



# PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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## **ABSTRACT**

Public diplomacy builds bridges between countries, enables people-to-people exchanges and fosters dialogue and mutual understanding. By going one step further from mere information dissemination to engagement and shared experiences, states can improve international image, attract investments and promote their values abroad. This paper aims to examine discourses in existing literature in area of public diplomacy, in particular in the context of the European Union. It looks at the concept of public diplomacy, its aims and factors that contribute to effective communication with foreign audiences. Institutional structure of public diplomacy within EU institutions, the role of EU Delegations and EU Centres are also discussed.

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Over the years the concept of public diplomacy has become increasingly important in the way countries consolidate their influence and build positive image abroad. Traditional diplomacy based on relations between government officials is no longer the only platform for international communication. Technological advancement of social media, free movement of people and exchange of ideas under the umbrella of globalization created the world in which information is transmitted within seconds and more people than ever are being engaged into global debates. Therefore, it became essential to reach non-governmental actors and create coherent public diplomacy strategy in order to gain support of foreign audiences. Within this framework the European Union has vast opportunities to shape its positive image based on cultural diversity, international commitment and good governance. Currently, various EU representations such as EU delegations and EU Centres work under the European External Action Service to make the European Union easily understood and more attractive to foreign public.

## **DEFINING PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

The origins of public diplomacy are difficult to precisely define. Practices and tactics which are contained in current understanding of the term were known and used by states long time before they started to be regarded as a part of a whole new approach in external relations. Describing how public diplomacy connects to the past, Melissen (2005: 3) compares it to 'old wine in new bottles'. She argues that communication with publics abroad was practiced before the term was first coined and can be traced back even to the time of ancient Greece and Rome. Nonetheless, it

was not until the twentieth century when those practices were linked together under one blurry conceptual framework. Therefore, scholars like Cull (2008: 31) argue that the term itself is a relatively new creation. Indeed, scholarly debate commonly acknowledges that the concept was first introduced in 1965 by Edmund Gullion, dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. The following definition was later included in a brochure of the Edward R. Murrow Center:

*"Public diplomacy ... deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as between diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the processes of inter-cultural communications."* (the Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy, n.d.)

Public diplomacy gained wide recognition during the Cold War in bipolar struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. According to Cull (2009: 17), the concept was used in order to separate propaganda and psychological warfare of the Soviets and the Western benign promotion of democratic values. Propaganda characterized by disinformation and manipulation lacked credibility and thus proved to be unsuitable tool for democracy (Critchlow 2004: 83). The information framing and promotion of particular image is believed to have contributed to the political transformation in Eastern Europe (Cull 2009: 17) and more broadly to the collapse of the communism (Richmond; in Critchlow 2004: 76). Currently, public diplomacy is an integral part of not only American foreign policy, but also other countries who want to be recognized globally. Leonard (2002: 2-3) points out that the concept has become increasingly important due to the

change in nature of power, caused by the spread of democracy, protest movements, development of media and global NGOs.

The understanding and scope of diplomatic practices have evolved over time. Nowadays many scholars agree that diplomatic service is not limited to traditional diplomacy which involves government elites only. For instance, Snow (2009: 6) makes a distinction between three platforms of international communication, which are: government-to-government, government-to-public and public-to-public relations. She also explains that the shift towards the network approach emphasizing on the role of the public was brought by the development of communication technologies, increase in people-to-people exchanges and rising involvement of the public in foreign affairs. The evolution of public diplomacy discourse remains an ongoing process, its borders are not clearly defined and it is transforming together with social and political changes. Thus, Cull emphasizes on the emergence of the new public diplomacy, juxtaposing differences in characteristics of the old and the new approach to the concept. According to the scholar, the new public diplomacy involves state and non-state actors that increasingly communicate with the world through global technologies. The new approach moved public diplomacy from the realm of propaganda and prestige to network, soft power and branding. What is more, top down approach has transformed into relationship building and people-to-people contact (Cull 2009: 14).

