

Europe in the world – The role of culture and soft power

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Summary:

Europe is a declining force and other alternative global cultures are on the rise. Meanwhile, terms like 'values' and 'interests' are entering public policy jargon as the EU looks to leverage its cultural heritage to raise its profile in a changing world. By working together, cultural institutes can help the EU to develop a common external cultural policy, heard participants a policy dialogue organised by the EPC and 'More Europe'.

Full Report:

Some would argue that Europe is going down the drain amid growing bureaucracy and rising Euroscepticism, said **Ana Paula Laborinho**, president of **EUNIC**, an EU-wide network of national institutes for culture.

"Politics mustn't just focus on short-term needs. It needs to take a long-term view based on values," argued Laborinho, who is a professor at the University of Lisbon.

The EU is based on values related to democracy, human rights, multilateralism and its international societies. But many Americans and Chinese know nothing about the EU's achievements, the academic said.

"How can Europe spell out what it stands for, and show that it isn't just all talk and no action?" she asked. "Cultural diplomacy is the cornerstone of this because it builds trust," she said.

"The EU is deeply preoccupied with its own crisis at a time when the Arab World is experiencing democracy for the first time and looking to Europe for inspiration," Laborinho said.

"How is Europe viewed in the world? The European External Action Service (EEAS) has come at the right time to show what Europe has to offer during this difficult period," she added, urging EU diplomats to "revitalise cultural diplomacy with a multilateral approach".

"Good things can happen if people decide to work together. Together national cultural institutes can be more than just the sum of their parts. They can help the EU to develop a common external cultural policy and make this network concrete and real, rather than just a random collection," Laborinho argued.

Despite admitting that European culture sometimes carries the stigma of colonial oppression, she insisted that it also represents a great way to show off the best that EU countries have to offer.

"Is the potential of culture being fully exploited? How can culture help to create a European identity and a European public space?" Laborinho wondered.

"Europeans talk a great deal about each other but rarely with one another. Most attempts to create pan-European media have failed. There is a dearth of EU news coverage," she lamented.

She singled out the role played by literature in Europe's cultural landscape and external cultural relations as one possible area for policymakers to exploit.

"Now is the time to talk specifically about the role of culture in the EU's external policy. Culture is conspicuously absent from the EEAS but it's probably the EU's biggest brand," said **Wolfgang Petritsch, Austria's Ambassador to the OECD** (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) in Paris.

"The EU prides itself on being the world's foremost soft power, so why isn't culture the positive expression of this?" Petritsch wondered.

"Cultural diplomacy is vibrant and diverse at member-state level, but it follows nation-state logic. We must do the same at EU level and boost the role of culture in the EU's external relations," he argued.

However, Petritsch warned against "culturalising" conflict. "Culture doesn't just have a positive side. The international community failed to address the issue of culture when reconstructing the Balkans," he claimed.

"More Europe means more visibility and more impact of cultural policy. But a strong Europe won't emerge without new transnational forms of democracy," Petritsch warned.

"We need no less than a joint vision and common strategy for EU external relations, accompanied by cooperation," he argued.

"'More Europe' is a paradoxical title which some people see as crazy in the current context. But citizens really want a strong Europe. Europe is changing, and people want their continent to have a face," argued **Gottfried Wagner**, a researcher at the **Austrian Ministry of Education and Culture**.

He spoke out in favour of "cultural relations and listening" rather than cultural diplomacy.

"2012 is a window of opportunity. Negotiations over the next EU budget provide an opportunity to change the way in which civilian power is used. Involve citizens in the debate," Wagner urged.

European external cultural policy needs a "severe upgrade" in the face of fresh cultural promotion abroad by nations like Korea and China, he argued.

EU countries should pool their resources. "Why can't we have European synergies? Why does it have to be dominated by the biggest member states?" he wondered.

The autonomous nature of Europe's cultural institutes grants them the capacity to act effectively at grassroots level. "Creating a new heavy bureaucratic body would be counter-productive," Wagner claimed.

"Fill the void with innovative ideas. Include culture in all the EU's external relations," he urged.

However, marrying hard power and soft power won't be enough. "We must not profess double standards or hypocrisy in our relations with the outside world," Wagner warned.

"I want the EU institutions to partner with civil society organisations to hammer out a roadmap for the future," the diplomat said.

