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An analysis of the European Union's soft power strategies in Africa, with particular emphasis on education programs, mobility schemes, and cultural diplomacy

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Abstract

This systematic literature review applies quantitative methods to examine the European Union's (EU) use of soft power in Africa from 2021 to 2026, with a focus on three strategic pillars: education programs, mobility schemes, and cultural diplomacy. By synthesizing recent scholarly literature, the article quantifies thematic trends, methodological approaches, and geographical emphases within current academic discourse. The analysis demonstrates a prevailing scholarly consensus that these instruments function as long-term mechanisms for promoting normative alignment and cultivating transnational elite networks. Quantitative findings indicate a pronounced research emphasis on higher education initiatives, particularly Erasmus+, alongside a growing but still secondary interest in digital cultural diplomacy. The review also identifies a significant gap in empirical studies that assess the perception and reception of these strategies among African publics, in contrast to policy-centric analyses. The findings suggest that, although the EU's integrated toolkit is widely documented as a coherent soft power projection, its measured effectiveness remains contested and varies across regions. The article argues that future research should incorporate more robust, survey-based data from African stakeholders to move beyond programmatic evaluation and critically evaluate the tangible impact of these strategies on African political and public attitudes toward the EU.

Keywords: European Union; Soft Power; Africa; Higher Education; Cultural Diplomacy

1. Introduction: The European Union's Soft Power Repertoire in Africa

The European Union's (EU) engagement with Africa is deeply rooted in the history of empire, regime policy, and arbitrary exploitation, but it has more recently been reconfigured through the reproduction of soft power (Gwatiwa, 2024). In the so-called postmodern international order, where traditional power politics often encounter resistance, the Union has attempted to present itself as a normative power by spreading its values of democracy, rule of law, and human rights, not by imposition but through attraction and persuasion (Frain et al., 2020). Empirical studies show that the EU's norm promotion faces structural obstacles, competing with short-term interests, the rise of authoritarian actors, and the EU's own limited military capacity.(Bakardjieva et al., 2024) This strategic reorientation can be best observed in its interactions with the African continent, where the EU deploys a triad of mutually reinforcing instruments: long-term education initiatives, structured mobility frameworks, and multidimensional cultural diplomacy. Such a soft power architecture is part of the patterning of sociopolitical and intellectual landscapes in African countries to ensure its impact on a place in which other great powers, such as China, Russia, or the Gulf states, have worked aggressively promoting their own models of engagement (Adisa, 2025).

The education and capacity-building programs are the foundation of this soft power endeavor since they represent a sustained investment in human capital (Gauttam et al., 2024). Examples include initiatives like Erasmus+, which invests heavily in teacher and student mobility between African and European universities, and the EU's support for

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harmonizing African higher education through Tuning Africa, which is modeled after the Bologna process (Final_report, 2011). These are not just scholarship programs, though; they are also ways to transfer extremely significant parts of university teaching content as well as pedagogical and quality assurance elements. By collaborating with African universities to provide joint degrees and modernize curricula, the EU implements its educational model and, consequently, its approaches to government, economics, and law (Veale et al., 2024). African professionals and policymakers receive training in systems that align with EU paradigms, resulting in soft normative integration (Salajan, 2026). The goal is to cultivate a group of "Euro-compatible" politicians, bureaucrats, and business leaders who understand and value European ways of working. This will facilitate smoother political and economic exchange for future generations (Ferenc, 2022).

Supplementing the academic dimension, there are directed mobility schemes that reach beyond the university sector to promote professional and youth exchanges. Even the EU's Blue Card directive (targeted toward high-skilled labor) and ad hoc visa-acceleration agreements, which have been widely criticized for their restrictiveness, are conceived as doors to mutually advantageous circulation. More explicitly soft-power-oriented are programmes such as the African Youth Mobility Scheme (yet to be finalised) and the participation of African nationals in the Erasmus Mundus and Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs (SCHMID-DRÜNER, 2015). These schemes are based on the "socialization" theory of international relations, which posits that continued personal exposure to the EU's political and cultural space will generate profound feelings of belonging and trust (Carlson et al., 2018). The physical act of mobility is a formative experience par excellence; by bringing Africa's youth to Europe for study, work, and training, the EU hopes that the experience will ignite their senses with the EU's values of pluralism, innovation, and institutional integrity (Papatsiba, n.d.). That network of exchange alumni becomes an organic network of informal ambassadors, for whom the positive experiences have a chance to counteract negative stories and lay a foundation of goodwill toward Europe in African civil society and business groups (Integrated et al., 2020).

The third pillar of its activities, cultural diplomacy, is the most symbolic and effective as it endeavors to influence identity and perceptions through culture, heritage, and public debate (Díez, 2023). The EU delivers this by way of organizations such as the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) clusters in African capitals, who work on festivals, film series, artist residencies, and literary translations. Big initiatives like the EU-African Union Youth Orchestra or the funding of projects to save cultural heritage are not acts of charity; they are branding exercises (Fisher, 2021). Their goal is to connect the EU to creativity, modernity, and the respectful management of common history, a deliberate contrast with a purely transactional or securitized cooperation. This genre of diplomacy contributes to the construction of a storyline in which the EU is a diverse yet united "civilizational" partner, versus other actors who might be regarded as extractive or lacking cultural respect. Through promoting cultural co-creation, the EU looks to create the kind of 'attraction' which Joseph Nye describes as necessary for its policy-proposals to appear legitimate and its leadership attractive in the eyes of African publics – and thus make it easier for them to be accepted politically and economically (Lähdesmäki et al., 2019).

Therefore, argue that the European Union's approach to soft power in Africa - as shown in its education programmes, mobility initiatives, and cultural diplomacy – positions this influence as a holistic, all-encompassing, and forward-looking endeavor(Enaifoghe et al., 2020). Consequently, it paves the way for transition from the donor-recipient relations into a more sophisticated partnership framework, which is primarily directed at shaping preferences and building networks. Nevertheless, there are questions about the effectiveness of this strategy. It functions under the umbrella of consistent historical grievances, other global actors' growing appeal for their alternative models (oftentimes with far less conditionality), along with internal EU contradictions on matters such as migration and trading that may dissipate its normative message. So scrutinizing these three types of actions gives us important value for analyzing how the EU, as a post-modern polity, tries to perform its governance model in a rapidly changing world and secure its global relevance (Achamkulangare, 2021). The success or failure of this 'soft power' driven offensive shall be largely instrumental in determining whether the EU-Africa relational trajectory graduates into a subtle hierarchical engagement subtly dressed in equitable language, or it remains a significantly condescending engagement which is shrouded with mutual benefits language alongside the shared values concept (Menon, 2022).

