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INTRODUCTION

Global perspectives on European Union public diplomacy: an introduction

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ABSTRACT

Public diplomacy has become increasingly important for countries around the world as a source of soft power. However, we still know very little about how international and supranational actors conduct public diplomacy. This Special Issue therefore looks at the public diplomacy of the European Union (EU) as a contribution to filling this research gap. Unlike existing research that has primarily focused on the institutional design and content of EU public diplomacy, the authors in this Special Issue examine the receptiveness of different countries and regions of the world to this specific type of diplomacy. Their key research findings are, firstly, an observed variation in the receptiveness of countries to EU public diplomacy, which correlates with the receiving country or region's social, economic and political context and past and contemporary experiences with the EU; secondly, a need for EU public diplomacy to be flexible in its application; and thirdly, a need for more extensive research on the effectiveness of EU public diplomacy.

KEYWORDS

Public diplomacy; EU foreign policy; EU delegations; European commission

Introduction

A basic and simple definition of public diplomacy is the diplomatic efforts of a country to gain the favourable opinion of foreign publics (see also Cull 2009, 12). According to Nye (2008), the ultimate goal of a country's public diplomacy is to increase its soft power; thus, public diplomacy is a component of a country's foreign policy. Traditionally, the main unit of analysis in public diplomacy studies has been the nation-state. However, the European Union (EU), and by extension its foreign policy and public diplomacy, is multilayered, with multiple political actors and multiple decision-making centres at both the national and supranational levels. EU public diplomacy has so far allowed the various EU institutions to interact directly with the citizens of countries both within the EU and outside its borders.

The EU's attention to public diplomacy is reflected in its official discourse. The Maastricht Treaty of 1993 established the Common Foreign and Security Policy, with its stated goal 'to assert its [the EU's] identity on the international scene' (Title I, Article 2). This assertion of identity suggests that the main strategies of the EU's public diplomacy are branding, raising the image of the EU in the international arena and fostering the gradual institutionalisation of public diplomacy as an integral part of EU foreign policy. The EU's understanding of the goals and processes of its public diplomacy was provided by the European Commission on the EU's 50th anniversary in 2007: '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

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fostering understanding of these goals through dialogue with individual citizens, groups, institutions and the media' (European Commission 2007, 12). This understanding was more systematically elaborated by Margot Wallström (2008), then Vice-President of the European Commission, in a speech in Washington DC: 'we Europeans believe that public diplomacy plays a special role in the external relations of the European Union'. She further emphasised the EU's approach to public diplomacy of 'going local' and getting closer to the people, reflecting the democratic values of the EU (Wallström 2008).

Going beyond such declaratory discourse, the EU has developed its public diplomacy over the years through practice. The external image of the EU and its predecessors (the European Communities) as a peace project or a model for peace was a popular narrative when European integration was initiated in the 1950s (Rasmussen 2009). Communication with EU citizens, practically known as 'information activities' (Lynch 2005, 26), has long been recognised as a key priority for both the European Commission and the EU member states. The 1973 Declaration on European Identity, the 1984 Television Without Borders Directive, the 1984 Committee for a People's Europe, the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the 1993 De Clercq Report and the 2001 Communications Strategy all contained recommendations for action to improve communication with EU citizens. Historically, the European Commission was pivotal in providing both EUropeans and the wider global public with information about EU institutions, policies and instruments. The principal vehicle for this was the network of EU Information Centres (EU-i), which was first established in the 1960s and now numbers 500 centres worldwide, with multiple centres in the countries that are the EU's most important strategic partners (Duke 2013).

In institutional terms, the key actors in EU public diplomacy are the EU delegations, which work closely with the headquarters of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in Brussels and with the departments of the European Commission with an external remit, such as the Directorates-General of External Trade, Enlargement and International Development. The EU delegations carry out a variety of public diplomacy activities in non-EU countries, such as managing websites in local languages, organising events (e.g. 'Europe Day' celebrations on 9th May), making official visits, conducting exchanges with local social, cultural and educational entities, publishing brochures and newsletters, and interacting with local media and participating in dialogues with civil society stakeholders, where feasible. For example, on the EU's 50th anniversary, EU delegations across the world organised activities publicising the EU and its achievements (European Commission 2007, 5), including conferences and receptions to develop relations with social elites, cultural and sport activities to raise awareness of and promote the core values of the EU, as well as activities for school children to promote knowledge of the EU and events to portray the EU as a model of good governance (EEAS 2022). Organising these activities required EU delegations to coordinate closely with the national embassies and cultural institutes of EU member states in the receiving countries, as well as with the EU Presidency.

Studying EU public diplomacy: the state of the art

Despite its importance for EU foreign policy and the EU's external affairs, EU public diplomacy has attracted relatively little scholarly attention. Most of the small number of studies on the topic are in the form of policy papers and edited books (e.g. Lynch 2005; Duke 2013; Cross and Melissen 2013). The literature primarily addresses the internal aspects of EU public diplomacy, such as its history, objectives and toolkits (see de Gouveia 2005; Rasmussen 2009; Porte and Teresa 2011). De Gouveia (2005) provides a relatively early yet comprehensive assessment of EU public diplomacy, addressing questions on the process, approaches and effectiveness of the EU's communication with the rest of the world. Lamenting that the EU is still profoundly misunderstood beyond its borders, the author argues that although the EU institutions are engaging in extensive public diplomacy activity, they should go further in method and scope, and recommends that the EU formulate and adopt a unified strategy for its public diplomacy (de Gouveia, Fiske, and Plumridge 2005).

