

EU's Cultural diplomacy and strategic autonomy

Policy briefing

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Cultural diplomacy is especially relevant for the EU, even more in the current geopolitical state of affairs. Europe has a very influential and important **cultural and symbolic capital**. Unfortunately, a certain misunderstood humility and competition between and with MSs does not allow the EU to develop its full cultural potential, neither from a political-diplomatic point of view, nor from the industrial one of the creative and cultural industries. For the EU to benefit from this potential, certain actions must be pursued.

Keywords

EU, cultural diplomacy, strategic autonomy, cultural policy, foreign policy, policy briefing

Recommendations

(R1) Adopt a definition for culture.

(R2) Adopt a definition for international cultural relations (or cultural diplomacy).

(R3) Adopt a clear policy/position on cultural diplomacy (or international cultural relations).

(R4) Trust building between the Council and EEAS.

(R5) Develop a funding instrument for cultural diplomacy.

(R6) Consider cultural diplomacy a policy of the EU in itself.

(R7) Continue the exchanges.

(R8) Assume EU's own interest in cultural diplomacy.

(R9) Develop a narrative on/against identity politics and neocolonialism.

(R10) Recognise and incorporate the link between cultural diplomacy and strategic autonomy.

Introduction

This document presents a **critical analysis of the cultural diplomacy of the European Union (EU) and its relationship with the theses of strategic autonomy**. Its main aim is to provide new ideas to the ongoing conversation about Europe's position in the world.

The scope of this research is EU Institutions and their policies from 2011 until the present. I have chosen 2011 as the starting date as it corresponds to the adoption by the EP of a very important resolution on the cultural dimensions of the EU's external actions. The research has been performed using both a qualitative and quantitative methodology. The main technique used has been document analysis.

Context

Cultural diplomacy can be defined as **'the deployment of a state's culture in support of its foreign policy goals or diplomacy.'**¹ (Mark 2009:7) As for everything cultural, there are other definitions that bring light to other also important aspects of cultural diplomacy. E.g.,

*'cultural diplomacy involves the systematic intervention of governments in the arts, sciences, and other cultural expressions as the basis of **an official categorization of national identity**'* (Zamorano 2016:169)

or

*'Cultural diplomacy designates an "essentially interest-driven governmental practice" (Ang et al. 2015:365) and it is characterised by the agency of state actors, which try to **foster their strategic interests by projecting well-defined representations** by means of rhetoric and strategic communications.'* (Murray and LaMoniCa 2021:9)

When reflecting on cultural diplomacy, we must consider two tension lines: realism vs constructivism and the importance of non-governmental actors in international relations.

Summarily the debate on **realism and constructivism** can be understood as the dichotomy between a **conflictual** understanding of international relations where the relations between states are a zero-sum game of power (for various and different understanding of power). Constructivism, on the other hand, presents international relations as **social, cultural, interactions** between people(s) and mostly performed through collaboration and common objectives and ideals. (Barkin 2003).

Regarding the actors of cultural diplomacy, this line of tension is related to the change from **club diplomacy to network diplomacy** where diplomatic activities are not the sole sphere of states and/or professional diplomats (Heine 2013). Indeed, the pre-eminence of different actors in international relations, diplomacy and public/cultural diplomacy is going to generate another concept in international relations: *international cultural relations* (Murray and LaMoniCa 2021) as the public/cultural diplomacy performed by non-diplomats. **International cultural relations:**

*'take place when governmental actors attempt to foster **international cooperation in support of the common good.** [...] They use an **argumentative** approach to dialogue and cooperation, empowering **international institutions** to work at arm's length from government, building **long-term transnational people-to-people relationships** based on trust and non-transactional mutuality'* (Murray and LaMoniCa 2021:1).

Academia claims that cultural diplomacy is associated with a realist professional approach to cultural matters in foreign policy while international cultural relations are clearly constructivist and performed by non-governmental actors.

¹ All highlights by the author.

Strategic autonomy is a fluid and contested term, too. This may be on purpose so that there is a certain flexibility around strategic autonomy to benefit from in national political narratives and in the negotiations taking place in the EU between member states. On the other hand, this undefinition hinders both the political and the academic discussion producing, e.g., apparent conflicts where in reality there may be none (Analysis and research team (ART) 2021).

