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# Soft Power as a Diplomatic Tool of Small States: Content Analysis of International Media Reporting on Kosovo (2022–2025)

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## **Abstract**

This study examines how international media coverage between 2022 and 2025 has shaped strategic narratives influencing Kosovo's soft power as a small state. Through qualitative content analysis of reports from global outlets including BBC, Reuters, Associated Press, and The Guardian, the research identifies dominant media framings, ranging from conflict and instability to culture, sports, and Euro-Atlantic alignment. Findings reveal that media amplify Kosovo's soft power when portraying it as a modern, reliable actor, yet weaken it when emphasizing crises or polarization. The research concludes that for small states like Kosovo, soft power is not optional but an existential necessity for international legitimacy, visibility, and diplomatic influence in a competitive global information environment.

**Keywords:** soft power, small states, media framing, strategic narratives, Kosovo.

## **Introduction**

In today's interconnected information environment, international influence is increasingly determined not solely by military or economic capacity, but by the ability to attract, persuade, and shape perceptions. Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of *soft power*, defined as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (p. 6), remains central to understanding this shift. However, soft power now operates within an intensely competitive digital ecosystem, where global media, networked publics, and online platforms continuously construct and contest state-related meanings. As contemporary scholars observe, influence in international politics depends increasingly on the art of storytelling,

representation, and public engagement, rather than traditional diplomacy alone (Arceneaux, 2024; Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013).

For small states, soft power is not merely complementary to "hard power"; it constitutes a strategic necessity. With limited material resources, small states rely heavily on reputation, perceived legitimacy, and international visibility to secure diplomatic support and advance foreign policy objectives. Public diplomacy and digital communication have thus become essential tools. Cowan and Arsenaault (2008) emphasize that modern diplomacy requires dialogue and relationship-building, while Bjola and Holmes (2015) note that digital platforms enable small states to amplify messages and reach broader audiences. Yet these opportunities are accompanied by vulnerabilities: media framing, disinformation, and narrative competition can rapidly undermine efforts by states with limited capacity to control the information space (McIntyre, 2018; Fridman, 2020; Wu, 2023).

At the heart of soft power lie *strategic narratives*, coherent stories through which states communicate their identity, values, and political intentions. Strategic narratives shape how global audiences interpret state behavior, conflicts, or key events (Miskimmon et al., 2013). They also underscore the importance of storytelling and organizational communication as diplomatic tools (Arceneaux, 2024; Kent, 2015). Within this framework, international media play a crucial mediating role: their reporting can reinforce a state's image, positively frame its actions, or conversely, deepen stereotypes, amplify tensions, or damage credibility. For small states, the impact of these narratives is direct, as their soft power is closely tied to how they are perceived in the international arena.

These dynamics are particularly salient in the case of Kosovo, a small and partially recognized state whose international status depends significantly on perception, legitimacy, and alignment with Euro-Atlantic values. Since declaring independence in 2008, Kosovo has relied on soft power to strengthen recognition efforts, promote its democratic identity, and secure support in international forums. Cultural diplomacy, diaspora engagement, and democratic image-building have become important pillars of its public diplomacy strategy (Saliu & Lljuni, 2022). However, Kosovo's image remains highly sensitive to how international media interpret political developments, regional tensions, and dialogue processes with Serbia.

During the period 2022–2025, Kosovo has been at the center of international media attention due to political confrontations in the north, security incidents, EU- and US-mediated negotiations, and renewed discussions about European integration. In this period, Kosovo's portrayal

in major international media has oscillated between two poles: narratives presenting it as a democratic actor committed to Western partners, and those framing it as an unstable space with ethnic tensions and unresolved conflict. As Saliu and Abrashi (2023, p.82) note, "media diplomacy" has become increasingly central for Kosovo, as its international image is continuously constructed, and at times constrained, by external narrative forces.

For a small state like Kosovo, these portrayals have direct diplomatic consequences. Positive framing can strengthen its soft power capital, consolidate alliances, and increase international support. Negative framing can limit diplomatic space, obscure domestic progress, and reinforce regional challenges. Understanding these dynamics is essential to assess how Kosovo navigates its soft power environment and how media narratives from external actors affect its international positioning.