Several studies adopt less conventional epistemological approaches in search of a better understanding of the topic. Rasmussen (2009) uses the discursive approach to analyse the self-images and core messages of EU public diplomacy and how relevant discourses are transmitted through its different practices. He concludes that EU public diplomacy is more likely to succeed where there is agreement on its messages between the EU and the receiving country (Rasmussen 2010). This is particularly true of the EU's efforts to advertise its self-image and normative, liberal values to foreign audiences. Drawing on post-structuralism, Sandrin and Hoffmann (2018) assess the effects of EU public diplomacy and find that it reproduces a hierarchized identity of the EU, authorising and validating particular courses of EU actions while limiting others.

Surprisingly, the recipients of EU public diplomacy, the worldwide audiences with which the EU is pleading and to which it is sometimes preaching, have been somewhat neglected by both policy and academic research. Possibly worried about its own image, the European Commission took the initiative to coordinate three research institutes[1] to conduct a large-scale, multi-country project on global perceptions of the EU and its policies abroad. Concluded in December 2015, the project has global coverage, with a special focus on the EU's strategic partner countries: Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the USA (PPMI et al. 2015). The project was part of a broader effort by the European Commission to revisit EU public diplomacy and to rethink the EU narrative. The project addresses various aspects of the EU and its policies abroad, including visibility, actorness, effectiveness, local resonance and EUrope's capacity to set norms abroad. It identifies substantial variation across countries and sectors that leaves plenty of room for EU institutions, in collaboration with the member states, to improve the design and delivery of EU public diplomacy (EU Commission 2015). The European Commission recently commissioned a new consortium of researchers to repeat this evaluative exercise. The official launch of the new Report roughly coincides with the publication of this Special Issue, but the research conducted by the contributors to the Special Issue precedes it.

Although these reports provide valuable information on the external dimensions of EU public diplomacy, we still need to enrich our knowledge and deepen our understanding of its implementation 'on the ground' by analysing empirical feedback from the receiving countries. This Special Issue aims to fill this knowledge gap by conducting a survey of EU public diplomacy activities around the world as perceived by its recipients. The receiving countries surveyed have been selected from among the most influential of the EU's strategic partners. Importantly, this Special Issue also focuses on how regions in the contemporary international system receive, digest and react to the messages of EU public diplomacy. Again, we have selected regions that have traditionally been of paramount significance for the EU's external affairs. The methodological choice of considering the region as a unit and parameter of analysis is consistent with how research on regionalism, inter-regionalism and trans-regionalism has gained momentum, in particular with reference to the EU (Katzenstein 1996; Söderbaum and Shaw 2003).

Rationale and focus of the special issue

The identified research gap involves the response, feedback and outcomes of EU public diplomacy in the counties and regions receiving it. By examining the reception of EU public diplomacy around the world, this Special Issue engages with scholarly work on the 'new public diplomacy', which emphasises firstly that a multiplicity of political and societal actors are engaged in the design and implementation of public diplomacy; secondly that public diplomacy is seen in actual diplomatic practice and not only in declaratory discourse; and thirdly that public diplomacy is not a one-way monologue but should ideally be a policy dialogue, with public diplomacy actors listening and not just talking to foreign audiences, thus enabling the active participation of foreign publics in the making of public diplomacy (Melissen 2005; Seib 2009; Nye 2010; Pamment 2013; Dolea 2018).

Accordingly, the articles presented in this Special Issue are mainly empirical studies, focusing not only on how the EU institutions and member states promote the image, values and policies of the EU

around the globe but also on how they are received and responded to by different countries and regions. The first article in the collection is of a conceptual nature, mapping out the terrain of EU public diplomacy. The ensuing contributions investigate EU public diplomacy in the United States, China, Russia, Africa and Latin America. To address the identified research gap, this Special Issue comprehensively answers the following research questions without suppressing the epistemological and methodological pluralism advanced by the authors:

- How does the EU design and conduct public diplomacy suitable for the different conditions of the various receiving countries and regions?
- How has EU public diplomacy been implemented in different receiving countries and regions?
- How is EU public diplomacy received and digested by its international audiences across the world?
- Has the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic affected EU public diplomacy in the focal countries and regions?

The first article by Fanoulis and Revelas (2022) introduces the conceptual dimensions of EU public diplomacy and provides an overview of its ontological aspects. Highlighting the need for greater conceptual clarity, it elaborates a comprehensive definition of EU public diplomacy, the main parameters of which are the messages (narrative), institutional design and actors involved in its design and delivery. The authors further argue that future research on this topic should consider the context of each receiving country or region, meaning its social, political and economic conditions and its past and contemporary relations with EUrope. The authors conclude that the study of EU public diplomacy requires a comprehensive but tailor-made approach.