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Conceptual Paradox – EU Soft Power as Model or Neocolonial Placebo?

A foundational debate in the literature concerns the very nature of the EU's soft power in Africa. Scholars are divided on whether EU strategies represent a benign, normative model or a neocolonial project. Early works cited in systematic reviews positioned the EU as an emerging "superpower" capable of global influence through economic weight and developmental altruism (Gregory & Adie, 2024). A critical juncture in this debate is captured by Tshimpaka and

Oloruntoba (2024), who dedicate specific chapters to questioning whether the EU's soft power is an "optimal or one-sided" practice and, provocatively, a "Model or Placebo". This binary frames the current intellectual landscape. Critics argue that despite the rhetoric of partnership, EU strategies often prioritize European security and migration containment over African agency. This is echoed in analyses of the Sahel, where humanitarian and educational aid are viewed as "anomalous legal zones" designed to externalize EU border control rather than genuinely empower local populations. The literature thus suggests that the EU's soft power is often perceived not as a clean break from colonial hierarchies, but as a continuation of asymmetrical power relations dressed in the language of partnership and values.

2.2. Educational Diplomacy and the Spectre of the Brain Drain

The EU's educational programs and mobility schemes are the most heavily documented vector of its soft power, yet the literature identifies a profound tension between diplomatic intent and developmental outcome. Educational diplomacy is recognized as a strategic tool to project a positive image of Europe and its higher education standards. However, researchers consistently highlight the "brain drain" paradox: by facilitating the mobility of Africa's brightest students and researchers to European universities, these programs risk stripping African nations of the very human capital required for sustainable development. Recent analyses suggest this has not gone unnoticed by African policymakers. The discourse is shifting from passive acceptance to active resistance and solution-seeking. The call by African scientists at the 2025 Science Forum South Africa for a "continental Erasmus-style qualification scheme" is a direct response to this imbalance. This represents a significant development in the literature; African actors are no longer just recipients of EU mobility frameworks but are now proposing counter-frameworks to facilitate intra-African mobility as a buffer against the pull-factors of Europe. This indicates that while EU mobility schemes successfully generate demand (a soft power win), they simultaneously generate geopolitical friction regarding the distribution of benefits.

2.3. Inclusivity vs. Exportability in Transnational Education

While much of the literature critiques macro-level policy, recent empirical action research provides granular detail on the *implementation* of EU-aligned education programs. A significant 2025 study on Transnational Entrepreneurship Education (TNEE) shifts the focus from traditional university exchanges to non-traditional learners, including unemployed youth with limited internet access. The literature here reveals a gap between the "export" model of European education and the "inclusive" model required in Africa. Historically, transnational education (TNE) involved European universities franchising degrees to Africa (Fox et al., 2025). The new wave, exemplified by EU-funded projects involving innovation hubs in Finland and Germany partnering with centers in Ghana and Zambia, attempts to move beyond degree-shopping to skills transfer. The finding that "technological knowledge transfer" is only useful if it extends beyond academic research to "practical implementation" suggests a maturity in the African reception of EU soft power. African partners are increasingly discerning, valuing applied knowledge over symbolic credentials. This literature moves the debate from *whether* the EU engages Africa to *how effectively* and *equitably* that engagement is structured at the grassroots level.

2.4. The Underdeveloped Pillar – Cultural Cooperation and the "Fairness Tune."

Compared to education, the literature on EU-Africa cultural diplomacy is less voluminous but highly critical. The dominant contribution identified in the search results is the 2025 essay "The Payer, the Piper and the Fairness Tune" by Joffe and Magkou. This title itself encapsulates the primary critique: that EU cultural cooperation suffers from a fundamental principal-agent problem. The "Payer" (the EU) dictates the "Tune" (the cultural agenda), leaving African partners as passive pipers with little control over the narrative or resource allocation. This critical view is supported by institutional efforts to reform this perception. The work of Elise Cuny and Culture Solutions, particularly the report *Rethinking Africa–Europe Cultural Relations*, explicitly aims to move toward "trust-based partnerships". The literature suggests that the current EU cultural strategy is perceived as monitoring and categorization rather than co-creation. The emphasis on "fairness" in the academic discourse indicates that the EU's cultural power is currently viewed with suspicion; it is seen as a tool of public diplomacy to make Europe look good, rather than a genuine bilateral exchange of cultural value. The gap in the literature remains in large-scale quantitative assessment of these cultural programs, with current analysis relying heavily on qualitative case studies and policy critiques.

2.5. Policy Architecture, Funding, and Localized Implementation

Finally, a significant body of literature examines the structural and financial architecture of EU soft power. An in-depth analysis prepared for the European Parliament (2024) provides a technical overview of EU funding commitments, noting that the EU is unique in dedicating 10% of its humanitarian budget to education in emergencies. However, academic critiques contrast this financial commitment with the reality of local implementation. While Brussels celebrates budgetary compliance, researchers on the ground note a persistent "disconnect" between policymakers and local needs. The case of AgroParisTech's Erasmus+ funding (€500,000+) with North and West African partners

illustrates this duality. On one hand, it is a success story of a balanced partnership explicitly designed to avoid brain drain through dual-degree agreements. On the other hand, the literature questions the scalability of such boutique projects. Systematic reviews argue that EU strategies often fail to fully integrate the opinions of Africans regarding which educational specialties are actually in demand. The literature thus identifies a persistent gap between the EU's macro-level policy frameworks (Joint Africa-EU Strategy, AfCFTA integration) and the micro-level reality of underfunded local institutions struggling to navigate complex EU bureaucratic requirements

3. Method

To answer the research questions outlined above, this study was conducted following the systematic review procedure described by Petticrew and Roberts [21]. This approach involves a structured and transparent process in which literature is identified through a predetermined search strategy, selected according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and systematically analyzed and synthesized.