## **PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND THE CONCEPT OF SOFT POWER**

American academic Joseph Nye closely relates the notion of public diplomacy with the concept of soft power. In contrast to hard power based on military and economic strength, soft power is the ability to affect others through attraction rather than coercion or payment in order to achieve what one wants (Nye 2008: 94). There are slight variations in academic debate aiming to explain how the two concepts are interrelated. In Nye's analysis public diplomacy plays a role of a strategy strengthening countries' soft power. Melissen (2005: 4) closely follows this argument and regards

communication with foreign publics as 'one of the key instruments' of soft power. Moreover, she mentions important point that in postmodern reality of transnational networks damage to soft power can have negative implications on hard power as well. Hocking (2005: 35) reveals contradictions in relations between the two terms, arguing that public diplomacy would not be necessary if we assume that goals can be achieved simply by attraction. He further explains that deficiency in soft power of hegemonic capacity is an incentive factor for increase of state's efforts in public diplomacy. Another way of differentiation between the concepts is offered by Rasmussen. He suggests that the presence of 'attraction' as the main element driving soft power is an automatic process, while public diplomacy is developed through attempts taken to influence foreign actors and direct participation (Rasmussen 2009: 5). Cull (2009: 15) responds to this approach arguing that the term 'soft power' creates a link between public diplomacy and the domain of national security. However, he also adds the point that emphasizing too much on international communication focused merely on the achievement of government's goals can have reversed, off-putting effect.

## EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Information, influence and engagement are the three concepts repeatedly mentioned by scholars while discussing public diplomacy. In the age of the New Public Diplomacy, there is a constant struggle to draw attention of audiences and make messages well-received. The use of new technologies made it increasingly difficult for a government to control information flow and respond to rumors. It has been argued by Zaharna (2009: 89) that credibility, providing valuable information, gaining audience trust and confidence are indispensable components of effective information dissemination. Besides informing the public, general agreement exists between scholars that influencing foreign publics should be based on engagement. The underpinnings of building long-term relationships abroad are best described by Leonard (2002: 8):

*'In fact public diplomacy is about building relationships: understanding the needs of other countries, cultures and peoples; communicating our points of view; correcting misperceptions; looking for areas where we can find common cause.'*

Henrikson (2005: 71) stresses that the goal of public diplomacy is to win hearts and minds; and in order to do that, one has to take into account the importance of the 'power of the better argument'. Recent scholarship draws attention not only to the power of persuasion but also outlines how the relationship with public should be managed. Leonard, Cull and Davis Cross emphasize on predominance of listening and two-way communication over one-way information dissemination. Leonard (2002: 7) calls for more interactive approach, while Cull (2009: 16) adds that engagement requires listening and feedback. Davis Cross goes further and addresses this argument from the perspective of constructivist theory. Well-constructed and presented identity, image, narratives and norms are crucial to attract targeted audience, especially when narratives become 'shared stories' and allow for the participation of public (Davis Cross 2013: 7-9). In contrast to the old propaganda-style tactics, public diplomacy should be aimed at multiple stakeholders attracted with the prospect of mutual benefits (Kelley 2009: 81). Furthermore, public diplomacy should be adjusted to the local environment and conducted with support of local network. It also requires flexibility and readiness to adapt to changing circumstances (Gass & Seiter 2009: 162).

Adoption of holistic approach can highly contribute to better understanding and successful strategic communication of messages to publics abroad. According to Hocking (2005: 36), it requires knowledge on how cultural characteristics and patterns of media usage affect human behaviour, as well as good orientation in news organizations and political situation.<sup>20</sup> It appears equally important to take into account special characteristics of targeted groups, instead of adopting 'one size fits all' approach. Therefore, Rasmussen (2009: 6) argues that messages should be tailored to different audiences in order to improve efficiency.

