

Written evidence submitted by **Dr Alina E. Dolea (SFT0061), Associate Professor, Bournemouth University**

Soft power: a strategy for UK success?

Written evidence submitted by *Dr Alina E. Dolea*, on behalf of Bournemouth University, to the *Foreign Affairs Committee's* call for evidence into *Soft power: a strategy for UK success?* on March 3, 2025.

I am a public diplomacy expert and a 2022-2024 Research Fellow at the USC Center on Public Diplomacy. My research explores how emotions and non-state actors shape public diplomacy, sometimes reinforcing but also contesting and disrupting state strategic communication and soft power. I focus particularly on diaspora diplomacy, examining how their transnational existence not only fosters cultural and political influence across borders but also reshapes and disrupts diplomatic engagement and state narratives.

I can offer the Committee and this particular call a perspective on emotions and diasporas as key actors in both enabling and disrupting UK's soft power, and some recommendations in response to several questions.

Executive Summary

- I. **Diasporas play a dual role in UK soft power**—acting as both potential enablers and disruptors. They contribute to the UK's global influence by fostering cultural and economic connections, yet their diverse and sometimes conflicting loyalties can also challenge official narratives and policy objectives.
- II. **Diaspora identities are fluid and shaped by emotions.** The “emotions of migration” (e.g., nostalgia, loss of homeland, identity and belonging) influence diaspora engagement with both the UK and their countries of origin. These emotions can be leveraged for positive diplomatic engagement but also make diaspora vulnerable to disinformation, manipulation and propaganda. The UK must recognise the diversity and complexity of diasporas in the UK and the British diaspora abroad rather than viewing them as homogenous entities.
- III. **Empathetic leadership should be a core element of UK soft power.** In an era of rising global tensions, an emotion-sensitive approach in diplomacy can help counter polarisation, enhance credibility, and strengthen international partnerships.
- IV. **The FCDO should deepen engagement with UK-based diaspora communities** through structured listening exercises, policy dialogues, and an annual Wilton Park diaspora conference to share best practices. This would improve diasporas contributions to UK as a diverse and multicultural society, increasing domestic societal resilience, while leveraging UK soft power.
- V. **To build resilience against disinformation and counter the soft power influence of other states, the UK should collaborate with diaspora organisations in the UK** to develop tailored interventions, including a **disinformation toolkit** and resilience-building training for diaspora leaders who act as micro-influencers.
- VI. **Bilingual cultural resources should be developed** in partnership with UK-based diaspora groups to support UK diplomats in understanding cultural tensions within diaspora communities that stem from their home countries.
- VII. **British diplomats should receive training in emotional resilience** to navigate the complexities of diaspora relations and soft power challenges in an increasingly volatile global environment.
- VIII. **British diaspora networks should be utilised as strategic partners to strengthen the UK soft power** and tackle transnational global issues. An education program for disinformation resilience building can be co-developed and launched for teenagers across the globe (The format could be similar to the Duke of Edinburgh award).

The Role of Diasporas in UK Soft Power: Complexity, Identity, and Emotional Dynamics