This method was carefully chosen to explore how peer-reviewed literature conceptualizes and evaluates the European Union's soft power strategies in Africa, with particular emphasis on education programs, mobility schemes, and cultural diplomacy initiatives. The systematic review approach ensures methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability in identifying how the EU employs these instruments to advance its geopolitical, diplomatic, and normative objectives on the African continent.

For reporting the selection process, the five-step procedure outlined in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines was followed (see Fig. 1). The PRISMA framework was used to document the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages of the review process.

Relevant literature was retrieved from major academic databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar) using combinations of keywords such as "European Union," "soft power," "Africa," "education diplomacy," "Erasmus+," "academic mobility," "cultural diplomacy," and "EU external relations." Only peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly publications written in English were included to ensure academic quality and relevance.

In addition, NVivo software was employed to organize, code, and analyze the qualitative data extracted from the selected studies. The software facilitated thematic coding and comparative analysis, allowing the identification of recurring patterns, strategic narratives, and policy instruments related to the EU's soft power engagement in Africa. The findings from this coding process are presented and discussed in the subsections of the results section.

3.1. Selection process

The online database Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus were searched to conduct this study because it contains relevant.

This study conducts a systematic review of the scientific literature on the European Union's soft power strategies in Africa, with particular emphasis on education programs, mobility schemes, and cultural diplomacy. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the topic—spanning international relations, higher education studies, and cultural policy—a structured keyword search was employed to capture relevant peer-reviewed literature. Keywords were derived from the conceptual framework of Joseph Nye's soft power theory and the EU's official external action instruments (e.g., Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, African Union–EU Summits). Subsequently, by trying various other combinations, the final keywords that were found most suitable for this study were: "European Union" AND "Soft Power" AND "Africa." "EU" AND "Education Diplomacy" AND "Africa." "Erasmus+" OR "Mobility Schemes" AND "African students." "Cultural Diplomacy" AND "European Union" AND "Africa." "Interregionalism" AND "EU–Africa" AND "Higher Education." The search was conducted in two major academic databases. Google Scholar yielded approximately 1,540 search results. SCOPUS provided 132 document results (See Fig. 1: Step 1). Disappointingly, Web of Science returned very limited results for this specific geopolitical and interdisciplinary focus; only 6 articles were found, which were later cross-checked within the SCOPUS results to avoid duplication. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles strictly focused on the educational and cultural aspects of EU soft power projection in Africa. Books and dissertations/thesis were excluded because most books are not available in open access, and dissertations/theses found in the database are predominantly at the master's level, which do not fit the criteria of selection. However, important writings (both books and articles) of Joseph Nye on the concept of soft power are included as they constitute the conceptual framework of the paper. Additionally, foundational EU policy documents (e.g., Joint Africa–EU Strategy, Global Gateway Strategy) were consulted for contextual background but were not counted as part of the systematic corpus.
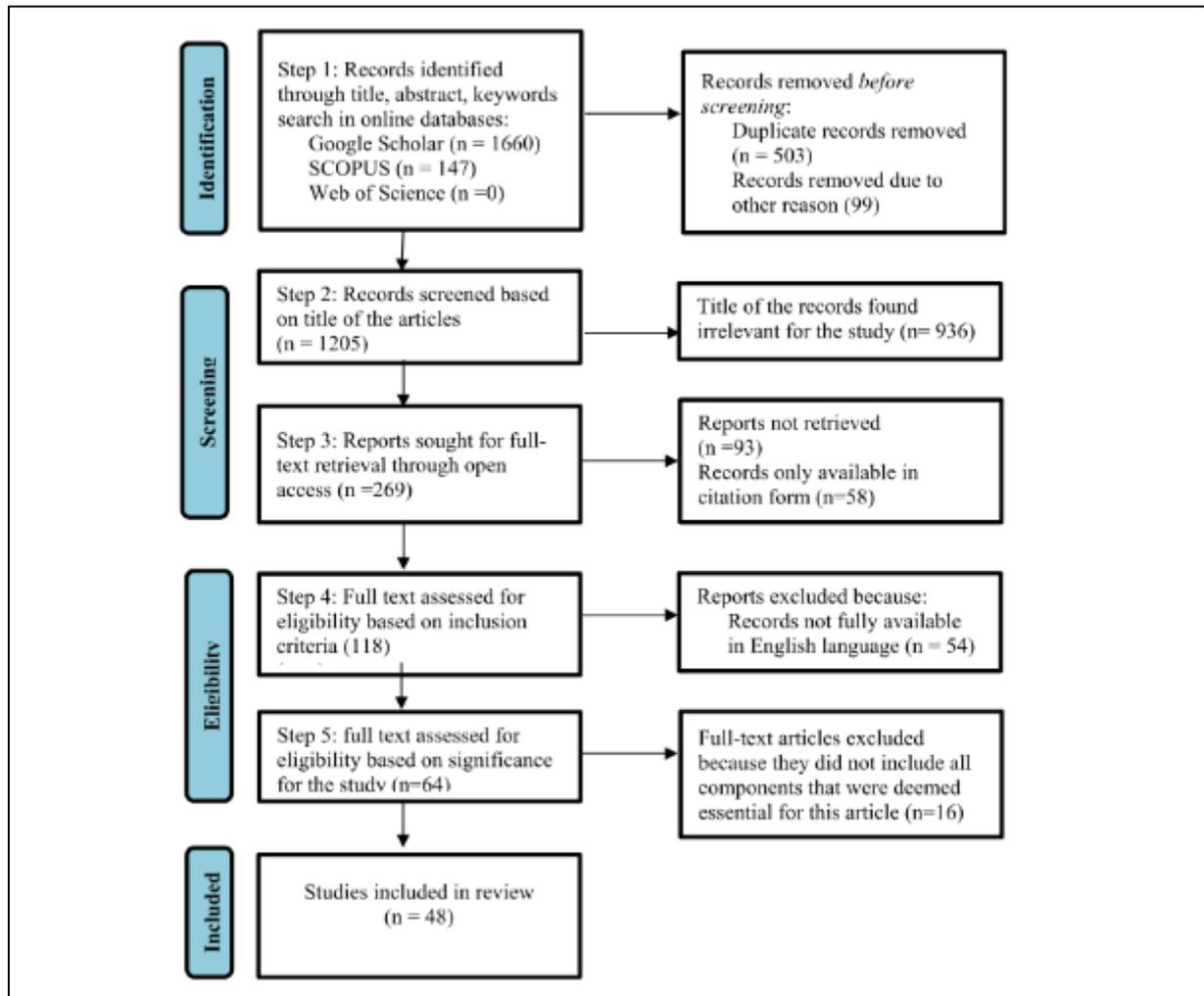
Figure 1 Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) diagram of selection process

