

Germany between Leitkultur and soft power: the first world cup in the Middle East and migratory conflicts

Abstract

This article examines the male FIFA World Cup in Qatar through the lens of the German newspaper Bild. To interpret this coverage, it discusses German Soft Power and Leitkultur policies and the influence of the Islamic world on the current European map. Finally, based on these previously articulated discussions, the article categorizes and analyzes the 82 collected articles.

Keywords: Qatar, Germany, soft power, Leitkultur, sports mega-events

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Introduction

This article is part of a broader research project funded by Fapesp that problematizes sports mega-events based on Soft Power. According to the Author, Soft Power, a phenomenon identified by American political scientist Joseph Nye, is the type of Power exercised through cultural and ideological “co-optation.” However, merely hosting such events does not ensure its acquisition. This article analyzes the coverage of the 2022 Qatar World Cup by the German newspaper Bild and some intangible elements related to Soft Power. Germany was chosen for analysis due to its simultaneous status as a soft power powerhouse and its conflicting internal outcomes with integration policies, which seek alignment with a European Leitkultur (leading culture).

Sports mega-events as a stage for soft power

Soft Power is a term coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye in the 1980s to denote political Power that seeks persuasion and conviction to achieve international objectives. Adding to the thought of Niccolò Machiavelli, Nye states that in the current political conjuncture, being loved is as crucial as being feared since attraction strongly influences the international community.

In a 2021 article, where he reviews and debates some points and criticisms of his work, Nye presents a simple differentiation between Hard and Soft Power: the former seeks to push, while the latter, to pull. He warns that the exercise of attraction should not be confused with mere propaganda, as it strongly depends on the political credibility of the country, achieved through facts, expressed more in the actions and values “of its civil society” than by the exclusive performance of “its governments”.¹

As an alternative to Hard Power, the use of threat and coercion, Soft Power is a more economically and politically interesting solution, but more laborious as it is “an asset that needs to be nurtured”.² It is exercised in three ways: (1) through the diffusion of the country’s culture, (2) through the diffusion of its ethical and political values, and (3) through its behavior in international relations. In this context, ideologies, religions, customs, leisure, arts, and sports are seen as traits of local sociability and as means for attracting investments and international projection.

In academia, various studies, including those used as a reference in this article, understand sports mega-events as an attempt to obtain Soft Power. The author clarifies that his concepts are not connected to Western, American, or liberal values, as “attractiveness” is an

“empirical question,” existing in “different times and situations,” a result of feelings and impressions about “competence, kindness, or charisma”.¹

Demonstrating that attraction depends on the culture and political regime of the “minds of the target audience”,¹ Nye exemplifies that a Hollywood movie may be attractive to the Brazilian public and repulsive to the Saudi Arabian audience. The latter country also exemplifies that Soft Power is not a Western concept, as it is recognized as possessing significant political influence among Sunni Muslims.

Fundamental to the definition of soft power is the voluntary behavior of the observer granted to the international entity. Unlike “Sharp Power, “which distorts reality, removes meaningful choice from the target, and obscures the brute force behavior of coercion, with lies and deceptions, Soft Power “depends on a voluntary choice, sufficient to allow an analytical observer to describe the target as being positively attracted significantly”.¹ In the final analysis, sympathy for the country falls on the analyzed civil society.

The German case: between soft power and Leitkultur

The research, to which this article is interconnected, chose the German newspaper Bild as a source of analysis because it is pointed out as “the largest and one of the most influential newspapers in Germany and the German daily with the widest reach.” According to media expert Norbert Bolz, such results are due to the “design of the newspaper,” with a presentation “understandable to anyone, whether they have a university degree or not”.³ It is noteworthy that the newspaper is sometimes called a tabloid, being frequently criticized for its political interpretation, methods, and journalistic style, which, for the research proposed here, confirms the search for a language aimed at assimilation and the interests of the general average of the population.

