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Communicating Europe

At Home in Tomorrow's World

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The time is ripe for European public diplomacy to take centre stage. Europe, and particularly the EU, is often misunderstood and seen in unnecessarily negative terms. The Eurozone crisis exacerbated the existing image of prevailing self-doubt. We argue that the EU myopically devotes too great a proportion of its communication resources to outreach with its own citizens. It is important to bridge the existing gap between the intra-EU and international communication spheres. Communicating Europe in other parts of the world will become increasingly important to Europeans and to business interests. The erosion of European influence and attractiveness is already evident in a number of policy areas. With international opinion in flux, it is urgent to prevent foreign publics from looking at Europe as a shopping paradise for high-end luxury items, or a continent suffering from endemic pessimism. As far as the EU does engage with the rest of the world, the problem is that communication is too often based on one-way informational practices rather than true dialogue. EU member-state governments, still behaving as though state-based diplomacy remains the name of their age-old Westphalian game, should be more conscious of the strengths of Europe's pluralistic and multi-level governance environment. Sharing excellence in public diplomacy practices is in their own interest as well as that of other international actors in Europe.

Introduction

The EU risks losing soft power – that most cherished form of power for an actor that is willing to use only few hard-power tools. There is a variety of reasons for this, including Europeans' self-criticism of their own efforts, serious controversy among member states and the media's tendency to exaggerate differences. We argue that there is a significant gap between all that the EU has accomplished and how the wider public perceives it. Overcoming the lack of global awareness and burgeoning scepticism about the EU's intrinsic assets is likely to become

more challenging. This Policy Brief addresses this important issue, which receives far too little attention and has been largely overlooked by analysts. It is based on the findings of a book-length study.¹

1. The ideas for this policy brief build on the chapter contributions to: Mai'a K. Davis Cross and Jan Melissen (eds), *European Public Diplomacy: Soft Power at Work* (New York: Palgrave, November 2013). We would like to thank Nicholas Cull, Simon Duke, Ali Fisher, Peter van Ham, Ellen Huijgh, Teresa La Porte, Ian Manners, Beata Ociepka, James Pamment and Richard Whitman.

Lack of Global Awareness

Emerging powers are starting to challenge Europe in areas of its traditional strength, and there is a complex story behind the gap between the EU's image and the reality of its significance in world politics.² This gap is much greater than simple misunderstandings about the EU's status as a 'unique international actor' – the only experiment of its kind in voluntarily ceding numerous dimensions of national sovereignty to a common governance structure in Brussels. Fundamental damage to Europe's reputation in other parts of the world also goes beyond critical images of European leaders with no capacity to lead, and intra-group behaviour among European bureaucracies and those orbiting them.

Europe continually underperforms when it comes to soft power. Its soft power primarily stems from the EU's strong commitment to international law and cooperation, its vibrant and creative economy, prioritization of development aid, identity as a peaceful and diplomatic actor, and its internal cultural, linguistic and social diversity, among many other things. Yet despite its numerous attractive qualities, the international community often characterizes the EU as weak, because the tendency is to focus on periods of crisis and specific moments when the EU fails to speak with one voice. This is not just to the detriment of the EU itself, but also damages the image and reputation of its component parts, including the states, regions, cities and – last but not least – European business interests. When member states, as the 'first line of defence', neglect to reinforce the European project and their stake in it, the EU becomes a more vulnerable target for negative perceptions, both from internal and external audiences. Of course, there are real divisions within European publics and among member states across a variety of issues, but this is to be expected in a democratic entity comprised of 28 member states. These differences in opinions and goals

cannot be papered over, but they are also perfectly normal in democratic societies. Still, it seems that Europe, as a collective of states, is becoming progressively easier to ignore.

The EU's external image is stronger when its constituent parts are able to communicate to outsiders how much they have in fact invested in their common European project. The international peace that is associated with integration may have lost much of its appeal among younger generations, which take the European cultural space for granted. For others, it remains one of the EU's greatest and most easily recognizable sources of soft power. On a more practical level, and obviously recognizing the reality of competitive cooperation among the European states, the more systematic transfer of expertise on public diplomacy among EU member states is an attractive proposition. Spin doctors and public practitioners in European capitals would all gain from sharing what they have learned in more than a decade marred by image crises in all corners of the EU, and they could do so without harming national interests or cherished secrets.

Competitive Cooperation: Economics, Culture, Geopolitics

Many of the world's regions would save themselves a chronic headache if their leaders could deal with one another on the basis of similar neighbourhood relations, as happens within the EU today. Ironically, it is often the Europeans themselves who fail to realize this. Europe constitutes the world's most radical political and diplomatic experiment.