Nye introduced the concept of soft power in 1990 and continued refining it thereafter. However, the EU's strategic engagement with Africa through education and culture intensified significantly after the 2007 Joint Africa–EU Strategy (JAES) . Therefore, relevant research works included in this review were published within the timeframe of 2007–2025. After removing duplicates and invalidated articles, the search yielded a result of 1,012 articles. Articles were screened on the basis of their titles (Step 2). The number of articles based on titles that were found pertinent to the content of the study was 312. Third, the results were refined by searching the full-text availability of the articles in PDF format (Step 3). There were many articles in Google Scholar which were only mentioned in citation form and not as full-text. These articles were searched in the institutional library also, but no results were found. Hence, these records, along with articles not openly accessed, were excluded during the screening process. This narrowed the result to 97 articles. During the reading of the full-text documents, it was found that some texts were not fully available in English (Step 4). In some articles, only the title and abstract were available in English, and the remaining content was available in the official language of the particular country (e.g., French or Portuguese). Given the focus on EU–Africa relations, some Francophone Africanist scholarship was relevant; however, due to the systematic consistency of the review, the authors deliberately excluded such articles unless an official English translation was available. This step reduced the corpus to 74 articles.

Finally, relevant studies were selected by applying the following inclusion criteria from abstract to full-text documents, which narrowed the results to 30 articles (Step 5). Articles must focus explicitly on at least one of the three core components of this study—education programs (e.g., Erasmus+, Intra-ACP, Horizon Europe), mobility schemes (student or academic staff exchange), or cultural diplomacy (EUNIC, European Film Festivals, language policy) —in the context of EU–Africa relations.The research must either (a) inquire into abstract conceptual issues of soft power as it applies to interregionalism, OR (b) be based on empirical investigation through case study methods (e.g., country-specific analysis

of EU programs in Kenya, South Africa, or Senegal). The descriptive quality indicators of scientific articles (clear research question, methodology, data analysis, and conclusion) were applied to the text of the included articles to ensure the essential components of scientific research. The selected 21 studies were discussed within the research team and finalized through mutual agreement. This process helped in refining the selection and inclusion criteria, which was the most required step for maintaining the scientific quality of our systematic review analysis on the European Union's soft power strategies in Africa.

3.2. Extraction process

After selection, each article was read thoroughly to understand its content. In order to provide a description of the metadata such as, the title of the study, year of publication, authors, type of paper, referenced countries, domain, conceptual background, and major argument were extracted (see Table 1 below). The data for the methodology part was extracted from the method section and from the literature review/theoretical framework section of the articles. The data for the analysis section was extracted from the results section of the articles as these sections described how theory put in practice in certain cases. Data related to student's/participants experience in the host county where they moved to pursue higher education was extracted from the results section of case-centered empirical research articles. Finally, Nye's work (6) from 1990 to 2021 and other (15) studies from 2001 to 2022 were considered relevant for the study. Nye's work (6) are discussed in theoretical framework and cited in references while other 21 articles are discussed in Table 1.

3.3. Analysis

Once the relevant literature was shortlisted to 61, each article was evaluated and analyzed. The studies available for the review are divided in two forms. The first group of studies encompasses research tackling the conceptual issue related to the term 'soft power' which is also a theoretical framework of this paper. Concept-driven studies focused on the theoretical discussion about the term and its various aspects of execution. Only those concept-based studies that have included the educational dimensions of the soft power are selected to be included in the literature review. The second group dealt with the empirical investigations using the term as a primary tool of inquiry. These case-centered studies are detached from the conceptual debate in the field and most of them limited it to the Nye's original theory. These studies can be considered as the testing ground of Nye's theory in which researchers advanced both positive and negative connotations. Some studies proved through empirical research that theory of soft power can be executed through higher education while some researchers found in some cases that this idea is not yielding the expected results in the actual field [20,22–25]. Hence, this review is not just limited to analyzing the positive views but also outlined the contradictory views to comprehend various perspectives on the topic.

3.4. Methodological Limitations

Limitations of the study are needed to be noted. First, this systematic review only included open access sources. Many sources (includes books and articles) that required to pay a fee in order to obtain access, were deliberately excluded to maintain the uniformity among the studies. Secondly, this article includes only English language sources and excluded the other sources written in other languages. Thirdly, this review included only those sources, which are peer-reviewed in journals. The assumption behind this choice is that research articles found in peer-reviewed journals are viewed as having quality and rigor, also guide further research.

Table 1 Selected articles for this review.

Title	Year	Type	Reference Countries	Domain	Conceptual Background	Major Argument
(1) Diplomacy and Education: A Systematic Review of Literature	(Khan et al., 2020)	Study of Literature	USA	Education	Soft power	It emphasizes the effectiveness of educational diplomacy in public diplomacy practices.

