



# The Challenge of Public Diplomacy for the European External Action Service

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## Introduction

One of the main questions emerging from the EU nascent diplomatic corps – the European External Action Service (EEAS) – is what type of diplomacy the EU will conduct and what will be the added value of this new level of diplomacy for the years to come? This article looks at the concept of public diplomacy both in general and in the specific context of EU external relations. It considers the potential of the Lisbon Treaty and the establishment of the EEAS to improve the public diplomacy capacity of the EU and argues that effective EU public diplomacy could be essential to the success of the new European level diplomacy<sup>1</sup>.

## The concept and definition of public diplomacy

The concept of diplomacy itself has considerably evolved over time to adapt to new foreign policy challenges and realities. The diplomatic practice has gradually extended beyond the notion of traditional diplomacy, understood as the attempt of a government to manage the international environment through engagement with other government elites<sup>2</sup>, to integrate new forms of diplomacy such as public diplomacy, which by contrast suggests 'leaving the traditional zone of diplomatic work' by 'engaging in two-way communication not only with foreign governments' but primarily with wider foreign audiences 'directly and/or *via* non-state actors' through informational, analysis, educational and cultural activities to support the foreign policy goals<sup>3</sup>.

Public diplomacy is about creating a 'supportive foreign environment for a country's foreign policy by understanding, informing and influencing an external audience'<sup>4</sup>. The emphasis is put on 'building relationships' by engaging and managing dialogue with a foreign public beyond the official channels with a view to create mutual understanding and ultimately to be able to influence perceptions. The term foreign audience refers essentially to civil society *i.e.* the citizens, the media, NGOs, think-tanks, researchers, social and economic partners, private sector agents etc. whose support is deemed necessary to advance foreign policy objectives and who play a role in shaping the public opinion.

The recent historical developments in the EU's southern neighbourhood are a good illustration of how public opinion, global communications and social media have become a crucial factor in the course of international affairs. These evolutions show that now is

the time for the EU to take public diplomacy seriously and to engage in effective public diplomacy with the Mediterranean region if it wants to seize the opportunity for change and democracy. As Herman van Rompuy commented following the EU's disappointing experience at the Copenhagen Climate conference, 'Europe can no longer shine by the force of its example only. You need more than the conviction that your proposal is the best to win them over [...] The Union needs to assert itself politically<sup>5</sup>'.

### The concept of public diplomacy in EU external relations

The concept of public diplomacy is not new for the EU but a quick review of the EU past public diplomacy practices reveals that the term itself has not been widely used in EU's external relations<sup>6</sup> and that the EU past practices of public diplomacy have often resulted in simple communication and information dissemination activities<sup>7</sup> (which are only one facet of public diplomacy) or disparate educational and cultural programs, conducted separately by multiple actors (Commission, Council General Secretariat, EC Delegations, EU Special representatives, rotating presidency of the Council etc.) with a variety of competences, means and mandates, and through a multilayered framework of policies and programs. This situation can be explained to some extent by the relatively young existence of the EU foreign policy as well as its dual nature, split between the Community and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) actors and instruments, with their distinct approach to the EU external action, and by its strong intergovernmental character. Ultimately, the EU foreign policy has been driven by the member states with their own diplomatic network and national public diplomacy apparatus.

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### The Lisbon Treaty and the EEAS: an opportunity for EU public diplomacy?

A major objective of the Lisbon Treaty was precisely to address some of the concerns about the visibility, efficiency and coherence of the EU action in the world. In that respect, the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), officially launched on 1 December 2010, gives the EU a better chance to fulfill such goals and to shape a successful public diplomacy. Indeed, it provides the EU with a quasi diplomatic service composed in an innovative way of EU officials from the Commission, the General Secretariat of the Council as well as diplomats of the member states. In addition to associating different staff, it also brings together different EU external relations policies and instruments in one integrated structure placed under the authority of a single High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) who *'de facto'* replaces the former Commissioner for External Relations, the former High Representative for CFSP and the Foreign Minister of the rotating presidency<sup>8</sup>. This new foreign policy architecture by streamlining the EU external action creates a real opportunity to shape a successful European level diplomacy which would be more effective by defining common foreign policy objectives and by supporting them through a successful EU public diplomacy<sup>9</sup>. A few positive opportunities can be highlighted in this respect:

First, the July 2010 Council decision establishing the EEAS makes an explicit reference to 'communication and public diplomacy actions' and the EEAS organisation chart<sup>10</sup> (see Annex 1) incorporates a strategic communication division and public diplomacy unit. This can be regarded as an official acknowledgement of the term, role and place of public diplomacy within the EEAS. Although public diplomacy kept appearing and disappearing in the successive versions of the EEAS organigram<sup>11</sup>, it was retained in its latest sketch, thus recognising a specific public diplomacy function for the EEAS.

