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URBAN DEVELOPMENT BASED ON THE CONCEPT OF SOFT POWER: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL AND CREATIVE INSTITUTIONS AND INDUSTRIES AS DRIVERS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

ABSTRACT

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Summary

Present research proposes a reconceptualization of the notion of soft power, adapting it to the urban context through the concept of *urban soft power*. In an increasingly urbanized and globalized world, cities are emerging as competitive actors not only in economic terms but also symbolically and culturally. They must attract human capital, creative resources, and international visibility by employing intangible tools such as reputation, culture, urban aesthetics, governance, and shared values.

The study defines and operationalizes the concept of urban soft power through an innovative instrument—the Urban Soft Power Index—which integrates both quantitative indicators (such as cultural infrastructure) and qualitative dimensions (such as reputation, symbolic attractiveness, and the quality of governance).

The research pursues the following objectives:

1. to conceptually define urban soft power;

2. to develop a measurable index;

3. to elaborate a practical guide for strengthening this power in support of sustainable and intelligent urban development.

The thesis is structured into both theoretical and applied chapters. Chapter 1 examines the theoretical foundations of the concept. Chapters 2 through 6 explore dimensions such as urban attractiveness, the creative class, cultural industries, urban aesthetics, and the role of public administration. Chapter 7 empirically validates the concept through a comparative study of Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, and Brașov. Chapter 8 develops the index, while Chapter 9 provides strategic recommendations for urban stakeholders.

The research emphasizes the significance of cultural diplomacy, education, heritage, and public space as key resources of urban influence. By strengthening these components, cities can construct a distinct identity, attract talent and investment, stimulate tourism and social cohesion, and increase community resilience in times of crisis. The study also highlights the role of collaborative networks and international partnerships in promoting a value-based and intercultural urbanism.

This work makes a substantial contribution to both administrative sciences and urban studies, offering a robust theoretical framework and a practical instrument for evaluating and advancing sustainable urban development through the lens of urban soft power.

Research Design

The proposed study adopts a mixed-methods research design, grounded in the principles of triangulation and conceptual transfer, in order to deeply investigate the complex phenomenon of urban soft power. This approach enables the integration of both quantitative methods (Likert-scale questionnaires) and qualitative methods (structured interviews), applied to residents as well as experts in relevant fields such as public administration, culture, urban planning, education, and media. By employing Lawshe's content validity method, the data collected are analyzed in a way that overcomes the limitations of a unilateral methodological paradigm.

The methodology incorporates theoretical triangulation (critical analysis of the literature), methodological triangulation (the use of multiple data sources and collection techniques), and interdisciplinary triangulation, through the integration of perspectives from administrative sciences and urban history. The latter plays a key role in the development of the practical guide, which is based on the analysis of historical administrative decisions and the use of primary sources (documents, artifacts, registers), providing relevant insights for the present and informing public policies adapted to contemporary realities.

The index is methodologically inspired by the *City Prosperity Index* developed by UN-Habitat and has been validated in the Romanian cities of Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, and Brașov. By combining historical sources with contemporary research methods, the study offers an innovative and applicable framework for assessing the cultural and symbolic influence of cities.

Thus, the research addresses essential questions regarding the nature, factors, and mechanisms involved in the consolidation of urban soft power. The rigorous integration of data and interdisciplinary triangulation enables a relevant and objective analysis, supporting local administrations in the formulation of evidence-based and historically contextualized sustainable policies.

Chapter 1. The Concept of Soft Power

Chapter 1 of the thesis is devoted to the analysis of the concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye in the 1990s as a form of non-coercive influence based on attractiveness and voluntary participation. The concept emerged as a response to the declining effectiveness of coercive power in the post–Cold War context and gained prominence as a strategic alternative, particularly in the realm of cultural diplomacy. Soft power refers to the ability to influence other actors through symbolic, cultural, educational, ideological, or institutional means, avoiding the use of force.

The theoretical framework of the concept is grounded in interdisciplinarity, drawing from international relations, administrative sciences, sociology, and history. It is supported by key ideas such as Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and Walter Lippmann's concept of perception management. Nye established a tripartite model of power: military, economic, and soft, highlighting the growing importance of cultural influence and the promotion of values as pillars of global leadership.

The core components of soft power include cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, mass media, participation in international organizations, economic development, and national branding. Its sources consist of culture (both classical and popular), political values, education, foreign diplomacy, and the role of non-state actors such as NGOs, corporations, and influencers. These elements operate synergistically to enhance a state's global influence, relying on attraction and the projection of a positive image.