(2) Place Branding as a Soft Power Tool: A Systematic Review, Bibliometric Analysis, and Future Research Directions	(Chotisarn et al., 2025)	Study of Literature	China	Place branding as a soft power tool	Strategic deployment	Branding is a critical soft power tool that requires an integrated framework for evaluation
(3) Interconceptualizing Europe and Peace: Identity Building Under the European Heritage Label	(Lähdesmäki et al., 2019)	Concept Based, Critical views	France	Cultural Heritage and Identity Building in the European Union	European Heritage Label, institutions, practices	The European Union uses peace as a tool for identity building through the European Heritage Label
(4) Intra-European student mobility and the different meanings of 'Europe.'	(Mol, 2022)	Case-Centered Empirical Study	Sweden	Student mobility in Europe	European identity	The European exchange programmes, such as Erasmus
(5) Decolonizing "the University" in Europe: Theoretical and Methodological Implications of an Affective Assemblage Approach	(Michalinos Zembylas 2021)	Theoretical	Europe (general reference to European countries)	European Higher Education	The University" and decolonization"	Addressing the affective dimensions of decolonizing universities in Europe,
(6) China's Educational Soft Power through Confucius Institutes: A case Study of South Africa	(Johanes Caesario Martin et al.,2021)	Concept Based	China, South Africa	Diplomatic and Educational Relations, Cultural Values, and Internationalization of Chinese education, Foreign Policy Goals.	Soft Power	Confucius Institutes are China's main agents in its augmentation of Soft Power overseas.
(7) Cultural Diplomacy, Language Planning, and the Case of the University of Nairobi Confucius Institute	(A. Wheeler 2014)	Case Study	Kenya	Education/Cultural Exchange	Soft power diplomacy and language planning	Institutes are primarily used by China to enhance its image and achieve political and economic interests.
(8) Soft power and higher education: an examination of China's Confucius Institutes	(R. Yang 2010)	Case Study	Australia	Higher Education and International Relations	Soft power and higher education internationalization	China uses Confucius Institutes as a conduit to project its soft power globally through higher education.

(9) Expanding engagement : Africa – Europe transnational education programmes across the entrepreneurial lifecycle	(Fox et al., 2025)	Concept Based, Critical views	Ghana, Kenya - Nigeria - South Africa	Entrepreneurship Education	Transnational entrepreneurship education	Traditional university-based initiatives and leveraging the expertise of African entrepreneurship
(10) Reforming European Development Aid: Creating Investment Incentives for Sustainable Mining in Africa	(Murat Bayram et al., 2025)	Systematic Review	Africa	Economic Development and Resource Extraction	EU development aid	EU development aid policies should be reformed to serve as strategic investment incentives for sustainable mining in Africa.
(11) Exploring Cultural Diplomacy as Soft Power through Cultural Communication Exports : A Model of Power for Promoting Peace and Security	(Enaifoghe & Makhutla, 2020)	Study of Literature	Thailand - South Korea - Malaysia - Peru - United States - China - Japan - Iraq - Soviet Union	Soft Power in International Relations.	soft power and cultural diplomacy	Cultural diplomacy is a crucial tool of soft power that enhances national security and promotes peace and security through non-military.
(12) The Role of Cultural and Creative Industries as Drivers of Innovation in Strengthening Morocco's Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power	(Fouinna & Ouazzani, 2025)	Qualitative approach	United States, France, United Kingdom, South Korea, Japan, Germany, China	Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power	Morocco's cultural diplomacy	Innovation within Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) plays a fundamental role in strengthening Morocco's cultural diplomacy and soft power on a global scale.
(13) <u>Influence of Soft Power in shaping Diplomacy and Foreign Policy</u>	(Baruah, 2024)	Qualitative Approach	China, Turkey, India, United States	Soft Power in International Relations,	Soft power	Arsheeta Dutta Baruah is that soft power, particularly through cultural diplomacy, public opinion, and historical.
(14) The European Educational	(Gribanova, 2025)	Study of Literature	African countries	Education programs, mobility	EU foreign policy	European Union's educational diplomacy in

Diplomacy: African Perspective				schemes, and cultural diplomacy		Africa is a complex tool of soft power that aims to promote a positive image of Europe.
(15) Soft Power in the European Union's Strategic Partnership Diplomacy: The Erasmus+ Programme	(Laura C. Ferreira-Pereira et al., 2021)	Study of Literature	Brazil, Russia	Higher Education and International Relations/Diplomacy	EU's soft power	Higher education, particularly through programs like Erasmus+.
(16) Higher education scholarships as a soft power tool: an analysis of its role in the EU and Singapore. EU Centre Singapore Working Paper	(Charles Chia Sheng-Kai 2015)	Comparative case study	European Union, Singapore	Higher education scholarships	Soft power,	The role of higher education scholarships as a soft power tool, comparing the EU's Erasmus Mundus program with Singapore's scholarship program.
(17) Cultural Diplomacy and European Integration: The Role of Education and Civil Society in Romania and the Republic of Moldova	(Stoica et al., 2025)	Study of Literature	Romania and the Republic of Moldova	Education and Cultural Diplomacy	European Union's cultural diplomacy	Education plays a critical role in shaping attitudes towards Europe and facilitating the Europeanization process.
(18) A Soft Power Projection Framework: Education, Cultural Diplomacy, and Regional Development in Nigeria's Foreign Policy	(Kafayat Ololade Liadi 2024)	Study of Literature	Nigeria	Education, Cultural Diplomacy	Soft power	Nigeria needs a more coordinated and data-driven soft power policy to strengthen its regional leadership and global influence by leveraging education.
(19) EU Higher Education as Soft Power in Neighboring Countries: A Projection of Influence by Compelling Means	(Eva María Reina Botonero 2013)	Study of Literature	Egypt, Russia	Education programs and international cooperation	Tertiary education	European higher education is a key mechanism for the European Union to project soft power.

| (20) Decolonizing German and European Union foreign and development policies: Pragmatic steps towards better Africa–Europe relations | (Gwatiwa, 2024) | Concept Based, Critical views | Africa; Germany; European Union | International Relations and Development Policy | Africa-Europe relations | Decolonizing German and European Union foreign and development policies requires addressing lingering colonial legacies, power dynamics. |
| (21) The graduation of EU development studies: towards a post-colonial turn? | (Orbie, 2021) | Concept Based, Critical views | Ghana, Africa (general reference to African countries) | EU development policy and its decolonization | Post-colonial perspective | EU development studies , emphasizing the importance of addressing colonial logics and continuities in foreign aid and development policy. |

4. Results

The review of literature on the educational dimension of soft power is divided into five key sub-sections, which were collected by coding in Nvivo. These categories are based on their frequency in the literature. The most prevalent codes are translated into sub-sections, which are then separated into subsequent categories within each part to add validity. Each sub-section displays the key and dominating findings of the examined studies, which are listed below.