Finally, it has been argued that public diplomacy can only be effective when it corresponds with country's foreign policy objectives. However, too close relations between the two can also bring undesirable consequences. Melissen (2005: 15) supports this argument with a claim that negatively perceived foreign policy can undermine efforts of public diplomacy and contribute to its failure. Cull (2009: 27) strongly states that on one hand bad policies cannot be substitute by best public diplomacy. On the other hand he argues that good policies may not gain enough recognition to influence country's soft power if they are not promoted through public diplomacy. Rasmussen (2009: 7) adds that words and actions must go together to avoid sending contradictory messages. Moreover, he points that words can change interpretation of actions only to a certain degree.

## **PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

It can be argued that public diplomacy initiatives have been for a long time present in European countries' relations with external publics. For instance, such strategies are certainly not a new invention in France, Germany, UK and Italy. These countries have long history of taking advantage of their cultural heritage for the purpose of framing their positive image abroad (Snow 2009: 4). The main transmitters of their cultural diplomacy are institutes such as Alliance Francaise, Goethe Institut, British Council and Instituto Cervantes. Pamment (2013) explains that public diplomacy policies in western European states are driven by competition in dissemination of culture, values and language. Education is seen as a very important element of this strategy for individual countries but also Europe as a whole. Manners and Withman (2013: 192) argue that the EU should put more attention to educational initiatives with third countries. Student exchange programs like Erasmus Mundus can greatly contribute to ideas sharing and facilitation of society-to-society contact. Duke (2013: 26) suggests that member states should put more effort to make their

cultural diplomacy more consistent so that it can be better coordinated on the national and European level.

In the context of the European Union, understanding of public diplomacy was put forward by the European Commission in the EU's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary brochure (Duke 2013: 2):

*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.*

The importance of public diplomacy as an integral arm of the EU's external relations is now unquestionably recognized by EU institutions. In 2008, Vice-President of the European Commission, Margot Wallström gave a speech to Washington's audience on the role of the EU public diplomacy. She emphasized that traditional communication between officials is no longer sufficient to build effective diplomatic relations in the modern world. She also stressed the need to reach wider and dispersed network of social actors to build mutual understanding.

The EU's image evokes rather sympathy than hostility. Polls on global attitudes towards the EU show mostly neutral and positive responses (Davis Cross 2013: 2). However, this predominance of neutral sentiments may not necessarily demonstrate a significant achievement. The high level of indifference may equally suggest that the EU underperforms in efforts to convey its messages to the world. Lynch (2005: 21) argues that the key challenge is to address ignorant and dismissive attitudes of often ill-informed and confused public. In his opinion, importance and values of the EU are still not well understood. Moreover, the development of a coherent identity image is a complex and challenging task. Scholars like Duke (2013: 2) Fiske de Gouveia and Plumridge (2005: 4) explain that the difficulties arise from unique character of the EU as an ongoing and constantly

transforming project, in which procedural and legislative reforms are not easy to follow. Additionally, EU's supranational structure encompasses varying national interests of member states with their independent public diplomacy strategies. Firstly, national and supranational messages can sometimes collide with each other. For instance, the tendency of national politicians to draw upon EU's successes for electoral purposes and using the EU as a scapegoat for unsuccessful policies has a destructive impact on the image of Europe as a whole (Davis Cross 2013: 9). Secondly, lack of common interests between member states can result in inconsistency and confusion. Nevertheless, pluralism embedded in EU's character can also be turned into an advantage. Disagreements and contradictions should be acknowledged as virtues and incorporated into the EU's narrative (Robberecht 2013: 3). According to La Porte (2011: 7), it can be achieved by unequivocal presentation of the way EU successfully maintains relative 'unity' in spite of inherent 'diversity'. Hence, EU member states are recommended to develop more cooperation in area of public diplomacy.