The chapter also addresses major critiques of the concept. These include its theoretical ambiguity, the challenge of empirical measurement, dependence on underlying coercive resources, and the risks of cultural imperialism and Western ethnocentrism. It is noted that soft power can become manipulative or elicit backlash if applied irresponsibly. A clear distinction is emphasized between soft power and propaganda: the former is based on voluntary alignment and attraction, whereas the latter involves deliberate manipulation.

In conclusion, soft power remains a contemporary, complex, and highly relevant concept, continuously evolving both theoretically and in practice. Its responsible and context-sensitive application is essential for building sustainable international relations grounded in shared values, mutual respect, and positive influence.

Chapter 2. The Concept of Soft Power: From the International to the Urban Scale

Chapter 2 explores the evolution of the concept of soft power, tracing its trajectory from its origins in international relations to its contemporary adaptation within the urban environment. Originally formulated by Joseph Nye, soft power refers to the ability of an actor to influence the preferences of others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Although initially applied to nation-states, the concept has gained increasing relevance in a globalized world where new actors—particularly cities—have emerged as influential entities on the international stage.

The chapter argues that cities possess a "purer" form of soft power, due to their lack of coercive capacity. Urban influence is exerted through cultural diplomacy, urban aesthetics, the quality of local governance, the promotion of democratic values, sustainability, and innovation. Unlike states, cities operate primarily through symbolic, affective, and cultural resources, shaping both local and global perceptions and aspirations. Accordingly, the author proposes a distinct definition of *urban soft power*—the capacity of cities to influence and attract through imagery, values, governance practices, and cultural narratives, fostering voluntary participation and enhancing urban identity.

Building on the premise that cities have historically exercised autonomous influence—as in the case of Greek poleis or Italian city-states—the chapter contends that we are witnessing a resurgence of cities as centers of symbolic power. This transition is supported by processes such as European regionalization, administrative decentralization, and institutions like the Committee of the Regions. Consequently, cities are no longer merely administrative units but international actors capable of negotiating partnerships, attracting symbolic capital, and shaping their own cultural policies.

The chapter identifies seven principal sources of urban soft power: (1) culture (both classical and popular), (2) urban aesthetics, (3) educational excellence, (4) human and intellectual capital, (5) urban branding, (6) effective governance, and (7) the engagement of non-state actors such as NGOs, universities, and influencers. Examples including Los Angeles, Geneva, and Mecca demonstrate that urban influence can transcend national borders via cultural content, academic infrastructure, or religious significance.

It emphasizes that a city's brand, alongside community engagement and strategic communication, are key tools for constructing an international reputation. Cities thus become magnets for talent, investment, and tourism, building durable and coherent images through non-coercive means.

In conclusion, the chapter asserts that adapting the concept of soft power to the urban scale provides a robust theoretical framework for analyzing cities' symbolic and cultural influence. In a world shaped by global competition and the imperative of cooperation and sustainability, urban soft power emerges as a critical component of the contemporary architecture of sustainable development.

Chapter 3. The Creative Class in the Urban Context

Chapter 3 examines the role of the creative class in contemporary urban development and its connection to urban soft power. The concept was introduced by Richard Florida in 2002, defining the creative class as a socio-economic group comprising artists, musicians, scientists, professionals in education, healthcare, technology, and other knowledge-based sectors. This class functions as a catalyst for innovation, economic diversification, and urban attractiveness in the context of a globalized economy.

Florida divides the creative class into two subgroups: the "super-creative core" (including artists, designers, engineers, and researchers) and "creative professionals" (such as lawyers, educators, and doctors). Both contribute to the innovation ecosystem. His theory emerged amid the transition from traditional industry to a knowledge-based economy, emphasizing that successful cities are those with vibrant cultural scenes, strong universities, and diverse populations.

Three key factors determine a city's capacity to attract the creative class—what Florida calls the "Three Ts": technology, talent, and tolerance. Technology refers to the presence of innovation infrastructure and ecosystems. Talent is derived from educational opportunities and professional prospects. Tolerance refers to openness toward cultural, ethnic, and social diversity. These elements not only attract the creative class but also significantly contribute to the consolidation of urban soft power.

