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ACADEMIC MOBILITY AS AN ELEMENT OF SOFT DIPLOMACY: A CASE STUDY SERBIA¹

Nena A. Vasojević, Research associate

Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade

Centre for Sociological and Anthropological Research

nvasojevic@idn.org.rs

Abstract

In the relevant scientific literature, topics dealing with the study of "soft power" in education, especially higher education, in the context of international mobility are increasingly represented. Academic mobility among students can influence the building of positive global results, which is the basis of soft power. However, soft power must be seen as a two-way process between the donor country and the beneficiary country. This paper explores to what extent and why the project "The World in Serbia" is important, i.e., the education of foreign students-scholarship holders at the Universities of the Republic of Serbia, and under what conditions it can be considered an instrument of soft power. The paper will use primary and secondary data, as well as data obtained by the research conducted on the population of foreign scholarship students who are educated in the Republic of Serbia within the project "The World in Serbia".

Keywords: academic mobility, soft diplomacy, Serbia, open society, students, scholarship holders

Introduction

In the 21st century, public diplomacy is the most common form of communication for establishing relations with other countries where the rapid process of globalization affects diplomacy. Today's paradigm of international order and the concept of power have been dramatically changed, and "hard power" has been replaced by "soft power", which countries use as their potential (science, art, culture, sports, education, etc.) to build a country brand instead of military, weapons, etc. (Snow 2009, 3). When it comes to diplomacy, topics are increasingly represented that study the role of education and academic exchange in building international relations, and this phenomenon is defined by the term "soft power" (Peterson 2014). Nye (2011) saw "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment, because it stems from the appeal of a

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country's culture, political ideals, and politics" (Nye 2004). Putman (1993) understands the term as a type of social capital, while Lukes (2007) indicates potentiality. Education is a key social dimension for building the country's future potential and is oriented towards future generations. Educational diplomacy is an effective tool for mutually favorable and reciprocal ties between nations (Khan, Ahmad & Fernald 2020) and the education of foreign students of the country donors is seen as an important factor in achieving the goals of soft power. The authors of Wojciuk, Michałek & Stormowska (2015) argue that power does not have to be active, but can derive from powerful properties, rather than from their actions as is the case with the power of attraction. This entails that the soft power derived from education need not stem from a focused policy on attracting foreign "capital". Education, especially academic education, attracts foreign students and thus universities and colleges are some of the most important institutions attracting hegemonic reproductions (Wojciuk, Michałek & Stormowska 2015) thus creating opportunities to establish good relations between countries through a public diploma. International educational programs are very effective and powerful tools that are important for the analysis of a country's foreign policy (Ayhan et al., 2022; Byrne 2016; Metzgar 2016). As such, they are important mechanisms that contribute to states' foreign policy strategies and their soft power (Nye 2004) and as a result of a relationship "based on mutual trust, countries could have support for their policies and gain" public opinion sympathy (Özkan 2015). Today, soft diplomacy is recognized not only by developed and not developed states, and large powers, but also by small countries that believe in the use of education as a diplomatic instrument to help their governments achieve their national interests and strengthen their identity and trust towards other countries (Waxevanid 2018), where the country's security and socio-economic development takes place. However, the potential has also been discovered by non-state actors, who use it as an instrument of influencing cultures, attitudes, and behavior, or as an instrument of influencing actions that benefit their interests and values (Gregori 2011), where on the other hand it influences other countries to adopt policies (Nye 2005). With this international action, donor countries and beneficiary countries build an image of their international diplomacy ("soft diolomatia") and the establishment of bridges for the development of relations with other societies (Leonard & Alakeson 2000, 10). Therefore, the elements of soft power should be properly used with the strategy of public diplomacy that contributes to the promotion of the country.

Soft diplomacy of countries in the field of education

Today, many countries in the world, but also EU members, choose to promote public diplomacy through education (Özkan 2015). As the leading country in the development of public diplomacy, the Shadow States of America are recognized, and as the closest competitor, Europe has a strong cultural appeal (Akçadag 2012). Also, some European countries have a network of national agencies that work to promote and disseminate their languages and cultures. In this promotion and by allocating funds, the Leading French Institutes and cultural centers were funded by the Government of France, followed by Great Britain and