Regardless of existing obstacles, the EU has tremendous capacity to refine its public diplomacy based on its unique attributes and experience. The story of peaceful unification of the continent based on principles of integrity and solidarity serves a powerful and appealing narrative. The EU is therefore recognized by its contribution to stability and prosperity in Europe, as a symbol of consensus and one of key players on the international arena (Lynch 2005). Europe's strength and potential to influence foreign attitudes are closely linked to the notions of 'soft power' and 'normative power'. Referring to emergence of Europe's soft power, Nye (2004: 80) highlights that the EU is increasingly regarded as a 'positive force for solving global problems'. He also mentions different sources of its appealing image and credibility, such as the stance on transnational issues, involvement in development aid and peacekeeping operations. Michalski (2005: 127) connects soft power and public diplomacy concepts within normative approach and states that diffusion of

the EU norms legitimizes soft power under condition that it is effectively communicated to internal and external publics. The importance of normative power approach is also recognized by other scholars, such as Manners and Whitman, Rasmussen, as well as La Porte. La Porte (2011: 17) lists three elements of EU's attraction: model of integration, values and experience in good governance. The EU's ability to influence the world is based on promotion of its core principles such as sustainable peace, democracy, human rights, social liberty and effective multilateralism (La Porte 2011; Manners & Whitman 2013).

The EU unique origins marked by consolidation of peace through economic cooperation constitute important foundation of its legitimacy. Scholars come to an agreement that the positive image of this EU integration model was undermined by negative impact of the Eurozone debt crisis. The economic and political hardship questioned the role of multilateralism as a solution to global problems (Väisse & Kundnani 2012; in Duke 2013: 12). As suggested by van Ham (2013: 160), it also causes difficulty for the EU to exercise a leading role in framing issues and guiding global policy debates.

## **INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE OF EU PUBLIC DIPLOMACY**

Before the Lisbon Treaty came into force in 2009, the responsibility to conduct public diplomacy rested in the hands of multiple actors. Various policies and programs were primarily coordinated by the Council General Secretariat, the European Commission and external Directorates-General (DGs), in particular the Directorate General for the External Relations (RELEX). In fact, the cooperation often extended to other departments like DG Development, DG Enlargement, DG Trade, EuropeAid Co-Operation Office and European Commission's Humanitarian Office. In order to inform and engage with external publics, the EU established delegations and EU Centres in third countries. Literature discussing pre-Lisbon public diplomacy points to shortcomings of ineffective coordination between departments. For instance, Fiske de Gouveia & Plumridge (2005: 14)

mentions confusion regarding which institution should take a leading role in shaping communication strategy, while Rasmussen (2009: 12) suggests that in practice it could potentially result in sending contradictory messages. Among other weaknesses, Duke and Lynch recognize extensive focus on information dissemination in application of public diplomacy strategies. Information-led approach is criticized by Duke (2013) for over-reliance on passive forms of communication and negligence of active engagement in dialogue by simply meeting the demand for information. Lynch (2005:31) points to the lack of research and analysis of public perceptions abroad, calling the EU a global player 'telling the world what it should think about it, but quite deaf to what the world actually thinks'. Moreover, Duke (2013) argues that there is no overall strategy at the EU level and clearly identified regional priorities.

To address concerns over fragmentation of external relations arrangement, after 2009 control over public diplomacy activities has been to large extent transferred to the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR). Duke & Courtier (2011) explain that the aim of this shift was to centralize various aspects of public diplomacy into one integrated structure under the authority of a single figurehead. By decision of the Council of the European Union EEAS has been established on 26 July 2010 and officially launched in January 2011. However, despite initial plans to establish a separate department for information and public diplomacy, it was ultimately included into the EEAS organigram as a branch of the Foreign Policy Instruments. Therefore, it is argued by Duke (2013: 15) that administrative and structural co-ordination of communication with third countries still causes confusion, as its various aspects remain scattered around the EEAS. The shift from information-based communication to interactive dialogue is also a continuing challenge.

