

Educational Aid and Soft Power: The Case of the EU and Ukraine

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Abstract. This article explores the relationship between soft power and education, revealing the impact of international education aid on the soft power of target countries. Taking the education aid provided by Ukraine and the European Union as examples, this study aims to analyze the role of international education aid in enhancing the soft power of recipient countries from a constructivist perspective. The article adopts a case analysis method, combines literature review with constructivist theory, and analyzes the EU's education aid policy in-depth. This paper proposes and verifies the idea that international education aid can change the education operation model of recipient countries, thereby enhancing their international status and soft power. This article fills the research gap on the correlation between education aid and soft power. At the same time, this paper provides a new perspective on the effectiveness of international education aid, which helps to understand the role of education in soft power construction.

Keywords: Education assistance, Soft power, Ukraine, EU, Constructivism.

1. Introduction

Since independence, Ukraine has been committed to integration with Europe, especially in the field of education cooperation. As Ukraine's relations with the European Union continue to deepen, education has become an important link between the two. In recent years, especially with the Russian aggression against Ukraine, there is an urgent need for comprehensive reform and modernization of the education system in Ukraine to meet the challenges of the war better and achieve further integration with the European Union. In this context, through various educational assistance measures, the EU has not only helped Ukraine cope with the current education crisis, but also actively promoted Ukraine's education system to move closer to EU standards. However, how this process can effectively integrate Ukraine into the EU, and its impact on Ukraine's soft power, has become an essential subject of study. This article reviews the relevant literature to explore the impact of EU educational aid on Ukraine's educational reform and soft power improvement and analyses the cultural and political challenges involved.

2. Literature review

2.1. Education and Soft Power

Education plays an indispensable role in the construction of national soft power. A country can effectively enhance its soft power by increasing the number of international students and promoting cultural exchange programs [1]. These initiatives create resources to attract other countries to agree to political proposals and play an important role in enhancing the international community's goodwill towards the country.

Further research has shown that educational institutions are not only key channels for disseminating culture, ideology, and social values but also facilitate the development of transnational networks and cooperative enterprises globally. Educational exchange programs and academic cooperation are crucial in supporting national soft power, and these initiatives not only contribute to deepening cross-cultural understanding but also build lasting relationships between countries [2]. In addition, the study notes that using education as a soft power tool requires culturally sensitive

strategies to ensure that these educational initiatives resonate with target audiences and further enhance soft power by leveraging advanced educational platforms and methodologies.

In the case of Ukraine, soft power is seen as the country's ability to project its national image to the world by demonstrating its culture and civilized model of human relations based on values [3]. Ukraine needs to develop its soft power base by modernizing its cultural and educational policies, including promoting the reform of the cultural and educational systems, formulating long-term development strategies, strengthening the self-regulatory capacity of education and culture, and promoting economic activities in these areas through the principles of transparency and advocacy. Education, socio-cultural infrastructure, and national knowledge resources are core elements of soft power and should be closely linked to the development of social capital.

Furthermore, educational soft power functions through three main mechanisms: as a carrier of authentic values, as a resource owned by the state, and as a tool for achieving specific goals [4]. With the advancement of internationalization, the importance of education in international relations and foreign policy has become increasingly prominent and its role in enhancing a country's international reputation and status has become more significant. Quality education not only improves a country's global economic competitiveness, but it can also play a key role in promoting social equality and empowering the disadvantaged.

The European education system guides the education policies of member states through voice, using soft power as a tool to promote policy coherence and convergence through peer pressure. Although soft power has unique advantages in promoting policy implementation, coercive power may limit its effect [5].

2.2. 2.2 Challenges of Target Countries

Many schools were destroyed during the war, and some educational facilities were occupied by the military, refugees, or other war-related needs. As a result of these factors, many children cannot be evacuated from war zones, and the educational process is interrupted by threats to life and inadequate technical conditions. The displacement of teachers and educators and the lack of school facilities and online teaching equipment hinder Ukraine's ability to provide quality education [6].

In the face of these severe challenges, it becomes imperative to make up for children's learning loss [7]. Remedial education has significant potential to help primary school students improve their literacy and numeracy skills and to be an effective catch-up strategy. However, in the context of the current conflict, especially in areas where face-to-face education has been interrupted, how to implement supplementary education effectively is still an urgent problem for the education system during conflicts and wars.

Education in former Soviet Union countries like Ukraine has a deep historical connection with ideology. During the Soviet reforms in the 1920s, Soviet ideology attempted to establish a totalitarian society through children's social security, Ukrainian educational concepts, and socio-political goals. [8] Within the Soviet ideological framework, children were regarded as political tools, and education became an essential means to achieve the objectives of Soviet rule. For example, after the Soviet Union ruled Ukraine, Ukraine's national culture was suppressed, and Ukrainian educators were often persecuted or even killed for adhering to local culture and educational concepts [8].