As exposed in the introduction, the journalistic coverage of a German newspaper about a World Cup in an Arab and Muslim country is interesting when confronted with Germany’s Soft Power policies. A country that repeatedly figures among the prominent leaders in this power⁴ and applies internal public policies aimed at a Leitkultur, which seeks, under protests, to ensure that its migrants understand its language and legislation. Proficiency in the famous language is ensured through government monitoring, with the risk of visa suspension if the migrant does not achieve the proficiency required by the test.

Coincidentally, in the modern era, the use of sports as a stage for exercising Soft Power dates back to the 1936 Berlin Olympics. According to the Holocaust Museum Encyclopedia, the Games were used for “propaganda purposes,” in which the Nazis reproduced “an image of a new, strong, and united Germany” and masked their “antisemitic and racist policies, as well as the country’s growing militarism”.⁵ The international civil society, especially the northern countries, and individually, the Jewish athletes, tried to boycott the event and protest. However, the games took place. As the great champion of the 11th modern Olympiad, Germany emerged victorious, so much so that the New York Times stated at the time its “return to the community of nations,” which was disproved with the unfolding of World War II and the Holocaust. According to the Think Talk Germany’s Soft Power Strategy in the Middle East: Past & Future, held on January 24, 2022, supported by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and with the participation of Ambassador Kai Boeckmann, German foreign policy in the post-World War II era is based on the “European Union as its cornerstone that places great emphasis on dialogue and cooperation and presents a strong role of Soft Power.”⁶

The *Leitkultur*, applied internally, as will be discussed next, is based on European Union values. For Nye, the German strategy adopted externally in the post-war period is a “success case” of Soft Power. Repudiating “its past of aggressions and reconciling with its neighbors”⁷ was the right path for the resumption of its attractiveness. Civil society is pointed out as a fundamental factor for its reputational reconstruction, for actively collaborating with restoration plans.⁷

As an emblem of overcoming the past of animosity, the direct collaboration between the United States and Germany stands out, post-September 11 attacks against Al Qaeda, as well as its firm and secure stance in openly disagreeing with the justifications presented by the United States for the war in Iraq. By publicly and internationally condemning the entry of the former ally into the conflict, the country demonstrated sufficient confidence in its Soft Power, stating that the justification presented was the result of biased political and journalistic action.⁷

As reported by the Global Soft Power Index 2022, Germany’s influence comes from its “extraordinarily positive” economy and the international perception of the country as the dominant entity of the European Union, with “balanced and moderate action in managing issues of political polarization”.⁴

Based on the information from the Federal Department for Migration and Refugees of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, for Construction and Homeland of Germany, BAMF, “Germany is a social state.” This implies that “every citizen must provide for their own livelihood through work,” however, it is the State’s duty to “compensate for inequalities” by assisting “people who are not able to secure their livelihood through their own efforts.” Among the social benefits of the State, the agency lists “mandatory social insurance,” unemployment benefits, as well as “kindergeld,” the “family allowance” granted to all residents who have children BAMF, p.129. Such benefits, combined with policies to combat labor shortages, make Germany one of the preferred destinations for migration.

German Muslims

After the construction of the Berlin Wall, policies aimed at “Gastarbeiter” (guest workers) accelerated the influx of migrants, resulting in the reception of “more than one million workers” from neighboring countries like Italy, Spain, Yugoslavia, and especially Turkey”.⁸ A 2022 survey by the German Federal Statistical Office

reveals that foreigners or descendants of foreigners currently make up more than 25% of the German population. Within this group, Turkish migrants are prominent, comprising 12% of the population.⁹ This makes Germany home to the largest Turkish population outside Turkey.

Turkish migration differs from other migrations due to its volume, which, in association with other migrations from Islamic countries, implies conflicts over religious and cultural values and customs. For a society that invests in a national brand of peaceful, responsible, and above all, tolerant in relation to religious differences, the presence of Muslim citizens is a constant civic and democratic exercise.

