SOFT POWER AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: THE ROLE OF ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY IN STRENGTHENING STATE INFLUENCE

Arnesa Sahiti
University "Kadri Zeka", Gjilan, Kosovo, arnesa.sahiti@uni-gjilan.net
ORCID ID: 0009-0004-0116-5576
Abdulla Azizi
South East European University, Tetovo, North Macedonia, a.azizi@seeu.edu.mk
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7444-6230

Abstract: In contemporary international relations, a state's influence depends not only on military and economic resources but also on its capacity to appear legitimate, reliable, competent, and attractive. Although soft power is usually associated with culture, political values, education, and diplomacy, these resources do not operate independently of public institutions. This paper examines administrative capacity as an underexplored foundation of soft power. Using a qualitative methodology based on conceptual analysis and a review of academic literature and institutional reports, it explains how professional civil services, regulatory quality, transparency, digital government, policy implementation, and crisis responsiveness shape external perceptions of the state. The central argument is that administrative capacity converts declared values into observable performance. Effective institutions strengthen credibility, facilitate international cooperation, attract investment and talent, and enhance a state's ability to set agendas without coercion. Conversely, politicization, corruption, weak implementation, and a gap between diplomatic narratives and domestic practice undermine attraction. The paper pays attention to small and developing states, for which institutional credibility can partly compensate for limited material power. It concludes that public administration should be treated as a strategic component of foreign policy and nation reputation, while warning that administrative performance generates durable soft power only when it is consistent with legality, inclusion, and democratic accountability.
Keywords: soft power; public administration; administrative capacity; good governance; state credibility; digital government; international influence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The distribution of power in international relations is no longer explained adequately by military assets, territory, or economic size alone. States also compete for legitimacy, trust, attention, partnerships, investment, and the ability to define what counts as an appropriate policy response. Nye (2004) conceptualized soft power as the capacity to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Its principal sources include culture, political values, and foreign policies that are regarded as legitimate. Yet these sources become persuasive only when they are supported by credible institutions. A government may promote democracy, efficiency, innovation, or the rule of law abroad, but international audiences compare these messages with the actual conduct and performance of the state at home.

Public administration is the institutional machinery through which political commitments become everyday realities. Civil servants implement laws, deliver services, regulate markets, manage public resources, protect rights, coordinate emergencies, and interact with citizens, businesses, migrants, investors, and international organizations. Consequently, the quality of administration shapes both domestic experience and external reputation. This paper asks: how does administrative capacity contribute to a state's soft power, and through which mechanisms does institutional performance become international influence? It argues that administrative capacity is a credibility infrastructure that transforms values and diplomatic narratives into observable and transferable practice.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper uses a qualitative, theory-building approach. It synthesizes foundational soft-power scholarship with research on state capacity, quality of government, institutional trust, digital administration, and place reputation. It also examines evidence from the World Bank, OECD, and United Nations as authoritative indicators of how institutional performance is assessed and communicated internationally. The analysis does not claim that administrative capacity is the sole cause of soft power. Culture, history, geopolitical position, foreign policy, media systems, and non-state actors remain important. Instead, it advances a more limited proposition: other things being equal, capable and accountable public administration increases the credibility, visibility, and transferability of a state's values and policy model.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Soft power beyond culture and public diplomacy

Soft power is relational: it exists when resources of attraction affect the preferences or behavior of others. Possessing cultural visibility does not automatically produce influence, and public diplomacy cannot manufacture attraction when policies are perceived as hypocritical or illegitimate. Nye (2008) therefore distinguishes resources, transmission mechanisms, and outcomes. Government communication can draw attention to national achievements, but the credibility of the message depends on conduct, consistency, and the perceived legitimacy of institutions. This distinction is especially important in a digital environment in which domestic administrative failures are rapidly visible to foreign publics.

The conventional soft-power literature gives significant attention to universities, cultural industries, international broadcasting, development assistance, and diplomatic networks. Administrative systems are often treated only as background conditions. However, political values are not abstractions: equality is tested in access to services, legality in administrative decisions, openness in access to information, and competence in the state's response to social and economic shocks. Public administration is thus one of the arenas in which a country's political values become credible—or lose credibility.