At the same time, during the war, restoring trust in state institutions and reshaping social expectations should also be given priority attention [9]. In the context of post-war socio-economic recovery in Ukraine, the collaborative network between the state, enterprises and civil society institutions is essential. Such collaboration can effectively promote post-war reconstruction and restore the country's political and social order.

However, the above analysis also puts forward high demands on educators, especially teachers. In the current situation, teachers not only have to teach academic knowledge but also must play an essential role in the formation of a national identity in the education system [10]. To this end, it is crucial to enhance the educational function of teachers. Specific measures include formally restoring the educational function of teachers in regulatory documents, emphasizing the education of national

values and European values, and providing training for educators to help them adapt to new functions such as safety education, information education, and social assistance. These challenges have been discussed in detail in the existing literature, especially the difficulties teachers face in fulfilling these new responsibilities mentioned in the literature review.

2.3. The Current Role of Education Aid

In addition, through the Erasmus+ program, the EU grants teachers and trainers who have fled Ukraine to help them integrate into their new educational environment and upgrade necessary skills, including languages. The EU is supporting member States in addressing migration challenges through its cohesion policy and the newly created European Cohesion Action for Refugees [CARE], which provide member States with significant flexibility to use funds to support the education needs of displaced people and to address education challenges arising from the crisis through resource reallocation [11].

Within the framework of the Erasmus + programme, the EU has also made flexible use of funds to promote the educational integration of Ukrainian children and support the attendance of university students. The committee is exploring ways to help displaced children stay connected to their culture by supporting the publication and printing of schoolbooks in Ukraine. At the same time, the School Education Gateway provides teachers with resources and professional development materials covering inclusive education, history education, language and cultural diversity in the classroom, to support teachers to better respond to the educational needs of displaced persons [11].

In addition, GPE's programs combine humanitarian assistance, development, and peacebuilding to ensure the continuity of education during crises and support the recovery of the education sector through policy transformation, technical assistance, and capacity building. The teacher training model will adopt a hybrid model, combining digital and face-to-face learning, and the development of training materials will prioritize interaction with school communities and educational partners, ensuring sensitivity in gender, social inclusion and accessibility for persons with disabilities [12].

In this context, the European Union Language Policy [EULP] project in the Erasmus+ Jean Monnet module has become an essential vehicle in the integration process between Ukraine and the EU. Ukraine chose the path of EU integration, a decision that has significantly affected its political, cultural, and social life. By participating in the Erasmus+ project, Ukraine was able to quickly and positively introduce sustainable education practices in the EU [13].

Through multi-level support measures, the EU actively responds to the challenges of the Ukrainian education system in the context of the war, promotes the integration and recovery of education, and strengthens the education cooperation between Ukraine and the EU.

2.4. Problems in Educational Assistance

In educational assistance, cultural issues have always been complex and challenging. It is pointed out in the literature that projects funded by international aid, whether artistic or non-cultural, often consider the uniqueness and context of local communities fully and over-rely on external evaluation and input, resulting in poor project results [14]. The root cause of this phenomenon is that international aid follows a unified internal logic; that is, the project must be in line with the national interests of the donor country, such as trade and economic growth. For example, while UNESCO implemented several cultural development projects at the turn of the millennium, its exaggerated results did not generate widespread cultural awareness or more financial support for artistic projects.

Donors often prioritize their national agendas or follow the rules of official development assistance, making it difficult for culturally sensitive projects to be effectively integrated into local needs.

In the aid process, there is a problem of power imbalance between donors and recipients. Donors control the history and memory of developing countries by deciding which heritages and narratives matter, thus cementing inequalities between developed and developing countries. This power imbalance further weakens the effectiveness of aid programs in terms of cultural sensitivity, making it difficult for international aid to contribute to sustainable development in recipient countries.

While the EU's educational aid to Ukraine has brought remarkable short-term results in facilitating its integration into the EU, it has also revealed some deep-seated problems, especially cultural hegemony and the uncertainty of Ukraine's international status. Through educational aid, the EU has implemented many EU standards and values in Ukraine's education system; however, this approach may also lead to the gradual assimilation of Ukrainian culture and education into the European mainstream, weakening its cultural independence. This cultural hegemony continues to some extent, controlling the developed countries over the developing countries and reinforcing the dominance of the European Union in Ukrainian education.

Moreover, while Ukraine has enhanced its soft power through educational cooperation with the EU, its position on the international stage remains uncertain. It remains to be seen whether Ukraine will be able to maintain its cultural identity while effectively increasing its international influence as it integrates into the European Union. In this process, how to balance EU standards with Ukraine's domestic needs, and how to maintain and strengthen its international status while integrating into the EU, will be the key challenges for Ukraine.