2. For a detailed analysis of EU power, see: Mai'a K. Davis Cross, 'Europe, A Smart Power?', *International Politics*, Vol. 48 (6), pp. 691–706.

Its efforts to promote global norms of peace and diplomacy, and to prosper through the creation of an internally borderless zone that represents much more than simply free trade, have given the EU considerable soft-power potential. Moreover, Europe's democratic principles and openness have enabled a variety of actors – at the sub-national, national and supra-national levels – to communicate Europe to others around the world, comprising a mosaic of public diplomacy engagement with foreign publics. Many of these actors compete with each other for the world's attention, but at the same time they together project their shared values, creating an overall image of Europe that outsiders perceive. It should also help the EU's public diplomacy that, with the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, its institutional muscle has been strengthened, which is in national governments' own interests.

However, economic hardship in general and the Eurozone crisis in particular have left their imprint on the practice of public diplomacy across the EU. There are predictable imbalances as well as unexpected parallels between former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's 'old' (Western) and 'new' (Central and Eastern) Europe. There is a sense that European states' public diplomacy is at some levels starting to look backwards rather than forwards. This is in spite of having learned a great deal about public diplomacy, although often by bitter experience, as the Danes, Dutch, Irish, Greeks, Spaniards and many others know. Enhanced economic competition is taking its toll. Embassies have made significant progress, experimenting with listening-based public diplomacy, but the 'beggar thy neighbour' climate of economic rivalry has affected thinking on public diplomacy in Europe's capitals. Going back to the future, governments of big and small countries are attracted by straightforward promotional practices that seem to harmonize better with their commercial diplomacy's objectives.³

In Western Europe, the primacy of economic diplomacy across the Eurozone has resulted in a resurgence of the corporate-inspired practice of nation-branding. To be fair, branding can exceed the purposes of promotion and contribute to a nation's identity -building, as well as engage domestic stakeholders in the projection of a favourable image. The critical difference between state-of-the-art public diplomacy and branding, however, remains that branding silences controversies, while public diplomacy tries to turn differences and variety into strengths. As far as things are heading in this direction, the Eurozone's economic plight has done the cause of a more enlightened public diplomacy more harm than good. Ironically, Western Europe's recent emphasis on national image promotion bears a certain resemblance to the preference for business-oriented practices in Central and Eastern European countries that came with their entry into a competitive economic environment.

In 'old' Europe, one effect of greater economic rivalry among partners in the common European project is intensified competition for cultural influence outside of Europe, at least among the culturally self-contained Big Three – France, Germany and the United Kingdom – which have their native languages as a key asset of their cultural relations. The financial crisis in Europe has resulted in deep cuts to cultural relations budgets, particularly in Southern Europe and among the smaller powers, but the governments of Germany and France are actually spending more on their foreign cultural presence.

3. R.H. Zaharna, Amelia Arsenault and Ali Fisher (eds), *Relational, Networked and Collaborative Approaches to Public Diplomacy: The Connective Mindshift* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012); and Brian Hocking, Jan Melissen, Shaun Riordan and Paul Sharp, *Futures for Diplomacy: Integrative Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', 2012).

The crisis helps small EU countries come to terms with the fact that they are not in the league of states with their own network of 'arms-length' institutions, such as the *Goethe Institut* and the *Institut Français*. Their cultural diplomacy is more often than not narrowed down to 'arts diplomacy'.

In Central Europe, geopolitical perspectives have traditionally dominated public diplomacy. The geopolitics of memory in Central and Eastern Europe aims at including these countries' views on the continent's history in official public diplomacy narratives. This historically infused public diplomacy may be seen more as reflecting an unresolved and still politically contested past than the preferences and interests of publics at the receiving end. Simultaneously, and reinforced by rapid developments in civil society, one can detect a post-modern variant of Central European geopolitically-inspired public diplomacy: the desire to contribute to democracy promotion in the Eastern neighbourhood (Belarus and Ukraine), as well as assistance to countries in transition in Northern Africa and the Middle East.

Overcoming Short-Sightedness in EU Communication

By no means is everything bleak when it comes to European public diplomacy. Europe is facing public diplomacy challenges and shortcomings, but it also possesses a range of noteworthy and reliable assets. As a democratic and multi-actor entity, with a coherent set of shared values and an impressive record of inter-state collaboration, Europe and the EU are structurally well placed for successful engagement with the outside world. The diversity and dense texture of civil society within Europe permits the development of multidimensional networking practices, like that of the EU National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC). The innovative development of these and other relationship-based networks should constitute the

cornerstone of tomorrow's public diplomacy. This would show that Europe has the capacity to go far beyond the traditional advocacy practices that are perceived as 'peddling Europe'.