1. **Diasporas are non-state actors that can be both a resource of soft power and a disruptor of soft power** for both home and host state. Understanding this complexity of diasporas is useful for the UK Government in engaging with diasporas in the UK and in engaging the UK diaspora as an asset to leverage the UK's soft power.
2. **Diasporas are not homogenous entities.** Often, there is a perception of diaspora 'uniformity' (e.g. the British diaspora), as well as an expectation of homeland loyalty which is conflated in the concept of "citizen diplomat". As I showed in my work, during the pandemic several diaspora sub-groups emerged and contested both home and host governments' policies on pandemic management and vaccination¹. In a world increasingly diverse, multicultural and multiethnic, essentializing and homogenizing diaspora along home nation-state lines obscures the heterogenous and intersectional make-up of diasporas, as well as potential contestation and disruption from within diasporas: within any one diaspora there are a variety of socio-professional, ethnic, class groups, as well as different agendas and issues that are relevant to different groups; traditional and conservative views, progressive views, moderate views, as well as extremist views coexist and clash within a diaspora; the imagining of homeland along the past vs along the future, the nostalgia for time gone by and different forms of governing and worldviews equally coexist².
3. It is worth noting that **diasporas are transnational communities with multiple belongings and identities that are constantly negotiated:** diaspora-state relations focus mainly on the diplomatic, economic, social, and political ties of diasporic communities with both home states and host states. I demonstrate in my CPD Research Fellowship project that there is a need to include an awareness of the *emotional ties* of diasporas that mediate their relationships with both home and host states. These emotional ties constitute what I call "**the emotions of migration**" that refer to the attachment to homeland and the experience a sense of loss and trauma that all displaced people (refugees, migrants, or expatriates) have in common: "loss of family members and friends; loss of ancestors' burial grounds; loss of familiar language, songs, smells, food, in one's environment; loss of country; loss of previous identity and its support system"³. They are "the newcomers" and carry with them this invisible emotional luggage that shapes their identity and influences their existence and integration in their new host places⁴.
 - a. For members of diaspora communities, the issue of belonging is an essential one as they often experience a "split existence".
 - b. These complex transnational ties impact the identity building process within diasporas which is always in-the-making and negotiated between *here* (host land) and *there* (homeland), sometimes *neither here, nor there*, at individual and collective level.
 - c. These processes are essential for understanding how the emotions of migration play out in diaspora diplomacy: fear, shame, the need for validation and appreciation, the perceived out-of-place, loneliness, sometimes abandonment, and double rejection, and the constant need for roots can make members of diasporas *vulnerable*.
4. **Stirred and instrumentalized by various actors, these emotions can contribute to marginalization, isolation, increased vulnerability of diasporas** to disinformation and propaganda, extremism and fascism, as well as to networks of exploitation, modern slavery and human trafficking. Especially appealing are nostalgic tropes of times gone-by, anti-Western narratives, anti-establishment and extremist discourses that promise a sense of justice and belonging to an imagined community aiming to disrupt the status-quo. Factors such as language competencies, digital competencies, media literacy, level of education, religious beliefs and values also add to the mix.
5. **The psychology of diaspora and the emotions of migration are as important as the official statistics that profile diaspora and migrant groups.** As nations are not stable structures, the domestic cultural tensions and struggles from homeland are brought in the host societies; the multiculturalism and multiethnic composition of the UK bring to the fore the need to better capture and understand these social, cultural and psychological processes within both UK based diaspora communities and the British diaspora abroad; they trigger engagement, but also contestation and disruption in diaspora diplomacy and soft power.

¹ Dolea, A. 2022. Transnational diaspora diplomacy, emotions and COVID-19: The Romanian diaspora in the UK. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 18: 12–14. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-021-00243-1>

² Dolea, A. 2024. Diaspora Diplomacy, Emotions, and Disruption: A Conceptual and Analytical Framework. *CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy* Figueroa Press Los Angeles. [Diaspora Diplomacy, Emotions, and Disruption_6.19.24.pdf \(uscpublicdiplomacy.org\)](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-022-00285-z);

³ Volkan, V.D. 2017. *Immigrants and refugees: Trauma, perennial mourning, and border psychology*. London: Karnac.

⁴ Dolea, A. 2023. The invisible luggage of the displaced: emotions, trauma and public diplomacy. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 19:242–247. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-022-00285-z>

What should the objective of soft power be, for example, to achieve economic growth for the UK overseas, bolster its influence or other?

6. UK's soft power rests on its culture, values and policies, as well as on its reputational security⁵. In the current international context dominated by heightened emotions and especially fear, **the objective of UK's soft power should also be to facilitate intercultural communication and understanding through empathetic leadership and empathetic diplomacy**. As discussed by others⁶, empathy can be a powerful antidote to fear in world politics; empathetic leadership in diplomacy can contribute to finding a common ground on different perspectives and positions, making possible dialogue and collaboration. The recent developments in the Russia Ukraine War and the new US foreign policy demonstrate the need for integrating empathetic leadership as a UK soft power resource.