Post-reunification in 1990 and in other economic crises, unemployment and state failures are attributed by the “native” society to foreigners, especially those of Muslim origin, which led to conflicts that persist to this day. For the Turkish community “there seems to be a climate of non-belonging”.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the current generation of descendants does not necessarily consider returning to their country of origin.

In response to the pressing necessity for integrating migrants through legalization and ensuring equal rights, coupled with the pursuit of more tolerant policies towards migrants in society, the concept of *Leitkultur* has surfaced in public discourse.

Idealized by the Syrian political scientist, Muslim, naturalized German, Bassam Tibin, the European *Leitkultur* is the Enlightenment and humanist culture of Europe, which must be adopted as the leading and guiding culture by migrants, as it “constitutes the substance of civil society” and the path to real pluralism.¹¹

According to the author, the determination of a *Leitkultur* is necessary in the face of the constant “migration of the Islamic world” to Europe, which means that Europe has, internally, people “susceptible to Islamism” or “socialized in a religious worldview oriented by sharia”.¹¹ Thus, the author proposes based on European Enlightenment principles, that the State adopts the following principles:

1. The primacy of reason over religious revelation, that is, over the validity of absolute truths;
2. Individual human rights (i.e., there are no minority rights as group rights), which include freedom of belief in particular;
3. A secular democracy based on the separation between religion and politics and,
4. A universally recognized pluralism, with mutual tolerance that helps to deal with cultural differences rationally.”¹¹

For Tibi, *Leitkultur* is the observance of the “rules of the house” regarding “secular values”. In approximation, it is the search for a consensus on values to the “cultural modernity of Jürgen Habermas”,¹¹ as it does not have an ethnic character; therefore, it is suitable for transcultural validity. Consensus is the alternative to actions based on parallel or arbitrary values.

The author clarifies that the term was inappropriately appropriated in public debate, both by the left, which understands it as a form of “hegemonic oppression of migrant minorities,” and by the right, which created the derivation of the “German *Leitkultur*,” which reinforces xenophobic stereotypes. As an example of the term’s appropriation by the conservative right, the use of the concept in an article by the then German Minister of the Interior, Thomas de Maizière, to the newspaper *Bild* in 2017 is cited. The politician understands that being German is about characteristics “beyond language and the Constitution” and

defines himself and his compatriots with the negative: “we are not burqa” and adds, “we shake hands,” “we have a diligent work ethic” and “we are committed to education and the arts”,¹² seeking to restore the conceptual wall between us against others.

Former Chancellor Angela Merkel herself used the term, as explained by her party Christlich-Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU):

1. Germany is more than a country of birth or residence. Germany is our spiritual home (Heimat) and part of our identity. Our cultural values - influenced by our origin in the ancient world, the Judeo-Christian tradition, enlightenment, and historical experiences - are the foundations for social cohesion and, furthermore, shape the dominant culture in Germany, to which the CDU feels especially obliged. We expect those who join us to respect and recognize this”.¹³

Jürgen Habermas, identified as one of the leading contemporary German philosophers, counters the above understanding in an article for *The New York Times* and asserts that Leitkultur should not be defined by religion. The German appropriation of the “Judeo-Christian tradition” is seen as arrogant and hypocritical, disregarding the fate “suffered by Jews in Germany,” and merely serves to fuel xenophobic discussions.

For Habermas, the utmost demand a “liberal state,” such as Germany, can place on its migrants is the “learning of the country’s language and acceptance of the principles of its Constitution.” The philosopher emphasizes the need to overcome the false belief that foreigners must assimilate the “values” of the majority-European culture and adopt its “customs”.¹⁴

According to a study conducted for the European Institute by Bilgi University Istanbul, the discussion surrounding Leitkultur promotes “assimilation” rather than “intercultural dialogue,” which has consequences for both natives and migrants. Behavioral expectations “perpetuate the isolation and marginalization of migrants of Turkish and Islamic origin,” leading to “humiliation, isolation, and deprivation.” A 2017 study found that over 75% of the German civil society, across political spectrums, considers it “necessary for migrants to adopt German customs and traditions”,¹³ making assimilation crucial for the recognition and acceptance of migrants.

