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Mega-Events as Instruments of Soft Power and Public Diplomacy: A Transformational Leadership Perspective on Polish Case Studies

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The study examines the organisational potential of leaders responsible for major mega-events hosted in Poland between 2016 and 2024. Its central aim is to identify how these leaders use large-scale events as instruments of soft power and public diplomacy, and to evaluate their transformational leadership capacity within the frameworks of CSR, ESG, and Economy 5.0.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: While mega-events are widely discussed in International Relations, the micro-level agency of leaders remains insufficiently explored. To address this gap, the study uses a mixed-methods design, combining a diagnostic survey of the entire leader population (n = 20), semi-structured interviews, and analysis of legal and audit documents. Descriptive statistics are complemented by thematic analysis to capture both systemic constraints and individual leadership strategies.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The article first conceptualises mega-events as tools of statecraft, linking them to soft power and European integration. It then integrates transformational leadership theory with CSR/ESG principles to propose the notion of the "guardian leader." Empirical results are interpreted through this analytical lens, highlighting the tension between technocratic delivery and internal relational competence.

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RESEARCH RESULTS: Findings indicate exceptionally high adaptability (92.19%) and strong collaborative capacity (83.52%), demonstrating leaders' ability to navigate fragmented governance systems, institutional volatility, and diplomatic pressure. However, internal relational communication scores were significantly lower (75.67%), producing a "diplomatic paradox": external effectiveness coexists with weaker internal cohesion and limited sensitivity to equality-related outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Mega-event leaders serve as effective diplomatic managers but need to shift towards more human-centric governance. The study recommends institutionalising "event diplomacy" structures, enhancing soft skills training, and embedding ESG standards as explicit foreign policy instruments. Developing leaders' capacity for empathetic communication and relational stewardship is essential to maximise soft power gains and ensure internal legitimacy.

KEYWORDS:

   mega-events, soft power, public diplomacy, transformational leadership, international relations

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of International Relations (IR), the definition of power has expanded beyond hard military and economic capabilities to include "soft power" — the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce (Nye, 2004). Within this framework, the hosting of mega-events has emerged as a primary vehicle for nation branding and public diplomacy (Anholt, 2007; Grix & Lee, 2013). For nations such as Poland, which are consolidating their position within the European and global economic structures, mega-events are not merely logistical exercises; they are geopolitical statements. They serve as platforms to signal modernization, stability, and alignment with Western democratic values.

However, the successful execution of this "event diplomacy" relies heavily on the human agents at the helm. The leaders of these events operate at the intersection of domestic administration and international relations. They must navigate the requirements of international governing bodies (such as the EU or global sports federations), the expectations of national governments, and the needs

of local communities. Consequently, the organizational potential of these leaders is a critical variable in the state's ability to project soft power effectively.

This paper posits that the success of a mega-event as a diplomatic tool is contingent upon the transformational leadership capabilities of its organizers. While bibliometric analyses of event studies often prioritize financial audits or infrastructural legacies, this study focuses on the political and sociological dimensions of leadership. By examining leaders responsible for events such as the European City of Science Katowice 2024, WorldSkills Europe Gdańsk 2023, and the European Capital of Culture 2016, we aim to understand the human dynamics that underpin Poland's public diplomacy strategy.

In light of the shift towards understanding these events as political instruments, this study addresses the following simplified and coherent research questions:

1. Diplomatic agency: What is the level of engagement and pro-activeness of mega-event leaders in shaping the strategic narratives of their events?
2. Network governance: How effectively do these leaders build and manage the complex domestic and international coalitions required for success?
3. Adaptive resilience: How do leaders navigate the volatile environments of international scrutiny and domestic political pressure?
4. Internal legitimacy: How do leaders manage relations and communication with their teams to maintain organizational cohesion?
5. Value stewardship: How do leaders integrate ethical principles and global standards (CSR/ESG) to legitimize the event domestically and internationally?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

To analyze the leadership of Polish mega-events through a political science lens, this study integrates the established theory of transformational leadership with concepts of soft power and public diplomacy.

