Canadian Journal of Political Science (2024), **57**, 602–625
doi:10.1017/S0008423924000301

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE/ÉTUDE ORIGINALE

Does Soft Power Look Different in Multinational Federations? International Education and Soft Power Politics in Canada/Quebec

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Abstract
While the study of soft power has gained significant scholarly attention, an understanding of soft power politics in diverse state models, and multinational federations specifically, is lacking. This study remedies this gap by exploring the connection between soft power and multinational federalism in the Canadian context, highlighting the tensions between the Canadian federal "majority" nation and Quebec's "minority" nation. Relying on the international education policy sphere and its soft power potential, the study extends the discussion of soft power beyond the typical unitary nation-state lens, elucidating the interaction of multiple (and contrasting) soft power rationales within one country. The study reveals that soft power politics can be exerted as much domestically as externally and can be pursued in a discorded fashion within a nation-state. Clearly, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of soft power, which considers its contested manifestation, and the context-specific ways it is utilized.

Résumé
Bien que l'étude du soft power (puissance douce) ait fait l'objet d'une attention particulière de la part des chercheurs, ses dynamiques sont moins établies et comprises dans divers modèles étatiques, particulièrement dans les fédérations multinationales. Cette étude comble cette lacune en explorant la relation entre le *soft power* et le fédéralisme multinational au Canada, mettant en scène les tensions entre la majorité canadienne au niveau fédéral et la nation minoritaire du Québec. En s'appuyant sur la sphère politique de l'éducation internationale et son potentiel de *soft power*, l'étude étend la discussion sur le *soft power* au-delà du prisme typique de l'État-nation, clarifiant l'interaction de ses logiques multiples (et contrastées) au sein d'un même pays. L'étude révèle que la politique de *soft power* peut s'exercer autant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur des frontières étatiques et peut être poursuivie de manière discordante au sein d'un État-nation. De toute évidence, il est nécessaire d'avoir une compréhension plus nuancée du *soft power* qui prenne en compte sa manifestation contestée et les manières spécifiques qu'elle est déployée dans divers contextes.

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Keywords: soft power; multinational federalism; Quebec; minority nationalism; international education policy

Mots-clés: puissance douce; fédéralisme multinational; Québec; nationalisme minoritaire; politique d'éducation internationale

Introduction

The study of soft power, understood as power deriving from "the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies" (Nye, 2004: 4) has proliferated since Nye first introduced the concept three decades ago. Although more recent work acknowledges the role of non-state actors, including academic, business and civil society organizations in influencing soft power, as well as the varieties of soft power beyond a "Euro-Atlantic locus" (Baykurt & De Grazia, 2021: 3), a more nuanced understanding of how soft power is manifested in diverse state models, including in multinational federal states, is lacking in the literature. Soft power, as a concept, is built on an underlying assumption of unitary state-driven policies directed toward the pursuit of uniform and seemingly uncontested national interests. However, in the case of multinational federal states, the very definition of national interests can be contested (McRoberts, 2001; Morin et al., 2022).

This article remedies this gap by exploring the connection between soft power and multinational federalism, using Canada as our case, and focusing on the soft power politics between Canada's "majority" nation and Quebec's "minority" nation, where different territorial scales are engaged in foreign policy endeavours. Relying on the international education (IE) policy sphere and its soft power potential, the study asks: *in what way does Canada's multinational federalism influence Canada and Quebec's potential for international education as soft power?*

Through the lens of Canada's multinational federalism, the study extends the discussion of soft power, problematizing the common unitary state-centred approach, as well as considering its manifestation at the substate scale. By tracing the evolution of IE policies in Canada and Quebec through two initiatives, Canadian/Quebec studies abroad and international student recruitment, the study reveals important divergences in the soft power rationales and approaches between the Canadian federal government and the Quebec provincial government. Findings show that while a shift away from soft power motivations is evidenced in the Canadian case, these remain more constant over time in Quebec. The findings also reveal how soft power politics are at odds domestically within Canada, contributing to the "under-studied domestic facet of public diplomacy" (Huijgh, 2019: 33). Taken together, these findings point to a need for a more nuanced understanding of soft power, one which considers its manifestations beyond the lens of the unitary nation-state paradigm to address the contested and context-specific ways in which it is relied upon and utilized.

The article opens by making connections between multinational federalism, soft power and international education. The pursuant section presents the empirical analysis, tracing the soft power potential of IE in Canada and Quebec focusing on Canadian/Quebec studies and international student recruitment policies. The article then discusses the findings against the backdrop of soft power theories and their relevance for multinational federal states.

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International Education as Soft Power in Multinational Federations

The concept of "soft power" has been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion since it was first described by Nye as occurring when "one country gets other countries to *want* what it wants… in contrast with the hard or command power of *ordering* others to do what it wants" (Nye, 1990: 166). Public diplomacy constitutes a key instrument for yielding soft power. Through public diplomacy, governments communicate with foreign publics promoting their values and fostering relations between countries (Melissen, 2008). As a core facet of public diplomacy, IE has strong soft power potential, heightening the attractiveness of a given country or culture in world politics (Nye, 2008; Peterson, 2014; Wojciuk, 2018). IE activities include exchanges, research partnerships, study abroad programs, virtual exchanges, foreign campuses, and the hosting of international students (Byrne and Hall 2011, Lomer, 2017; Potter, 2009; Trilokekar, 2010). Two IE activities are discussed in this article: area study programs abroad and international student recruitment.

Within broader cultural diplomacy initiatives, establishing area studies centres in foreign universities promotes a country's culture, language and history internationally. The education of international students is also identified as a strong soft power resource, based on the potential of international students to act as ambassadors for the host country upon their return. Governments also promote a positive image of their territory as worthy "host nations," to attract international students often through marketing and branding tools (Lomer et al., 2018; Stein, 2018; Moscovitz, 2022).

If, as noted by Huijgh, "successful public diplomacy starts at home," (Huijgh 2019: 70) understanding how internal tensions affect these initiatives and their outcomes is of particular importance. For Potter, "the sense of national identity or the level of pride shown by citizens in their country influences the level of success that a country will have in projecting its national identity abroad" (Potter, 2009: xiii). Our study on the soft power approaches of Canada and Quebec seeks to generate knowledge on the domestic dimension of public diplomacy by considering how the country's multinational federal dynamics and overlapping nationalist projects are reflected in soft power politics.