How effective is the FCDO in leading HMG's soft power approach across Government, and overseas? Where can these efforts be improved? What contribution should the Soft Power Council make?

These efforts can be improved through:

7. Expanding the "listening" component of public diplomacy and soft power practices: monitoring foreign media and social media is important; but equally important is **engaging regularly with the diverse diaspora communities in the UK** to establish series of events in order to listen and understand the issues on those diasporic communities' agendas, the diversity of perspectives and positions.
8. **Creating a platform – e.g. an annual Wilton Park event - to bring together the largest migrant and diaspora communities in the UK** and facilitate best practice sharing as more established diasporas can act as "mentors" for the new diasporas. This would support the societal resilience building efforts of the government as often all diasporas deal with similar macro issues (e.g. vulnerabilities to disinformation, propaganda and foreign interference, human trafficking and exploitation, etc).
9. **Work in partnership with the largest migrant and diaspora communities in the UK to develop bespoke bilingual cultural resources for each such groups**. These resources would help UK diplomats better understand the cultural tensions in these communities (that stem from their home countries), which could prove instrumental in their diplomatic efforts of building relationship with those countries. British diplomats can thus constantly improve their practices of soft power cultivation through the understanding of the key enabling but also disruptive role diasporas can play.
10. **Connect and partner with the wide network of British diaspora organizations across the globe** to tackle transnational global issues; for example, through the launch of a targeted education program of disinformation resilience building – media literacy, source criticism and critical thinking – for teenagers across the globe (The format could be similar to the Duke of Edinburgh award)
11. **Train British diplomats on emotional resilience** as an essential skill in the diplomatic toolbox for this increasingly challenging and turbulent times when emotions are easily and unexpectedly stirred.

How does the UK counter the soft power influence and narrative of other major powers including China, India, Russia and Turkey?

12. Work with the Chinese, Indian, Russian and Turkish diasporas in the UK, as well as other large diasporas in the UK (Polish, Romanian, Moldovan, Nigerian, etc). **Capacity building for diaspora resilience is much needed** as diasporas (and their leaders) are a missing target group in the current strategies of societal and institutional resilience. Diasporas are distinct and complex communities that need tailored approaches: due to their transnational and digital existence, they are targeted by hostile information activities and disinformation that crosses borders, aimed to catch them in a web of mixed local, national, and global narratives; they are

⁵ Cull, N. J. (2024) *Reputational Security. Refocusing Public Diplomacy for a Dangerous World*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

⁶ Crawford, N. C. (2014). Institutionalizing passion in world politics: Fear and empathy. *International Theory*, 6(3), 535– 557.

also difficult to reach by governments, authorities, and civil society organizations. Specific actions can include:

- a. The development a disinformation toolkit, in partnership with these diaspora organizations in the UK with a special emphasis on cultural aspects.
- b. The running of a series of trainings to build and strengthen the resilience of these diaspora organizations, with a focus on their leaders as micro-influencers within their online and offline communities.

I remain available to provide further detail and give oral evidence as needed.

Sincerely,

Dr Alina E. Dolea

Associate Professor in Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy
Head of Department in Humanities & Law
Faculty of Media and Communication, Bournemouth University
Talbot Campus, W408, Fern Barrow, Poole, Dorset, BH12 5BB, UK; Tel. 01202 963516
Email: edolea@bournemouth.ac.uk
<https://staffprofiles.bournemouth.ac.uk/display/edolea>

2022-2024 Research Fellow, USC Center on Public Diplomacy - [Diaspora Diplomacy, Emotions, and Disruption_6.19.24.pdf \(uscpublicdiplomacy.org\)](#)
Academia.edu: <https://bournemouth.academia.edu/AlinaDolea>
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/alinadolea>
ResearchGate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Alina_Dolea

3 March 2025