



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF

THE EUROPEAN UNION EXTERNAL ACTION IN TIMES OF CRISIS AND CHANGE

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND DISCOURSE



Advocacy, Governmental Organisations and Research networks Associated – AGORA Forum (www.agora-forum.eu) – Organised by the Institut d’Etudes Européennes de l’Université Libre de Bruxelles in partnership with the European External Action Service and the European Commission on 27-28 February 2013

8th Round Table’s Summary of Findings and Policy Recommendations

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October 2013



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Ceci n’est pas un Simple Forum



Public diplomacy is generally seen as an instrument of “soft power”, focused on influencing public opinion and enhancing the international image and attractiveness of the EU. As a normative power engaged in public diplomacy, the EU aims to influence what is considered as “normal” in politics, to bring it in line with prevailing EU norms.

Internally, its main functions are to legitimise EU foreign policies as well as to construct EU identity.

Foreign policy is generally seen as being built on a coherent identity: yet a unique characteristic of the EU (as a normative power) is to celebrate its diversity.

In contrast to the standard practices, EU public diplomacy therefore has to “sell” and engage with different values and policy stances, rather than seek to impose coherence when there is necessarily none.

Externally, it mainly seeks to influence the opinions of civil societies outside the EU.

The success conditions of EU public diplomacy have been widely discussed. Its effectiveness depends on a series of predispositions: (1) the EU integration project as a peace project; (2) its reputation as a civilian rather than military power; (3) the weight of, as well as the networks built on, its colonial past; and (4) its loss of economic power in the wake of the financial crisis.

The EU’s actions themselves also influence its normative power: (1) the consistency between what is being preached and what the EU and its member states pursue in terms of concrete policies; (2) the problem of bureaucracy often seen as suffocating funded projects, as well as project applications; (3) the, at times, exclusionary funding of liberal civil society actors; (4) the tensions between norms that are seen as core norms of the EU, such as democracy, peace and justice; (5) the discrepancies between how the EU understands these core norms and how they are seen elsewhere; (6) the many different instruments used by many different actors when communicating the EU’s messages; and (7) the uneven, publically-available information, even at times within a single website.

Resulting core questions

Imposing coherence where there is none, might not be an acceptable strategy in a pluralist international society: yet if not well managed, diversity can easily become a liability. Furthermore, in matters of transparency and legitimacy, the EU’s public diplomacy can be abused to merely try to “sell” its foreign policy. As a consequence, a core question emerges in terms of its *internal function*: does the EU’s public diplomacy need to represent unified values at all? If so, to what extent can it allow for disagreements and contestations?

In light of the pre-identified conditions for its success, and with regards to the influence of its own action, which strategy and tactics should the EU adopt to achieve the *external purpose* of its public diplomacy?

EU promotion and diplomacy confused

In general, foreign policy can rely on a well-established institutional diplomatic network. Until the EU's dedicated external action institutions were created under the Lisbon Treaty, which came into force in December 2009, its foreign policy was formally organised on an essentially intergovernmental basis, with no foreign ministry or diplomatic service.

Consequently, the EU's external action has long focused on public diplomacy as one of its core instruments. The means at its disposal included support for EU Centres seeking to foster research, information and exchanges on the EU, and European Commission's representations (formally not operating as embassies) concentrating their efforts on promoting both the EU, as well as its interests and core norms.

Since the beginning of the activities of the European External Action Service (EEAS), EU delegations' efforts have been recalibrated to better co-ordinate foreign policy, be it of the EU itself or of its member states. However, the footprint of the EU's traditional way of conducting public diplomacy remains tangible: the EU still pays more attention to selling information and promoting itself, rather than in engaging diplomatic dialogue.

An ill-assumed complexity

The institutional setup behind the EU's public diplomacy is a new and complex one, a consequence of which is that it has to use a lot of effort in explaining itself, be it internally or externally. Even if the content of the EU's public diplomacy can be convincing and persuasive, as democracy, human rights, peaceful means of conflict resolution and sustainable development are at its heart, the diversity of European societies and the EU institutions, as well as the complex bureaucratic system on which they rely, often result in a counterproductive confusion. Erratic policy changes, double standards (e.g. on Turkey), a multitude of actors and initiatives, slow reactions, unclear definitions of common (or even contradicting) interests, conspire to produce an, at times, inconsistent public diplomacy and foreign policy set. The resulting gap between the EU's discourse and behaviour constitutes a real risk.

Concomitantly, while further integration of public information through the newly setup EEAS would be helpful, this remains a sensitive move for both Member States and other EU institutions. Foreign policy roles and prerogatives remain, and are likely to remain, decentralised and essentially functionally distributed. Disagreements and contradictions are part of the EU's narrative and nature, and should therefore be acknowledged and recognisable parts of its identity. A common position is sometimes unnecessary, as debate also shows the EU's diversity as a positive value.