4.1. Internationalization of higher education

Internationalization of Higher Education (IHE) has been discussed and examined by several of scholars in relation to their research on international relations and education. The meaning of the term, its historical context, different analytical stances, and the causes behind the internationalization of higher education are highlighted in this section based on the material gathered from evaluated studies.

4.1.1. Definitions

Internationalization of higher education (IHE) is "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purposes, functions, or delivery of tertiary education," according to Knight (as stated in Ref. [26]). Vestal and Leestma (as cited in Ref. [26]) defined the term "international education" as follows: "a) study of the education of other peoples in other countries, b) educational exchanges and study abroad, c) technical assistance to educational development in other countries, d) international cooperation in educational development through international organizations, e) comparative and cross-cultural studies in a variety of subjects and disciplines, f) intercultural education." International education was first defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1974)1 as "the standardized national education for mutual international understanding, cooperation, and peace."

4.1.2. Evolution of IHE

IHE has historically been characterized by the mobility of international students, including those from Greece, Athens, Egypt, mediaeval Europe, and 20th-century North America [27]. Gultekin [26] has outlined the various phases of IHE, as shown in Table 1. The internationalization of education began in ancient Greece with the travels of teacher philosophers in the 5th-1st centuries. Later, the intellectual focus shifted to the Muslim world as they learned and engaged with the Hellenistic intellectual tradition and oriental knowledge from the East, particularly from China and India, during Europe's "Dark Age" [26]. However, in 1974, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural

Organization, or UNESCO, established the first Christian university in Europe. Revision of the 1974 Recommendation on Education for International Understanding, Cooperation, and Peace.
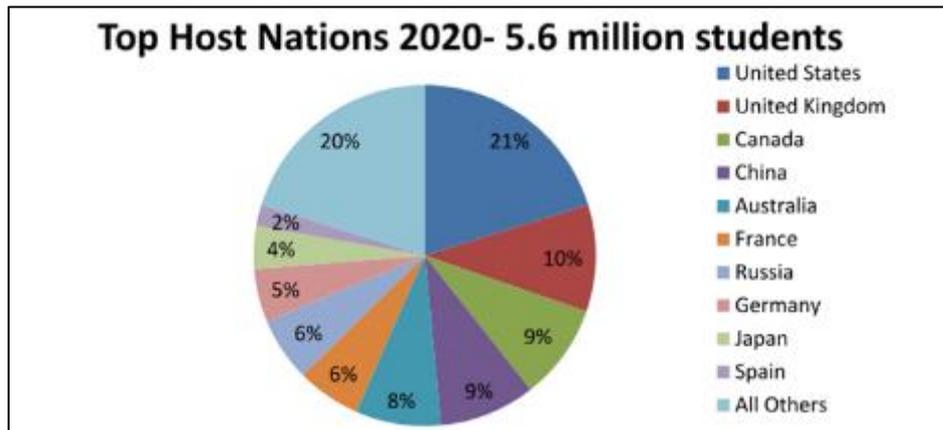
Source: Global Mobility Trends (Project Atlas, 2020) [70].

Figure 2 The top host destination countries for students in 2020

During the 13th and 14th centuries, Europe was the primary destination for foreign students [26]. In the 19th century, colonial countries modeled their education systems after their colonizers, such as India and other Asian, African, Caribbean, and North American countries, based on the British system. During the same period, Europe's two major universities

The use of international educational exchange as a foreign policy and diplomacy weapon began after World War II.Developed countries used education to influence developing countries' domestic affairs. It was the era of 'international diplomacy of education'. Later, with the arrival of the neoliberal paradigm in the 1980s, education became a weapon for achieving both political and economic aims [29]. In the 2000s, education saw "intense industrialization," including increased student mobility, immigration/visa liberalization, and the expansion of private universities worldwide. Since the 2010s, there has been a new complicated competitive environment in which many nations have made considerable investments in their national institutions in an attempt to elevate them to "world-class" level [26]. he purpose of these efforts are to attract more overseas students and gaining more political and economic advantages (Table 2).

4.1.3. Viewpoints on analysis

Several academicians explored the topic of IHE in their own settings. According to Francois [30], international education can be analyzed from three perspectives: philosophical, pedagogical, and comparative. Mok [31] outlined three distinct perspectives on the internationalization of higher education. First, there is the "internationalist" viewpoint, which praises the traditional version of internationalization of higher education, which is based on knowledge diffusion. Second, a "translocalist" perspective that reinforces the IHE's nationalistic viewpoint by favoring one's own national educational systems over those of other countries. Third, he articulated the "globalist" position, which holds that national education should promote intercultural understanding and cooperation among international organizations. Pan [32] identified four theoretical lenses for IHE that have been widely used in European and American higher education since the late 1990s: neoliberalism, soft power, global citizenship, and domestic internationalization. These ideas emphasize the marketization of universities and education to generate cash, improve host nations' reputation, increase cross-cultural understanding, and prepare international students for global job markets (33, 34). According to Magyar and Robinson-Pant [35], IHE attempts to integrate experiential learning into university courses to promote intercultural understanding and international cooperation. Wihlborg and Robson [36] contend that these discourses exclusively apply to western countries. All cross-country references are presented in the context of the United States and Europe. IHE should be redesigned to align with the structures, systems, and roles of developing countries.

In the contemporary era, Knight [37] classified IHE into three generations. The first generation, known as the 'classic model', involves international collaboration and student and staff exchanges. The second generation, known as the'satellite model', involves establishing satellite offices, branch campuses, research centers, and management offices overseas. The third generation builds on the second-generation paradigm by 'co-founding an international institution' in another country through international collaboration [37]. In their research on Brazil's education system, Aparecido and Schettini [38] discovered that universities monitor and take note of the political and economic environments of the

countries in which they choose to open offices, particularly in terms of soft power externalizations. Saudi Arabia uses soft power by establishing institutes and colleges in foreign countries to promote Islamic culture [39].