Anchoring soft power in the context of Canada's multinational federalism

Within the broader literature on Canadian federalism, multinational federalism is cited as a potential pathway to addressing the deep diversity in Canada, particularly as it relates to Quebec. A multinational state is made up of at least two distinct national groups and separate nation-building agendas between a majority nation, and one or more minority nations (Kymlicka, 2000; McRoberts, 2001). Federalism has the potential for ensuring stability by managing the presence of multiple political communities within one territory (Gagnon, 2009). Distinct from the model of territorial federalism exemplified in the American context, multinational federalism recognizes the existence of more than one *demos* within a state and provides the institutional flexibility to accommodate them (Gagnon and Tremblay, 2019). For Gagnon, multinational federalism promotes "the expression of national diversity within complex democratic settings" (Gagnon, 2021: 101). It

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ensures equity within multinational societies by safeguarding the development of distinct national communities within a state (Gagnon, 2009). By providing minority nations with a certain level of territorial autonomy and policy competencies, a multinational federal state provides minority communities with "a sense of 'separateness' within the state rather than a separation from the state" (Burgess, 2012: 24).

The preservation of minority nations within such a system remains precarious. They have accordingly been described as "fragile nations," as their capacity to promote their distinctiveness and autonomy within the state is not guaranteed (Guénette and Mathieu, 2018). While Quebec holds extensive control over its domestic affairs, struggles vis-à-vis the federal government over the allocation of power or "policy ownership" (McEwen, 2005) are common. As outlined by Couture Gagnon and Saint Pierre (2020: 117), Quebec's officials "have fought—and are still fighting—to keep their constitutional prerogatives (education, health, employment/labor, natural resources, etc.) under the control of the Quebec government and oppose federal encroachment." Thus, any policy implemented by the federal government, be it in areas of joint or strictly provincial jurisdiction is open to suspicion and can be seen as posing a threat to Quebec's national identity.

The tensions over policy ownership in Canada and Quebec are also apparent in the international relations sphere. Accordingly, in the realm of IE, Quebec has challenged the diplomatic status of the federal government, questioning its legitimacy to represent the Quebec state's interests. Describing Canada's soft power politics between the 1960s and 1980s, Cooper states:

> If there was a competitive component, it was not directed at external actors but at internal ones, especially the push by the Quebec government into the international arena… the province of Quebec also used culture as a weapon in its wider struggle with Canada's federal government over legislative powers, a struggle in which—during the early stages in the 1960s—Quebec placed the federal government on the defensive (Cooper, 2015: 44).

Quebec has a longstanding engagement in the international arena including in the IE domain, through representation at different education venues and participation in agreements as though it were a sovereign state, much to the annoyance of the federal government (Trilokekar, 2007). Through its foreign affairs, the Canadian government has promoted an ideal of national unity, establishing itself as the legitimate representative of all Canadians (Massie and Roussel, 2008). Yet, minority nations like Quebec conduct their international relations, or paradiplomacy, *in parallel* to that of central governments (Morin et al., 2022). Through paradiplomacy, minority nations gain legitimacy as state-like actors and demarcate themselves from the central state apparatus (Lecours and Moreno, 2003). The notion of protodiplomacy has also been applied to explain the international relations of substate entities like Quebec. Through protodiplomacy, substate governments seek to garner support for secessionist claims (Cornago, 2018; Duchacek, 1986; Kirkey et al., 2016). This distinction is important for the Quebec case, where international relations veer between para and protodiplomacy, largely depending on the party in power. Common to both "sovereigntist" (like the Parti Québécois) and "federalist" (like the Parti Liberal du Québec) parties in Quebec is the quest to promote its

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distinct identity through its foreign relations. The term "identity paradiplomacy" (Paquin, 2004) offers a useful meeting point between para and proto diplomacy. Through identity paradiplomacy, substate governments act as "identity entrepreneurs" striving to gain recognition on the world stage (Paquin, 2004: 30). Concerned with attractiveness and visibility, "identity paradiplomacy" is inherently about soft power. Through its international activity, whether under sovereigntist or federalist political parties, Quebec seeks to express its distinct identity, affirm its cultural distinctiveness and highlight its actorness as a minority nation within a larger state structure (Lecours, 2008).

Toward an understanding of soft power in multinational federal states: beyond the unitary nation state

Canada's soft power approaches have been the subject of research (Brooks, 2019; Cooper, 2015; Cull and Hawes, 2021; Potter, 2009; Trilokekar, 2010). Among the central themes connecting Canada to soft power is its status as a "middle power." For Potter (2009), middle powers have a proclivity toward a reliance on soft power as their capacity to exert influence on world politics by other means is limited. Cooper (2015: 36) similarly identifies Canada as "an exemplar of the traditional middle power model." While the scholarship on soft power typically takes the nation-state as a unit of analysis, a small number of studies have considered the connection between soft power and minority nations, including the Catalonian (Xifra, 2009), Basque (García, 2012) and Quebec (Couture Gagnon and Chapelle, 2019) cases. The dearth of research on the soft power approaches of minority nations is surprising as like middle powers their ability to exert influence in the global arena is limited. By highlighting the Quebec case in comparison to that of the federal government, this study seeks to provide additional empirical evidence on the soft power approaches of minority nations.

The existing literature on soft power also tends to view the nation-state as a unitary system, with little consideration paid to how federal or devolved systems of governance influence the use and role of soft power. There is to a certain degree, a *methodological statism*, or a "tendency to assume that there is a particular *form* intrinsic to all states" (Robertson and Dale, 2008: 1116). As substantiated below, Canada's multinational federalism influences the very rationale for soft power, the way it is exerted and its potential for influence. Through this lens, our research extends the understanding of Canada's soft power potential beyond its status as a middle power to investigate how its positioning as a multinational federal state influences the projection and potential of its soft power arsenal.

Method and Data

Examining more broadly *how Canada's federal dynamic translates in the soft power realm,* our research also investigates: i) How is soft power through IE pursued by the federal and Quebec governments? ii) How are tensions between majority and minority nations manifested in IE soft power initiatives? iii) How does the empirical discussion on IE in a multinational federation reframe our theoretical understanding of soft power?