The creative class plays an active role in shaping the image and reputation of cities, transforming them into cultural and innovation hubs that are attractive to tourists, investors, and

prospective residents. Urban festivals, conferences, and events enhance the city brand and global influence. Additionally, the creative class fosters economic diversification by developing creative and cultural industries that generate employment and attract investment.

Critiques of the theory highlight the risks of social inequality and marginalization, as well as the difficulty of replicating this model in cities with limited resources. Nonetheless, inclusive urban policies can transform these challenges into sustainable opportunities.

In conclusion, the creative class occupies a central role in the economic, cultural, and symbolic development of cities, serving as a key pillar in the architecture of urban soft power.

Chapter 4. The COVID-19 Crisis and Cultural and Creative Industries in the Urban Context

Chapter 4 examines the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on cultural and creative industries in the urban environment, and its implications for the soft power of cities. The pandemic disrupted cultural events that are essential to urban identity, affecting the attractiveness and social vitality of cities. Cultural and creative industries play a pivotal role in reinforcing urban soft power by contributing to a city's image, reputation, social inclusion, and community cohesion.

The health crisis highlighted both the vulnerability and adaptive capacity of these sectors. Culturally oriented cities demonstrated greater resilience, repurposing cultural spaces as platforms for solidarity and dialogue. The European Union emphasized the strategic importance of these sectors by integrating them into a key industrial ecosystem, which generates over €470 billion in added value.

Museums, in particular, emerged as cultural anchors during the pandemic, gaining increased media visibility. They continued to support urban identity and promote cultural diplomacy through exhibitions and international collaborations. A prominent example is the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which significantly contributed to the city's regeneration and became a symbol of urban identity renewal.

Furthermore, reports from UNESCO and the World Bank underscore that culture-centered cities promote inclusive and sustainable development. By fostering creativity, such cities attract talent, stimulate local economies, and enhance social cohesion. However, the

commodification of culture remains a risk, potentially leading to the erosion of authenticity and the marginalization of local expressions.

The chapter also highlights the strategic role of cultural diplomacy as a tool of urban influence. Cities utilize creative industries to assert their international presence, increasingly acting as independent actors within global networks. Exchange programs, artistic collaborations, and heritage promotion initiatives contribute to the construction of strong and enduring urban brands.

In conclusion, Chapter 4 demonstrates that cultural and creative industries serve not only as sources of economic value but also as strategic instruments for consolidating urban soft power. These industries enable cities to navigate crises while reaffirming their identity and influence within an uncertain global landscape.

Chapter 5. Urban Aesthetics: Public Policies and Cultural Planning Approaches in the Context of Urban Soft Power

Chapter 5 explores the role of urban aesthetics as a vital source of soft power for cities. Urban aesthetics—defined as the totality of visual and experiential qualities of the built environment—is examined as a major contributor to a city's symbolic and cultural influence. Elements such as architecture, public spaces, art installations, and urban design contribute to the construction of a distinct visual identity, generating attraction for residents, tourists, investors, and professionals. Thus, urban aesthetics becomes a strategic tool for city branding and the consolidation of international reputation.

The chapter emphasizes that urban design is more than a physical planning activity; it is a complex process that shapes collective perception, quality of life, and social behavior. Through the analysis of emblematic examples like Paris and New York, the author highlights how architectural landmarks serve not only as tourist attractions but also as symbols of a city's values, history, and collective aspirations. In this sense, urban aesthetics plays a central role in shaping cultural narratives and symbolic diplomacy.

The chapter also explores the connections between urban aesthetics and public policy, underscoring the importance of coordinated interventions and urban cultural planning. Rehabilitation projects, the revitalization of public spaces, artistic lighting, and the promotion

of urban art are cited as policies that enhance city image and reinforce social cohesion. Urban design is analyzed as an interdisciplinary domain at the intersection of architecture, urban sociology, cultural policy, and administrative sciences. It must account for both cultural heritage and local specificity, while also addressing contemporary challenges such as sustainability, climate adaptability, and technological integration.

The chapter argues that urban aesthetics has a direct impact on symbolic capital and international image, thereby influencing global competitiveness. In conclusion, it asserts that coherent urban policies centered on visual identity and aesthetic value can significantly contribute to sustainable development and the strengthening of urban soft power in an era defined by globalization and inter-city competition.