Mega-events as tools of foreign policy and soft power

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye (2004), suggests that a nation's influence is derived from its culture, political values, and foreign policies. Mega-events act as high-visibility conduits for these assets. As Grix and Lee (2013) argue, nations use these events to achieve specific diplomatic outcomes, ranging from image enhancement to signaling diplomatic normalization. In this context, the leader of a mega-event acts as a "para-diplomat." They are not traditional foreign service officers, yet their decisions regarding partner selection, sustainability standards, and cultural messaging have direct implications for the host nation's international reputation.

Within the European context, events like the European Capital of Culture or the European Games are deeply embedded in the politics of European integration (European Parliament, 2006; Journal of Laws, 2021). They are designed to foster a shared European identity while allowing the host city/nation to assert its unique relevance within the bloc (Roche, 2000). Therefore, the organizational potential of the leader is directly linked to the state's capacity to capitalize on these diplomatic opportunities.

Transformational leadership in public governance

To manage the complexities of "event diplomacy," traditional transactional leadership – focused on exchanges and logistical targets – is often insufficient. The transformational leadership approach, which focuses on the interplay between leaders and followers to achieve a "higher good," is more aligned with the normative goals of public diplomacy (Bass & Riggio, 2005; Blane, 2017; Burns, 1978; Crowley, 2011; Warfa, 2024). Transformational leaders inspire followers by framing their work within a larger narrative of national or social significance.

In the context of this study, the revised model of transformational leadership (Poszytek, 2026) is utilized. This model identifies dimensions such as engagement, ethics, collaboration, and adaptability. When applied to the political sphere, these dimensions transform into:

- E n g a g e m e n t: The leader's commitment to the diplomatic mission.
- A d a p t a b i l i t y: The ability to maneuver within the "realpolitik" of conflicting stakeholder interests.
- C o l l a b o r a t i o n: The capacity for network governance, bridging public and private sectors.
- E t h i c s: The adherence to international norms (rule of law, sustainability) which confers legitimacy on the event.

CSR, ESG, and the "Guardian Leader"

In modern international relations, legitimacy is closely tied to adherence to global norms regarding sustainability and governance. The concepts of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria have migrated from the private sector to public administration (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Groves & LaRocca, 2011; Haski-Leventhal, 2021; Townsend, 2020). C o r p o r a t e S o c i a l R e s p o n s i b i l i t y (CSR) is a management concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations and interactions with stakeholders. Unlike the traditional "shareholder primacy" model, which focuses almost exclusively on profit generation for owners, CSR operates on a stakeholder model. This means a company voluntarily goes beyond legal compliance to account for the impact of its activities on employees, communities, the environment, and consumers. It frames business success not just by financial bottom lines, but by the "triple bottom line": people, planet, and profit (Carroll, 1999). E n v i r o n m e n t a l, S o c i a l, a n d G o v e r n a n c e (ESG) principles constitute a strategic framework used by investors and stakeholders to evaluate a company's operational standards and performance beyond traditional financial metrics (CFA Institute, 2023; Dong & Aguinaldo, 2023; Porter & Kramer, 2006):

- E n v i r o n m e n t a l: This pillar assesses an organization's ecological impact, focusing on how it acts as a steward of nature. Key factors include carbon emissions, waste management, energy efficiency, and natural resource conservation.
- S o c i a l: This aspect examines how a company manages relationships with its employees, suppliers, customers, and the

communities where it operates. It covers issues such as labor standards, diversity and inclusion, data protection, and human rights.

- G o v e r n a n c e: This refers to a company's leadership, executive pay, audits, internal controls, and shareholder rights. It ensures that the organization uses accurate and transparent accounting methods and that business practices are ethical and accountable.

Accordingly, a mega-event leader must function as a "Guardian Leader," ensuring that the event does not merely serve elite interests but aligns with broader social and environmental goals such as those embodied by Economy 5.0 concept. Economy 5.0 is an emerging economic model that shifts the focus from the pure efficiency, automation, and profit maximization to a human-centric, sustainable, and resilient approach. Economy 5.0 reintegrates the human element to empower workers, enhance their well-being, and solve complex societal and environmental challenges (Jędrych & Rzepka, 2024).