3.2. Administrative capacity and quality of government

Administrative capacity refers to the ability of public institutions to formulate, coordinate, implement, monitor, and evaluate policy in a lawful and effective manner. It includes a professional and merit-based civil service; organizational coordination; fiscal, analytical, digital, and regulatory capabilities; integrity safeguards; and mechanisms of accountability. Fukuyama (2013) defines governance in terms of the government's ability to make and enforce rules and deliver services, irrespective of regime type. For the present analysis, however, capacity is linked to democratic quality because attraction based on efficient delivery alone may be fragile if it rests on repression, discrimination, or arbitrary decision-making.

Rothstein and Teorell (2008) identify impartiality in the exercise of public authority as a central feature of quality of government. Impartial, predictable, and professional administration lowers uncertainty for citizens and external partners. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators similarly treat government effectiveness as a dimension encompassing perceptions of public-service quality, civil-service independence, policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of government commitments (World Bank, 2025). These dimensions' overlap directly with the attributes that make a state appear reliable and worthy of emulation.

3.3. Credibility and the narrative–performance gap

The first mechanism is credibility. Diplomatic narratives are persuasive when audiences can observe corresponding institutional behavior. A state that advocates the rule of law while tolerating arbitrary administration creates a narrative–performance gap. The gap is costly because attraction depends less on official claims than on whether others regard the claims as authentic. Consistent implementation, reasoned administrative decisions, transparent procedures, and effective remedies provide evidence that national values are embedded in institutions. Administrative performance thereby gives reputational substance to foreign-policy messages.

Credibility also affects commitments. International agreements frequently require complex domestic implementation involving ministries, regulators, municipalities, courts, procurement bodies, and statistical agencies. Partners are more willing to cooperate when they expect a state to honor obligations, produce reliable data, and sustain policies beyond changes of government. Administrative continuity therefore expands diplomatic room for maneuver (OECD, 2023). It can make the state a preferred partner in regional initiatives, development programs, regulatory networks, and multilateral negotiations.

3.4. Trust, legitimacy, and citizen experience

A second mechanism operates through institutional trust. Citizens, diaspora communities, tourists, businesses, students, and foreign residents encounter the state through public services. Fair treatment and accessible procedures can strengthen legitimacy, while corruption and administrative arbitrariness travel quickly through personal networks and digital media. The OECD (2024) reports that trust is closely connected to whether people believe institutions are responsive, reliable, open, fair, and capable. Although domestic trust and external attraction are not identical, they share important causes. A government that earns trust through competent and fair administration has more credible advocates among its own citizens and diaspora.

Legitimacy also influences compliance and policy resilience. When public institutions explain decisions, use evidence, consult affected groups, and provide review mechanisms, citizens are more likely to regard outcomes as procedurally acceptable even when they disagree (OECD, 2024). Such practices demonstrate democratic governance in action. They can become reference points for international organizations and neighboring administrations, giving the country agenda-setting influence through standards and examples rather than pressure.

3.5. Regulatory quality, investment, and knowledge attraction

A third mechanism links administration with economic and intellectual attractiveness. Investors and skilled professionals assess more than tax rates or wages; they consider predictability, licensing, property protection, data governance, procurement integrity, and the ability of regulators to apply rules consistently. Efficient administration reduces transaction costs and reputational risk (World Bank, 2025). It also supports universities, research ecosystems, mobility schemes, and innovation partnerships. The result is not simply greater economic activity. A reputation for competent regulation may allow a state to shape standards, export administrative expertise, and attract networks that reinforce its international influence.

3.6. Policy learning and the export of administrative models

Successful public policies can become soft-power assets when others study, adapt, or cite them (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). Examples may include digital identity, transparent budgeting, participatory local government, social-service integration, environmental regulation, or crisis coordination. The attraction lies not in publicity alone but in demonstrable problem-solving. Peer reviews, civil-service exchanges, technical assistance, and regional schools of public administration transmit these practices. Administrative officials then become diplomatic actors in professional networks, producing influence below the level of traditional high politics.