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We rely on a historical case study approach, allowing for an in-depth investigation of multiple bounded systems (cases), approaching both Canada (the federal state) and Quebec (the province) in our comparative policy analysis (Creswell, 2007; Imbeau et al., 2000; Widdersheim, 2018). A historical approach allows us to capture the chronicle of events as well as the specific policy changes over a longitudinal time frame, from 1960-2020, providing empirical evidence of policy patterns (Widdersheim, 2018). The 1960s marked a pivotal decade for both Canada and Quebec's foreign affairs. It coincided with critical debates over Canada's international role and identity leading to the launch of the country's cultural and economic diplomacy initiatives. Quebec experienced the onset of its Quiet Revolution in 1960, prompting a large-scale modernization process and a national awakening. This period is concomitant with Quebec's official "arrival" on the international scene. Our data collection and analysis were finalized in 2021, limiting the presentation of data up to 2020. We refer to significant updates on the patterns discussed where relevant.

Our analysis included the review of academic and grey literature on Canada and Quebec's IE initiatives, and the analysis of policy documents and associated political discussions on the establishment of Canadian/Quebec studies centres abroad and the recruitment of international students.

Our primary data was retrieved through publicly available policy documents, including working files of Global Affairs Canada (GAC), the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC), Quebec's ministries of education and higher education, international relations and immigration. Certain files, including personal correspondence and political speeches, were accessed through the Library and Archives of Canada as well as the *Bibliothèque et archives nationale du Québec* (BANQ) websites. Excerpts on the Quebec case were translated from French by one of the authors. While writing each of the cases, the authors used a constant method of juxtaposing as this enabled comparison of the similarities and differences in policy approaches of the two governments (Manzon, 2014).

International Education as Soft Power in Canada/Quebec

Setting the context: who "owns" IE in Canada?

With education a provincial competency in Canada, there is no central ministry responsible for education. While lacking authority over education policy, the federal government is responsible for international affairs and trade, and in this way, IE "falls between the cracks of jurisdictional divides" (Trilokekar and Jones, 2020: 30). Thus, while the federal government has the sole authority to enter into agreements with other sovereign states and their representative bodies, this power does not extend to the *implementation* of the terms of these agreements if the subject matter, as in the case of education, falls under provincial jurisdiction. Broadly speaking, cultural policy, which includes education, gives rise to jurisdictional conflicts between the two levels of government, most notably with the province of Quebec (Gattinger et al., 2008). By default, when it comes to matters of IE, Global Affairs Canada[1], takes the lead role at the federal level, alongside other federal departments engaged in different aspects of IE, including the departments

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overseeing immigration, employment and economic development. It is thus through the guise of these broader policy domains that the federal government has pursued IE activities, albeit with challenges from the provinces, who view culture/education as their exclusive or at least primary jurisdiction.

As a provincial matter, education policy in Quebec is closely linked to culture and the projection of its identity. IE has long featured as a component of Quebec's international relations. Education cooperation with France was the basis for Quebec's very first international agreement in 1965. At the time, the decision to sign it was challenged by the federal government, which saw itself as the sole representative of Canada abroad. Ironically, in response to Quebec's cultural and academic exchanges, the federal government increased its spending on cultural relations with francophone countries. As Brooks states, "[d]omestic politics and the fear that Quebec might come to be seen as the only genuine voice abroad of French Canada stirred Ottawa to action" (Brooks, 2019: 20).

For Quebec, education was a matter of cultural sovereignty. The idea of the "international extention of Quebec's internal jurisdictions" became the basis for Quebec's international relations doctrine, proclaimed by its very first minister of international relations, Paul Gérin-Lajoie (Gérin-Lajoie, 12 April 1965). Hence, if the federal government uses its authority over foreign affairs to justify its engagement in IE, Quebec relies on its authority over education for this same engagement. A battle over IE policy "ownership" (McEwen, 2005) is apparent, with both the federal and Quebec governments viewing themselves as the rightful provider of this field. As the historical case analysis elucidates, once in place, IE activities are also in a constant battle of soft power politics between Canada's majority nation and Quebec's minority nation.

Tracing the soft power rationales of Canadian studies abroad

In June 1972, the federal government appointed Professor T. H. B Symons to chair the Commission on Canadian Studies. The Commission was mandated by the federal government amid widespread debate in Canada about the adequacy of Canadian content taught at universities and the "alarming" number of graduates lacking basic knowledge about "Canadian culture, history, government, geography, sciences and social dynamics in their homeland" (DEA, 1973). In its report, the Commission dedicated a volume on "Canadian studies abroad" creating Canadian studies as a legitimate academic area in the achievement of both national and foreign policy objectives.

The foreign policy appeal of Canadian studies was attributed in part to its potential to influence the perceptions of Canada abroad. As outlined in the report, "in most countries, universities are highly influential in the shaping of individual attitudes and perceptions, particularly as these relate to other nations" (Symons Report, 1975: 248). Government support for the promotion of Canadian studies internationally was deemed valuable for projecting a clearer image of Canada as according to the report, the country "is still rarely viewed abroad as a distinct country and society, whose history, politics and literature merit serious intellectual examination" (ibid). Likely as a direct result of these initiatives, the Department of External Affairs (DEA) acquired an entirely new mandate during this period

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and, by 1974, there was more direct and systematic support for the Canadian Studies Program Abroad (CSPA) within the wider ambit of the Department's cultural relations plans (Hilliker et al. 2017).[2] Among its aims, the program sought "to expand the influential community and keep them informed about and favorably disposed toward Canada; to raise awareness of Canadian realities overseas; to foster productive exchanges between Canadian and foreign universities; and to thereby improve Canada's bilateral relations" (DFAIT, 2006). Prior to the establishment of the CSPA, the promotion of Canadian studies was largely led by networks of academics through organizations like the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States (ACSUS), created in 1971. The government decision to help finance these initiatives brought a new level of impetus to the cause (Brooks, 2019).