This, in turn, creates a "logic of appropriateness" crucial for international credibility. If a host nation organizes an event that violates environmental standards or ignores social inclusion, the soft power gains can be negated, turning the event into a reputational liability (Black, 2007). Thus, the leader's ability to integrate CSR and ESG principles is a measure of their political competence.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a mixed-methods design (Babbie, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Flick, 2018; Kvale, 1996; Nowak, 2007; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018) to assess the organizational potential of mega-event leaders in Poland.

Sampling and participants

The study utilized purposive sampling to cover the entire population of leaders responsible for significant mega-events in Poland between 2016 and 2024. This includes the European City of Science Katowice 2024, WorldSkills Europe Gdańsk 2023, European Games Kraków

2023, European Capital of Culture 2016, European University Games EUSA Łódź 2022, European Youth Capital Lublin 2023, and COP24 Katowice (UN Climate Summit).

A total of 20 complete responses were obtained in January 2024, representing a 100% response rate of the identified "universe" of top-level leaders for these specific events.

Instruments

The primary instrument was an original diagnostic survey constructed based on transformational leadership theories and adapted for the context of large-scale public projects. The survey included closed-ended questions (Likert scale) and open-ended questions grouped around the dimensions of engagement, ethics, collaboration, communication, adaptability, and innovation.

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the "organizational potential" percentages in each dimension. These quantitative results were supplemented by in-depth interviews with four leaders representing the sectors of culture, sports, vocational training, and science, as well as an analysis of legal documents and Supreme Audit Office (NIK) (2024) reports to provide institutional context.

RESULTS: THE PROFILE OF THE "DIPLOMATIC MANAGER"

The results of the study offer a granular view of how Polish mega-event leaders operate. Rather than presenting raw data tables, the following sections describe the findings in detail, interpreting the statistical trends through the lens of leadership and political agency.

1. Engagement and pro-activeness: The high agency of leaders

The survey data indicates a high level of agency among the respondents, with an overall engagement score of **78.91%**. This suggests that these individuals do not view themselves merely as technocratic administrators executing orders from central government or international bodies, but as active architects of the event's strategic vision.

When asked about their role in the initiation phase (Question 1), 60% of respondents indicated they were either the main initiator or a co-initiator. Furthermore, regarding the design of the event (Question 2), 75% were deeply involved in developing the concept. Crucially, 60% of leaders reported that their original ideas and working methods were implemented "to a large extent" (Question 3).

This high degree of personal influence extended to critical diplomatic areas. According to Question 4, the leaders had the most significant personal impact on the "working methods used during the event" (75%) and the "selection of partner institutions" (70%). This latter point is vital in a political context, as the selection of partners determines the geopolitical and domestic coalition supporting the event. The leaders also reported high emotional involvement (mean=4.75 on a 5-point scale), confirming that these roles are viewed as missions rather than standard administrative posts.

2. Collaboration and network governance

In the realm of public diplomacy, success depends on "network governance"—the ability to manage horizontal relationships between disparate actors. The leaders scored 83.52% in collaboration and networking abilities, indicating strong proficiency in this area.

The descriptive data from Question 6 reveals that 90% of leaders personally sought out institutional partners, with 65% doing so "many times." This underscores the hustle required in modern event diplomacy; resources and legitimacy are not given, they must be negotiated. Interestingly, while leaders recognized the absolute necessity of networking—with high agreement on statements linking

success to suitable partners (Question 8)—they also acknowledged the difficulty of this task. "Finding partners" was rated as the most difficult task (Mean=4.0 on a difficulty scale where 5 is very difficult) in Question 7, more difficult than designing the event or fulfilling formal requirements.

This dichotomy—viewing networking as essential but arduous—reflects the fragmented political landscape leaders must navigate. They must align the interests of international licensors (e.g., the UN or European Commission) with local sponsors and municipal authorities. The fact that 55% of leaders attributed the event's success primarily to the "work of the event team" (Question 9) rather than external support further highlights the importance of the internal coalitions they built.