Germany (Akçadag 2012). Throughout history, France has been known for its well-developed diplomatic networks, which always include soft diplomacy as an important segment based on culture, interpersonal relations, publishing, and scholarship education. Today, the Government of France has more than 650 diplomatic and consular missions around the world, and as a result of its activities, it has almost 200 institutes and cultural centers aimed at teaching the French language and culture of other nations, especially in Africa (Özkan 2015, according to Akçadag, 2012). In the field of education, France provides financial support to 22000 foreign students coming from abroad, of whom 80% of these scholarship students are educated under a bilateral agreement between France and other governments (Özkan 2015). In addition, there are two programs: the first is Eiffel for students coming from Latin America and Asia, and the second is 'Major' for students who have a French Baccalaureat (high school diploma) and are living abroad (Özkan 2015, 39). In 2011, approximately 270,000 U.S. students used academic credit to study abroad, and that number increased by 10.4% compared to 2009 (Open Doors report 2011). U.S. colleges and universities hosted over one million international students in 2016/2017 and over half of the students came from China (33%), India (17%), and South Korea (5%) (Glass, 2018). However, a large increase in foreign students was also recorded in Korea from 2010 to 2021; the number of students rose to approximately 152 thousand international students currently studying at various Korean universities (Im, et, al. 2022). According to Frankel (1965), the education of foreign students (scholars) to develop and advance soft diplomacy according to Frankel (1965) leads to "improving the context of communication to become aware of other people's cultural codes" developing "disciplining and spreading international intellectual discourse", as well as "developing international education in its independent terms", different from other economic and social developments (Frankel 1965, 99–112). Relying on Frankel's conclusions, we do misunderstand the "hallmark" of soft diplomacy, which, in addition to educational programs, is embodied in other forms of cultural interaction between beneficiaries and donors. At the same time, students studying abroad outside their home country as scholarship holders of foreign governments and foundations can be seen as the new informal cultural diplomats of the 21st century (Vasojević 2022; Khan, Ahmad & Fernald 2020; Akli 2012), and according to available data, 183 international scholarship programs have been identified in 196 countries (Vasojević 2022; according to Cosentino et al, 2019) among which there is no program modification by the Government of the Republic of Serbia.

Soft diplomacy of Serbia in the field of education

Serbia has a historical background, and the development of modern society is based on soft diplomacy and an educational elite, but its perception of the outside world is not comparable to its actions. The development of modern Serbian society began with the education of Serbian scholarship holders at prestigious European universities. This tradition has been preserved throughout history, but it has also been extended to the education of foreign students at Serbian Universities as a form of soft diplomacy. This scholarship was first introduced by the Ministry of

Education and Religion in the 1920s (Vasojević 2022: according to Covic 2019), but the program was not planned and systematically coordinated. This scholarship initially served the Government's strategic plan in efforts to further advance and develop higher education capable of developing a dimension of internationality. However, in the early 1950s, Yugoslavia was looking for "soft diplomacy", from which new forms of soft diplomacy (cultural-educational cooperation) emerged and which resulted in an increasing number of foreign students at Yugoslav universities from Western countries and later from Third World countries, i.e., Asian countries (Vasojević 2022: according to Bondžić 2014), and in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the largest number of students was from underdeveloped Third World countries from the Asian and African continents, i.e. from countries with which close political relations had been established (Vasojević 2022: according to: Bondžić 2014). A result of international relations, i.e. International scientific and cultural cooperation, along with technical cooperation, led to the establishment of a unique Republic Institute for International Scientific, Educational, Cultural, and Technical Cooperation (In 1975), (Vasojević 2022; according to: Information Bulletin 1982) which brought numerous new bilateral agreements for education and training of (scientific) personnel where developing countries were dominant.

In the 21st century, the Government of the Republic of Serbia provides scholarships for students coming from developing countries, members and observer countries Of The Non-Aligned Countries (Movement of Non-Aligned Countries), aged 18 to 35 (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*55/05, 71/05) as one of the instruments supporting the strengthening of the strategy of international policy and development cooperation. Since 2010, this scholarship within the project "The World in Serbia" has provided opportunities for future students in developing countries to increase their knowledge and competencies by studying and acquiring an academic title at all levels of studies (undergraduate, master and doctoral studies) at four universities in the Republic of Serbia. It represents an implementation component of the program for strengthening the quality of higher education institutions and strengthening and developing international relations between donor countries and beneficiaries. where the main holders (coordinators) of the program are the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Also, the program provides a financial package that covers administrative expenses related to the preparation of documentation for enrollment at Serbian universities, financing Serbian language learning, covering tuition in full, student accommodation, and food, as well as additional monthly scholarships to cover living expenses (Vasojević 2022). Recognizing the significant contribution of the program to the development of human resources and the development of the "national brand" through this form of cooperation with the scholarship beneficiary countries, the Serbian government decided to expand the scope of the program and increase the number of scholarships offered to 200 packages per year (See: Vasojević 2022). Increasing scholarship beneficiaries can "act as a catalyst for sustainable development and competitive balance" because it can restore weak international credibility, increase international political influence, and stimulate stronger international partnerships (Dinnie 2008), indicating that if a country establishes a strong national brand, that image will attract talented people, such as international students from abroad (Anholt 2007).