Government senior officials viewed the CSPA as a valuable public diplomacy initiative and an effective tool to project Canada's image abroad and raise its profile among decision-makers in foreign countries. This would then translate into better promotion and marketing of Canadian products, ultimately improving Canada's international trade relations. Hence, several federal government representatives, who according to Brooks, were Canadian nationalists with a centralist bias, were surprised when they faced stiff opposition, predominantly from Quebec (Brooks, 2019). The CPSA went on to become a well-established dimension of Canada's cultural foreign policy, with headquarters, budget and personnel support. It provided the Department's *raison d'être* and was protected from departmental budget cuts whenever possible (DFAIT, 1988).

The program was initially established in target countries, including Britain (the first Centre for Canadian Studies was established at the University of Edinburgh in 1975), France, and Japan, expanding to Belgium, the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy. In 1981, the International Council for Canadian Studies was created to oversee the program's administration (Trilokekar, 2007). Foreign offices abroad also played an important role in developing Canadian studies centres; the program was viewed as a model of "cultural diplomacy to promote better understanding of Canada abroad" (DFAIT, 1988).

By 1992, Canadian studies was operational in 27 countries, having served 4,500 foreign academics, over 150,000 students annually, organized 200 conferences and seminars and launched ten journals in priority countries (DFAIT, 1993). However, beginning in 1991, the government's support for the CSPA began to dwindle. In the late 1990s, as cultural diplomacy became peripheral to Canadian foreign policy objectives (Graham, 1999), the program's budget was cut by 44 per cent. By 2008, the CSPA had substantially shrunk in size and importance for the Department. Here, we note a shift in rationales from soft power to economic considerations.

The program was renamed "Understanding Canada" in 2008 and was eventually terminated as a government program in 2012 (Brooks, 2019; Nimijean, 2013). The initial view of Canadian studies as an important tool for Canada's soft power declined over time, and under Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006-2015), the federal government cut most investments in diplomacy, including the CSPA, which were by then viewed as "bureaucratic and burdensome with dubious results" (Nimijean, 2013: para 18). Ironically, Canada's disinvestment in soft power came at a time when other middle-power countries were increasing their investments in

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cultural diplomacy. As Cooper states, "in more recent years, Canada has become more instrumental, shifting the emphasis away from symbolic projection to concrete delivery, with a focus on the economic and security domains" (Cooper, 2015: 32).

The removal of government support for the promotion of Canadian studies was not only perceived as undermining Canada's influence but also viewed as detrimental to the Canadian economy, as it was arguably generating more income than its costs. Interestingly, among the arguments in favour of continued support for the program was the notion that researchers on Canada or, *Canadianists*, played an important role in promoting a unified vision of Canada, "when it appeared as though Quebecers might vote to separate from Canada in 1995" (Brooks, 2019: 30). With the ousting of Harper's conservative government in 2015, and the electoral victory of Justin Trudeau, Canada has sought to prove "it is back" and "recommitted" to a sustained public policy agenda (Hawes, 2021). The 2019 Senate report, *Cultural Diplomacy at the Front Stage of Canada's Foreign Policy*, re-affirmed the role of cultural diplomacy, and of education, as an important instrument of foreign policy, recommending among other initiatives that Global Affairs Canada support the creation of a modernized Canadian studies program (Government of Canada, 2019). However, there has been no substantial commitment in this direction.

Tracing the soft power rationales of Quebec studies abroad

The Symons Commission Report on the development of Canadian studies was met with rebuke in Quebec. Published on the heels of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, a period of national awakening for the province, the report was heavily criticized by the newly elected sovereigntist Parti Québécois (Harvey, 2001). Its recommendations for promoting Canadian studies were construed as a federal government plan to cultivate an "intellectual basis" for Canadian nationalism (MEDC, 1978: 23). For the Quebec government, the "federal government is presenting itself as the government of all Canadians. On the international level, it is the only voice which is meant to represent the voice of Canadians" (MEDC, 1978: 25). As more than "a province like all others" and with a people "conscious of its national identity" (MEDC, 1978: 35), Quebec had a different cultural identity to promote, necessitating a distinct cultural development policy. It is in this broader discussion of Quebec's cultural policy that the promotion of Quebec studies emerged.

The first Quebec studies centres abroad were established with the financial assistance of the Ministry of Intergovernmental Relations (MRIG)[3], at the University of Treves in Germany (1976) and the University of Liège in Belgium (1977) (Harvey, 2001). It was the American context, however, which became the focus of significant government investment for the promotion of Quebec studies. Following the PQ's electoral victory in 1976 and the subsequent surge of the sovereignty question, concerns over the negative image of Quebec in the United States rose. This negative image had the potential to trigger significant financial backlash as American businesses projected risks in their commercial dealings with Quebec (Couture Gagnon and Chapelle, 2019; Paquin, 2016). In response, *Opération Amérique* was launched, spearheading new activities to promote Quebec among the American public and political elite, aiming to go beyond a limited government-to-government approach

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(Balthazar and Hero, 1999). Education diplomacy was at the heart of this initiative with plans for developing Quebec studies in American universities and strengthening teaching on Quebec through French language university programs.

Opération Amérique prompted the MRIG's active engagement in the promotion of Quebec studies in the US. In 1984, it supported the establishment of the American Council for Quebec Studies (ACQS). Founded by members of the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States (ACSUS), the ACQS sought to create a space dedicated to the study of Quebec specifically (Moss 2001). Within a year, approximately 150 American institutions had a Quebec-oriented study program, partially financed by the Quebec government (MAIG 1985). For the PQ, which was laying the groundwork for an eventual referendum on independence, the dissemination of Quebec's history, culture and language in the US would help solidify the external perceptions of Quebec as a distinct nation.

The fact that ACQS was not officially a political organization downplayed the potential risk, and the federal government came to accept its establishment (Balthazar and Hero, 1999). Of note, Quebec delegations would participate in both the ACSUS and ACQS bi-annual conferences. In fact, these conferences commonly included opening remarks by representatives of both the federal and Quebec governments. The organizations also became arenas where the diverging interests between levels of government played out. Both used the organization's forums to promote their visions of Canada and project their version of the country's image, that is, a unified federal Canada vs. a sovereign independent Quebec.

The dual soft power politics are on display at ACSUS and ACQS conferences, through speeches delivered by representatives of the federal and Quebec governments. At the 1996 ACQS conference in Quebec City, Stéphane Dion, Canada's minister of foreign affairs advocated a federalist vision of Canada, one where Quebec belonged as a distinct yet fundamental part of the country.