3. Adaptability: The technocratic strength

The most striking finding of the study is the leaders' exceptional score in adaptability: 92.19%. This was the highest-scoring dimension across the entire survey, suggesting that the primary characteristic of Polish mega-event leaders is their resilience and flexibility in the face of "realpolitik" friction.

The narrative data from Question 12 paints a picture of leaders who thrive in chaos. A vast majority agreed with the statement, "I can quickly adapt to a new situation during event realization" (mean=4.05). Furthermore, the respondents exhibited a "crisis-as--opportunity" mindset; the statement "Every crisis situation could teach me something" received broad support (mean=4.0).

An analysis of the demographic data regarding risk-taking (Question 11) reveals an interesting generational shift in administrative culture. The data describes a clear correlation: younger leaders (under 46) showed a lower propensity for risk compared to their older counterparts (46+). The older cohort, perhaps hardened by the systemic transformations of Poland's past, expressed that "risk cannot be avoided, it is part of the work" or that they actively do not avoid risk. In contrast, the younger cohort was more likely to seek to "minimize risk." Despite these differences in risk appetite, the high adaptability score was universal.

This adaptability is likely a response to the volatile institutional environment described in the legal analysis. With shifting regulations and funding streams, leaders who could not pivot quickly would fail. The data from Question 12.8 indicates that stress generally had a "mobilizing effect" on the leaders, further confirming a high degree of psychological resilience essential for high-stakes public diplomacy.

4. Relations and communication: The "democratic deficit"

While leaders excelled in adaptability (technocratic skill) and networking (external politics), they scored lowest in relations and communication with their teams: **75.67%**. While still a passing grade, the relative drop compared to other metrics indicates a potential "democratic deficit" within the internal organizations of these mega-events.

Descriptive analysis of Question 19 (communication difficulty) clarifies where the friction lies. Leaders rated "giving praise" and "moderating discussions" as relatively easy. However, "assertive refusal" and "communicating difficult messages" were rated significantly more difficult.

More telling are the results from Question 14 regarding team management. While leaders felt confident in "developing a team spirit" (mean=4.05), they scored lower on "noticing conflict situations within the team" (mean=3.35) and "noticing co-workers' problems, including private lives" (mean=3.45). This suggests a leadership style that is mission-oriented and outwardly focused on the diplomatic objective, potentially at the expense of internal empathy and deep dialogue. In the context of political science, this mirrors the critique of technocratic governance: effective at delivering the project but potentially disconnected from the human constituency (in this case, the staff) implementing it.

5. Ethics and governance

The leaders scored 81.67% in the ethical dimension. The descriptive data reveals a nuanced, perhaps "Machiavellian," approach to ethics in public administration.

On one hand, leaders strongly affirmed that "Ethical behavior is very important to me" (mean=4.45 in Question 25.5). On the other hand, when pressed on the realities of getting things done, there was an admission of pragmatism. Responses to Question 25.6 regarding "bending the rules to achieve goals" indicated that while strict adherence to law is the norm, the pressure of the diplomatic mission sometimes necessitates flexibility.

Critically, leaders displayed high self-awareness regarding the consequences of their actions (Question 12.7). This aligns with the "ethics of responsibility" (Weberian ethics) rather than a purely "ethics of conviction." They prioritize the successful delivery of the event—and by extension, the national interest—while navigating the grey areas of bureaucracy.

DISCUSSION

The integration of the empirical findings with International Relations theory reveals a specific typology of the Polish mega-event leader. These individuals are not mere managers; they are d i p l o m a t i c s t e w - a r d s. They operate in a high-pressure environment where the domestic administrative reality collides with international expectations.

The Paradox of competence: Technocratic resilience vs. relational soft power

The findings highlight a dichotomy between what we might call "technocratic resilience" and "internal soft power".