Europe easily qualifies as the region with the world's greatest variety of public diplomacy practices. The kinds of practices that are associated with the term 'public diplomacy' have a long historical pedigree among the states of Europe. With its highly active civil societies and non-governmental actors, great variety of states (and contrasting relationships between them), assertive regions, activist town halls and cities with metropolitan glamour, Europe is a mosaic of collective projection capacity. The public diplomacy achievements of Europe's regions are well known. They have all benefited from joining the public diplomacy game later than states. Some regions have occasionally performed better than their national governments. The potential of cities as emerging actors in public diplomacy is also particularly promising, but has so far received little attention from the public diplomacy community. Cities' proximity to the civil population, practical disposition in relationships with counterparts in other parts of the world, and their capacity to help solve problems have all added to their remarkable public diplomacy potential.

Public diplomacy's accelerated mainstreaming throughout Europe's national governments, regions and cities, as well as its international institutions, has led to much greater awareness of its importance. As a result, Europe's public diplomacy capacity has grown much more substantially in recent years than can be shown in a mere calculation of budgets dedicated to public diplomacy activities. It is quite likely that the Eurozone crisis has contributed to a growing consciousness of public diplomacy in government departments that are increasingly hard pressed to demonstrate their added value. The composite effect of all this European public

diplomacy activity could be substantially greater, however, if actors at different levels mustered a greater capacity to collaborate, thus maximizing the effect of working at different levels.

Turning to the EU level of public diplomacy, it is necessary to be clear about the ways in which the EU's public diplomacy performance has fallen short, and the areas in which it is possible to improve. First, perhaps the most striking shortcoming is the way in which the EU uses its public diplomacy resources at the supranational level. No week goes by without think tanks and the media in Europe debating the impact of the 'rise of the rest', but it has not sufficiently dawned upon inward-looking governments that this means that there is an urgent job to do. There is a tendency towards myopia in the field of external communication that is not in Europe's own best interests. The European Commission fails to deliver when it comes to communication at the global level. While the rest of the world is trying to make sense of Europe's recent crisis, the bulk of the EU's communication budget is being spent on the EU's own 28 member states.⁴ EU policy-makers deem this necessary because they assume that they continually have to 'sell' Europe to their own constituents, while national government bureaucracies tacitly fear growing political criticism of the EU. However, many studies and opinion polls have shown that the majority of citizens identify with the EU on some level and desire its continued existence.⁵ Thus, more resources should be reserved for European engagement with the wider world. External image and internal identity are related. If the EU's external image becomes increasingly associated with a positive and successful force for good, domestic perceptions are more likely to sharpen around the idea that Europeans have a reason to be proud of the EU.

Second, the limited resources set aside for EU-level public diplomacy are too often directed at exclusively one-way communication. What do Brazilians, Indonesians and Indians really

know about Europe's complexities and how can we blame them for their lack of understanding? 'Europe' still largely appears to be talking at previous colonies rather than listening to them as rising powers with their eyes set on the future. This can to some extent be justified by the need to explain in pretty basic terms what the workings of the EU are all about. Through its 'informational activities', the European Commission has traditionally been the central actor responsible for EU public diplomacy. The problem, however, is that much of this communication does not encourage two-way engagement, which is crucial for creating enduring narratives about the EU's positive image, and for persuading non-Europeans with a mind of their own.

Third, there has recently been a stronger tendency for European leaders and high-ranking officials to be rather too self-critical of the European project – and publicly so. This can be explained by the logic of politics in a period of economic crisis, but people from other parts of the world are often perplexed, as they are used to entirely different leadership styles. This tendency is reinforced by international media coverage, which either largely ignores the EU or casts it in a negative light, particularly during EU crises.⁶

4. Steffen Bay Rasmussen, 'The Messages and Practices of the European Union's Public Diplomacy', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 5 (3), pp. 263–287, at p. 273.

5. T. Risse, *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); J. Checkel and P. Katzenstein (eds), *European Identity* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and A. Favell, *Eurostars and Eurocities: Free Movement and Mobility in an Integrating Europe* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

6. For data on international media coverage during EU crises, see: Mai'a K. Davis Cross and Xinru Ma, 'EU Crises and the International Media', *ARENA Working Paper*, No. 3 (June 2013).

