



The EU's External Public Diplomacy and the EEAS – Cosmetic Exercise or Intended Change?

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November 2011

This Policy Paper is the seventh in a series that will be produced by the Jean Monnet Multilateral Research Network on 'The Diplomatic System of the European Union'. The network is centred on three partner institutions: Loughborough University (UK), Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (BE) and Maastricht University (NL). It also brings together colleagues from a wide range of academic institutions within the EU, and includes participants from EU institutions and non-governmental organisations. The aim of the Policy Papers series is to contribute to current debates about the emerging EU system of diplomacy and to identify the key challenges to which the EU's diplomatic system will need to respond in the short and medium term.

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The EU's external public diplomacy and the EEAS: cosmetic exercise or intended change?

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Overview

The concept of public diplomacy is not new to the EU but the term has not been widely used in EU's external communications. Although there are a few exceptions, where reference is made to public diplomacy it is more often than not confused with related activities such as communication or information dissemination which, while certainly aspects of public diplomacy, do not in and of themselves constitute public diplomacy. At its most basic public diplomacy implies 'creating a supportive foreign environment for a country's foreign policy by understanding, informing and influencing an external audience'.¹ Although classical diplomacy is also about influencing external audiences, public diplomacy differs in terms of the referent audience (generally civil society and non-governmental groups) as well as time frame (understanding and informing implies a process of dialogue which normally occurs over a longer-period of time than most traditional diplomatic intercourse).

Historically the EU's external public diplomacy efforts have been hampered by the complex structure of the EU's external relations (split between three pillars) as well as the persistent Westphalian nature of diplomacy. The advent of the European External Action Service (EEAS), which posits an end to the formal split of EU's external relations by bringing together in an innovative manner officials from the Commission, the Council General Secretariat and diplomats from the Member States, presents an opportunity to develop genuine external public diplomacy. A key issue for the developing EEAS, therefore, is whether it has the potential to improve the external public diplomacy capacity of the EU and to apply it more systematically to the promotion of the EU's external objectives. Although there are obviously other institutions involved in external public diplomacy, the Service should be the keystone of public diplomacy, especially when the extensive role of the High Representative, who is also a Vice-President of the Commission, is taken into consideration.

With this in mind it is necessary first and foremost to sharpen the notion of public diplomacy so that it may be separated from other related activities which, as argued, sometime masquerade as public diplomacy. The contribution will then assess in more detail the opportunities, as well as the pitfalls, afforded to public diplomacy by the Lisbon Treaty, notably in the context of the EEAS. Finally, a number of recommendations will be made with an eye to the future.

The question of terminology

The notion of public diplomacy is notoriously difficult to define especially since it is closely related to other activities such as cultural diplomacy, (strategic) communication, information, propaganda, media campaigns, public relations or, in modern political parlance, various kinds of 'spin'. At the national level interest has grown in public diplomacy with globalization and a new era of communication technologies. The relevance of public diplomacy has also been enhanced by 9/11 and the increasing realization of the limits of hard power and the utility of 'soft power' tools, of which public diplomacy is one. This has led to the general recognition that 'engagement with other government elites' is not enough to contribute to the successful management of world affairs and that it is now necessary to 'leave the traditional zone of diplomatic work' and to 'engage in a dialogue' not only with foreign governments but 'primarily with other foreign audiences' (civil society, NGOs, think-tanks, media, social and economic partners, citizens etc.)², as well as to 'build relationships' through various 'analysis, informational, educational and cultural activities' in support of foreign policy objectives'.³

The Commission's understanding of public diplomacy is similar and appeared as part of a booklet produced on the occasion of the EU's 50th anniversary celebrations:⁴

Public diplomacy deals with the influence of public attitudes. It seeks to promote EU interests by understanding, informing and influencing. It means clearly explaining the EU's goals, policies and activities and fostering understanding of these goals through dialogue with individual citizens, groups, institutions and the media.