"If European culture means great art, literature, remembering the past, cutting-edge theatre and Internet innovation, then we have loads of that. But if we're talking about mainstream culture, like the films, video games and music that our kids watch, play and listen to, then we don't have it," said **Frédéric C. Martel, a sociologist, researcher, journalist and writer.**

Claiming that he had no idea how to define European culture today, Martel said "the cultural debate used to be characterised as Europe vs. the USA, and especially as France vs. the USA. But nowadays Saudi, Latin American and Indian TV channels are hugely influential too".

"Emerging countries are not just emerging in terms of economic power: they are doing so in the worlds of sport, media and culture too. Al-Jazeera is launching a major sports channel in France," he pointed out.

Martel said the world in general had a fine track record in pursuing cultural diversity and insisted that the USA was a stronger nation for promoting diversity so successfully at home. "We are wrong not to promote it like that in Europe too," he argued, lamenting the fact that governments across Europe were cutting funding for culture as the recession continued to bite.

Seeking to set the record straight regarding stereotypes of 'hard' and 'soft' power, Martel pointed out that US soft power was very strong. "The US cares a lot about cultural diplomacy," he said.

Attempting to outline a way forward for Europe, Martel said: "We need regulation at a time of globalisation. We need to regulate the cultural industry and fight the monopolies of America, like Amazon and Facebook."

He concluded by declaring that cultural policy should become part of EU policy at large.

"I don't trust conventional wisdom, and it's my duty to be a watchdog and a whistleblower. The cultural sector tends to be self-reverential. But people are interested in the commoditised world of the USA: yes, even here in Europe!" said **Yudhishtir Raj Isar**, professor of cultural policy studies at the **American University of Paris.**

"Europeans are very proud of what they have developed, but other countries have also been forging their own identities over the long term," Isar reminded his audience.

"The rest of the world views Europe as the coloniser," he claimed, making it difficult for the continent to shake off its image as an actor that seeks to impose its 'better' things on others.

"The world is changing and people have other loyalties now. Europe is just one element of a global society," he reminded listeners, advising EU policymakers to "abandon the benefits of history and further Europe's interests by enriching the wealth of humanity".

"Cultural diplomacy is instrumental in furthering the interests of nation states. So don't presume everyone wants [cultural diplomacy at EU level]. Europeans are very concerned about national sovereignty," Isar said, questioning the existence of widespread support among citizens for EU cultural diplomacy.

Indeed, he sounded a cautious note regarding what the EEAS would try to achieve. "Culture is a soft-power resource but it's only part of the right strategy. It's also about getting others to do what you want and setting the agenda," he said.

EU cultural diplomacy is not about "nation branding" or "EU branding": "it's about building relationships and listening as well as talking," the professor argued.

"It's a dialogue, not a monologue. When it's too planned or comes from the top down, it can sound contrived," Isar warned, citing as a bad example the 'Cool Britannia' image pushed by Tony Blair's first Labour government in the UK.

"It needs to be bottom up. Using soft power mustn't be introspective or shot through with defeatism and despondency," Isar said, urging the EU "to present a far more upbeat and optimistic face to the world".

"I feel like I'm an intruder but I'm very happy to intrude. I'm an Arab citizen, a Southern Mediterranean citizen and a Palestinian," said **Leila Shahid, general delegate of Palestine to the European Union**.

Describing herself as "a diplomat from a country that doesn't exist," Shahid said "when I arrived in the EU five years ago, no-one wanted to talk to about culture".

"It was like being in a desert without an oasis – well, now I can see the oasis!" she declared.

"Palestinians don't have diplomatic school. We're not trained, so we learn our own diplomacy. But you can't talk to or understand someone without knowing something of their culture," Shahid said.

The diplomat stressed the importance of building bridges between those interested in learning about culture and those who produce it.

Nevertheless, it is equally important to ensure total autonomy in the field of culture. Authorities should just provide the framework, she insisted.

"I don't like the word 'cultural diplomacy'. I prefer the concept of 'citizenship'. What we're seeing in the Arab world right now is the birth of citizenship and the end of ideology. So I prefer to talk about 'diplomacy via culture,'" Shahid said.

"The EU needs to realise how powerful the cultural dimension can be in boosting relations with the rest of the world," she concluded.

Pledging to bring the discussion "back down to earth," **Pierre Vimont, the executive secretary-general of the European External Action Service**, warned that "we must be realistic when talking about Europe and culture: it's very difficult for people who work for the EU to talk about culture, because national diplomats see it as their territory".

