and culture is still seen by many as being peripheral to politics. There remains some disagreement within academia as to where Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy are precisely located within political portfolios. Some scholars see these concepts as purely cultural,<sup>44</sup> whereas others firmly situate them within foreign policy and international relations.<sup>45</sup> This confusion, and the head start provided by this enquiry, signals the need for multi- and interdisciplinary approaches to studying these phenomena to enable a realistic (and thereby more complex) understanding.

The terms Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy are used with a lack of precision by diplomats and the Secretariat at UNOG. This chimes with previous empirical analyses, which have shown that even within the same organisations (such as the British Council and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in the UK) there has been little concern with distinctions or differentiating terms.<sup>46</sup> It persists to this day: a workshop in early 2017 on Soft Power hosted by the British Council arrived at a consensus that the rhetoric frequently shifts and is dependent on the political discourse of the day, yet the actual substance and direction of the work does not change.<sup>47</sup> A recent shift in the vocabulary used by the UK government (replacing Cultural Diplomacy with Soft Power) has been registered in academic research.<sup>48</sup> Rather than adding yet another voice to the persistent cries for semantic differentiation, this enquiry was concerned with understanding how those at UNOG use art and culture in their work rather than what they call it.

Perhaps insight will emerge from new forms and fields of scholarship. Computer scientists at the University of Edinburgh are exploring the potential for 'sentiment mapping' in ascertaining whether emotions and feelings can be changed through cultural intervention. An exciting new study by colleagues at the universities of Oxford and Exeter has found that briefly listening to music (in this case West African and Indian pop music), can give the listener a more positive attitude towards those cultures.<sup>49</sup> They demonstrated that it is possible to improve someone's unconscious attitudes towards other groups by exposing them to music from those groups. Interestingly, they found that people with an empathetic personality were more susceptible to the effects of music. The drawback of this study is that the participants were music students, so arguably they were already predisposed to respond positively. However, this experimental research has huge potential for studies of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy, especially as empathy has been recognised to be a key personality trait amongst diplomats.<sup>50</sup>

The analytical potential of ritual and performance is something that demands a more comprehensive and refined application. David Kertzer's attempt to analyse ritual within



political affairs has been largely neglected in political science as it is at odds with models of policymaking based on rational human behaviour.<sup>51</sup> Within cultural policy studies, there is a long-fought battle to keep the cultural separate from the political. The vigorous debates around 'art for art's sake' and instrumental policymaking serve as an apt example.<sup>52</sup> Kertzer conceives of ritual as a tool for creating and asserting ideology and maintaining hegemonic power. He argues that all political systems involve ritual, as it is an important way of influencing policy.<sup>53</sup> There is enormous potential to apply this developed body of work to studies of Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power beyond this UNOG case study.

By engaging across academic disciplines, in this case psychology, sociology, ritual studies and anthropology, it is possible to look more purposefully at the ways in which the intuitive feelings of diplomats toward their cultural work can be approached more scientifically.

Research into Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy is complex, and fraught with difficulties of definition, data capture, analysis and policy relevance. While no one project could address every shortcoming and overturn every misunderstanding in the literature, this enquiry into diplomacy at UNOG has generated a great number of new and unexpected insights.

The primary contribution of this enquiry has been to provide a better understanding of how art and culture are used as levers of power and diplomacy, within the context of the UN. Although Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power are difficult to precisely define and their effective deployment a little unpredictable at times, this enquiry has shone a light on a tangible real-world manifestation of these phenomena. It has not solved the question of 'what works' but it has taken a number of steps towards answering that profound, difficult and eternally relevant question. It has provided a rare glimpse into the workings of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy in a politically charged environment at the world's most important multinational organisation. Only by focusing on empirical data, lived experiences and real-world case studies like this will scholars, policy-makers and cultural practitioners understand what is at stake when countries decide to reach out or stand out using art and culture.