This article aims to analyze how Kosovo has been represented in major international media during 2022–2025 and to examine what these representations reveal about the strategies and vulnerabilities of small-state soft power. By situating Kosovo within the broader debate on public diplomacy, strategic narratives, and media influence, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how small states negotiate visibility, legitimacy, and influence in a complex global information landscape.

## **Literature Review: Conceptual Foundations**

### ***Soft Power and Strategic Narratives***

Joseph Nye (2004) defines soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (p. 6). Unlike hard power, which relies on tangible resources such as military force or economic leverage, soft power derives from intangible assets: culture, political values, and foreign policies that inspire trust and admiration. The success of soft power depends on credibility, moral authority, and the perception that a state's actions serve a legitimate and broadly beneficial purpose (Nye, 2008). Subsequent scholarship has expanded the soft power concept to include dimensions of communication, culture, and global governance. Lane (2023) and Kent (2015) emphasize storytelling as a central instrument of soft power projection, arguing that compelling narratives constitute a key mechanism for influencing global audiences. The concept has also been linked to *reputational security*, the idea that a nation's international reputation can serve as a form of protection against external threats (Cull, 2024). For small or vulnerable states, maintaining a positive image can be as vital as territorial defense.

Strategic narratives are the stories states tell about themselves,

others, and the international system, with the aim of shaping perceptions and legitimizing their actions (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p.146). Hayden (2013) identifies narrative coherence as the foundation of successful public diplomacy: for soft power to be effective, a state's discourse must align with its practices and international behavior. When a gap exists between narrative and reality, what Cull (2024, p. S16) calls a "credibility deficit," soft power effectiveness is undermined. Furthermore, Arceneaux (2024) argues that strategic storytelling creates "authenticity that maximizes valuation among foreign stakeholders" (p. 6), while Lane (2023) notes that effective cultural narratives succeed when they "articulate a spectrum of societal norms and expectations in a format digestible to a broad audience" (p. 5).

### ***Soft Power in Small States***

Soft power takes on particular significance for small states, whose material resources and geopolitical influence are limited. While major powers can rely on military and economic capacities, small states depend on reputation, perceived credibility, and international legitimacy to secure their national interests (Cull, 2024; Gilboa, 2024). Cull (2024) introduces the concept of *reputational security*, arguing that for states with limited hard power options, international esteem functions as a defensive asset: a favorable image deters aggression and encourages cooperation. In a globalized communication environment, visibility represents both opportunity and risk. Small states often struggle to attract attention amid the noise of major-power narratives; however, once they achieve visibility, often through crises, innovation, or culture, their actions are subject to heightened scrutiny (Saliu, 2020, 2013). Fitzpatrick (2024) notes that the "social turn" in public diplomacy has benefited smaller actors by enabling transnational partnerships and advocacy that amplify their voices. Yet this visibility also brings vulnerability: reputation crises, scandals, or political instability can rapidly erode trust, especially when international media frame events through stereotypes or historical biases.

For small states, soft power functions primarily through identity communication. Browning (2006) describes small-state diplomacy as "identity politics by other means" (p. 382) where nations use narratives of morality, peace, or victimization to define their role in the international order. Public diplomacy becomes the arena where these narratives are projected and tested. Saliu (2022, 2023) emphasizes that globalization and media digitization have enabled even smaller actors to build international personas through storytelling and symbolic actions. Ni et al. (2018) add that the relational dimension in diplomacy is essential for small states:

interpersonal networks and trust compensate for the lack of structural influence.