The leaders are masters of technocratic resilience (92.19% Adaptability). They successfully navigate the "real world" of funding gaps, legal instability, and logistical crises. This capability is crucial for the state; it ensures that despite potential internal chaos, the international spectacle proceeds without embarrassment. This aligns with the "Governance" aspect of ESG—ensuring the system functions.

However, the lower score in Relations (75.67%) presents a risk. In the realm of soft power, credibility begins at home. If the internal teams executing the diplomacy feel unheard or undervalued—due to the

leader's difficulty in deep communication or noticing personal struggles—the authenticity of the external message can be compromised. A leader who projects "inclusion" and "dialogue" internationally (as is typical for EU events) but fails to practice it internally creates a dissonance. This finding suggests that while Polish leaders have mastered the *hardware* of event diplomacy (logistics, risk management), they are still refining the *software* (empathetic internal governance).

The guardian leader in a geopolitical context

The study confirms that effective leadership in this sector requires adopting the mantle of the "guardian leader." This concept, rooted in the CSR and ESG frameworks, suggests that leaders are custodians of values.

The high scores in Learning Potential (92.08%) and Ethics (81.67%) are promising for the evolution of Polish public diplomacy. They suggest that these leaders are reflective practitioners capable of growth. The "guardian leader" in a geopolitical context does not just deliver an event; they ensure the event reinforces democratic norms and social cohesion.

The survey data showed that leaders prioritized "building cooperation based on dialogue and trust" (Question 13) over purely commercial goals. This indicates an intuitive understanding of the event's political purpose: to build social capital. However, the data also showed a complete lack of activity regarding "achieving equality of socio-economic opportunities" in the specific responses. This is a blind spot. If mega-events are to serve as true engines of Economy 5.0 and social integration, leaders must move beyond general dialogue to specific actions addressing inequality, thereby aligning the event with the broader EU social agenda.

Institutional constraints and the need for systemic support

The findings obtained from survey questionnaire are in line with mega-events leaders' statements during interviews, namely that researched leaders' communication and relation capabilities were

lower than their adaptability and learning potential, which turned out to be their strongest point. Accordingly, the qualitative aspect of the research, supported by the review of legal frameworks (e.g., Special Acts for the European Games), suggests that the "deficit" in soft skills may be structurally induced. The legal environment for mega-events in Poland is often fragmented and ad-hoc. Leaders are often parachuted into temporary organizational bodies with strict deadlines and high political stakes. This structural pressure prioritizes "delivery at all costs" (favouring adaptability and risk-taking) over "team well-being" (favouring empathy).

Therefore, the "diplomatic paradox" observed—high external efficacy, lower internal cohesion—is likely a rational response to the institutional incentives provided by the state.

CONCLUSION

The organization of mega-events serves as a critical litmus test for a nation's administrative and diplomatic maturity. This study of leaders responsible for Poland's major international events between 2016 and 2024 reveals a cadre of professionals who possess high levels of agency, adaptability, and strategic vision. They are effective agents of soft power, capable of navigating complex networks to deliver prestigious outcomes for the state.

However, the analysis reveals a critical area for development. To fully unlock the organizational potential of these undertakings, leadership must evolve from a "technocratic" model to a "humanistic" or "guardian" model." The observed gap in relational communication suggests that while the *mechanism* of public diplomacy is functioning, the *culture* of it requires nurturing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

1. Diplomatic training: Future training for mega-event leaders should focus less on project management (where they are already proficient) and more on internal conflict resolution, empathetic communication, and team sociology.

2. Institutional continuity: The state should move away from ad-hoc legal structures toward a permanent "Event Diplomacy" framework that retains knowledge and reduces the "crisis mode" that drives leaders toward purely task-oriented behaviors.
3. ESG as foreign policy: Leaders should be encouraged to view ESG not just as a compliance metric, but as a foreign policy asset. High standards of internal governance and social inclusion enhance the soft power value of the event.

In conclusion, the leaders of Poland's mega-events are formidable "virtuosos" of logistical and political maneuvering. The next step in their evolution is to become true "artists" of social engagement, ensuring that the values preached on the international stage are deeply resonated within the teams that build that stage.

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