This useful definition also serves to remind us of both the internal and external aspects. Any EU public diplomacy must have an eye not only upon the external impact of its public diplomacy but also its internal legitimizing function. Internal acceptance of EU public diplomacy is vital so that there is harmony with the public diplomacy of the Member States towards third parties.

The historical emphasis in the EU has been, unsurprisingly, upon the internal aspects of public diplomacy. The legitimizing factor of the internal aspects is vital to the external appeal of the Union as an exemplar. When it comes to the external practice of public diplomacy, beyond the somewhat special cases of enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy countries, a quick review reveals that public diplomacy has often been limited to simple communication and information dissemination activities (which, as argued, constitute only one facet of public diplomacy) or fragmented educational, exchange or cultural programs (which are also important elements, but need to be linked to key

Policy Paper 7: The EU's External Public Diplomacy and the EEAS – Cosmetic Exercise or Intended Change?

strategic objectives). All external relations actors, such as the DGs of the Commission, a small number of EU delegations, or the Council General Secretariat and the EEAS at present have developed web-based portals onto which a plethora of news, videos, narrative leaflets, official speeches, facts and figures, statements or declarations are made available. More recently the EEAS has even ventured into social media (now on Facebook and Twitter).

The various communication platforms differ enormously in terms of their quality, their maintenance and accessibility for anyone not familiar with the EU environment. Overall they form a useful pool of information, but in some instances there is also a fair degree of replication and a factual overflow of information which can be counter-productive to the intended effect. Such forms of communication, with the possibly under-developed 'blogosphere', are essentially one way and do not meet the basic criterion that public diplomacy is about establishing a two-way dialogue. This can undoubtedly be facilitated and supplemented by various forms of 'e-diplomacy' but this is subject to those cases where there is sufficient internet or mobile phone penetration and literacy. There is though no real substitute for personal engagement in the field at different levels and fora.

The Lisbon Treaty and the EEAS: opportunities and challenges for EU public diplomacy

The Council decision of 26 July 2010 establishing the organisation and functioning of the European External Action Service (EEAS) makes a reference to 'communication and public diplomacy actions'.⁵ This component is reflected in the EEAS organigram⁶ which incorporates a 'strategic planning' division, a 'strategic communication' division, and a 'public diplomacy' (and electoral observation) unit, the latter being placed under the 'Foreign Policy Instruments service' (or FPI as it is now known). The FPI, though a service of the European Commission, reports directly to the High Representative, Catherine Ashton. As such, it can be asked whether it was not a mistake in retrospect to locate such a competence within the Service. There is no explicit competence for public diplomacy elsewhere in the EEAS, although other offices, like those for Strategic Planning and Strategic Communications are of obvious related importance. Nevertheless, the significance of the provisions of the Council decision lies in the acknowledgment of public diplomacy as one of the appropriate tools within the EEAS for supporting the conduct of EU foreign policy. The advent of at least an implicit public diplomacy function for the EEAS gives rise to opportunities, as well as challenges.

a) Opportunities

A major objective of the Lisbon Treaty was to address concerns about the visibility, efficiency and coherence of the EU role in the world. In this regard some

Policy Paper 7: The EU's External Public Diplomacy and the EEAS – Cosmetic Exercise or Intended Change?

of the changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, notably the creation of a quasi European diplomatic service, may prove promising in a number of ways:

- i) The establishment of a 'new' leadership architecture in the EU embedded in the appointment of Herman van Rompuy as President of the European Council and Catherine Ashton as a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP), as well as the return of José Manuel Barroso as President of the Commission, provides the potential for more leadership in the EU and to increase the EU's visibility and weight on the global scene. Although their primary interlocutors are governmental, they have an undeniable public diplomacy role, especially since they set the tone for other diplomatic efforts and in some instances strategic directions of the EU.
- ii) The creation of the EEAS, officially launched on 1 December 2010, represents a unique opportunity to 'centralize' the different public diplomacy components of EU external relations into one integrated structure placed under the authority of a single figurehead who could link together the different aspects of EU external action that fall either under her responsibility or are subject to coordination. The new HR/VP benefits both from a certain degree of political authority (in her HR capacity) and the possibility of making use of available resources (in her VP guise)⁷. In concrete terms, this implies that most of the public diplomacy activities and programs which were conducted on the one hand by the Council General Secretariat and on the other hand by the Commission and its network of 137 Delegations can now be connected and consolidated within the overarching structure of the EEAS.
- iii) The EU delegations which are part of the EEAS and which were often referred to as the 'eyes and ears' of the Commission now represent all of the EU's interests overseas (not only those of the Commission) under the authority of the HR/VP.⁸ This should contribute to greater understanding, as well as to the visibility and legitimacy of their mission and actions. Their role has been enlarged and has become more political as they assume a number of duties previously associated with the rotating presidency, notably those related to the representation and coordination of the EU positions in third countries and in international fora.⁹ This should place the EU delegations in a better position to promote the EU foreign policy objectives, to influence and to engage with a plethora of foreign policy stakeholders (official and non-official).¹⁰ Furthermore, the EU Delegations will be required to strengthen their political analysis and reporting activities¹¹ which should have a positive impact upon the level of information, political understanding and knowledge of foreign countries and audiences.

- iv) Finally, the fall-out of the Arab spring and the responses formulated by the European Commission and the HR/VP are likely to put a far higher premium on public diplomacy.¹² Instruments like the European Endowment for Democracy or the Civil Society Facility, both designed to support ‘deep democracy’, are likely to emphasize public diplomacy since there will be a greater need to engage with non-governmental actors, including political parties and non-registered NGOs throughout the region, as well as to raise the understanding and visibility of the EU in the neighbouring countries.

b) Challenges and qualifications

In spite of the latent potential implied by the changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, as well as the opportunities provided by the Arab spring, there are a number of serious challenges to the development of the external dimensions of the EU’s public diplomacy:

- i) In spite of efforts to lend more coherence, visibility and efficiency to EU external actions generally, the new leadership architecture also creates some confusion about the balance of responsibilities and influence between the different posts. The risk is that the Lisbon treaty may unwittingly merely create new divisions drawn upon old lines between (and within) the EU institutions. This would have the undesirable effect of propagating divided and ineffective public diplomacy on the part of the Union’s external relations bodies.
- ii) Many parts of the Commission are, as of this time, insufficiently coordinating with the EEAS or, even worse, are at odds with the emerging Service. In the case of D-G TRADE, where some of the deepest reserves of EU diplomatic experience are to be found, coordination with the EEAS is far from clear, aside from at the most senior level. The ambiguous association of the FPI with the EEAS (noted above) is a further source of concern, as is the potential fall-out of bickering between the EEAS and D-G DEVCO over the programming of early stages of financial instruments. Similar parochialism between the EEAS and D-G ELARG or D-G DEVCO over outreach initiatives to civil society in the Southern Neighbourhood in the aftermath of the Arab spring, may also frustrate efforts to develop the Union’s external public diplomacy.
- ii) The EEAS is being developed with a view to ‘budget neutrality’ at the end of this financial perspective (2013). The lack of resources and manpower threatens the development of public diplomacy which, by definition, is time and effort intensive. Efforts to expand various forms of ‘e-diplomacy’ could

prove to be useful supplements, but they are not substitutes for face-to-face dialogue.

- iii) The development of a Strategic Communication plan for the EEAS risks being divorced from any deeper consideration of public diplomacy. The temptation to rely upon legacy understandings of public diplomacy, stemming from D-G RELEX in particular (stressing communication and information) is apparent.
- iv) Public diplomacy can only be effective if there is internal consensus on the 'message' or underlying aims and objectives of the EU's external action. This will involve the formulation of a far clearer idea of what the EU's fundamental aims and objectives are on the international scene as well as consensus on what type of actor the Union wishes to be.