### ***Media, Digital Diplomacy, and Cultural Strategy***

Media visibility is indispensable for small states. Saliu (2022) identifies *media diplomacy* as a process through which nations lacking extensive diplomatic infrastructure communicate their narratives through international news reporting. Global media act as amplifiers of national stories, influencing foreign public opinion beyond what official embassies can achieve. For developing or contested states, coverage in influential media such as *The New York Times* or *BBC World News* can legitimize existence and encourage international recognition. Digital platforms further reduce barriers to participation. Manor (2023, p.270) notes that small states can use social media to "punch above their weight," reaching foreign audiences directly through personalized and emotional messages. Online communication offers flexibility and immediacy, enabling real-time responses to international developments. However, Bjola and Holmes (2015) caution that digital success depends on maintaining professionalism and ethical transparency; credibility remains the ultimate currency of influence.

Cultural diplomacy remains the most sustainable instrument of soft power for small states. According to Saliu and Llundji (2022), cultural exchanges create long-term relationships that transcend political fluctuations. By promoting art, music, language, and heritage, small nations foster mutual sensitivity and respect. Unlike political campaigns, cultural initiatives cultivate gradual recognition that strengthens international legitimacy. Jarvie (2024) further distinguishes soft power from cultural relations, noting that while "soft power is the pursuit of influence through attraction, cultural relations is the creation of the conditions for sustainable collaboration between like-minded countries for mutual benefit" (p. 677). This distinction is crucial for small states, as sports and cultural festivals often function as relational bridges rather than unilateral attraction tools.

### ***The Post-Truth Environment and Narrative Fragmentation***

The contemporary communicative landscape has fundamentally altered how soft power operates. Wu (2023) describes the rise of *post-truth public diplomacy*, where "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (p. 24). In this environment, states no longer maintain effective control over how their values are interpreted or disseminated, as individuals communicate directly and actively shape global narratives (Saliu, 2023). Durrani (2023)

conceptualizes this vulnerability as *Negative Watch*, noting that "consistent unfavourable media narratives contribute to the erosion of a country's political legitimacy, credibility, and soft power" (p. 459). For small states like Kosovo, navigating this fragmented ecosystem requires shifting from unilateral promotion to dialogic, transparent, and strategically coherent narrative management. Henne (2022) adds that diffuse, integrative cultural-symbolic instruments "help to integrate collective mobilization" (p. 100) while Baykurt (2022) observes that digital infrastructures and information governance have become central to contemporary soft power, as states navigate fragmented media environments where "the global internet is no longer seen as the democratizing, liberalizing force... It is more fragmented and conflict-ridden" (p. 459)

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research approach to analyze how international media produce and structure narratives about Kosovo during 2022–2025, and the influence these narratives may have on shaping the country's soft power. Given that the study's purpose is not only to analyze the literal content of articles but also to interpret hidden meanings, framings, identity representations, and political retellings constructed by media, the qualitative method constitutes the most appropriate research framework.

## ***Research Design and Data Sources***

The research design is based on a methodological combination of qualitative content analysis and strategic narrative analysis. Qualitative content analysis enables the study to systematically evaluate the textual structure of media reports, focusing on how events, actors, and political processes are presented and framed. Strategic narrative analysis extends this process by exploring the deeper meanings structured through these framings, identifying what function the narrative performs in the geopolitical context (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

Primary data consist of articles published in international media during 2022–2025, a period characterized by intensive political, diplomatic, cultural, and security developments related to Kosovo. Media selected, including BBC News, Reuters, Associated Press, The Guardian, The New York Times, and Al Jazeera English, were chosen due to their reputation, influence, and role in shaping international discourses. Approximately 26 articles were included, depending on availability and relevance to topics related to foreign policy, diplomacy, culture, sports, or security.

## ***Analytical Procedures***

The analytical process is divided into three interrelated phases:

1. Coding and thematic identification: Each article was coded for recurring patterns such as media framing, tone, metaphors, assessment of political actors, and references to values such as democracy, rule of law, conflict, or Euro-Atlantic orientation. Coding combined deductive approaches, based on consolidated theoretical concepts, with inductive coding, allowing new elements to emerge directly from empirical materials.

2. Narrative categorization: Repeatedly appearing themes were integrated into broader narrative categories, representing the main structures through which media construct meanings about Kosovo. These include narratives of international legitimacy, interpretations of regional security, perceptions of Euro-Atlantic orientation, and how cultural, sporting, or technological achievements are presented.