> I would like to suggest today that this Quebec creativity is stimulated by its belonging to Canada and that in return, Canada is enriched by the contribution of Quebec society. I want to show that Quebecers and other Canadians have every reason to stay together (cited in Dion, 1996: 14).... We can recognize, in complete confidence, Quebec's distinctiveness as a fundamental characteristic of our country (22).

The opening speech given by Quebec's minister of international relations, Sylvain Simard, made the case for Quebec sovereignty (Balthazar and Hero, 1999). The following year at ACSUS in Minnesota, Simard proclaimed: "It is no secret that the Parti Québécois government feels that Quebec now has both the resources and the maturity to create a sovereign state, one which will enable us to ensure our own cultural existence" (S. Simard, 21 November 1997).

The success of the ACQS, combined with the growing number of Quebec Studies centres established across Europe throughout the 1980s and 1990s, created the impetus for the establishment of the International Association for Quebec Studies (*Association international d'études québécoises* AIEQ) in 1997. With the goal of "encouraging and supporting the development of a better understanding, comprehension and appreciation of Quebec studies around the world" (AIEQ,

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2018: 1), the AIEQ was viewed as a critical tool of Quebec's public diplomacy, one which would support Quebec's "increased influence" in the world by cultivating its international image (MRI, 2003: 74). While the creation of the AIEQ was deemed necessary to ensure Quebec was representing itself internationally, the strengthening of Canadian studies around the world was also an opportunity to develop its own Quebec studies networks around the world. In fact, the niche of Quebec studies abroad was initially developed within the network of Canadian studies centres (Harvey, 2001).

As outlined by Chartier (2002: 39), Canadian studies centres abroad "opened up an institutional route for Quebec studies…" as they were better funded and already structured. Yet, with time "[a]s Quebec studies become institutionalized they end up detaching themselves from Canadian studies, or at least establishing their specificity within Canadian studies" (47). Part of the problem was that the network of Canadian studies could not ensure the sustainability of Quebec studies internationally. This is evidenced by implications of the 2012 cancellation of the "Understanding Canada" program on Quebec studies. The decision was considered a challenge for the AIEQ noting "a loss of 1.5 million dollars for *Québécists* in Quebec and abroad" (AIEQ, 2015: 68). Moreover, while the axing of the Understanding Canada program saw the loss of federal funding for ACSUS, as of 2023, the Quebec government continues to fund this initiative (MRIF, 2023). A clear clash of soft powers is apparent. By manoeuvring within the framework of Canadian studies, on the one hand, Quebec made its intricate and unique status as a minority nation known and exerted its soft power. On the other hand, in paradoxical ways, it used the very contested federal apparatus as a springboard to demarcate itself from the federal government.

In recent years, the AIEQ has been the subject of significant budget cuts by the MRI, perhaps signalling shifting rationales toward economic considerations. Toward the end of 2014, under PLQ leadership, Quebec's Treasury Council announced plans to end the MRI's funding to the AIEQ, which would effectively compel it to shut its doors by the first quarter of 2015 (Gervais, 2014). For the political opposition, the decision was an affront to Quebec's distinctiveness within Canada. Voicing concern over the move, PQ representative Carole Poirier notes, "[t]he liberals are using austerity measures to justify cuts aiming to minimize Quebec's influence abroad. For [Premier] Philippe Couillard, Quebec should simply be a Canadian province like the others" (PQ, 14 January 2015). The implication here is that as a minority nation, Quebec requires public diplomacy tools, which the other provinces can do without.

Unlike the case of the federal government, the elimination of the AIEQ's budget was ultimately walked back, with the MRI assuring the organization of its continued support for the promotion of Quebec studies. While the AIEQ's budget line from the MRI was saved, it was reduced by 20% that same year, leading to a significant reduction in activities (Gervais, 2014). In 2018, the AIEQ was at risk again when the PLQ announced its decision to cut funding by an additional 40 percent. Opposition leaders and academics were quick to defend the organization and its singificance for Quebec's international influence. The pressure exerted on the government led it to double down on its decision to cut funding. This time, it put forth what it deemed to be a more sustainable solution to the budget difficulties. To ensure consistent financing for AIEQ, in 2018, the MRI established

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a partnership with the National Research Fund, through which the AIEQ's funding would be managed from then on (AIEQ, 2018.)

Tracing the soft power rationales around international student recruitment in Canada

The federal government's engagement with international student recruitment began within the framework of overseas development assistance (ODA) in the late 1940s and constituted an important component of Canada's postwar foreign policy, consolidating the role of Canadian universities in IE (Bond and Lemasson, 1999). During this time, the education sector deployed among the world's largest number of technical assistance personnel, including faculty and students to developing countries and hosting students from developing countries on Canadian campuses. The Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Program (CSFP) consolidated academic exchanges with the newly independent countries of the Commonwealth serving the federal government's interests through "cultural diplomacy and a recognition that education could serve as a Canadian foreign policy tool" (Bergfalk, n.d.: 2). Canadian campuses first hosted international students from commonwealth countries of the developing world, students largely funded by Canadian tax dollars.

The perception toward international students started changing dramatically from the 1980s onwards with the growing importance of trade and commerce in foreign policy and the government's perceived link between cultural diplomacy and trade goals. Reflecting this shift was the amalgamation of the DEA into a single Department of External Affairs and Trade in 1995 under Jean Chretien's Liberal Party. Cultural activities abroad were now being measured by their direct contribution to economic development objectives and as a vehicle for the promotion of Canadian cultural industries. This was also reflected in how international students came to be perceived. There was growing sentiment that international students should not be supported by Canadian tax dollars, rather a new policy approach charging international students full tuition fees was to be introduced (McCartney, 2016; Trilokekar and El Masri, 2019). This new policy went hand in hand with the government's growing emphasis on economy and trade as defining features of its foreign policy (Trilokekar, 2007).