3.7. Digital public services as a reputational interface

Digital government makes administrative capacity unusually visible. Online portals, interoperable registers, digital identification, open data, and mobile services allow citizens and foreign users to evaluate the state directly (Mergel et al., 2019). The United Nations E-Government Survey 2024 assesses all 193 UN Member States and emphasizes that resilient, inclusive, and human-centered digital transformation is increasingly central to sustainable development (United Nations, 2024). High-performing digital services can signal innovation, organizational coordination, and respect for users' time. They also create opportunities for policy transfer and technology partnerships.

Yet digitization is not automatically attractive. Poorly designed systems can exclude persons with disabilities, rural communities, linguistic minorities, or people lacking digital skills. Data breaches, opaque algorithms, and surveillance can damage trust more rapidly than traditional administrative failures because their effects are scalable (OECD, 2019). Digital soft power therefore requires cybersecurity, privacy protection, algorithmic accountability, offline alternatives, and clear institutional responsibility. The relevant achievement is not the number of online services, but whether digital administration combines convenience with rights and inclusion.

3.8. Crisis responsiveness and institutional reputation

Crises act as stress tests of administrative capacity (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). Public-health emergencies, natural disasters, energy disruptions, migration pressures, and cyber incidents reveal whether institutions can coordinate information, procure goods, communicate uncertainty, and reach vulnerable groups. Effective response can produce international respect and requests for expertise. Failure, by contrast, exposes fragmentation and can undermine years of reputation-building. Crisis performance has a strong communicative effect because the distance between policy promise and operational reality becomes immediately observable.

The reputational value of crisis performance depends on transparency. Governments may be tempted to conceal shortcomings, but credible communication acknowledges uncertainty, publishes evidence, corrects errors, and permits scrutiny. Such behavior signals institutional maturity. It also protects soft power from the perception that national branding is merely propaganda. Administrative capacity and strategic communication should therefore be coordinated, but communication must describe verifiable performance rather than substitute for it.

3.9. Measurement and international rankings

Governance indicators and international rankings influence how states are perceived by investors, donors, researchers, and partner governments. The Worldwide Governance Indicators aggregate multiple sources across government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, control of corruption, voice and accountability, and political stability (World Bank, 2025). The UN E-Government Development Index similarly makes digital capacity comparable across countries. These tools do not provide complete or culturally neutral measures, and perception-based indicators can reproduce bias. Nevertheless, they shape reputational narratives and policy priorities.

States should avoid managing only for rankings. Cosmetic reforms may improve formal scores without changing user experience, and centralized digital systems may look efficient while weakening accountability. A stronger strategy connects measurement with administrative learning: disaggregate outcomes, publish methods, invite independent evaluation, and treat user feedback as evidence. When improvement is genuine, rankings become amplifiers of credibility rather than the purpose of reform.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Limits and risks

Administrative capacity is neither sufficient nor always benign (Nye, 2004). Highly capable institutions can support coercive policies, censorship, or exclusion. Such states may earn admiration for speed or infrastructure while generating distrust because the purposes and procedures of administration conflict with human rights. Soft power based solely on efficiency is therefore vulnerable. Attraction becomes more durable when capacity is combined with impartiality, legal restraint, participation, and accountability.

4.2. Implications for small and developing states

For small states, soft power is not a decorative addition to foreign policy but a way of compensating for limited material resources (Timilsana, 2024). Administrative excellence can create reputational niches: a country may become known for digital services, mediation, public-health management, environmental governance, education, or transparent regulation. Specialization makes influence more achievable than attempts to compete across every field. It also allows officials to contribute expertise in international organizations and coalitions where formal size is less decisive than knowledge and credibility.

Developing states face a harder sequence. They are expected to modernize rapidly while operating with constrained budgets, fragmented systems, skill shortages, political turnover, and external reform conditions. Imported models can create formal compliance without operational capacity (OECD, 2023). A soft-power strategy must therefore begin with domestic administrative needs. Institutions become attractive when reforms solve real problems for citizens, not when they merely imitate fashionable structures. Local ownership, gradual implementation, and investment in civil-service skills are essential.

4.3. A strategic framework for administration-based soft power

First, governments should integrate administrative reform with foreign-policy and national-development strategies. This does not mean subordinating civil services to public relations. It means identifying credible areas of institutional achievement and supporting their international exchange. Ministries of foreign affairs can connect regulators, municipalities, universities, and administrative schools with regional and global networks, while professional bodies protect the technical integrity of cooperation.