3. Interpretation and soft power assessment: Drawing on theories by Nye (2004, 2008), Cull (2024), Snow (2009), and Fitzpatrick (2024), the final phase interprets how these narratives influence Kosovo's soft power assets: credibility, attractiveness, legitimacy, and perceived alignment with Western democratic values.

## ***Ethical Principles and Limitations***

Since this study relies entirely on analysis of secondary data, primarily articles published by international media, ethical risks are minimal. However, the research maintains academic standards of integrity through correct citation of sources and use of materials solely for research purposes. Media content is treated with particular care to avoid distorted interpretations, respecting the original context of articles. Despite the structured methodological approach, the study has several inherent limitations. First, the international media selected for analysis, although prestigious, represent only one segment of the global media ecosystem; consequently, study results may primarily reflect Western perspectives. Second, qualitative content and narrative analysis implies an element of subjective interpretation, which, although controlled through systematic coding and theoretical frameworks, cannot be entirely eliminated. Third, the study focuses on the 2022–2025 period and therefore does not offer a long-term historical perspective of media narratives about Kosovo.

## **Findings: Media Framing and Strategic Narratives about Kosovo (2022–2025)**

Analysis of 26 international media sources (2022–2025) reveals that

Kosovo is increasingly portrayed not merely through lenses of conflict, non-recognition, or instability, but is gradually shifting toward a more complex, multidimensional, and positive image. This perceptual transformation results from a strategic combination of political, cultural, and sporting factors, which global media have captured and amplified in varied ways.

### ***Political-Institutional Framing: Kosovo as a Reliable Euro-Atlantic Partner***

In the political-institutional domain, Kosovo has made visible strides in positioning itself as a proactive and credible actor within the Western system. A BBC (2025) article titled "PM Albin Kurti on tensions in Kosovo" and an AP News (2025c) report titled "Kosovo marks 15 uneasy years of independence from Serbia" highlight institutional resilience, EU-mediated dialogue, and sustained engagement with Euro-Atlantic structures. A Reuters (2025) article titled "Kenya recognises Kosovo as independent state, first such move in five years" frames Kosovo's diplomatic lobbying as a persistent effort to overcome structural non-recognition. Similarly, an AP News (2025d) report titled "NATO chief assures Western Balkans of alliance support and urges flexibility in Kosovo, Serbia talks" positions Kosovo within Western security architectures, emphasizing regional stability and the need for political flexibility. An EEAS (2024) press release titled "Global Media Communities Gather in Pristina, Kosovo to Fight Disinformation" further constructs Kosovo as a space for transparency, anti-manipulation cooperation, and digital information security. Collectively, these reports frame Kosovo as a small state that expands its international presence through persuasion and targeted diplomacy (BBC, 2025; AP News, 2025c, 2025d; Reuters, 2025; EEAS, 2024).

Interpretively, these institutional portrayals align with scholarly frameworks on how state credibility generates international attraction. Nye (2022, p. 5) argues that soft power derives fundamentally from "its culture, its political values, and its policies." Kosovo's consistent participation in EU-mediated dialogues and NATO-aligned security initiatives projects normative alignment, which Cull (2024) identifies as a core component of *reputational security* for small states. Furthermore, Gallarotti (2022) emphasizes that soft power functions through "co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading and eliciting positive attraction" (p. 398) meaning that Kosovo's institutional transparency operates as a deliberate cognitive filter. This aligns with Arceneaux's (2024, p. 6) assertion that effective diplomatic storytelling requires "narrative coherence, fidelity, and continuity to maximize stakeholder trust". Additionally, Rothman (2011) argues that agenda-setting and rhetorical framing serve as non-coercive

mechanisms that shape international preferences without relying on military or economic leverage. Finally, Jansson (2025) emphasizes that attraction in soft power "is built on a history of exchange and interactions which over time, as acquaintances develop, make for a sense of appreciation and thus receptivity" (p. 2) highlighting how states' sustained institutional engagement cultivates long-term normative legitimacy rather than short-term visibility (Nye, 2022; Cull, 2024; Gallarotti, 2022; Arceneaux, 2024; Rothman, 2011; Jansson, 2025; Fitzpatrick, 2024; Henne, 2022).