With this new policy focus, higher education was seen as a mechanism to meet the need for exports and access to key international markets. IE, through the recruitment of international students, took on a firm economic rationale. International students' value came to be measured strictly in terms of dollars (estimated then at 472 million) leading to discussions on developing a marketing effort within Canadian embassies for promoting Canadian education (DFAIT, 1991: 8). In 1991, the government set up its first education office in Taiwan (DFAIT, 1994), which was followed in 1995 by an agreement between DFAIT, the Canadian International Development Agency, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, and the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, to set up the first eight Canadian Education Centres (CEC).

Through the CECs and the marketing of Canadian universities, Canada's international student recruitment became increasingly tied to its trade and economic

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competitiveness goals, slowly consolidating itself as one of the top destinations of choice for international students. As Sergio Marchi, minister of international trade at the time, put it: "Education is now an industry. Canada needs to approach the international market place for education services with the same discipline and commitment that we bring to other sectors" (CMEC, 1998). Marchi took the lead within DFAIT to create an education-marketing unit for the promotion of Canadian education in September 1998. The unit was later renamed Edu Canada and provided with new funding to strengthen its mandate and establish a Canadian international education brand.

In the 2000s, the rationalization of international student recruitment was increasingly focused on an immigration lens. The importance of international student recruitment for Canada's economy was increasingly linked to its need for skilled immigrants, viewed as a linchpin to "significantly improve Canada's performance in the recruitment of foreign talent, including foreign students, by means of both the permanent immigrant and the temporary foreign workers programs" (Industry Canada, 2002: 9). During this time, the new Immigration and Refugee Protection Act established a separate category of temporary residents for international students in Canada with a view to facilitating their study and work opportunities. In 2006, the Harper government released its economic plan *Advantage Canada,* in which it noted a policy commitment to recruiting the "best" foreign students to Canada and providing the country with a highly skilled Canadian workforce best positioned to "adapt quickly to the Canadian economy" (Department of Finance, 2006: 49). In the next few years, government initiatives were rolled out facilitating the integration of international students as permanent residents in Canada, including novel immigration routes such as the "Canadian Experience Class" launched in 2008.

IE thus became synonymous with marketing Canadian education abroad as a way to recruit and retain international students. It was deemed essential for Canadian national prosperity given declining demographics and the need for a young, educated labour force. To achieve these policy objectives, the federal government relied on the cooperation of provinces, who at times, resisted what they viewed as federal infringement in matters of their rightful jurisdiction (Trilokekar and El Masri, 2020). Provinces resisted discussions on developing a national policy on international students (CMEC, 1991). When Edu Canada wanted to establish a Canadian brand for marketing IE, it took over 18 months to come to an agreement with the provinces. With growing global competition, provinces, with the exception of Quebec, slowly shifted their perspective. Most accepted the need for a federal role in marketing Canadian education.

In 2014, Canada's first IE strategy was announced, aimed at doubling the number of international students to Canada by 2022 and "increasing the number of international students choosing to remain in Canada as permanent residents after graduation" (DFATD, 2014: 17). In the years preceding the strategy, the department of foreign affairs, trade and development discussed the potential of an IE strategy to serve as a "key vehicle to engage with other countries and to share our Canadian values worldwide" (DFATD, 2012: 38). The rationales for the development of an IE strategy were thus accompanied by soft power ideals of projecting "Canadian values." A second IE strategy was rolled out under the

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Liberal Party in 2019. International student recruitment and retention remained a central focus of the strategy with the caveat to diversify the countries from which international students come to Canada, as well as their fields, levels of study, and locations of study within Canada (GAC, 2019). While soft power ideals are articulated in the government justification for an IE strategy, the policies themselves are much more focused on economic rationales. The most recent policy changes to the international student program address improving program integrity but are also equally concerned with aligning international student recruitment with Canadian labour market needs (GOC, 2024). The recurring theme of economic motivation directs Canada's interest in international student recruitment and retention.

Tracing the soft power rationales around international student recruitment in Quebec

Hosting international students has long been a central feature of Quebec's IE activities. The 1965 Franco-Quebec education cooperation agreement constituted the first official policy encouraging inward and outward student mobility. The agreement was underpinned by the "need to establish exchanges with brethren countries and with which [Quebec] shares a common heritage" (Gérin-Lajoie, 22 April 1965 cited in Michaud and Simard, 2018). For Gérin-Lajoie, the agreement reflected "Quebec's determination to take the place it deserves in the contemporary world" and to project Quebec's "true" image. The agreement was also perceived as vital to differentiate Quebec from "English Canada" and to challenge the federal government's ability to negotiate internationally on behalf of Quebec. Quebec's interests were not only different from the rest of Canada's, but they were also incompatible with those promoted by the federal government.

In 1978, student mobility between Quebec and France was strengthened by the *Agreement on Matters of Student Mobility at the University Level*, establishing reciprocal tuition rates between Québécois and French exchange students. This placed French students at a considerable advantage compared to other international students and even those from other Canadian provinces. As per the agreement, a student from Toronto would pay twice as much as a student from Paris to study in Quebec. This paradox reflects Quebec's paradiplomatic aims, namely, to promote its distinct francophone identity in part by prioritizing its relations with France.

The agreement with France served as an impetus for additional bilateral initiatives on student exchanges with other countries, and enriching Quebec's relations with its partners, especially Francophone ones (MAI 1991). The Quebec government has since signed 40 bilateral agreements for tuition exemptions, most recently with Belgium's French community in 2018. Of note is that among the 40 countries with which Quebec has signed student mobility agreements, over 60% can be considered either part of the *Francophonie* or as having francophone colonial heritage (MEES, 2017). This supports existing research on Quebec's IE initiatives tying them to its ambitions in the *Francophonie (*Barbarič, 2020; Moscovitz, 2022). *S*upporting student exchanges aligned with Quebec's soft power objectives of promoting its image and interests internationally. International students were viewed as potential

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ambassadors for Quebec, relaying a positive image to their home countries upon their return (MAI, 1991).

While over the years, efforts grew to attract international students from a broader pool of countries, French citizens remain among the highest percentage of Quebec's international students, constituting over 33% compared to only 3% of the total number of international students in Canada (CBIE, 2023; Government of Quebec, 2021). Yet, the soft power ideals underpinning the agreement with France were eventually met with practical and importantly, financial rationales challenging its legitimacy in Quebec. Responding to heightened calls for a balancing of the higher education budget, in 2014, the Quebec Liberal Party announced plans to renegotiate the 1978 agreement. According to the plan put forth by Premier Philippe Couillard, from the following September, undergraduate French students in Quebec would pay a tuition rate equivalent to Canadian students from outside Quebec. According to the government, the amendment would allow it to save close to ten million dollars in the transitional 2015-2016 year, and 30 million dollars annually in the years to follow (FQ, 2014). The rationales behind the renegotiation of the 1978 agreement were purely financial.