The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) Josep Borrell defined **strategic autonomy as 'the capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible'** (Quoted in Borrell Fontelles 2020). Another definition from academia: '*strategic autonomy is about setting objectives, making decisions and mobilising resources in ways that do not primarily depend on the decisions and assets of others*' (Grevi 2019:3). Both definitions are quite similar in spirit although both have specific nuances on the collaboration with partners in the first, while the second one is more detailed on what strategic autonomy entails (*objectives, decisions, resources...*)

The EU Institutions have discussed these matters for quite some time. Adopting 2011 as starting point, we can identify the following main documents by the EU Institutions which also correspond to the main milestones:

- European Parliament resolution of 12 May 2011 on **the cultural dimensions of the EU's external actions**.
- JOINT COMMUNICATION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL **Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations** (2016)
- Council conclusions **on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations** (2017)
- COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS **A New European Agenda for Culture** (2018)
- Council conclusions on **an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action** (2019)

Analysis

All EU Institutions position themselves on the side of **international cultural relations**. They claim to favour an approach based on values more than on interest and to foster long-term relationships with like-minded partners. There is **no mention to the economic, political or diplomatic interests of the EU**.

Regarding the actors involved, the EP barely receives any attention while the EC is the entity that appears more in any of the documents analysed and which receives the more requests and tasks as could be expected from its operational role. On the general discussion on club diplomacy vs. network diplomacy, the analysis confirms that current **EU's views on cultural diplomacy as those of network diplomacy**: there is an important variety and number of actors, the responsibilities of EU's professional diplomats (EEAS) is limited, and entities like EUNIC play a very important role.

There is a recurrent complaint on the **fragmentation of EU cultural diplomacy** actions that the EC acknowledges while defending the current architecture on cultural (diplomacy) funding.

Another important point is that of **exchanges** which allow 'the development of lasting relationships with key individuals over many years or even decades' (Nye 2013). Both the EP and the EC consider this point, support it and promote it.

The number of **EU programmes** associated with cultural diplomacy is very important although organised along the various geographic programmes of the EU and **without specific information about the cultural diplomacy aspect** of them. So, even if this number may be high, there is no reasonable manner to know the exact amount dedicated by the EU. As it is always the problem with **cultural statistics**, it is very difficult to find the relevant information as culture is not usually, ever, tagged as such and there is no direct and easy way to get the information.

The discussion on **strategic autonomy** includes an obvious **paradox**. If we take into account the EU motto United in diversity, we must consider said diversity as a given. Then, at what level to apply this strategic autonomy? Of course, the theses supported by the EU (EEAS HR/VP) scope the strategic autonomy to the EU; the tensions described between EU and member states hint at another level (a national one) at play here. And still, we cannot forget the EU of the regions and their desire for (strategic) autonomy. If we add to this the UNESCO anthropological understanding of culture as linked to social groups which may not be represented by an administrative entity (country or region) the situation gets even more complicated.

Policy implications

EU cultural diplomacy is void of EU interests. There is no meaningful position on cultural trade, market or industry which hinders both the cultural diplomacy capacity of the EU and their cultural and creative sector.

There is not a single mention to public diplomacy even if their objectives permeate all documents analysed. Public diplomacy is about *affecting the thinking of foreign people or cultural diplomacy in using state's culture in support of its foreign goals* which is completely aligned with the utilitarian treatment of culture by the EP, the Council or the EC. Recognising the value and opportunity of public diplomacy will add a new tool to our diplomatic toolset.

A more assertive EU will be accused of identity politics and neocolonialism. An open and transparent policy based on EU own legitimate interests could allay any fears or at least provide a counter narrative.

Conclusions

There is no intended relationship between the current EU's policy on cultural diplomacy and EU's strategic autonomy or the theses of strategic autonomy. If anything, the current approach to cultural diplomacy would play against the subjacent ideas of strategic autonomy. This disconnection between cultural diplomacy and the EU's strategic autonomy is a missed opportunity. International relations are to a certain extent a competition of narratives and cultural diplomacy is the tool to compete. EU's position on cultural diplomacy is one on values without any reference to EU's interests.

The EU institutions claim to be pro international cultural relations: EU's approach based on values more than on interest fosters long-term relationships with like-minded partners. If this is a proactive political decision or the result of the power dynamics of the EU institutions combined with a certain disregard of culture in foreign policy is open for discussion. In the documents analysed it is clearly reflected the tensions between the EP and Council and the operational-non-political role of the EC while the EEAS does not seem to have played any major role in defining this particular policy.