### **Cultural Framing: Diaspora Figures as Cultural Ambassadors**

In the cultural domain, Kosovo has leveraged what might be termed the *diaspora advantage*, utilizing globally recognized artists to shift perceptions from narratives of war and trauma toward creativity, youth, and modernity. A BBC (2024) article titled "Can Dua Lipa's family change Kosovo's image?" presents the Sunny Hill Festival as a powerful form of cultural soft power. A Daily Mail (2025) report titled "Dua Lipa cosies up to fiancé Callum Turner as she parties the night away at Sunny Hill Festival to celebrate being granted her Kosovo citizenship" and a The Guardian (2025) piece titled "Dua Lipa 'feeling grateful' after Kosovan president grants her citizenship" amplify this narrative, framing state recognition of diaspora figures as strategic acts of national branding. An A2 News (2025) article titled "Pristina, the capital of music, classical and modern, with 'Sunny Hill' and the International Opera Festival" emphasizes cultural reconnection and youth-driven creative energy. A Daily Mail (2024) piece titled "Rita Ora returns to her native Kosovo as she makes surprise career move away from the music industry" further highlights this cultural momentum. Additionally, a Billboard (2022) report titled "David Guetta, Bebe Rexha & more set to perform at 2022 MTV EMAs" and a Rolling Stone (2022) article titled "Bebe Rexha makes the AMAs 'Feel Good' with otherworldly performance" document international stage performances that position Kosovan artists within mainstream global entertainment networks. These media frames collectively construct Kosovo as a dynamic, culturally vibrant actor whose diaspora networks function as de facto cultural ambassadors (BBC, 2024; Daily Mail, 2024, 2025; The Guardian, 2025; A2 News, 2025; Billboard, 2022; Rolling Stone, 2022).

Scholarly interpretation reveals that these cultural narratives function through emotional resonance and cognitive imprinting rather than institutional decree. Marlin-Bennett (2022) explains that soft power attraction works by "deliberately tapping into powerful psychological principles which exploit our emotional vulnerabilities, sensory preferences, and desire for social connection" (p. 439) precisely mirroring how Kosovo's

diaspora artists bypass traditional political gatekeeping. This emotional capture aligns with Bethell's (2025) concept of a "cultural forcefield" that "deliberately taps into powerful psychological principles which exploit our emotional vulnerabilities" (p. 1). Arceneaux (2024) further argues that strategic storytelling creates "authenticity that maximizes valuation among foreign stakeholders" (p. 6), while Lane (2023) notes that effective cultural narratives succeed when they "articulate a spectrum of societal norms and expectations in a format digestible to a broad audience" (p. 5). Saliu (2023) adds that in the post-truth era, narrative power now supersedes classical soft power mechanisms in a fragmented media ecology. Kent (2015) corroborates that compelling narratives constitute a key mechanism for influencing global audiences, demonstrating that Kosovo's cultural framing operates not through state propaganda, but through decentralized, emotionally intelligent storytelling that converts artistic success into diplomatic capital (Marlin-Bennett, 2022; Bethell, 2025; Arceneaux, 2024; Lane, 2023; Saliu, 2023; Kent, 2015; Nassar, 2025; Hobbs et al., 2025).