#### ▲ UNOG Open Day

*A father and son look at a giant globe during UNOG's Open Day event.*  
15 September 2012  
Geneva, Switzerland  
© UN Photo/  
Jean-Marc Ferré



**▼ Human Rights Council**

*A general view of participants during the 29th Regular Session of the Human Rights Council.*  
22 June 2015  
Geneva, Switzerland  
© UN Photo/  
Jean-Marc Ferré





# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Origins of the project

The kernel for this enquiry was planted at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2015, where King's College London's Assistant Principal Deborah Bull was giving a series of talks about the impact that arts engagement can make on the lives of individuals and society. The subject of Soft Power and the question of evidence to support claims for the role of art in international relations was one of the topics to arise during discussions in Davos. These conversations took King's to Geneva for an initial scoping visit in 2015, as the university recognised the need for a more substantive enquiry to explore this topic in detail, and to contribute some much-needed empirical evidence to inform the ongoing scholarly debates around Soft Power.

## Appendix 2: Methodology

At the heart of this enquiry's methodology is a suite of 20 interviews. The majority of the interviews were conducted in person. The advantage of face-to-face interviews is the quality of the data that they generate. Conversations in person take account of changes in body language, gestures and facial expressions, which not only encourage the interviewer to be sensitive to the respondent's mood and manner, but also allow the interviewer to signal in non-verbal ways that they would like the respondent to continue with a train of thought or end a particular thread. A skilled interviewer establishes an easy rapport with a respondent face to face. Due to constraints of availability, of the 20 interviews conducted, one was by Skype and one via email.

With the consent of participants, the interviews were recorded and transcribed to prepare them for analysis. Where the interview was conducted through email, the correspondence acted as the record of the interview. In total, the transcripts formed a substantial corpus of 160,000 words, which was analysed using a technique called Thematic Analysis. This involves looking for key themes in the data, without any predefined ideas about what these themes might be. The themes are easily identifiable as they emerge through repetition, since many interviewees talk about the same things, in similar and different ways.<sup>54</sup>

Securing the involvement and time of diplomats at UNOG proved to be a significant challenge. For obvious reasons, this enquiry was not a priority in the diaries of ambassadors, and it frequently coincided with a number of politically fraught situations, such as Brexit, conflict in Syria and the global refugee crisis. To supplement names identified in the 2015 scoping visit, the UNOG Secretariat made some suggestions and the remainder of participants emerged through an active 'snowball sampling', where interviewees were asked to recommend others who might be useful to talk to. In aggregate, the interviewees reflected a diverse cohort, in terms of geography and the mix of developed/developing countries. All of the interviews were conducted in English.

The interviews were used to investigate whether the current theories that dominate the academic literature hold true in the experience of diplomats and the Secretariat at UNOG. Any insights from the interviews were supplemented with observations made while on site at the Palais des Nations and secondary data from books, journal articles, websites, pamphlets and policy literature.

At every possible juncture while in Geneva, the team observed events that formed part of the Cultural Activities Programme and made careful notes of the ways in which dignitaries and diplomats spoke about the work that was being presented. The physical spaces (meeting rooms, corridors, assembly halls and gardens) were adorned with art which was in one way or another designed to symbolise and signify the work of Missions at UNOG. Careful reflection on the way that people moved through those spaces has subsequently influenced the findings presented in this enquiry.

Accompanying every event in the Programme has been a suite of documentation that informed the development of the enquiry: posters, invitations and (most interestingly) the transcripts of speeches given by dignitaries and senior staff from UNOG at opening and closing ceremonies. There was also a set of statistics about the work of the Programme. All of this has been incorporated into the analysis to supplement the core data collected through the interviews.



## Appendix 3: Recommendations for the Cultural Activities Programme

This enquiry has produced a range of thoughts about the role and purpose of the Cultural Activities Programme at UNOG. These should inform the future development of the Programme, as well as provide testament to the difference that it makes to the work of UNOG. Overall, the sentiments and perceptions towards the Programme were as follows:

1. Larger Permanent Missions see it as partially useful but not essential. They have the resources to arrange their own cultural events, but take advantage of the collaborative potential offered by the Programme.
2. The Programme is crucial, particularly for smaller nations as a way to have their voices heard and to stand out.
3. The team which runs the Programme is seen as adding value to the work of the Missions through their collaborative suggestions and administrative support.
4. The Programme's captive audience is culturally open-minded, sensitised, sophisticated, well-educated, sympathetic and receptive, but their diaries are crowded and they are at saturation point in terms of the Cultural Programme.
5. The Programme is vulnerable as it is reliant on core contributions to the UN from member states. There is a danger that shrinking funds might lead to over-stretch, which in turn makes it harder to showcase the full potential that the Programme might offer.