Chapter 6. The Role of the Public Sector in Consolidating Urban Soft Power

Chapter 6 analyzes the essential role of the public sector in strengthening urban soft power, conceptualized as a form of non-coercive influence exercised through public policy, urban aesthetics, cultural diplomacy, and strategic communication. Local public administrations, as key actors in urban governance, are responsible for designing and implementing policies that directly contribute to enhancing a city's reputation, increasing its attractiveness, and shaping a distinct urban identity.

In the context of globalization and urbanization, cities are emerging as decision-making hubs and strategic actors in international networks. The public sector holds the capacity to transform intangible resources—such as culture, local values, history, and civic engagement—into competitive advantages. By formulating effective urban policies based on inclusion, sustainability, and participation, cities can generate a lasting impact on both external and internal perceptions.

The chapter underscores the importance of urban aesthetics, cultural infrastructure, and a responsive and transparent administration in attracting human and investment capital. Cultural projects, the revitalization of public spaces, and symbolic events are presented as strategic tools for reinforcing a city's soft power.

In addition, the role of urban diplomacy is examined—including international partnerships, sister-city networks, and transnational collaborations—as a mechanism for expanding a city's influence beyond national borders. The public sector thus becomes a bridge between local initiatives and the global stage, contributing to the construction of a coherent and attractive urban image.

The chapter highlights that soft power cannot be cultivated in the absence of a professional public administration equipped with strategic vision, expertise, and resources. It calls for the professionalization of the civil service, citizen participation in decision-making, and institutional transparency as the foundation of a sustainable governance model.

In conclusion, the public sector plays a fundamental role in designing and consolidating urban soft power, acting as a driver of transformation, stability, and the promotion of local values within the global competition among cities. Through well-calibrated public policies and strategic cultural partnerships, local administrations can transform a city into a hub of influence, attractiveness, and sustainable urban identity.

Chapter 7. Urban Soft Power: Concept Validation

Chapter 7 is dedicated to the validation of the concept of urban soft power through a two-stage applied study, employing a triangulated methodological approach. The research integrates three primary data sources: academic literature, a national survey, and structured interviews with experts across relevant fields. The first stage consisted of an anonymous cross-sectional survey conducted between June 1 and July 31, 2024, aimed at evaluating expert perceptions regarding the relevance and effectiveness of the dimensions that constitute urban soft power. A total of 384 responses were received from 3,521 experts invited nationwide, selected based on official registries from fields such as culture, urban planning, public administration, and education.

Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, with the primary criterion being professional engagement in fields relevant to urban development and involvement in initiatives related to soft power. The questionnaire was structured into six sections: demographic information; evaluation of the soft power concept; identification of key factors; assessment of measurement tools; analysis of current practices in respondents' cities; and an open-ended section for qualitative responses.

The questionnaire aimed to capture perceptions of the effectiveness and relevance of the concept, as well as data on the importance of dimensions such as cultural influence, reputation, urban aesthetics, innovation, civic participation, and local governance. The survey's ultimate objective was to establish a robust empirical foundation for the development and subsequent validation of the Urban Soft Power Index, designed to quantify city performance in terms of non-coercive influence and symbolic attractiveness.

The geographic diversity of respondents and the wide range of professional backgrounds provided the study with broad interdisciplinary coverage and representativeness, offering diverse insights into the researched phenomenon. As such, the research confirms both the theoretical and practical relevance of the urban soft power concept in the context of sustainable development and offers a strong foundation for policy formulation based on cities' symbolic, cultural, and institutional capital.

Chapter 8. Development of the Urban Soft Power Index

Chapter 8 proposes the development of a complex, multidimensional instrument to measure the non-material influence of cities—namely, the Urban Soft Power Index. Since urban soft power manifests through a combination of symbolic, cultural, educational, institutional, and social influences, the authors advocate the use of a composite index capable of coherently and comparatively capturing these dimensions.

The index is constructed through the standardized and weighted aggregation of relevant variables drawn from official sources, such as national statistical institutes and international organizations. This process produces a singular score for each city, facilitating comparative analysis, progress monitoring, and the design of tailored public policies. The construction of the index draws methodological inspiration from the UN-Habitat *City Prosperity Index*, with adaptations made to fit the Romanian and urban context.

The conceptual model of the index is structured around six core dimensions: cultural and recreational facilities; urban aesthetics and public spaces; tourism and services; public administration and civil society; education and research; and media and communication. These are complemented by three secondary dimensions: economic vitality, quality of life, and environmental quality. Each dimension is broken down into sub-dimensions and quantitative

indicators (e.g., cultural expenditure, unemployment rate, healthcare access, or media presence), with clearly defined weights.