4.1.4. Drivers of IHE

The end of the Cold War has weakened political antagonism and expedited the trend of global integration. The increasing interdependence among world economies and advancements in digital technology have lessened political conflicts

Table 2 List of Major International Programmes Cited in the reviewed studies

Nation	Scholarship Programmes
US	Fulbright-Nehru Research Fellowships International Military and Training (IMET)
UK	The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan (CSFP)British Marshall and Chevening Scholarships Schemes Erasmus Mundus Programs
Germany	Germany's Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)
France	Eiffel Scholarships
Japan	MEXT Scholarships
Australia	Australian Leadership Awards and Endeavour Awards Asia Bound Grants Program
China	Chinese Government Scholarship Program (China Scholarship Council)

among countries. In the era of globalization and digitalization, classic political and military conflicts have evolved into challenges for national strength through economic, scientific, and technological advancements [40]. Globalization and digitalization have an impact on higher education, including knowledge societies, information and communication technologies, market-based economies, trade liberalization, and new governance structures [41]. Some scholars [42,43] argue that Beijing aims to re-globalize values and standards with 'Chinese Characteristics', appealing to the global audience. Globalization and digitization have been identified as key drivers of state IHE policies.

4.2. Reconstructing EU policies

This is the most problematic step, as we don't fully understand the ramifications of provincialization and engagement. According to Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis (2021), reconstruction involves recalibrating EU policies to redefine "shared commitments" and make them more "inclusive" and "transformational" by building on previous steps (pp. 293-294). These terms are undoubtedly ambiguous, but they are also consistent with development discourse, which frequently incorporates formerly anti-hegemonic concepts. The writers are somewhat unsure if rebuilding concerns increased debate within the present framework or a more fundamental rejection of existing power systems.

In order to investigate this subject in light of the contributions to this Volume allows us to distinguish between two scenarios. In the first, the EU continues its colonial policy. This does not necessarily contradict most authors' claims that EU development policy (and foreign action) are becoming increasingly interest-driven and dominated by migration, security, commercial, investment, and other reasons (Philippe De Bruycker, 2023). Once it is evident that such concerns have always influenced European development strategy, it is easier to discern the neocolonial path. According to Haastrup et al. (2021), the EU is now pursuing this strategy. Faced with ontological security issues caused by "stressors" such as China's growth, rising African agency, and immigration, the EU's approach has been to "exercise a coloniality of power". The authors make this point by citing recent initiatives such as the European Investment Plan (EIP), the European Fund for Sustainable Development (EFDS), the EPAs, the European Migration Trust Fund, the militarization of development cooperation, and a new agreement with the Organisation of African, Caribbean, and Pacific States (OACPS).

This volume's contributors are less certain of what a decolonial path might entail. Whether this can be accomplished within the current system, which is marked by power imbalances and "client-based relationships," as Dimier (2021) reminds us in this book, is a crucial question. Global political justice, according to Saltnes and Steingass (2021), can be attained without necessarily emphasizing equitable resource redistribution. In lieu of the conventional idea of redistributive justice, they decide to expand on the idea of partnership in a way that allows for "absence of domination." The article identifies two conditions for international partnerships: "absence of arbitrary power," which means the EU

does not use its power surplus to impose its will or preferences on others, and "a participatory approach," which allows for collaborative arrangements and decision-making procedures that give affected parties a fair hearing. Although they are simply "minimum conditions," research indicates that the EU has failed to meet them in relation to the ACP (Saltnes & Steingass, 2021). This emphasizes even more the key point, not discussed by the authors: whether global political fairness can be achieved at all without power redistribution.

4.3. European Union foreign policy towards Africa

The EU's foreign policy towards Africa is comprehensive, encompassing issues like as peace and security, development, energy, and migration (Okello et al., 2023). Although issues like as migration, trade, and industrialization have gained center stage in recent years, peace and security, as well as development (aid), have been at the forefront of European foreign policy toward Africa (Engel and Porto, 2010; Haastrup, 2013a, 2013b). The concept of the security-development nexus has served as the foundation for the focus on security and development. This concept was incorporated into the 2003 Cotonou Agreement, where Article 11 stated that 'the Parties [sic] acknowledge that without development and poverty reduction, there will be no sustainable peace and security, and that without peace and security, there can be no sustainable development' (European Commission and Africa Caribbean Pacific States Secretariat, 2000, p. 22). Until now, the implementation of EU foreign policy has been seen as inextricably linked to peace and security. However, this does not imply that development policy lacks autonomy. Far from it. The European Union's development policy prioritizes human and social development, as well as economic development, and is primarily executed through development cooperation and/or development aid (European Commission, n.d.). Development cooperation, financed through the European Development Fund (EDF), was a key component of the Cotonou Agreement (now expiring) (Gwatiwa, 2024).

The EU currently executes its foreign policy through the (Service for) Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI). The current implementation occurs under the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)-Global Europe, which runs from 2021 to 2027. The other component of this foreign policy is the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).2 In 2022, the FPI committed 59% of its budget to NDICI and 39% to CFSP (European Commission, 2023, p.8). The NDICI provided EUR 600 million to food security in African, Caribbean, and Pacific states (European Commission, 2022, p. 3) as well as aspects of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), formerly known as the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

4.4. Students' experiences in host countries

To understand how soft power can be developed through education, it is necessary to assess relationships between students and the host country. Students' experiences gained through this contact may have long-term implications for foreign policy results. According to Nye [10], human ties, visits, and exchanges facilitate the spread of culture. In view of this purpose, various case-centric empirical research has analyzed the impact of host countries' scholarship and exchange programs on participating students.

Hong, Lee, and Tian [25] performed an online survey (2017) of Chinese students who had studied or were presently enrolled in South Korean universities. The study's findings revealed a positive relationship between students' living experiences and their perceptions of the host country. Chinese students' pleasant experiences in South Korea turned them become advocates of the Korean government's policies and encouraged them to buy Korean products. However, the author noted a paradox in terms of support for the host country's conflicting foreign policy toward their home country.

Using a survey approach, Perilli [71] has investigated the opinions of students in ENP (Eastern Partnership)2 countries about the Erasmus + Program in relation to Europe's fellowship program. According to the author's findings, Erasmus participants are more likely to become informal ambassadors and bearers of the EU's soft power because of their socialization through P2P interactions ([71], p.02).