Germans and Muslims

For political scientist LR Rustamova, Leitkultur can be understood as a form of Soft Power applied internally. However, in her view, the ethical, political, and public actions of citizens from Muslim cultures are imbued with religious values, thus not pluralistic. In author’s words:

1. “Countries with large Muslim populations are difficult to influence, as they differ from Europe in terms of civilization, possessing their own customs and traditions, strictly followed due to the peculiarities of the religion.”¹⁵

The author maintains that Germany’s attractiveness policies have led to a significant influx of Muslim migration, creating three problems: the inability of foreigners to integrate into local culture, the division of German society, threatened by foreign absorption, and the host’s inability to obtain a positive image in the Muslim world.

Furthermore, she clarifies that Soft Power policies can produce unpredictable results for the interested entity, such as the increase of Turkish Soft Power influence in German politics itself, evidenced in the votes for Turkey’s inclusion in the European community. Instead

of “becoming targets of soft influence,” German Turks have become a more effective means for Turkey’s Soft Power within Germany.¹⁵

The relationship of Turkish-German footballer Mesut Özil with the Deutsche Mannschaft (DM) illustrates the controversial balance between German Leitkultur and Soft Power. As a member of the 2014 German national team, the winner of the World Cup, and host Brazil, Özil was hailed as an example of positive integration of Turks into local society. At that time, the DM consisted of many players resulting from migration, such as Polish-German player Miroslaw Klose and Brazilian-born German national, Claudemir Jerônimo Barreto, known as Cacau.

Following Germany’s elimination in the Russian World Cup, Özil announced his retirement from the DM, stating he felt “persecuted and discriminated against” by the German Football Federation due to his Turkish ancestry and, primarily, for expressing his “favorable opinions on migration and multiculturalism in German society”.¹⁶ Heavily criticized in Germany after posing in a photo with Recep Erdoğan in 2018, shortly before the World Cup in Russia, the player denounced these attacks as racist, as he, like many Turks, maintains ties with Turkey.

With ongoing policies to combat labor shortages, Germany aims to simplify its visa-granting processes,¹⁷ meaning the migrant population in the country is likely to become increasingly significant. Additionally, the Muslim world is emerging as a source of investment. The hosting of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, led by the owner of Paris Saint Germain, where World Cup top scorer Kylian Mbappé and vice-scorer, captain of the winning team, Lionel Messi play, proves this fact.

Emerging with multinational companies like Qatar Airways, the sponsor of FC Bayern, the country is working on its Soft Power, with massive investment in Europe. In Germany, the BBC estimates that Qatar’s investments exceed \$24 billion, spread across stakes in major companies, understood as standard-bearers of German culture like Volkswagen, Deutsche Bank, and Siemens.¹⁸

With the 15-year energy pact made between Germany and Qatar during the games, the political relationship between both countries has direct strategic importance for the lives of millions of European citizens. On the other hand, their civil society questions the validity of agreements made with political regimes with values that seem contrary to their Leitkultur. Next, we will analyze the Bild report groups that we understand as relevant to the work defined here.

Analysis of Bild newspaper reports

For the research presented here, we analyzed articles collected from the Bild newspaper from November 20, 2022, to December 18, 2022, the end of the Qatar World Cup. The methodology for selecting articles is based on Nye’s categories: 1) the country’s culture, 2) societal values, and 3) political and international relations.