The chapter outlines the logic behind indicator selection, validation criteria, and the data sources used, ensuring transparency and replicability. A sensitivity analysis of the model is also presented, confirming the index's structural robustness to minor data fluctuations. For external validation, the index was applied in a comparative assessment of three Romanian cities—Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, and Brașov—highlighting significant differences in urban soft power levels, especially in terms of cultural funding, public infrastructure, and democratic participation.

The proposed index is intended as a strategic tool for local public administrations, providing an empirical basis for decisions related to urban branding, investment attraction, sustainable planning, and identity-building. As such, this initiative offers an innovative contribution to urban governance grounded in intangible resources and contextual adaptability.

Chapter 9. Practical Guide for the Development and Strengthening of Urban Soft Power

The practical guide for the development and consolidation of urban soft power provides a strategic framework for transforming cities into sustainable, attractive, and globally competitive urban centers. In the current context of accelerating urbanization—where cities compete not only for economic resources but also for human, cultural, and symbolic capital—urban soft power becomes essential. It is defined as a city's capacity to influence the preferences and perceptions of other communities through attraction, image, and voluntary engagement, rather than through coercion.

The guide proposes a clear methodology for measuring and managing intangible capital through a set of thematic clusters such as: cultural facilities, urban aesthetics, tourism, public administration, education, and mass media. It includes concrete actions such as the restoration of iconic buildings, the promotion of cultural events, the development of an urban soft power index, and the creation of digital platforms for transparency and civic participation.

The strategy involves establishing an interdisciplinary working group and fostering partnerships among public authorities, the private sector, academia, and civil society. Objectives are formulated in a participatory manner, reflecting the cultural, social, economic, and

ecological dimensions of urban development. Through this approach, cities can attract talent, investment, tourists, and resources, while also contributing to social cohesion and innovation.

A key component is the implementation of an Urban Soft Power Index, which offers a comparative overview of cities' non-coercive influence. Based on open statistical data, the index allows for performance evaluation and policy adjustments tailored to local contexts. Additionally, the guide promotes urban branding and digital storytelling to enhance external image and encourage civic engagement.

Thus, this document is not only an action plan but also an innovative urban governance tool focused on harnessing the symbolic and identity-based resources of cities. It advocates a shift from infrastructure-driven development toward influence-based development grounded in image, soft capital, and participatory culture—thereby strengthening cities' strategic positioning within global urban networks.

Conclusions

This research proposes an innovative conceptualization and operationalization of the notion of urban soft power, adapting Joseph Nye's theory of soft power to the realities of contemporary cities. In a globalized, highly urbanized, and increasingly competitive inter-city environment, non-coercive influence is gaining strategic importance for cities aiming to attract human capital, investment, and international recognition.

The thesis offers a solid interdisciplinary approach, integrating perspectives from administrative sciences, urban history, urban planning, sociology, and cultural studies. It constructs a coherent theoretical and applied framework that defines urban soft power as a city's ability to influence internal and external perceptions through culture, aesthetics, diplomacy, and participatory governance. The sources of this power reside in three foundational dimensions: culture (creative industries and traditions), urban aesthetics (architecture and public space), and promoted values (transparency, cooperation, and participation).

One of the most important contributions of the research is the development and validation of the Urban Soft Power Index, a robust analytical instrument for quantifying cities' symbolic and reputational influence. The index was piloted in Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara, and Brașov, demonstrating both methodological feasibility and practical relevance for policy

formulation. The guide developed on the basis of these findings provides strategic directions for local administrations in strengthening intangible resources through urban branding, cultural investment, and participatory policies.

The research addresses essential questions regarding the advantages, determinants, and mechanisms of strengthening soft power, offering concrete strategies such as promoting cultural events, revitalizing public spaces, and employing urban storytelling. It underscores the importance of collaboration among the public sector, civil society, and academia in implementing coherent and context-sensitive policies.

Furthermore, the study highlights methodological challenges, including the accessibility of comparable data and the complexity of operationalizing qualitative indicators. Future research directions include extending the applicability of the index to the international level, integrating emerging technologies, and developing digital platforms for monitoring urban performance.

In conclusion, the research provides an innovative and applicable model of urban governance based on symbolic influence, proposing a new paradigm of development for cities—one centered on identity, attractiveness, and social capital.