Recommendations

The arguments above illustrate that the EEAS has the potential to develop its public diplomacy role, but this is hampered by the lack of a clear understanding of public diplomacy and the lack of appropriate human and financial resources. It is also limited by a lack of clear political vision or strategy and thus of appropriate context for public diplomacy. Given these constraints, the following are suggestions for a possible path forward:

- i) Public diplomacy should be integrated into ongoing reviews of the EU strategic partners (such as Brazil, India and South Africa) and into other subsequent reviews of other country or horizontal (thematic) strategies.
- ii) Coordination at the highest levels of the EEAS and the European Commission on public diplomacy should be enhanced as a matter of importance, along with firmer ideas about how to mainstream public diplomacy across the EU's external actions.
- iii) A number of modest pilot projects, preferably based in the EU delegations, should be undertaken. One obvious locale for a pilot project would be in the EU's southern neighbourhood.
- iv) The EU delegation in Washington DC is the best example of an attempt to conspicuously embrace and develop a public diplomacy role. The successes and challenges of this should be shared internally as lessons learnt.
- v) The development of a Strategic Communications Strategy within the EEAS should include the public diplomacy aspect (within the scope of the

definitions above). Ideally a Public Diplomacy Strategy should incorporate a Strategic Communication Strategy.

- vi) A more systematic attempt should be made to incorporate the national experience of diplomats in the public policy area who are temporarily assigned to in the EEAS.
- vii) Public diplomacy should be actively discussed as part of the 2014-20 financial perspectives.
- viii) Training on public diplomacy could be widely disseminated and could incorporate lessons learnt and facilitate the development of EU external public diplomacy (building upon points ii-iii above).

ENDNOTES

¹ Dov Lynch, 'Communicating Europe to the World: what public diplomacy for the EU?', *EPC Working Paper*, n° 21, November 2005, p.14.

² Jasna Jelusic, '21st century diplomacy: a necessity, not a choice, on the road to the EU', Policy brief n° 55, Policy development fellowship programme 2009-2010, Open Society fund Bosnia and Herzegovina, p. 1.

³ Dov Lynch, 'Communicating Europe to the World: what public diplomacy for the EU?', *EPC Working Paper*, n° 21, November 2005, p. 15.

⁴ European Commission, *The EU's 50th anniversary celebrations around the world, A glance at EU public diplomacy at work* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2007), p.12.

⁵ Council decision on the organisation and functioning of the European External Action Service, 26 July 2010, (2010/427/EU), Art. 9(6).

⁶ European External Action Service, Organisation chart, 1 April 2011, available at: http://www.eas.europa.eu/background/organisation/index_en.htm

⁷ See Council decision on the organisation and functioning of the EEAS, 26 July 2010, (2010/427/EU), Art. 9(6).

⁸ Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, (OJ C 83, 30.3.2010), Article 221.

⁹ Treaty on the European Union, (OJ C 83, 30.3.2010), Article 34.

¹⁰ 'The European External Action Service: A step change in external policy for the Union: Delivering on the promise of the Lisbon Treaty', (undated), Paragraph 7. Available from http://www.europolitics.info/pdf/gratuit_en/267601-en.pdf

¹¹ Ibid, Paragraph 7.

¹² See Joint Communication to the European Council, the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *A Partnership Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean*, COM(2011) 200 final, Brussels, 8 March 2011 (17 pages); Joint Communication to the European Council, the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *A new response to a changing neighbourhood*, COM(2011)303, Brussels, 25 May 2011 (22 pages), Press release, 'The European Commission approves regional information and communication programme (2011-2013) for the Neighbourhood Partners', Brussels, 8 April 2011.

The Diplomatic System of the EU Network, funded by the European Commission's Jean Monnet Programme, brings together three partner universities with a strong tradition in the study of European integration in its international context. The lead partner is Loughborough University, and specifically its Department of Politics, History and International Relations and Centre for the Study of International Governance. The other partners are Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, from Belgium, and Maastricht University, from the Netherlands. Each partner is responsible for key events and a research strand. In addition selected experts drawn from EU and Member State institutions and from relevant sections of civil society will be invited to participate in selected network activities.

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