Second, the establishment of the HR/VP and the EEAS puts an end to the formal split of EU's external relations between two different pillars (the CFSP and the Community aspects). It therefore offers a unique opportunity to 'centralise' the different public diplomacy components of EU external relations in one integrated structure placed under the authority of a single figurehead who according to its mandate can link together the different EU foreign policy aspects and has both a certain degree of political authority (in her High Representative capacity) and the possibility of making use of available resources (in her Vice President of the Commission capacity)<sup>12</sup>. In concrete terms, it means

that most of the public diplomacy activities and programs which were conducted on the one hand by the Council General Secretariat represented by Javier Solana supported by its spokesman, a number of Special Representatives and a Directorate-General for Communication, Information Policy and Protocol, and on the other hand by the Commission, primarily DG Relex and its network of 136 EC Delegations<sup>13</sup> can be connected and brought together within the overarching structure of the EEAS. This should also be read in the light of the HR/VP overall mandate to ensure the 'unity, consistency and effectiveness of EU's external action'<sup>14</sup>. As can be observed on the EEAS organigram, the establishment of a specific 'strategic communication' division and 'public diplomacy' unit within the EEAS placed under the direct authority of Ashton and her cabinet should provide this opportunity. The connection between the two will be crucial though to link the political message and the various instruments of EU public diplomacy in order to promote coherence and efficiency.

Third, the EC Delegations which have become EU Delegations under Lisbon and which form part of the EEAS have the potential to play a greater role in the EU external information and public diplomacy efforts. The EU Delegations are now representing the whole of the EU abroad<sup>15</sup> (not only the Commission) under the authority of the HR/VP which should contribute to increasing the understanding, visibility and legitimacy of their mission and actions. Their role has been enlarged and has become more political as they are taking over the duties of the rotating presidency in terms of representation and coordination of the EU position in third countries and in international fora<sup>16</sup>. This should place the EU Delegations in a better position to promote the EU foreign policy objectives, to influence and to engage with the different foreign policy stakeholders (official and non-official)<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore the EU Delegations will be required to strengthen their political analysis and reporting activities<sup>18</sup> which to some extent should strengthen the level of information, political understanding and knowledge of foreign countries and audiences. The presence of national diplomats within the EEAS<sup>19</sup> in general, and in the EU Delegations in particular, might also be a great asset to raise the diplomatic profile of the Delegations and further collaborate with national Embassies of the Member States who often already have strong public diplomacy experiences. This could help to better coordinate the different public diplomacy efforts. Furthermore, most EU Delegations already incorporate a 'Press, Information and Cultural Affairs' section of some sort which could be upgraded and oriented towards true public diplomacy departments<sup>20</sup>.

### From theory to practice: some recommendations for the future

Therefore, the creation of the EEAS offers real opportunities to improve the public diplomacy potential of EU external relations. Nevertheless, in order to make full use of these possibilities, several aspects should be considered with particular attention:

1. **Defining a Public Diplomacy Strategy for the EU:** the idea as such is not completely new<sup>21</sup> but now that the EU has acknowledged the specific public diplomacy function of the EEAS, it would be of concrete added value. For that purpose the EU should clarify its understanding of public diplomacy and raise the EEAS awareness of public diplomacy. A review of EU public diplomacy activities and programs could be made to retain best practices and to differentiate between public diplomacy and information transfer, cultural events and outreach programmes – the latter being sub-components of the former. Although informational activities are an important element of public diplomacy, they are not in themselves sufficient. Public diplomacy should incorporate both a short and medium-long term components. Moreover, the EU and its member states should specify their common approach to the main foreign policy challenges of our times and the way to promote them abroad. Public diplomacy efforts of the EEAS should be truly connected to the EU's core foreign policy 'message'.
2. **Providing appropriate human and financial resources:** in order to avoid turning into an 'empty shell' the public diplomacy set-up within the EEAS should be accompanied by appropriate staffing and financial resources. It means that a new approach to public diplomacy and professional communications structure<sup>22</sup> should be developed requiring communication specialists, journalists etc. to move away from the technocratic culture<sup>23</sup>. Investment in relevant training programmes but also communication technologies and in the necessary linguistic support for instance to ensure key EU foreign policy documents or message can reach out to the public of key international security partners (Chinese, Russian, Arabic etc.)<sup>24</sup>.