### ***Sports Framing: Athletic Achievement as National Affirmation***

Sport has served as another powerful channel of national affirmation and soft power projection. An Inside the Games (2022) article titled "Krasniqi retains Mediterranean Games title for Kosovo's first Oran 2022 gold medal" presents a highly affirming narrative of Kosovo's sporting excellence. An AP News (2025e) report titled "Olympic dreams come true for Kosovo skier Kiana Kryeziu" and a Reuters (2025) piece titled "Kosovo win 2-0 in Slovenia to secure World Cup playoff spot" extend this framing by highlighting Olympic and World Cup qualification campaigns that link athletic success to national legitimacy and institutional capacity. A The Guardian (2024) article titled "Kosovo to appeal against Uefa-imposed 3-0 loss for leaving field over pro-Serbia chants" covers symbolic sporting moments, framing athletic integrity as an extension of sovereign dignity. Meanwhile, a CIJM (2025) report titled "The Olympic Committees of Portugal and Kosovo have expressed interest in hosting the 2027 and 2030 Mediterranean Games" and an AP News (2025b) piece titled "Kosovo capital Pristina chosen to host 2030 Mediterranean Games" document Kosovo's successful bid to host major sporting events, positioning sport as a vehicle for urban modernization, diplomatic visibility, and cross-cultural engagement. These media narratives collectively reinforce Kosovo's image as a resilient, talent-producing state that competes respectfully with established nations (Inside the Games, 2022; AP News, 2025b, 2025e; Reuters, 2025; The Guardian, 2024; CIJM, 2025).

Theoretical interpretation confirms that sport functions beyond

mere attraction, operating as a mechanism for sustained cultural relations, alliance-building, and compensatory legitimacy. Jarvie (2024) distinguishes soft power from cultural relations, noting that while "soft power is the pursuit of influence through attraction, cultural relations is the creation of the conditions for sustainable collaboration between like-minded countries for mutual benefit" (p. 677). Kosovo's sporting achievements exemplify this shift. Gallarotti (2016) demonstrates that compound soft power relies on *transitivity*, where "the friend of my friend is my friend" (p. 473) logic expands diplomatic networks, allowing Kosovo to leverage international sporting federations for reputational compensation despite non-recognition challenges. Nye (2008) observes that sport "generates feel-good factors" (p. 102) that temporarily but effectively elevate national attractiveness, while Henne (2022) emphasizes that diffuse, integrative cultural-symbolic instruments "help to integrate collective mobilization" (p. 100). Arceneaux (2024) adds that consistent sporting narratives strengthen *brand loyalty* among international stakeholders. Trunkos (2022) corroborates that soft power initiatives, including sports diplomacy, function as tools for *alliance-building processes* that help threatened states project stability. Collectively, these insights confirm that Kosovo's sports framing operates as a strategic cultural relations tool, transforming athletic excellence into sustained diplomatic engagement (Jarvie, 2024; Gallarotti, 2016; Nye, 2008; Henne, 2022; Arceneaux, 2024; Trunkos, 2022; Fitzpatrick, 2024; Kim & Knuckey, 2021).

### ***Tensions and Limitations: The Dual Nature of Media Representation***

Despite positive framings, media analysis reveals persistent structural and narrative limitations. An Al Jazeera (2023) article titled "Which countries recognise Kosovo's statehood?" and an AP News (2025a) report titled "Kosovo's authorities close parallel institutions run by the country's ethnic Serb minority" continue to emphasize Kosovo's unresolved diplomatic status, highlighting non-recognition by five EU member states and ongoing geopolitical friction with Serbia. A BBC (2025) piece titled "PM Albin Kurti on tensions in Kosovo" and a Reuters (2022) article titled "Kosovo, Serbia reach deal to end dangerous dispute over car plates – EU" report on institutional tensions in northern Kosovo, framing parallel structure closures and sovereignty enforcement as flashpoints that complicate international trust-building. A The Guardian (2024) article and an AP News (2025c) piece further document how domestic political decisions, particularly those perceived as confrontational by Western partners, trigger media narratives that question Kosovo's diplomatic consistency. When aggregated, these reports construct a *legitimacy challenge framing*

that keeps Kosovo in a transitional zone between emerging statehood and full international normalization (Al Jazeera, 2023; AP News, 2025a, 2025c; BBC, 2025; Reuters, 2022; The Guardian, 2024).