Historically, EU legislation in the field of culture has tended to focus on regulating cultural industries rather than on culture as such, because that was the only scope for action, the EEAS official recalled.

He said three crucial things were missing from the European Commission's delegations abroad, which are soon to become offices of the EEAS: military attachés, consuls and cultural attachés.

To establish the EEAS, "we'll need to create the EU culture part," said Vimont. "In the past, EU cultural policy has been very nice but lacking in ambition," he added.

But he was realistic about the constraints under which the nascent EEAS would have to work.

"We can't come out and demand more money for culture when there are so many other priorities. But we must fight," said Vimont, recalling how his experiences living outside Europe had helped him to understand "what being European is all about".

"It's about the role played by the state institutions in culture and the role of culture in defining our identity. This is why Americans find Europe so attractive: we live culture in our daily lives. Why not promote that?" Vimont said.

The top EEAS official believes EU politicians often fail to understand the huge impact that immigration has had on European culture. "Immigrants have made Europe livelier. The Google CEO invests in Europe because he finds more interesting minds here," Vimont said.

He argued that European society is "still very interesting" and he urged his fellow Europeans to show self-confidence. "Don't self-indulge in our crises," he said.

Setting up this new EU cultural policy will require acting from the bottom up. "EU delegations everywhere are experiencing budget cuts, just like member states' own cultural institutes, so why not set up joint ventures instead?" he said.

"We have to open the box and let people come up with ideas," he added.

Vimont stressed the importance of letting the Arab Spring run its natural course. "We mustn't be arrogant. Many Europeans expected Arab countries to rush to adopt the European way of doing things and to turn to the EU for help," he said.

"But we're quickly realising that we're facing major competition for global influence from Brazil, South Africa and Turkey in this regard, for example. If we want to show more ambition, we'll all have to get out of our little boxes and work together: the EU institutions, member states and civil society," Vimont declared.

"This is what the EEAS is all about and it's a daily fight. Because Brussels has never been about working like that. Brussels is Commission vs. Council and DG vs. DG, so changing attitudes is going to be very difficult: it'll take years," the EEAS official concluded.

Discussion:

Sounding a warning note regarding calls for stronger EU cultural diplomacy, **Rosa Balfour**, a senior policy analyst at the **European Policy Centre**, said "intercultural dialogue already features in most EU external relations. But the EU is accused of being Eurocentric and imposing its values on other cultures".

"This undermines it from a cultural point of view in the eyes of many other countries, particularly those which are actually European too," Balfour added.

Asked whether cultural diplomacy was more about promoting values than pushing 'soft power', **EEAS official Vimont** said "we've got plenty of ideas about how to promote our interests and our values".

"We need to join forces rather than the EU trying to do it by itself. Competition between ourselves is the worst thing – we need to work together. In fact the crisis is already forcing us to do this," Vimont said.

Responding to comments about events in the Southern Mediterranean, Vimont said "the Arab Spring is humbling and we are listening, rather than arrogantly pushing forward our views".

"We presumed that they would turn to us for help with their transitions. But the World Bank helped them by sharing experiences from Argentina and Indonesia's transitions – those countries were much closer to their levels of economic development," he explained.

"But we're not just going around complaining about not being wanted. We need to take [this reality] on board," he said.

"I'm uncomfortable with this notion of 'soft power' and that Europe should push that. We're not looking for strength, but dialogue. We live in a world in which competition is very strong. Success will depend on many factors. I like [US Secretary of State] Hillary Clinton's 'smart power'. Think about the EU as a gathering of member states and as an entity that has something to say," Vimont concluded.

Austrian government official Wagner responded by saying that young people are interested in seeing more fairness in the world. "Europe is a place where transnational democracy works. And that's what outsiders can see," he said.

University professor Isar said there could be no soft power without hard power. "Finding an EU foreign policy will be desperately difficult – and now we're grafting culture onto it in a game of global political prestige," Isar said.

"How is the EU going to override the member states, which are also playing this game? Use cultural diversity as a global public good. The EU is very successful at using the environment like this," he advised.

Sociologist Martel responded by painting a much more pessimistic picture. "The EU neither has the hard power, nor the soft power, so how are we going to get to the smart power?" he wondered.

"The soft power cannot be exercised by the same people who are wielding the hard power. Diplomats are part of the elite and have rules to follow. They are not from the mainstream. How are they going to exercise any soft power at all?" he asked.