Recipients of the scholarship also become cultural ambassadors and are expected to become agents for the dissemination of the culture and language of the donor country, spreading a positive image of the receiving country and their home country.

Research methods and findings

This study uses primary, secondary, and qualitative data. The information in this study is also enriched with data obtained by the survey method on the population of respondents among scholarship students from the project "The World in Serbia". The condition was that the respondents spend a minimum of six months in Serbia. Given that there is no database available in Serbia on international scholarship students who were educated in Serbia, we used the "snowball" technique to reach the interlocutor. The survey was conducted anonymously on the territory of the Republic of Serbia from December 2021 to March 2022 and it included 126 international scholarship students, thus providing a representative sample. In this paper, only a part of the results we have come to, which will respond to the established goal of the research, will be presented. The data was processed using the statistical programs Microsoft Excel and "IBM SPSS20". This paper aims to analyze detailed information about the project "The World in Serbia", and show its importance, i.e., show in which conditions the education of foreign scholarship students within the project "World in Serbia" can be considered an instrument of soft power, as well as to discover elements that should be improved to influence better implementation of the project.

For the analysis of the primary data, we used the model used by the author (Brilyanti, 2021), in her work. Based on the primary data in this case, by analyzing available regulations, we notice that the project "The World in Serbia" is one of the priority programs of the Government of Serbia in the field of higher education, where the education of foreign scholarship students aims to:

1. Enhancement and expansion of cultural diplomacy to better position Serbia as a global brand by promoting knowledge of its culture and educational system, as can be seen from the text below: "The project has invaluable importance for the promotion of the Republic of Serbia in the world and not only in the field of education" (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* 55/05, 71/05 – correction, 101/07, 65/08, 16/11, 68/12 – decision "US" and 72/12, 7/14 – decision "US", 44/14 and 30/18- another law).

2. Contributing to the development of human resources in the beneficiary countries, this is reflected in the fact that students who are beneficiaries of scholarships from the Government of the Republic of Serbia are not obliged to stay in the donor country after schooling but are allowed to return to their home country or a third country where they are involved in workflows.

3. Stimulating a deeper cultural understanding among donor and beneficiary countries and from the program can be seen in the following section: "... The impression that scholarship holders take from our countries to their countries is a significant contribution to international cooperation, especially in the field of

maintaining friendly ties with Member States and Observers of the NAM² (Non Aligned Movement), (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* 55/05, 71/05 – correction, 101/07, 65/08, 16/11, 68/12 – decision “US” и 72/12, 7/14 – decision “US”, 44/14 and 30/18- another law)

4. Support for strengthening the reputation of Serbian universities at the international level, which is achieved through academic mobility of students where there is international competitiveness and better placement of universities on international lists,

5. Strengthening (international) relations and cooperation between beneficiary and donor countries: "... a large number of countries covered by the Project have not recognized or withdrawn or are expected to withdraw recognition of the independence of so-called Kosovo (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia* 55/05, 71/05 – correction, 101/07, 65/08, 16/11, 68/12 – decision “US” and 72/12, 7/14 – decision “US”, 44/14 and 30/18- another law).

Also, secondary data indicate that in the period from the school year 2010/11-2021/22, the Government of the Republic of Serbia approved 1471 scholarships, but it is not known how many scholarships were used because there is no systematic monitoring of this group of scholarship holders. Based on the data we have received from the Ministry of Education at the moment, according to their records, there are 478 scholarship holders from 67 countries. In this sample, the largest number of scholarship beneficiaries come from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (44), and the most sought-after study programs attended by scholarship holders are medical studies (151). Based on the results obtained with the help of online research on a sample of 126 subjects (57 female and 69 male) students, some factors were discovered that may be important for the implementation of the project itself, related to the difficulties faced by students during academic mobility. Out of the total number of respondents, a smaller number of scholarship students, 48 of them face difficulties when enrolling in the faculty; 19 of them cite poor communication with representatives of the Ministry as a reason; 18 see problems that arise at faculties and universities during the enrollment procedure; and 11 respondents cite the language barrier as the reason. Also, 18.3% of scholarship holders state that with the monthly scholarship they receive from the Government of the Republic of Serbia, they can cover the cost of living, while 63.5% state that they cannot afford everything for life from the scholarships they receive monthly, and 4% of respondents state that the scholarship is not enough for them and that they are additionally engaged in work (part-time), while 14.3% of scholarship holders point out that the scholarship is not enough for them to cover the cost of living and that parents send them money to cover everything. However, this data should be viewed from a different angle. As stated by the author Vasojević (2022) during their stay in Serbia, only 23% of the scholarship holders had a scholarship from their country. This policy indicates that not only major powers but also small countries believe in the use of educational diplomacy as a diplomatic instrument that can help governments pursue their national interests and strengthen their identity and trust towards other countries (Vasojević 2022, 910, according to Khan, Ahmad & Fernald