Anne and Elena (2022) investigated Nye's soft power conversion model for higher education in the context of Russian education. The author utilized the case study approach to test the proposition "higher education has been used as a tool to achieve foreign policy goals". The survey was conducted on two groups of international students: those who had just begun their studies and those who were nearing the end of their studies at three leading Russian universities. The study discovered that pursuing higher education at Russian institutions matches students' positions with the Russian perspective on international issues presented at these colleges.

In Turkey, a study by Aras and Mohammed [23] found that 115 out of 195 students who received the "Türkiye Bursları" government scholarship had a positive experience and 65% would recommend studying in Turkey to others. However,

despite favorable affirmations of Turkish image and culture, many students indicated discontent with the language of instruction, which the author advised should be considered by program policymakers (Gauttam et al., 2024).

5. Discussion

Higher education policy aims not only to promote the education system for human growth, but it has also evolved into an alternative model to the coercive strategies employed by states to spread their influence. In this scenario, education fits neatly into Nye's description of soft power, which allows countries to influence the choices of others through permission rather than compulsion. Each of the studies chosen for this systematic review elaborated on the various forms of higher education that countries use to achieve their vested national interests, such as educational diplomacy, student mobility, public diplomacy, foreign education policy, cultural diplomacy, scholarship and exchange programmes, and so on. In each example, education is portrayed as a desirable aspect of the country.

According to the literature cited in the findings section, higher education is becoming more and more important in both the domestic and international spheres and is now a crucial component of governments' foreign policies for managing international relations.
Nonetheless, the dispersed character of research in the fields of international relations and education was impeding our understanding of this important subject. As a result, this systematic review gathered all pertinent information about higher education and arranged it in the results section, which is based on the information in the chosen research. As a result, it accomplishes the paper's primary goal of giving an overview by methodically arranging and analyzing the body of existing material. The last two goals of the study are outlined in the sections that follow: (i) a framework of necessary circumstances to use education as a soft power resource; and (ii) opportunities for further research.

5.1. Crucial Prerequisites for Using Education as a Soft Power Asset

After examining the data in the results section, it was discovered that the following prerequisites must be met in order to use education as a soft power tool (see Fig. 3).

- A country must meet the basic needs of a modern economy by investing a significant portion of its resources in education, as well as having a rich cultural legacy and attractive political principles.
- To attract foreign students, a country should develop a standardized national education strategy and integrate it with the international educational and scientific arena. A country's IHE policy should prioritize the establishment of international partner institutions, the facilitation of academic and student exchange programs, and the provision of financial aid to foreign students.
- Quality educational institutions are crucial for a country's integration into the global education system. The country should have a high-quality university, host international conferences, and prioritize science, technology, research, and infrastructure.
- The country must provide academic and non-academic amenities for its pupils. The university should prioritize academic facilities such as internationally integrated curricula, short and long-term courses, inclusive pedagogy, interactions, a conducive academic environment, language training, and job placement assistance after completion. The state should cover non-academic costs such as accommodation, visas, and exposure to cultural and political values through exhibitions and festivals.
- To enhance cross-border student mobility, the state should send and receive students from different nations. This can be accomplished through economic help for students, exchange programs, joint degree programs, and educational cooperation agreements with foreign countries.

The aforementioned conditions are the minimum needs for a country to develop soft power. Meeting these parameters leads to excellent experiences for international students in the host country, ultimately influencing a nation's foreign policy outcomes.

5.2. Prospects for future research

Research indicates that higher education is a valuable soft power resource for countries. It is a developing field in the literature of higher education and international relations.

The research team suggests additional research in this field, particularly in developing nations, given the majority of published literature is focused on developed countries. Most studies demonstrate a pattern of student mobility from the south to the north. South-South educational cooperation and student mobility remain largely unexplored. A systematic

review can assess student experiences in different countries by analyzing empirical research findings. It will help governments understand the problems they face when using education as a soft power resource.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, an examination of the European Union's soft power initiatives in Africa reveals a varied and growing partnership, but one that is regularly weakened by a mismatch between its basic rhetoric and actual application. The EU has strategically used education programs, mobility schemes, and cultural diplomacy as vital instruments for promoting stability, mutual understanding, and long-term growth.

The EU's approach is increasingly characterized by a framework of "shared vulnerability," in which both continents endure internal and external challenges, creating a potential, if unrealized, opportunity for a more equal collaboration. Initiatives like the PEERS project for education policy reforms, the Erasmus+-funded READ project for renewable energy skills, and the Africa-Europe Partnerships for Culture (AEPC) show a strong commitment to investing in human capital and cultural exchange. These projects aim to address important skills gaps, empower youth, and develop networks that connect institutions and companies across two continents.

However, the efficiency and credibility of these soft power instruments are severely harmed by ongoing contradictions. While the EU encourages mobility and legal avenues for students, researchers, and artists, its migratory policies nevertheless create substantial impediments. According to research, Schengen visa procedures disproportionately exclude young West Africans due to bureaucratic, costly, and opaque decision-making processes, effectively immobilizing the demographic that these partnerships seek to attract. This "restrictive selectiveness" creates a substantial gap between the EU's inclusive development discourse and its exclusionary border actions.

Furthermore, migration cooperation is strongly securitized, with the primary focus on reducing irregular migration and negotiating bilateral return arrangements. This transactional approach frequently overlooks the broader development goal and the mutually beneficial possibilities of labor mobility, particularly in sectors key to the green and digital revolutions, where Europe faces significant labor deficits.

To truly redefine its power dynamics and build a reciprocal partnership, the EU must move beyond summit rhetoric. It needs to ensure that its soft power investments in education and culture are matched by coherent and fair mobility policies, thereby transforming strategic partnerships from a "model or placebo" into a tangible reality that serves the interests of both Africa and Europe.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors state that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work presented in this study.

Statement of Ethical Approval

This article is a comprehensive literature review, with no new experiments with human participants or animals conducted by any of the authors. All references and studies were cited in compliance with established academic and ethical criteria. As a result, this study did not require any ethical approval.

Statement of Informed Consent

As this study is a systematic review of previously published literature and did not involve direct interaction with or the collection of data from human subjects, informed consent was not applicable.

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