Second, merit and continuity should be treated as strategic assets. Politicized recruitment and frequent managerial replacement weaken institutional memory and reduce the credibility of long-term commitments (Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). Transparent recruitment, continuous professional development, ethical leadership, and protection from improper political pressure increase both implementation capacity and international confidence. Specialized skills in data analysis, digital systems, regulatory impact assessment, languages, and negotiation enable civil servants to represent the state effectively in trans governmental networks.

Third, governments should select a limited set of demonstrable flagship reforms. A flagship should address a genuine public problem, publish measurable results, protect rights, and be capable of replication. Digital identity or one-stop services can generate attraction only if users experience them as accessible and trustworthy. Similarly, open-government initiatives require usable data, timely responses, and independent oversight—not simply portals and legal declarations.

Fourth, evaluation must connect domestic legitimacy with international reputation. Useful indicators include service quality, processing time, administrative appeal outcomes, citizen satisfaction, integrity violations, interoperability, privacy incidents, and the distribution of access across groups and regions. External measures such as governance indices should complement, rather than replace, these domestic indicators. Independent audits and civil-society participation increase the credibility of reported success.

Fifth, public communication should follow performance. Anholt (2007) cautions that national reputation cannot be changed sustainably through slogans alone; it is shaped by policy, conduct, and the experiences that others associate with a country. Administrative achievements should be communicated through evidence, practitioner exchange, open documentation, and third-party validation. The most persuasive message is often that other governments voluntarily adopt or learn from a practice.

4.4. Relevance to European integration and contested statehood

The argument has particular relevance for states pursuing European integration. Accession and association processes assess not only legislation but also the administrative capacity to implement the acquis, coordinate policy, manage funds, and guarantee rights (OECD, 2023). Each credible reform can strengthen the state's image as a reliable European partner. For countries with contested international status, functional cooperation and administrative professionalism may create channels of recognition in practice even where formal diplomatic relations are limited. Participation in regulatory, municipal, academic, and digital-governance networks can gradually expand visibility and trust (Worster, 2020).

However, external conditionality cannot substitute for domestic legitimacy. Reforms designed only to satisfy international reports may remain fragile and may even deepen public cynicism. The strongest contribution to soft power arises when European standards, administrative effectiveness, and citizen needs reinforce one another. In that case, international attraction is an outcome of legitimate governance rather than a separate branding exercise.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that administrative capacity is a foundational but under recognized source of soft power. It performs three connected functions. First, it supplies evidence that a state's values and promises are credible. Second, it produces experiences of fairness, reliability, and competence that circulate through citizens, diaspora communities, businesses, visitors, and professional networks. Third, it creates policies and administrative models that others may voluntarily study or adopt. Through these pathways, public administration helps transform reputation into access, partnership, agenda-setting, and influence.

The relationship is not mechanical. Capable administration cannot erase an illegitimate foreign policy, persistent corruption, democratic backsliding, or systematic rights violations. Nor can rankings establish attraction by themselves. Administrative capacity contributes to soft power when performance is visible, consistent, and aligned with values that relevant audiences find legitimate. This condition explains why the quality of means matters as much as the efficiency of outcomes. Impartiality, transparency, inclusion, privacy, and accountability are not constraints on attractive governance; they are part of what makes it attractive.

For small and developing states, the practical implication is clear: institutional reform should be understood simultaneously as domestic state-building and external capability. A professional civil service, credible regulators, resilient digital services, effective crisis management, and evidence-based policy can compensate partly for limited hard-power resources. The most sustainable strategy is to select areas of genuine comparative administrative strength, solve concrete problems, measure results honestly, and share successful practices through international networks.

Future empirical research should test the proposed relationship across countries and over time. Comparative studies could examine whether changes in government effectiveness, digital-government performance, or administrative impartiality predict changes in international reputation, investment attraction, diplomatic network centrality, or policy diffusion. Interviews with diplomats and senior civil servants could also clarify how administrative agencies contribute to influence in practice. Such research would help move the discussion from a plausible theoretical link toward a measurable account of administration-based soft power.

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