The decision was criticized both in Quebec and France. The head of the Federation of Quebec Students accused the government of considering French students as a "budgetary problem" as opposed to recognizing "the positive economic, demographic and cultural benefits these students bring" (Oti, 24 November 2014). The delicate nature of the decision to re-negotiate the longstanding agreement with France was not lost on the Quebec government. The final renegotiation agreement included provisions aimed at maintaining a "privileged" status for French students. This included the fact that the new rates were directed only to undergraduates and that it was equivalent to the one provided to Canadians outside Quebec. Those opposing the renegotiation saw it as a betrayal of the special relationship and to Quebec's ambitions as a paradiplomatic actor. For the PLQ representatives pushing it forward, it was a necessary sacrifice to make. Yet, the decision was not cut and dry. It was the subject of important negotiation and balancing of interests by the government. The issue of tuition fees is currently the subject of intense debate in Quebec following the 2023 announcement of a tuition fee hike for international students.[4] Of note, however, is that French and Belgian students are not affected by this change in fees as per the reciprocal agreements.

Akin to the federal government's shifting rationales for IE, over the years, the Quebec government also began to view the potential of international students in immigration terms. In 2009, *the programme d'éxperience québécoise* (PEQ) was launched, initiating a fast-track immigration for international students graduating from Quebec institutions. The program closely resembled the "Canadian Experience Class" immigration route promoted at the federal level, incorporating similar aims—namely to benefit from high-skilled labour and immigration and counterbalance the demographic deficit. Yet, in the Quebec case, the IE-immigration connection is also explicitly linked to its nation-building agenda. International students, as "individuals who are already on the territory for a while, know and share the values of Quebec" (MIDI, 2015: 1) are described as prime candidates for immigration. The desire to attract French-speaking students specifically is at the core of the PEQ. The immigration-IE connection in Quebec

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is therefore not only about solving labour deficits but also about sustaining French as the national language and maintaining a distinct culture.

The value of international students for Quebec led to heightened efforts to recruit and attract international students to the territory as a (separate) study destination. Throughout the 1990s, Quebec's delegations abroad were engaged in student fairs aimed at attracting international students to its universities. Akin to the federal example, the IE marketing goal reflects the rising economic rationales behind IE. A discourse of "competition" is recurring in policy discussions on IE marketing, linked to the goal of ensuring Quebec "remains competitive on the international scene" (MRIF, 2017: 26). In 2009, the Ministry of Education in coordination with the Ministry of International Relations initiated the development of an online portal "study in Quebec" to "position Quebec as a destination of choice for international students" (MRI, 2011: 19).

Quebec's desire to better promote itself as a study destination was accelerated by the federal government's announcement of its 2014 IE strategy. The Quebec government resisted the strategy, viewing it as a federal intrusion in provincial affairs, and one which did not take into account the "specificities of Quebec" (PQ, 2014). In its 2017 international policy, Quebec announced plans for the development of an international education strategy of its own aimed to "enhance the prospecting and promotional capacities of educational institutions…" (MRIF, 2017: 30). A separate strategy and marketing initiative was viewed as essential. Quebec's opposition to the federal initiative in marketing Canada as a study destination and its pursuance of separate initiatives for Quebec are indicative of internal competition. Hence, beyond the economic competitiveness underpinning IE marketing efforts, in this case, competition is also about image and international recognition.

IE and soft power politics in Canada and Quebec: differentiated and colliding

Examining the historical development of two IE initiatives in Canada and Quebec, our study sought to shed light on how Canada's multinational federalism influences the soft power potential of IE. This inquiry unearthed two core findings: first, that soft power politics in Canada's multinational federation are exerted as much domestically as they are externally, lending weight to the idea of public diplomacy as "Janus faced" (Potter, 2009). Second, the findings showcased an important distinction between the two cases. While in Canada, soft power interests are supplanted by economic rationales, in Quebec, though tensions between the economic and soft power interests are apparent, the latter are maintained over time, suggesting distinct rationales within the multinational federation for the pursuit of soft power.

Soft power is typically associated with relations *between* countries. This is not surprising as the concept originated in the broader international relations scholarship (Nye, 2022). This study's findings, however, point to the interaction of soft power politics *within* a country. Domestically, within Canada, the federal and Quebec governments are in a constant power struggle over "policy ownership" (McEwen, 2005) in various domains, including IE. The federal government's investments in education/cultural diplomacy were originally a counter-reaction to Quebec's increased projection of its identity abroad. Accordingly, both domestic

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and foreign policy interests motivated them. Without a centralized Ministry of Education, and with education competencies decentralized to the provinces, the federal government's role in matters of IE is rather weak and nebulous, while Quebec's is strengthened. Tensions between the two levels of government over IE jurisdictions are deep as both see themselves as legitimate policy actors in this field. The balance of power within Canada therefore has an impact on the ability of both the federal and Quebec governments to exert their soft power externally.

For Quebec, the federal government's soft power initiatives are problematic. As described by Lecours, "[i]n the case of Quebec, for example, a central justification for paradiplomacy is that the specific identity of Quebecers, and also sometimes their interests cannot be adequately represented internationally by the Canadian government" (Lecours, 2008: 12). The same rationale initiated the Quebec studies programs and the discussions of a separate international education policy for Quebec. As a minority nation, Quebec has its own soft power to project. The dual soft power projects are not only conducted in parallel, but they are also at times opposing and competing forces. In the promotion of Canadian and Quebec studies abroad and the international student recruitment policies, a clash of soft power between both scales of government is apparent, as they are jostling for enhanced (and importantly distinct) visibility on the international stage. On one hand, Canada is aiming to present a unified image, while Quebec bases its projection on a distinct and unique image. In the case of international student recruitment efforts, competition, which tends to be discussed in economic terms, is also about image and international recognition (see Moscovitz, 2022). Here again, Quebec's investments in soft power diplomacy were geared toward setting itself apart from other provinces and the interests of the federal government domestically. The two soft power strategies are in competition and even at times incompatible.