In his article, Thiel (2022) argues that because of the importance of transatlantic relations, EU public diplomacy in the USA is a complex enterprise with both structural and agent-based challenges. His analysis focuses on the agency of the EU delegation in Washington DC and the latter's cardinal role in the delivery and coordination of EU public diplomacy in the USA. Based on document analysis and interviews with public diplomacy actors, the author identifies several structural constraints – the institutional configuration of transatlantic relations, political polarisation in the USA and misinformation among US citizens about what the EU is and does – and agential characteristics linked to the variety of EU public diplomacy actors in the USA that render the EU public diplomacy mission on the other side of the Atlantic particularly demanding.

The article by Song and Ai (2022) is epistemologically informed by role theory and its application in international relations. The authors argue that the EU and China are in dispute over the role of the concept of 'Normative Power Europe' (NPE), yet have managed to reach a compromise to maintain working relations. Beijing filters the role-projecting efforts in China through which the EU attempts to gain visibility and recognition from Chinese audiences. Although EU public diplomacy actors have used various channels to directly engage with Chinese society, they have narrowed their efforts to the social and technical elites, as it is almost impossible to directly engage with the general public in China.

Nitoiu and Pasatoiu (2022) study EU public diplomacy in Russia, a largely neglected topic in the literature on EU–Russia relations. Their analysis is necessarily embedded in the 'bigger picture' and the breakdown in EU–Russia relations due to the war in Ukraine. In such a precarious political landscape, the authors argue that EU public diplomacy in Russia preserves a sedimented understanding of cooperation and conflict and does not escape its monological nature. It is therefore rather ineffective in appealing to the Russian general public. With the current breakdown of EU–Russia relations, the authors conclude that the emphasis on cooperation is muted and the role of public diplomacy much questioned.

Mark Langan's (2022) article challenges the value-added of the health-focused public diplomacy of the EU in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic from a post-colonial theoretical perspective. He questions the extent to which the use of health support for public diplomacy objectives can overcome the health-related damage caused by the pursuit of the EU's own interests as expressed by its

trade policy. He offers evidence from interviews showing that the EU's health discourse is contested by various stakeholders in the African continent, pointing towards an unhealthy relationship between the EU and Africa.

Finally, Dominguez et al. (2022) study EU public diplomacy performance in Latin America and examine its variation in Brazil, Mexico and Colombia, and they find that the EU scores more points in Mexico and Colombia than in Brazil. According to the authors, this variation is due to the interaction of three factors: the general social, economic and political contexts of the receiving country. As also argued by Fanoulis and Revelas (2022) in this Special Issue, this interaction appears to affect the receptiveness of countries towards EU foreign policy in general, its public diplomacy included. Moreover, the EU's ability to systematically communicate with local partners and to respond and adapt 'to immediate disruptive events or crises' in the receiving countries seems to affect the overall performance of EU public diplomacy.

General findings and the way forward for the study of EU public diplomacy

Comparing the contributions to the Special Issue confirms that although there are a plethora of actors involved in the design and making of EU public diplomacy, the European Commission and the EEAS, with its network of EU Delegations around the world, play a cardinal role in its delivery. The messages and narratives of EU public diplomacy may be slightly varied to fit the targeted audience, yet they are primarily centred on the EU's norms, values and principles – democracy, freedom, equality, peace, human rights protection and the rule of law, to name but a few – as expressed in the Lisbon Treaty. We find that EU public diplomacy also varies across regions and countries in terms of performance and reception. To put it simply, some foreign publics are keener than others to consider the EU public diplomacy narrative to be reliable and credible. Whilst it merits more extensive empirical research, our assumption is that this variation is due to the very different experiences that regions and countries have had so far with EUrope. For example, the receptiveness of Latin American or African countries to EU public diplomacy may be affected both by past colonial experiences and contemporary dependencies maintained through the EU's trade and development policies. Furthermore, as EU public diplomacy strongly advertises the Union's devotion to liberal democratic ideas and ideals (von der Lyen 2022), illiberal governments such as those in Moscow and Beijing are often tempted to sieve EU public diplomacy activities before they reach citizens. Readers can explore examples of these general findings throughout the contributions to this Special Issue.

A comparative reading of the articles in this Special Issue reveals the struggle of researchers with one specific facet of EU public diplomacy: its effectiveness. What is the impact of EU public diplomacy on foreign publics, and what is, generally speaking, the value-added of public diplomacy for broader EU foreign policy? Is EU public diplomacy effective, and if so, according to which criteria? Are there methods available to researchers to operationalize and measure the deliverables of EU PD by linking influence on foreign public opinion with governmental actions that favour the EU? Although the contributors to this Special Issue touch upon aspects of the effectiveness of EU public diplomacy in their articles, a systematic and comprehensive methodological roadmap for investigating the effectiveness of EU public diplomacy around the world is lacking. We hope that future research can shed light on this unexplored territory.

Note

1. The three research institutes are the Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI) (the lead partner) based in Vilnius, Lithuania; the National Centre for Research on Europe (NCRE), located at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand; and the NFG Research Group, based at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany.

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