A fledgling communication strategy

Even if the EU runs its own channel on YouTube, and if the EEAS has been making use of the contemporary social media (Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter accounts), much of the EU strategy in this area, as well as many of its public events organised by its representations, remain focused on information and not on dialogue. However, public diplomacy is an exchange at the societal level, a two-way communication exercise, which promotes ideals and expectations. A more dialogical approach would allow EU actors to better know what their counterparts are thinking.

This "marketing strategy", combined with underused social media, results in a lack of general visibility. A quantitative comparison of social media numbers ("followers" on twitter or "likes" on Facebook) is particularly illustrative in this regard. On August 1st 2013, the EEAS Facebook page accounts 21095 likes, whereas the US Department of State accounts 325.000. President Barack Obama has 34.680.699 followers on twitter, whereas HRVP Catherin Ashton accounts 34.593 and Counsellor Angela Merkel 44.265.

Further centralisation of EU foreign policies is unlikely to happen (and perhaps not even desirable). National EU political determinants underlying the appointment of the HRVP hinder the choice for a widely known figure in the short term. As the EU has no clear internal identity, it has to invent an innovative public diplomacy approach, which acknowledges this fact and fosters the combination of both its external and internal dimension. A comprehensive communication strategy should support the EU's real policy and engage with the EU's external partners, while simultaneously acknowledging its public diplomacy's internal dimension geared towards transforming diversity and disagreements into virtues. Information control, traditionally applied in foreign policy, is indeed in direct contradiction with the EU's systemic, institutional and citizenry's structures.

Exclusionary funding of civil society actors

A positive aspect of the EU's working method is the involvement of civil society. As raised earlier, in light of its evolving complex democratic structure, its public diplomacy long rested on ties with EU and non-EU civil societies. It can therefore count on strong relations with Civil Society Organisations (CSO). But these strong relations have also resulted in a certain hierarchy among said CSOs: on the one hand, big CSOs that have been able to meet the formal demands have de facto acquired the status of privileged partners, and on the other, a constellation of smaller CSOs who struggle to emerge from their shadow.

Engaging with civil societies has proven to be a success in the EU's public diplomacy so far, but the internal legitimacy of the European foreign policy now calls for more transparency on how decisions are made in this regard, since it has acquired a dedicated institutional framework with the Lisbon Treaty. Besides more/better funding, it is confidence which is called for.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A comprehensive approach: the EU's diversity and subsequent complexity accepted and promoted as such

- In light of its complex narrative, nature, system and identity, the EU's foreign policy cannot rely on a traditional approach in matters of foreign policy. If normative power Europe is to work, it will have to transcend the traditional society of states, rather than to replicate it. The EU should therefore acknowledge diversity and debate as virtues, and streamline them into its public diplomacy.
- As a result, the EU's foreign policy cannot be that of a state, it has to invent a unique public diplomacy, which enhances transparency and debate. It should promote the EU's values through engagement, based on cultural diversity. This needs to be a core theme not only within the EU, but also in its external representations.
- EU member states should be systematically taken on board, while divergences in points of view should be accepted: multilateralism has to cope with such differences and is an added value when it comes to shaping global governance. The EU has a unique and recognised experience to share in this regard.

Innovative strategy

- This comprehensive approach should be systematically mainstreamed throughout all external relations' related actions and personnel.

- EU foreign policy failures ought to be addressed head-on and not ignored. If the classical determinants of collective identity cannot be applied to the EU, the way it deals with diversity and contradictions can become an aspirational goal at the international level.
- A more dialogical approach would make EU actors more aware of what their counterparts think, thus promoting genuine two-way-interaction as a negotiations' model.
- To promote its own interests within this broader strategy, the EU should focus on controversial debates, bringing in a wide range of local actors, including as many Civil Society Organisations as possible. This would guarantee coherence with its nature as a civilian power and reinforce its message, by combining a bottom up approach with the traditional top down one.
- The ever-growing voice and influence of civil society (for example in the context of the Arab Spring) needs to be better acknowledged: funding regulations for local projects should be relaxed to enable smaller CSOs to access such initiatives.

Adapted tactics and tools

- The growing role of social media in disseminating information should be prioritised, as traditional media such as TV, although still important, might seem to simply convey official messages.
- There should be systematic links between EU/EEAS new social media outlets, and those of member states with specific forums to summarise the viewpoints of member states, even when they diverge. Information control is in contradiction with the very way the EU works. Controls also lower its profile by heightening the gap between its diverse actions and its truncated messages.
- Further integration of EU and Member State information would illustrate the EU's capacity to pursue common objectives, while at the same time accommodating diversity. To this effect, a single website through which civil society actors access this information is desirable.
- More resources for engaging with tweets and posts – some of which will be violating EU norms – would provide the EU's public diplomacy with coherence.
- Public diplomacy needs to be a vital component of any EU diplomatic personnel's training, even more so as it is likely to remain an evolving object.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME Global Re-ordering: Evolution through European Networks (GR:EEN).

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Waseda University
Tokyo, Japan

FUNDING SCHEME FP7 Framework Programme, Collaborative Project, SSH – Europe facing a rising multi-polar world

DURATION March 2011- February 2015 (48 months)

BUDGET EU contribution: 7 944 718 €.

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