Scholarly interpretation reveals that these tensions directly impact soft power through credibility deficits, narrative erosion, and reputational decline. Kearn (2022) argues that "the Trump experience was awful, but we may recover from it" (p. 399) illustrating how domestic political instability and leadership choices corrode international attractiveness, a dynamic equally observable in Kosovo when internal sovereignty assertions clash with external diplomatic expectations. Durrani (2023) conceptualizes this as "Negative Watch" noting that "consistent unfavourable media narratives contribute to the erosion of a country's political legitimacy, credibility, and soft power" (p. 459) which precisely mirrors how conflict-centric reporting keeps Kosovo in a transitional legitimacy zone. Saliu (2023) argues that in the post-truth era, "traditional state-led public diplomacy faces fragmentation, making Kosovo's reliance on institutional credibility and multilateral networks a necessary adaptation to decentralized information flows". Nye (2022) emphasizes that soft power depends on how a government behaves at home, and Cull (2024) adds that reputational security is damaged when political actions are perceived as confrontational in a global media environment. Kim and Knuckey (2021) empirically demonstrate how leadership dissonance and policy inconsistency deepen anti-Americanism and corrode national favorability abroad. Together, these frameworks confirm that Kosovo's soft power remains fragile when political actions generate international dissonance (Kearn, 2022; Durrani, 2023; Saliu, 2023; Nye, 2022; Cull, 2024; Kim & Knuckey, 2021; Fitzpatrick, 2024; Baykurt, 2022).

### **Discussion: Interpreting Media Influence on Kosovo's Soft Power**

The findings of international media content analysis (2022–2025) indicate that Kosovo, as a small and new state, is not perceived solely through lenses of conflict, non-recognition, or instability, but is gradually shifting toward a more complex, multidimensional, and positive image. This perceptual transformation is not spontaneous but results from a strategic combination of political, cultural, and sporting factors, which global media have captured and amplified in varied ways.

First, the analysis reveals that international media are not merely mirrors of reality but active actors in constructing Kosovo's image, functioning as intermediaries of strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Media reports position Kosovo within modern, progressive discourses connected to Western values, confirming Nye's (2022) postulate

that cultural attraction and political values are primary sources of soft power. Rothman (2011, p. 58) extends this by identifying norm diffusion as a core mechanism of attraction, noting that "success in a particular culture or policy increases the attractiveness of that policy or culture abroad." Furthermore, the consistent media emphasis on Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic alignment aligns with Trunkos's (2022) finding that threatened democracies systematically deploy soft power to build alliances and avoid direct confrontation, while Arceneaux (2024) asserts that narrative coherence, fidelity, and continuity remain essential to maximize stakeholder trust and institutional ROI.

Second, results show that this process of global affirmation is continuously interrupted by internal and external tensions. Actions such as closing parallel Serbian institutions or Prime Minister Albin Kurti's refusal of American requests create dissonance between internal sovereignty discourses and external diplomatic expectations. This aligns with Kern's (2022, p. 399) finding that domestic institutional decay and leadership inconsistency "directly impacted these three pillars of American soft power in profound and negative ways," a pattern that equally applies to Kosovo's international reputation. Durrani (2023, p. 459) further explains that reputational decline operates as a "Negative Watch" status, where sustained unfavorable narratives deplete a nation's diplomatic credit reserves. International media tend to balance these tensions, but the persistence of conflict-centric narratives demonstrates how media ecologies can amplify narrative fragmentation, confirming Fitzpatrick's (2024) observation that small-state soft power remains highly dependent on the alignment between domestic governance and international perception management.

Third, an essential finding is that Kosovo's soft power is not fully institutionalized but remains fragmented and personalized. Most positive narratives originate from individual figures rather than state structures, operating as transnational cultural and sporting ambassadors. This aligns with Marlin-Bennett's (2022) analysis of how attraction operates through emotional and affective channels, bypassing traditional state apparatuses. However, this model carries structural vulnerabilities: it is highly sensitive to personal career trajectories, public controversies, or shifting artistic choices. As Arceneaux (2024) warns, narrative strategies lacking institutional continuity risk diminishing long-term brand loyalty. Therefore, Kosovo's future diplomatic success depends on transitioning from a hero-based model to a systematic, state-coordinated strategy where cultural festivals, athletic programs, and public diplomacy campaigns are integrated into a unified foreign policy vision (Saliu, 2022; Lane, 2023; Gallarotti, 2016; Nassar, 2025; Henne, 2022).