**3. Coordinating all aspects of EU external action:** although the Lisbon Treaty and the establishment of the EEAS are already providing a great opportunity to improve and further streamline the external EU public diplomacy actions, ensuring further coordination between all components of EU external relations will be crucial to its success. This requires not only the centralisation and coordination of the different public diplomacy components within the service (between CFSP/Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and Community actions and between the political message and the financial resources and programs' implementation) but also with the parts of EU external relations which are not included in the service (such as Trade, an important number of Development and European Neighbourhood Policy aspects etc.). Ultimately, the Member States which remain at the core of the EU foreign policy making and which have traditionally developed strong national public diplomacy cultures will have to empower the service accordingly.

## Conclusion

Thus, the establishment of the EEAS opens a window of opportunities for the EU external public diplomacy. In these times of financial austerity and of increasing competition for influence between major international players, public diplomacy is an underdeveloped facet of the redefinition of the EU's role on the global stage. It is a critical one, both in terms of influencing external partners but also internally, to bolster support within the EU for its external actions. Now that the EEAS is in place, the EU should not miss the EU public diplomacy opportunity.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Discussion with Jelusic, J., September 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Cull, N. J., *Public Diplomacy, Lessons from the past*, CDP Perspectives on Public Diplomacy, USC Centre on Public Diplomacy, Annenberg School, Figueroa Press 2009.

<sup>3</sup> See Jelusic, J., *21<sup>st</sup> century diplomacy: a necessity, not a choice, on the road to the EU*, Policy brief No 55, Policy development fellowship programme 2009-2010, Open Society fund Bosnia and Herzegovina, p. 1 and Lynch, D., *Communicating Europe to the World: what public diplomacy for the EU?*, EPC Working Paper, No 21, November 2005, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Lynch, D., *Communicating Europe to the World: what public diplomacy for the EU?*, EPC Working Paper, No 21, November 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Address by Van Rompuy, H., *The Challenges for Europe in a Changing World*, College d'Europe, Bruges, 25 February 2010, PCE 34/10.

<sup>6</sup> Lynch, D., *Communicating Europe to the World: what public diplomacy for the EU*, EPC Working paper No 21, November 2005, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> See de Gouveia, P.F., with Plumridge, H., *European Infopolitik: Developing EU Public Diplomacy Strategy*, (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, November 2005), pp. 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Upcoming publication: Vanhoonacker, S., Pomorska, K., and Heidi, M., *Belgium at the helm of the EU External Relations: a successful non-presidency*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Discussion with Jelusic, J., September 2010.

- <sup>10</sup> See EEAS organisation chart available from: [http://eeas.europa.eu/background/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/background/index_en.htm)
- <sup>11</sup> See Duke, S., *The Implicit becomes Explicit? The EEAS and Public diplomacy*, prepared for the International Studies Association Annual Convention in Montreal, 16-19 March 2011, p. 1.
- <sup>12</sup> See Council decision on the organisation and functioning of the EEAS, (2010/427/EU), 26 July 2010, Article 5(9) L 201/30 Official Journal of the European Union 3 August, Article 9, Paragraph 6.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, Duke, S., p. 8.
- <sup>14</sup> TEU Article 26(2).
- <sup>15</sup> Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, (OJ C 83, 30.3.2010), Article 221.
- <sup>16</sup> Treaty on the European Union, (OJ C 83, 30.3.2010), Article 34.
- <sup>17</sup> *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 [www.europolitics.info/pdf/gratuit\\_en/267601-en.pdf](http://www.europolitics.info/pdf/gratuit_en/267601-en.pdf)
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, Paragraph 7.
- <sup>19</sup> When the EEAS has reached its full capacity, staff from the Member States should represent at least one third of all EEAS staff at AD level.
- <sup>20</sup> See Duke, S., *The Implicit becomes Explicit? The EEAS and Public diplomacy*, prepared for the International Studies Association Annual Convention in Montreal, 16-19 March 2011, p. 22
- <sup>21</sup> See de Gouveia, P.F. with Plumridge, H., *European Infopolitik: Developing EU Public Diplomacy Strategy*, (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, November 2005), p. 23 and *Ibid*, Duke, S., p. 19.
- <sup>22</sup> *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 [www.europolitics.info/pdf/gratuit\\_en/267601-en.pdf](http://www.europolitics.info/pdf/gratuit_en/267601-en.pdf)
- <sup>23</sup> Discussion with Jelusic, J., September 2010.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview, Brussels 4 March 2011.