Among the 82 selected reports, we found 02 reports dealing directly with the country’s culture, 38 on political and international relations, and 42 on the ethical and political values applied by the country, with the following themes standing out:

15 Reports on the “One Love” Armband:

In a symbolic clash between European Leitkultur and the actions of a government religiously determined by Islam in association with the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), the armbands gained political prominence. Initially used in 2020 by the Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB), they symbolize opposition “to

discrimination based on race, skin color, sexual orientation, culture, faith, nationality, gender, age, and all other forms of discrimination".¹⁹

Captains of European national teams- England, Wales, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, and Denmark- wished to use these accessories as a protest against Qatar's laws, which prohibit same-sex relationships. As a Muslim country with a conservative culture, the emirate considers homosexuality an illegal practice. Initially, the use of the accessory at the event was permitted by the host and FIFA; however, hours before the tournament's start, its use was prohibited.

Gianni Infantino, FIFA's president, appointed after corruption scandals in recent World Cups, was labeled by the newspaper as "Hypocrite, Traitor, and Villain".²⁰ It's worth noting that in his opening speech at the event, Infantino made a controversial statement in which he also identified as a minority, feeling "gay," "female," and "migrant," and concluded, in response to criticism, with a statement that questions European

Leitkultur:

"This way to give lessons unilaterally is hypocritical (...) I think that what we, Europeans, have done around the world in the last 3,000 years, we should apologize for the next 3,000 years before we start distributing moral advice to others."²¹

In the struggle for the use of the armbands, European football associations considered political, legal, or financial measures such as paying fines for their use. However, they backed down when FIFA threatened to issue yellow cards to any player who wore them, as it would violate team dress rules. Bild reported that the DM (German national team) would file a case with the international arbitration chamber to resolve the conflict, but days later it reported its impossibility, given FIFA's organizational sovereignty, which had made no legally binding promise.

As a result, the German team was demoted sportingly and morally, as the newspaper's sports director Matthias Brügelmann commented: "The lack of a strong response to FIFA's decisions and the prohibition of the one love band make the people ashamed of the team. Better to be disqualified for fighting for human rights than to play FIFA's game."²²

15 Reports: On the Qatar energy contract and suspicions of corruption in the European parliament

Of the selected reports, 08 focus on Germany's acquisition of liquefied gas from Qatar and 07 on corruption in the European Parliament and suspicions of bribe payments by Qatar. These themes were unified due to their political and economic interconnection. During the World Cup, Qatar Energy and the German government concluded a billion-dollar contract for liquefied gas supply. According to the newspaper, with an initial validity of fifteen years, the contract violates German Soft Power policy principles. In concrete terms, this means: "Germany is sending billions to a state that punishes homosexuality with imprisonment and death, discriminates against women, and finances terrorists."²³

In conjunction with the news about the contract, Qatar's entry into the European market began to have its methods questioned, due to bribery scandals in the European Parliament. Although it has rejected any accusation linking its agents' stance to the bribery of European Parliament deputies,²⁴ strong suspicions linger that the emirate participated in such actions, perceived by the German government as an attack on European democracy.

The European Parliament initiated an investigation campaign, planning to penalize visa access and the air agreement between the EU and the emirate, yet such a request conflicts with pre-existing agreements that affect the countries of the bloc and Qatar itself.

14 Reports: conflicts linked to Islamism

Of the selected reports, 06 are about games and conflicts in Iran, 03 about the treatment given to visitors of Jewish origin, 02 regarding the reactions of Moroccan migrant fans, 02 related to protests involving the player Özil, and 01 dealing with the suspension of a sports commentator for making political criticisms against Qatar.

Generally, the reports support Muslim protests towards democracy and rights related to European Leitkultur. Celebrations by Moroccan migrant communities in Belgium, which turned into conflicts due to their victory over the host, were criticized. Similarly, protests featuring images of player Özil, in direct attack on Germany, were described as "bizarre," "pre-arranged," and proof of "FIFA's double standards," which accept protests against other countries but not against the stances of its host.^{25,26}