Finally, media analysis shows that Kosovo has achieved a significant perceptual shift: it has begun to shed war stereotypes and enter global discourse as an actor with its own identity. International media function as a megaphone for soft power, amplifying successes when Kosovo appears modern and cooperative, while weakening influence when actions are perceived as isolating. This dynamic reflects Hobbs et al.'s (2025) argument that storytelling in public diplomacy operates as a rhetorical device that primes audiences for geopolitical positioning, often functioning as an *intermestic* tool that bridges domestic legitimacy and international strategy. For Kosovo, the next challenge is not to avoid narrative complexity but to manage it strategically, using media not merely as a promotion channel but as a space for dialogue, transparency, and narrative recalibration. In today's information environment, where power is measured through voices, stories, and images, being heard is equivalent to existing.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, soft power for Kosovo is not merely a diplomatic tool but a new form of international existence, a way to speak when its political voice continues to be censored by geopolitical blocks, and to be visible when global institutions still keep it outside. In this context, international media report on Kosovo not only as a state in formation but as an actor rewriting its identity through culture, sport, individual talent, and engagement with democratic values. Analysis of sources between 2022 and 2025 reveals that Kosovo's image is no longer limited by narratives of war, non-recognition, or instability; it is shifting toward a richer, more dynamic, and more globally connected perception.

This perceptual transformation does not happen spontaneously. It is the result of an unformalized but effective strategy, where figures such as Dua Lipa, Rita Ora, Bebe Rexha, Majlinda Kelmendi, Distria Krasniqi, Kiana Kryeziu, etc., serve as cultural and sporting ambassadors who make Kosovo accessible, attractive, and emotionally connected to global audiences. Sunny Hill Festival, Olympic Games, American Music Awards, MTV EMAs, performances on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, all these events function as platforms where Kosovo does not say "we are" but shows "who we are": a young, fruitful society, connected to the world, courageous and creative. The significance of mentioning Kosovo in the title of a Daily Mail (2024) article goes beyond mere biographical information, transforming into a clear manifestation of the country's soft power.

In the political-institutional field, Kosovo is also using soft power through clear credibility actions: organizing the EEAS event in Prishtina on countering disinformation (2024), membership in over 200 international

organizations, new recognition from Kenya (2025), and sustained engagement with NATO and the EU. These steps position the country as a reliable Western partner, strengthening its Euro-Atlantic orientation and normative legitimacy. However, internal tensions, such as closing parallel Serbian institutions or Prime Minister Albin Kurti's refusal of American requests, create perceptual dilemmas. International media, especially neutral ones like Reuters or AP News, tend to balance these tensions, but some sources, such as Al Jazeera, continue to present Kosovo primarily through lenses of conflict with Serbia, hindering the formation of a consistently positive narrative.

This duality, between affirming internal sovereignty and the need to maintain international trust, shows that Kosovo's soft power remains dependent on the context of regional and global relations. However, this model has structural limitations. Kosovo's soft power often remains "personalized" and "fragmented," linked to individual successes, not to a sustainable institutional strategy. When Dua Lipa celebrates Kosovan citizenship at Sunny Hill, she is not merely a star returning home; she is a soft power act penetrating millions of global screens.

Therefore, Kosovo's next challenge is not to find more stars but to create a system that makes soft power independent from those stars. To move from a "hero-based" model to an integrated strategy where culture, sport, information security, public diplomacy, and tourism are part of a shared vision of foreign policy. Only in this way can Kosovo transform its soft power from a random advantage into a sustainable instrument of global influence.

Finally, this content analysis shows that international media are not merely mirrors of reality but active actors in shaping Kosovo's image. They amplify successes when Kosovo appears as a modern, cooperative actor connected to global values; but weaken it when its actions are perceived as isolating or confrontational. For this reason, Kosovo must manage not only what it does but also what is transmitted about it. Because in today's world, where power is measured not only with weapons but with voices, stories, and images, being heard is equivalent to existing.

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