## Appendix 4: Acknowledgements

We are indebted to the assistance of colleagues in the UNOG Library team. They were instrumental in identifying and securing the participation of many diplomats who became interviewees in this research. They also generously allowed us to attend cultural events at UNOG and shared data with us on the activities that they support through the Cultural Activities Programme.

### We would like to thank the following people for their participation in the project and for their openness and candour:

Noor Al-Sada, *Second Secretary, Permanent Mission of Qatar to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Javad Amin-Mansour, *Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Salman Bal, *Senior Political Coordination Advisor, Political Affairs and Partnerships Section, United Nations Office at Geneva*

Bakary Bamba Junior, *Permanent Representative, Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, Permanent Delegation to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Jerzy Bauriski, *Minister Counsellor and Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Poland to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Alexey Borodavkin, *Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Urška Čas Svetek, *Human Rights Advisor, Permanent Mission of Slovenia to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Pedro Luiz Dalcero, *Minister and Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Brazil to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Assia Davidova, *Minister Plenipotentiary, Permanent Mission of Bulgaria to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Serigne Dieye, *First Counsellor, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Senegal to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Alexandre Fasel, *Ambassador and Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Sigrun Habermann Box, *Chief, Cultural Diplomacy and Outreach Section, United Nations Library Geneva*

Jorge Lomónaco, *Ambassador and Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Mexico to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Mark Matthews, *Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Michael Møller, *Director-General, United Nations Office at Geneva*

Rytis Paulauskas, *former Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Lithuania to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Francesco Pisano, *Director, United Nations Library Geneva*

Amr Ramadan, *Ambassador and Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of the Arab Republic of Egypt to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Meg Riggs, *Deputy Public Affairs Counsellor, Permanent Mission of the United States of America to the Office of the UN in Geneva*

Sumit Seth, *First Secretary, Permanent Mission of India to the Office of the UN in Geneva*



#### ◀ 'Luminarium' Sculpture on Human Rights

An inflatable sculpture by British artist Alan Parkinson at UNOG. The walk-through 'Luminarium' sculpture is designed to challenge diplomats, UN officials, school children and communities to think more creatively about how to make the work of the Human Rights Council better understood and applied around the world.

10 June 2013

Geneva, Switzerland

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#### Thanks also to the many people in Geneva who assisted in the early development of this project by participating in scoping discussions in 2015 including representatives from:

Permanent Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organisations in Switzerland

Permanent Mission of Austria to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organisations in Switzerland

Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organisations in Switzerland

Permanent Mission of Denmark to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organisations in Switzerland

Permanent Mission of Estonia to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organisations in Switzerland

Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organisations in Switzerland

Permanent Mission of Iceland to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organisation in Switzerland

Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organisations in Switzerland

Permanent Mission of Peru to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organisations in Switzerland

Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organisations in Switzerland

Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, Permanent Delegation to the United Nations Office at Geneva

Thanks are also due to many other staff at the United Nations Library Geneva including:

Clara Gouy, Thomas Kryger, Niverte Noberasco, Ivanna Petrova, Pascal Sim, Charlotte Warakaulle and Sanna You.

#### We would also like to thank:

Egle Aleknaite, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lithuania*

Kate Arthurs, *British Council, UK*

Nico Daswani, *World Economic Forum, Davos*

Keith Nichol, *Department of Culture, Media and Sport, UK*

Daniel Walpole, *GREAT Campaign, UK*

#### From King's College London:

Ruth Hogarth, Oliver Stannard and Rebecca Wismege



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▲ **Concert for the Understanding of Civilizations and Human Rights**

*Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon poses for a group photo with members of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, on the occasion of their performance of a 'Concert for the Understanding of Civilizations and Human Rights' at UNOG.*

31 October 2015

Geneva, Switzerland

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Design: RF Design, [www.rfportfolio.com](http://www.rfportfolio.com) Approved by brand@kcl.ac.uk, July 2017