Moreover, as has been demonstrated again and again in the field of external communication, the EU is usually slow when the speed of events during international security crises demands an immediate response. This has contributed to recurring criticism of the EU's foreign policy chief, Lady Ashton, and compounded the difficulties of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in counteracting the dominating image of European inaction and self-doubt.

When faced with a crisis of any kind, European leaders project a lack of resilience and a European political culture of negativity. Public diplomacy actors may be better at encouraging positive perceptions of the EU when everything is business as usual, but when times are tough the EU's image is extremely vulnerable to external criticism. European leaders themselves contribute to this, drowning out the efforts of a variety of other public diplomacy actors in Europe, including the EEAS. In many ways, the EEAS – as the first supranational diplomatic service of its kind – represents the culmination of centuries of evolution for professional diplomacy in Europe. It is not only ground-breaking in terms of its mission to represent 28 member states, but also in terms of its ability to enable Europeans to speak with one voice, in the farthest corners of the globe, whether the issue is big or small. In other words and – crucially – if allowed to do so, it can make Europe's image and soft power tangible.

Policy Recommendations

The following four recommendations must help to increase the use of two-way communication in European and EU public diplomacy. Mutuality is simply indispensable for any meaningful dialogue with other parts of the world. It is the public diplomacy equivalent of reciprocity in diplomatic relations. In the years ahead, Europe – and above all the EU – could take a chance and

cast off its long-standing image as a 'missionary actor' that is sending rather than receiving. 'Infopolitik' needs to be substituted with dialogue, collaboration and shared networks across cultures.

Recommendation #1: *Future EU public diplomacy should build on evident strengths at the sub-national level, closer to civil society.* Sub-state international actors can make a significant difference, and there are clear opportunities for greater collaboration among actors at different levels. The value-based discourse of regions and cities overlaps with European narratives (on good governance, the rule of law, and anti-discrimination, etc.). They are natural allies of the EU institutions that have helped them to extend their room for manoeuvre independently of the state, and there are numerous recent examples of town halls and foreign ministries that have successfully worked side by side. Europe also benefits from a remarkable group of city networks.

Recommendation #2: *Public diplomacy that is targeted abroad must become integrated with its domestic dimension.* It is clear that the current separation between the international and domestic communication spheres is increasingly out of touch with societal realities. Instead of viewing the domestic public as part of a different ball game, it could in fact be seen as an important asset in communication with foreign publics. One positive trend is that Europe currently shows an increasingly diverse pattern of practices at the national level, with a growing number of governments showing awareness of the potential of integrating communication with foreign and domestic publics. One argument that has actually led to greater governmental involvement with domestic publics is that domestic public diplomacy enables governments to give greater prominence to the introduction of EU narratives.

Recommendation #3: *The advent of the EEAS should drive new approaches for the EU's engagement with the rest of the world.* The EEAS can play a strong role in projecting not only a positive image for Europe, but also a resilient one. This potentially powerful tool may help the EU to weather future storms. EU member states should not only become more open-minded, but should also trust EEAS diplomats to develop new public diplomacy traditions, professional orientations and a common culture based on their experiences in the field. Such trust in the capabilities of the EEAS might bring with it the benefit of solving some budgetary constraints. Some of the resistance to an EU public diplomacy inside European foreign ministries could perhaps be overcome by looking at it from an economic point of view. The need for budget cuts may provide an impulse for creative 'out-of-the-box' thinking about existing policies. The fledgling EEAS now has a window of opportunity to do EU public diplomacy differently. Unfortunately, however, the EEAS's public diplomacy function so far remains under-developed and under-specified.

Recommendation #4: *National governments should start sharing excellence in public diplomacy practices more systematically, and policy transfer between different types of international actors must be facilitated.*

Governments and other international actors do occasionally share information through informal bilateral consultation or at international conferences on public diplomacy, of which scores have been held across Europe in the past ten years. Expertise in Europe's public diplomacy laboratory does, however, remain very unevenly divided and there are bound to be many occasions when the wheel has been reinvented. There is an insufficiently articulated interest in sharing public diplomacy knowledge and intelligence, innovation in public diplomacy practice, the honing of skills, as well as joint learning from a variety of real-life examples. All of this could help to improve the practice of public diplomacy across the EU significantly. It is a task that can be accomplished through piecemeal collaboration and the sharing of best practices, but a more coordinated effort at fulfilling Europe's public diplomacy potential, involving outside experts, would be a better way forward.

About Clingendael

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