13 Reports: On FIFA

Of the selected reports, 4 are about the development of upcoming events, and 9 criticize its management, declining viewership, and discussions about the future of football. As a result of the event, the newspaper points out the discrediting of the German political class, which positions itself as "outraged" by the World Cup in Qatar while simultaneously make financial agreements with the country and FIFA. The DM itself was included in the criticism for also pretending "not to know that Qatar is an Islamic state where the rights of women, minorities, and migrant workers are trampled upon." The newspaper makes it clear that it is common knowledge that "FIFA places (financial) interests above values and human rights" and that the DM had the opportunity to set an example, in the Qatar World Cup and even in the Russia World Cup, but continues to yield "to the first gentle breeze."²⁷

Final considerations

Although propaganda artificially generates attraction, its conversion into Soft Power primarily depends on the opinion of civil society. In the case studied it can be concluded that Qatar's objectives were partially met, as it became known to "policymakers," this being before the corruption scandals, which, even with the subsequent judicial investigation, damaged its reputation as an unblemished country until the end of the investigations.

The sympathy of the German civil society was hardly increased with the news about the impossibility of dialogue on human and democratic rights. Similarly, there is a natural tendency to resist a country that ties itself to daily life through a strategic, billion-dollar, and suspect agreement.

As the United States has demonstrated for decades with its pop culture, and as South Korea has learned well with K-POP and its dramas, popular culture continues to be the best means for attracting people and producing Soft Power. Nye explains that for successful attainment, investment in "situations where cultures are somewhat similar rather than very different" is necessary.²⁸ In this sense, Germany and the Islamic world have an interesting opportunity to bridge with their Muslim migrants, who, as interpreters of cultures, can influence both the country of residence and the country of origin.

In multicultural debates, Habermas limits discussions to human rights, which should always be understood as absolute, indivisible, and interdependent, without cultural relativism. The diverse interpretation of the theme occurs, according to the author, more for socioeconomic reasons than cultural ones. The pursuit of the benefits of economic liberalism, undertaken by countries outside their tradition, only makes sense if accompanied by a legal framework that ensures fundamental liberal rights for their population. This does not mean that European Leitkultur is better. The debate becomes increasingly necessary if understood as an “opportunity to clarify common blind spots”.²⁹

Both those who demand obedience to the German “Leitkultur” and the ghettos dominated by sharia know that “a consensus based on conviction cannot materialize unless there are symmetrical relations among the participants in the communication.” For the evolution of human rights, actions focused on mutual recognition, reciprocal transposition of perspectives, and a willingness from both sides to observe their own tradition are necessary. “A foreign gaze to learn from each other”,²⁹ which can give meaning to a new consensus, based on a power supported by facts and positive experiences of civil society.

Being open to learning from the foreigner tends to be fundamental for Western culture, which, according to economic statistics, will cease to control the global economy in a few decades. Hans Rosling states that around 2040, the West will no longer be the residence of the planet’s wealthiest, who will mostly be located in countries with non-Western cultures.³⁰

The World Cup in Qatar solidifies the existence of Soft Power investments from the East to the West. In the analysis proposed here, it is possible to understand that the results sought by the emirate, as an independent nation and representative of Islamic culture, did not yield the desired fruits in the face of German civil society.

Two months after the event, the allegorical floats used in the 2023 carnival show indications of the correction of the above thesis. In the city of Cologne, Infantino was portrayed as a giant doll with a mouth full of money, accompanied by a bag with the same content, in front of a football field, with a sign stating in English: “Best Coup Ever”.³¹

In Frankfurt, a float accuses FIFA and the host country of being hypocrites, who propagated the narrative of high moral and religious standards, but also committed the universally known crime of corruption. It depicts a sexual encounter between Infantino and the emirate. As the passive partner, the FIFA chief is portrayed with eyes closed, covered by money notes, happily bending to the advances of an active partner, the latter dressed in the typical white Muslim cloak, with the World Cup symbol stamped on the face.³²

The allegories demonstrate the resistance of German society to the campaign from the East. It remains to be seen whether, with the predicted shift in the economic pole in the coming decades, Leitkultur will also resist or lean towards new cultural possibilities.

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