In the case of the EU, similar contrasts and tensions exist between EU-level integration guiding principles and national-level policy implementation. There is a gap between what national governments and other responsible agencies are doing and what local governments and municipalities – especially educators and schools – are implementing on the ground [15].

There are some notable trends in the EU's aid program to Ukraine, such as the Bologna Process. Legislation in higher education has made steady progress, and demand for the teaching profession is growing rapidly, but higher education institutions have made slow and incomplete progress in implementing necessary reforms, and corruption in education is increasing. At the same time, the free assessment system has been increasingly questioned and distrusted, students' attitudes towards mobility programs have become more hostile, and the credibility of national higher education quality assurance agencies has declined [16].

3. Case study

3.1. Background

Ukraine's education system has long faced many challenges, especially in the context of social, economic and political unrest. These problems not only affect the improvement of the quality of education, but also greatly weaken the overall educational capacity of Ukraine. In addition, Ukraine's education system is also faced with problems such as lack of objective quality assessment standards, disconnection between professional training and social needs, imperfect educational facilities and lack of teaching resources [17]. These problems have become more serious since the beginning of Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the situation of cultural exclusion intensified [18]. The war exacerbated cultural exclusion in Ukrainian society, with studies suggesting that between one-third and nearly half of Ukrainians had abandoned the Russian language altogether. The status of the Ukrainian language has improved significantly, while that of Russian has declined significantly. Ukrainians are generally indifferent to the Russian language and Russian culture, and they turn to Ukrainian as a language of resistance, of opposition to the enemy, and of self-identification.

Ukraine's education system is during a profound transformation. The combination of war, globalization and technological progress has led Ukrainian educators to explore and innovate to meet current challenges and seize future opportunities.

In response to the education crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, the European Commission has actively mobilized its various instruments to support the education systems of EU Member States to accommodate and assist the displaced persons fleeing from Ukraine [11]. In addition, the European Commission provides links to online education resources in the Ukrainian language and makes recommendations for integrating displaced children into the national education system, including

teaching and language support, as well as fast-track practices for integration into the local education system.

In addition, the war has caused direct damage to Ukraine's educational infrastructure. The current situation and challenges of the Ukrainian education system are not only a reflection of its internal problems, but also a direct result of the impact of external conflicts. In the context of the war, the sustainable development of education has been seriously threatened, and how to effectively restore and rebuild the education system in the future has become a significant issue that Ukraine needs to solve urgently.

The Ukrainian education system is facing a series of new challenges and trends in the process of modernization and globalization. In the context of war, these trends become more complex and urgent. The Ukrainian education system needs to adapt to modern challenges and adapt its education system to meet the requirements of the new global economy [19]. Especially when children in war zones face the dual challenges of poor access to educational facilities and poor quality of education, teachers in Ukraine need to focus more on developing students' practical skills, encouraging them to question conventional ideas, engage in open-ended tasks, and critically analyse the information they receive. In the age of information explosion, the ability to correctly analyse and critically understand information and form independent opinions is particularly important. In an increasingly polarized world, schools have a responsibility to instil three core values in students, but it is increasingly difficult to determine the criteria for these values, and people are becoming more sceptical about what values are.

Modern education is not only the reproduction of social experience but also the cultivation of individuals with a free and independent personality [20]. The goal of education should not be merely to transfer knowledge and skills mechanically, but to help students develop and make the most of their inner potential. A significant trend in education development is the deepening of intercultural relations, which is closely related to globalization, the integration of the world into a unified cultural and economic space. In this highly multicultural context, intercultural competence becomes an important skill for future teachers. In addition, with the development of technological means, the digitalization and interactivity of the educational process have also become the key carriers of the development of modern teacher education. By deeply integrating advanced information technology into the educational process, ensuring the competitiveness of future teachers in the global digital world has become an important direction in the modernization of education in Ukraine.

Ukraine's education system develops at different rates in different regions, with some areas recovering faster while others focus more on innovation. As Ukraine looks to integrate more closely with Europe, they are working to create a more unified and standardized education system [21]. To achieve the country's sustainable development, Ukraine needs to protect and rebuild its core educational institutions. In the process of driving change in education, educators in Ukraine are paying more and more attention to the application of digital technologies and interaction with the international community.

3.2. Analysis

Constructivist theory argues that a country's identity, interests and power are not inherent, and they are not generated according to some unchanging natural order or principles but are formed through a social construction process [22]. Specifically, constructivism believes that social structure is not determined by material forces but is shaped by the mainstream ideas and interactions in human society. Actors in international relations, such as states and international organizations, are driven by their identity and interests rather than their inherent nature. As some scholars have pointed out, all international institutions, regardless of size, play a specific role and function in the overall construction of international relations [22]. In the international aid cooperation between the EU and Ukraine, this interaction has not only produced effects at the material level, but also has a profound impact on the formation of culture, values and identity.