## THE ROLE OF EU DELEGATIONS

The delegations to third countries have been always the key actors directly representing the EU abroad and engaging with external audiences. The Lisbon Treaty changed already existing delegations of the Commission into the delegations to the European Union. It has also broadened the scope of their influence in area of European Security & Defence Policy (ESDP) and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). They are included in the structure of the EEAS and are subject to the HR authority. Currently EU diplomatic representation constitutes of 139 delegations and offices around the world (EEAS, n.d.) Great emphasis is being put on their role in explaining and promoting positive image of the EU. According to Information and Communication Handbook for EU Delegations (2013) public diplomacy should embrace elements of basic information provision, advocacy and public persuasion. Delegations are encouraged to develop their own strategies, targeting specific audiences, framing messages and planning related activities. Their network should extend to local media, policy-makers, politicians, academia, business, NGOs, international organizations and general public. Moreover, it is desirable that they maintain cooperation with other institutions related to the EU, such as embassies of EU member states and EU Info Centres. The Handbook provides guidelines for strategic communication based on 'the promotion of EU values' and 'delivery of peace, security and prosperity', through which the EU should be presented as major partner in democratic transition, biggest development donor, global economic power, defender of human rights and security provider. The effectiveness and quality of communication depends on delegation size, number of staff and resources. Rasmussen (2009) and Duke (2013) provide successful examples of delegations in the Washington DC and Moscow, which both established special units focused on public diplomacy and strongly engaged in activities and programs promoting the EU.

## EUROPEAN UNION CENTRE INITIATIVE

Regardless of expectations that the EU Delegations will greatly contribute to promotion of the EU, many of them tend to lack resources and time to run such activities (EEAS 2011: 40). Moreover, diplomatic staff appointed to delegation posts are subject to the periodic rotation, which can hinder effectiveness of long-term initiatives and development of enduring relationship with local society. Therefore, these shortcomings increased the necessity for the establishment of new actors that can regularly hold EU related events and maintain network of contacts.

The European Union Centre initiative came into being in 1998 in order to complement the work of the EU Delegations. So far 37 centres have opened at hosting universities in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Russia, Macao and Hong Kong. As stated by the EEAS on the program's webpage, EU Centres aim to:

- promote greater understanding of the EU, its institutions and its policies
- disseminate information and EU views on issues of interest within regional communities
- increase awareness about the political, economic and cultural importance of the relationship between the EU and the specific country

Public diplomacy engagement of the EU Centres is founded on four main pillars, which are: teaching, research, outreach and networking. On academic field, EU Centres offer teaching programs and courses on the EU, conduct research, organize conferences/seminars and provide academic materials. Promotion of academic and student exchanges includes visiting EU scholars, fellowship programs, summer programs and scholarships to study in Europe. Targeting the wider community, outreach activities go beyond the extent of the university setting. The EU Centres work with local high schools, international organizations, chambers of commerce, the government and the media. Furthermore, cooperation with other EU institutions and various representatives of civil

society provides the centres with a wide spectrum of opportunities for developing long-term relationships with local social actors. As professional communication facilities they are credible source of information, which they circulate through official websites, social media platforms, newsletters and other publications to raise awareness about the EU.

In 2011 the EEAS provided a comprehensive report on Evaluation of EU Centres in which their objectives, achievements and concerns were discussed. Incorporation of the initiative into universities' structures is positively seen as adding neutrality and credibility and providing essential setting for teaching and research activities. However, it may also limit their outreach abilities, due to main familiarity with educational networks (EEAS 2011: 35). The report states that depending on the strength of the host universities in specific disciplines, EU Centres engage in cooperation with corresponding departments. It is suggested that they will progressively develop more multidisciplinary approach to reach broader audience and increase their influence.

## **CONCLUSION**

Public diplomacy has been for long debated by scholars as a key to increase countries' soft power, develop positive image abroad and influence external publics. The approach towards the concept is constantly changing and updating to the realities of the modern world. A lot of emphasis is currently being put on two-way interaction and engagement with the audience, as well as building long lasting networks abroad. The European Union is also trying to maximize potential of its public diplomacy initiatives and closely work with representations and partners abroad. To a great extent public diplomacy is conducted by EU Delegations and EU Centres. The latter undoubtedly have vast reserves of potential and can be developed into strong arm of EU advocacy abroad, especially with its credibility and unique outreach opportunities. Therefore, the development of communication strategy has to be accompanied by more in-depth focus on EU Centres role, actions and challenges.

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