² Hereinafter NAM (Non Aligned Movement)

2020; Vaxevanidou 2018). In addition to financial factors, the sense of acceptance and belonging to a new environment is a very important factor when it comes to academic mobility and soft diplomacy because the sense of belonging enhances the international academic performance of students (users) and increases intercultural interaction between international students and domestic students (Glass 2018). Also, the meaning of satisfaction and belonging includes a group of different factors, and accordingly, we asked the respondents to express the degree of agreement on the Likert five-level scale with the following statements:

Table 1. The degree of agreement of respondents with the given claims

Scale 1-5	N	%
I feel accepted in Serbia.		
1	3	2,4
2	7	5,6
3	31	24,6
4	53	42,1
5	32	25,4
Σ	126	100,0
Through other students (colleagues) I feel accepted		
1	21	16,7
2	15	11,9
3	35	27,8
4	36	28,6
5	19	15,1
Σ	126	100,0
As a foreigner, I feel safe to live in Serbia		
1	0	0
2	6	4,8
3	32	25,4
4	35	27,8
5	53	42,1
Σ	126	100,0
I am satisfied with my life in Serbia		
1	41	32,5
2	72	57,1
3	8	6,3
4	3	2,4
5	2	1,6
Σ	126	100,0
I don't feel discriminated against in India.		
1	5	4,0
2	19	15,1
3	33	26,2
4	42	33,3
5	27	21,4
Σ	126	100,0

1-I feel fully accepted by other students; 5-I don't feel accepted by other students; I don't agree at all; 5 I totally agree.

Discussion

Granting scholarships to foreign students within the project "World in Serbia" for studying in the Republic of Serbia is a form of soft power for improving the branding of the nation. Project "The World in Serbia" i.e. Foreign students' scholarships are a form of cultural diplomacy that supports the policies of a country. In addition to contributing to the development of human resources in beneficiary countries and donors, the "World in Serbia" scholarship also aims to increase cultural understanding and strengthen relations and cooperation between beneficiary and donor countries. The implementation of the "World in Serbia" project is a synergy between the government, the ministry department, and universities. This program provides opportunities for students from developing countries (Non Aligned Movement) to experience living and studying in Serbia, i.e. Europe.

Also, the project "The World in Serbia" provides a financial and administrative package to beneficiaries, which is an important factor why international students opt for Serbian universities, i.e. Scholarships. The Serbian government provides them with an easier visa process, covering tuition costs at all programs and higher schools within four universities, free accommodation in dormitories, as well as a monthly scholarship. Through this project, it can be seen that the Serbian government has introduced various financial and political initiatives that are part of soft diplomacy, intending to increase the number of international students studying in Serbia as an element of maintaining friendly ties with member states and observers of the NAM and strengthening international relations.

Questions focused on acceptance by domestic students suggest that 92% of respondents feel accepted in Serbia and that 95.2% of scholarship holders feel safe as foreign citizens in a donor country. Most students feel accepted by colleagues who are not part of the project (71.5%). However, a sense of acceptance and belonging largely depends on the host government and the host scholarships. Also, an important factor that affects the overall satisfaction of international students (scholarship holders) is their knowledge of the host language, which positively correlates with better adaptation in that community, and from the documents of the project "The World in Serbia" it can be seen that the Government covers free learning of The Serbian language for all scholarship holders. However, since we have not identified different levels of engagement with international students depending on their knowledge of the Serbian language, a plan for such an organization should be made in the future. In this way, there would be a reduction in differences between domestic and foreign students, but on the other hand, favoring English in communication with foreign students could cause a power dynamic for international students who are only able to speak English, and they would feel isolated and less appreciated than domestic students, so it is necessary to find a suitable model for all populations.

Conclusion

In international reports, education is used as an index in calculating a country's soft power. Today, Serbia is one of the most competitive countries for NAM students, with the number of students growing every year. The Serbian education system offers quality higher education where students feel safe and

accepted in society. The Serbian project "The World in Serbia", the education system, and the "open society" towards international students are mechanisms for strengthening and improving countries soft power.

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