The EU understanding and position on strategic autonomy is still very fluid and flexible. The geopolitical situation has a great impact on the political discussion and there is no will at the highest level to concretise any particular proposal. We can consider the definition reminded by HR/VP Josep Borrell, 'the capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible', as the most advanced position on this and endorsed by the latest communications from EEAS.

Recommendations (extended)

Recommendation	Rationale
(R1) Adopt a definition for culture	An adopted and consensual definition for culture would guide and support any possible initiative regarding culture: from foreign policy to public funding. The EU institutions could adopt the UNESCO one (anthropological) or devise their own one maybe more in line with the understanding behind the creative and cultural sector/industry.
(R2) Adopt a definition for international cultural relations (or cultural diplomacy)	As for the previous point, once having a clear posture (as on international cultural relations vs cultural diplomacy), there are many advantages in claiming so and sharing our own understanding. Again, this has an impact on all actions and would guide better the more practical work of the EU institutions.
(R3) Adopt a clear policy/position on cultural diplomacy (or international cultural relations)	Providing a clear policy or position on EU's cultural diplomacy would make clear where the EU stands on this matter for all stakeholders involved: third countries and regions, member states and member states own stakeholders like citizens or creative businesses, and also the people in charge of its implementation. None of the documents analysed are complete enough including all elements that a foreign policy needs.

(R4) Trust building between the Council and EEAS	Fostering the collaboration between EEAS and member states own cultural diplomacy efforts would enlarge the reach of EU's cultural diplomacy to the benefit of both the EU as an entity and member states. The diplomatic expertise and capacity of EEAS should be put to better use when doing cultural diplomacy. Tensions between EU institutions and the abuse of the principle of subsidiarity are hindering the full reach of EU's cultural diplomacy.
(R5) Develop a funding instrument for cultural diplomacy	Even a small one would provide clarity and a clear link between policy and financial commitment. It would also provide transparency and communication opportunities for the EU on its support to international culture.
(R6) Consider cultural diplomacy a policy of the EU in itself	<i>(Even if a minor one.)</i> It is fundamental to have a quantitative view on the cultural diplomacy activities done in the EU. The means should be developed to extract information from public statistics both on the action of the EU institutions and of the other actors involved. Without solving the problem of international cultural statistics, at least tagging could be used to extract this particular component from the information available. The previous recommendation and this one would also allay the claims of fragmentation providing a consolidated global picture of EU actions in this field.
(R7) Continue the exchanges	The current exchange programmes run by the EU are probably its best ambassadors in the world. They must continue and probably grow with regards to third countries. They could be improved by having a clear cultural diplomacy aspect even if a secondary one. Also, it is important to develop long-lasting relationships with their beneficiaries allowing some, many, of them to benefit from a whole series of exchanges to accompany specific important persons their whole life and use their multiplying effect on their own societies.
(R8) Assume EU's own interest in cultural diplomacy	Developing a cultural diplomacy policy for the EU which contemplates EU's own interest is fair and accepted by our counterparts. It also shows real commitment by the EU and a wish for transparency of EU's intentions. International relations are a zero-sum game in certain aspects (consider democracy vs autocratic regimes) and it is both realist and realistic to deal with those. Also, an interest-based discussion will be considered less sensible by some parties unwilling or unable to engage with the EU on a purely value-based relation. Prejudices on an EU's interest based foreign policy or concepts like public or cultural diplomacy limit our capacity for action.

(R9) Develop a narrative on/against identity politics and neocolonialism	Assuming international relations as a bourdieuan field; a more assertive EU should develop a narrative on its cultural diplomacy that counters accusations of identity politics and neocolonialism. An open and transparent policy based on EU own legitimate interests is a perfect antidote to this. The current fixation on values in EU's cultural diplomacy may suggest a superiority view from the EU on other cultures. Any reaffirmation of EU's culture with regards to (or even against) other cultures is easily countered by claims of neocolonialism.
(R10) Recognise and incorporate the link between cultural diplomacy and strategic autonomy.	Cultural diplomacy is a strategic asset for strategic autonomy. One of the basic tenets of strategic autonomy is to work alone only if needed and in collaboration as often as possible. Cultural diplomacy is a great enabler for this last option fostering understanding, dialogue and personal relations that transcend conjuntural situations and conflicts.

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