Language has played an essential role in the education system of post-Soviet Ukraine, with secondary and higher education becoming an important channel for promoting nationalization. English gained more attention in 2014-2015, especially when Petro Poroshenko proposed it as a working language. Ukrainian is not only a symbol of national identity, but also a vital symbol of the European future [23]. In the process of nation-building, the protection of Ukrainian has become the core of the opposition to Russian. When minority rights are violated, Ukraine's "Western" legitimacy is questioned. There are two conflicting language policy discourses in the Russian-language online media in Ukraine, and the education system has become a powerful tool for nation-building, often reformed due to political needs.

In Ukraine's martial law education system, constructing national identity is crucial. Ukraine's national identity must not only reflect Ukraine's local culture and values, but also integrate into the European value system [22]. Especially in the context of war, the education system needs to attach importance to the value of life, continuous learning, and respect for human rights. In this process, the shaping of national identity involves not only the content of education, but also the preservation of crucial stages in the educational process. This raises an important issue for further research: evaluating whether the new way of forming Ukrainian identity is effective.

In the process of de-Sovietization and integration into the European Union, how Ukraine can ensure its national interests is an important issue. The core of de-Sovietization is strengthening Ukraine's sense of national sovereignty and independent cultural identity. There are three key factors in national identity: first, the strength of the civil society network, which integrates different regions into an organic political system; second, the ability of the state to provide public goods; and finally, the homogeneity of the language [24]. These factors work together to promote the consolidation of Ukraine's national identity. In the current war environment, the civic and ethnic elements of national identity have become more consistent, and civic education has played a vital role in this process. It not only cultivates the patriotic consciousness of the younger generation, but also helps students form a deep understanding of national identity [25].

In addition, the war's profound impact on Ukraine's politics, society and culture cannot be ignored. The war not only consolidated Ukraine's national identity but also democratized memory politics. All those who fought for the country, regardless of their social status, were remembered and respected. This democratization of memory reflects the core role of war in constructing national identity [24].

As the language of the national majority, Russian serves both scientific and socialist progress, and therefore all other languages of the Soviet Union, as well as the languages of socialist-oriented post-colonial countries, etc., are included in its socio-cultural sphere and carrier of development [26]. Soviet policies created significant differences between Ukrainian linguistic identity and language practices. On the one hand, these policies promoted Ukrainians' identification with their nation and language, and on the other hand, Russian was established as the main language for social mobility and national unity [27]. After independence, although Ukrainian language was prioritized in post-independence policies, this promotion did not result in systematic discrimination against Russian speakers. Many Russian speakers still use it in education, work and daily life. Russian. Although the war in Ukraine has increased the identification of some Russian-speaking Ukrainians with the country, overall, Russian-speaking Ukrainians have not formed a unified identity group, but still have significant regional differences.

In addition, in past projects, Ukraine has actively participated in the construction of the European Higher Education Area and promoted a number of changes in the higher education system, including the adjustment of degree structure, the introduction of mobility mechanisms, the unification of diplomas and appendices, the establishment of a credit-module training organization system, and a higher education quality assurance mechanism, and measures have been taken to improve students' employment levels [16].

3.3. Discussion

The above analysis shows that educational aid is deeply integrated into the local education system by providing hardware assistance such as teachers, software, textbooks, and classrooms, and cooperating with local educators. Strengthening Ukraine's higher education exchanges and accepting refugee policies have helped Ukraine improve its soft power in higher education.

Aid changes the educational operation mode of the target country to change its international status and soft power. The national education operation mode will be more inclined to the EU, and Ukraine will go further in de-Sovietization. In terms of language, de-Russification emphasizes Ukrainian. Culture and education will reduce dependence on Russia.

4. Conclusion

While helping the country cope with the war and education crisis, the EU's educational aid to Ukraine has also promoted the modernization of Ukraine's education system and its integration with European standards. Through educational cooperation, Ukraine has gradually enhanced its soft power internationally, especially in improving the quality of education and promoting cultural exchanges. However, this process also faces the risk of weakening cultural hegemony and the independence of local culture. Although Ukraine has achieved specific results in the process of integration into the EU, how to balance EU standards with domestic needs, maintain cultural identity and enhance international influence in the future still needs further exploration. In the continuous education reform and international cooperation, Ukraine not only needs to rebuild its education system, but also needs to cope with complex cultural and political challenges in the context of globalization to achieve sustainable development.

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