The study also reveals distinct soft power trajectories between Canada and Quebec. Over time, a weakening of soft power motives at both levels of government to more economically oriented interests is identified. Certainly, both levels of government are influenced by neoliberal orientations and more pragmatic approaches. Yet in Quebec, the balance of scale toward a strictly economic imperative is less clear-cut as soft power rationales are seemingly maintained over time. Since the mid-1980s, the federal government has drifted away from investments in cultural/educational diplomacy to pursuing interests that directly meet its national economic and prosperity agendas. Cultural diplomacy programs, such as the Canadian studies programs, are seen as ineffective, expensive and disposable, while the recruitment of international students, which brings revenues and direct economic benefits to Canada, is prioritized. It is indeed ironic, yet symbolic, that the Harper government cut the funding to CSPA at the same time as he announced the development of an IE strategy for Canada.

In Quebec, there are pressures to stop investments in Quebec studies and reduce fee subsidies for international students from France. There are also indications of a steering of IE toward more economic gain, to support initiatives that enhance Quebec's prosperity, aligning it with the economic competitiveness narrative at the federal level. The economic rationales are also, akin to the federal government,

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described in terms of their domestic implications, as the lack of a marketing strategy for Quebec is seen as compromising the "national targets on the workforce to meet the needs of the labour market and Quebec's economy" (MEES, 2018). However, in the case of Quebec, identity paradiplomacy comes into play to reinforce and eventually support a soft power rationale for pursuing IE. To date, the Quebec case illustrates a victory of soft power rationales over economic imperatives. The need to invest in its distinct image vis-à-vis the federal government, both nationally and internationally, as well as its desire to maintain its francophone character, permeate any government efforts to substantially reduce funding and/or close programs that promote its soft power. This same rationale does not hold in the case of the federal government.

Conclusion: Rethinking Soft Power beyond a Unitary Nation-State Lens

Our comparative study of Canada and Quebec's IE initiatives and their soft power rationales adds nuance to the common conceptualizations of soft power and opens possibilities for rethinking its manifestations in the current international system. Taken together, our two overarching findings, the clash of soft power politics domestically and the diverging soft power trajectories, are telling for the very conceptualization of soft power.

The unitary notion of soft power, as rooted in the study of power in international relations, and in the importunity to advance seemingly uncontested national interests, is challenged. Our cases clearly suggest that with diverging international relations and national interests as a result of majority-minority dynamics, soft power can be pursued in a divergent and discorded fashion within a nation-state. Minority nations like Quebec have a distinct set of rationales underpinning their desire to engage in paradiplomacy, including nation-building and the promotion of a distinct national identity. In this way, the exertion of soft power should not only be understood in terms of power *between* countries but also as an outcome of power *within* them.

In the Canada/Quebec context, soft power potential is influenced by power struggles occurring domestically. The ability of a government to exert soft power can either be facilitated or circumvented depending on the balance of power within the country. This extends the current discussion around the domestic dimension of public diplomacy to understanding the uncomfortable interactions between diverging soft power interests within one country, advancing knowledge on the domestic dimension of public policy. This study also contributes to critical studies on soft power as it raises the question: how does the very definition of soft power as the "attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies" (Nye, 2004) shift meaning within federations that are home to multiple nations? Who defines national interests when the very concept of the nation state is contested? Taking it a step further and following McRoberts (2001) proposition, what form can soft power take in a "post-modern state," which transcends nationalism?

Our case studies also suggest that there is a tension between economic imperatives and investment in soft power strategies. At the federal level, Canada has shifted its focus from investing in soft power/public diplomacy initiatives to

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more instrumental and pragmatic vs. ideological rationales and approaches. This same impetus to reduce provincial investment in soft power tools and adopt more neoliberal discourses is also identified in Quebec. Yet, soft power, as currently theorized, assumes a more ideological engagement of culture, identity and global positioning. The study of soft power could benefit from more in-depth accounts of shifting policy objectives and the tensions that arise between pragmatic and ideological objectives. For example, in the Quebec case, a balance between the economic and perceived soft power interests of IE is maintained. The continued investment in soft power for Quebec can be attributed to its identity paradiplomacy—its desire to promote and strengthen its nation-building agenda domestically through the projection of a strong image and actorness abroad. As a minority nation striving to maintain its cultural distinctiveness, the "boomerang" effect of soft power initiatives is of particular importance. Ironically, even though the federal government invested in cultural diplomacy as a reaction to Quebec's efforts, at present for the federal government, soft power is no longer deemed a priority. This contemporary context supports the need to understand soft power as a differentiated process and practice within states. We agree with Baykurt and De Grazia (2021) when they suggest that "as the concept of soft power was disseminated globally, it became a key word that concealed more then it revealed" (3) and that it is now time to make more visible its inherent assumptions, contradictions and possibilities.

Acknowledgements. We would like to thank the Editor and anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback on a previous version of the article. We are also grateful to Jane Moss, former President of the American Council for Quebec Studies, who provided us with crucial background knowledge on Quebec Studies in the United States. Part of Hannah Moscovitz's work on this research was conducted during her postdoctoral studies at the University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education and supported by the Israel Science Foundation (Grant 75/19).

Competing interests. The authors declare none.

Notes

1 Formerly the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAIT) and Department of External Affairs (DEA).

2 For a comprehensive account of the CSPA in relation to soft power see Brooks 2019.

3 Named the Ministry of International Relations in 1983, and Ministry of International Affairs between 1988-1995, Ministry of International Relations post 1995.

4 In October 2023, Quebec's ministry of higher education announced the upcoming hike in tuition fees for international and out of province students, which were seen as disproportionately profiting Quebec's Anglophone institutions. The government also announced the mandating of French language courses for international students. The decision follows broader policy aims to reverse the decline of French in Quebec, and Montreal specifically.

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Cite this article: Moscovitz, Hannah and Roopa Desai Trilokekar. 2024. "Does Soft Power Look Different in Multinational Federations? International Education and Soft Power Politics in Canada/Quebec." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* **57** (3): 602–625. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423924000301

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