SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

'Greening' the EU's cultural diplomacy: Uncovering the potential of the culture-climate nexus

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The EU made its first forays into the field of public and cultural diplomacy when the European External Action Service (EEAS) was created a decade ago. In 2016 the Joint Communication of the European Commission and the EEAS, titled 'Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations',[1] made further headway. The Communication and the accompanying preparatory studies[2] concluded that enormous potential existed for the EU's cultural diplomacy, but that a strategy to realise that potential was lacking.

This brief argues that the EU should use the momentum of post-COVID recovery for strategically aligning its cultural diplomacy with the climate and sustainability agenda.

Culture has received only limited attention in the EU's ambitious transition to a climate-neutral economy and environmentally conscious society. History, however, suggests that culture has a significant role to play in recovering from a crisis, be it war, economic recession or an epidemic. Well-known artistic and architectural movements such as the Renaissance, Romanticism and Neo-Classicism came about as a direct or indirect response to various shocks.[3]

A similar observation can be made about the limited recognition of cultural diplomacy in the post-COVID international politics. Ambitious global agendas such as implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) regard cultural cooperation as nice to have, but not indispensable. This may not remain so for long. The more climate change and policies concerning its mitigation and adaptation affect people and the environment in which they live, the bigger the role of culture will be. Hence, the momentum exists for the EU's cultural diplomacy to play a constructive role in the important culture-climate nexus.

However, the EU also needs to address challenges and limits to its current cultural diplomacy. The EU's capacity to act as a global cultural actor has been undercut by a lack of leadership and having an agenda too broad and somewhat amorphous to make an impact. At the same time, as the analysis here suggests, behind these shortcomings lie unresolved strategic questions about what the EU's cultural diplomacy is actually about. A strategic question can be formulated as to whether the EU's cultural diplomacy should serve as an instrument to

project some kind of European soft power *onto* other actors, or as an instrument of co-creation *with* others.

The EU's domestic 'green and digital recovery' agenda creates opportunities for the Union's cultural diplomacy to move beyond this dichotomy, and perhaps also to gain in terms of priority and leadership. The European Green Deal (EGD), the flagship policy of the European Commission to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, has a cultural dimension, albeit a very nascent and limited one. This cultural dimension could be extended into the EU's diplomacy to create a mutually reinforcing dynamic. The more progress the EU makes in implementing the EGD, the bigger the role of climate in its external relations, including culture. Two new initiatives at the intersection of climate and culture – the European Climate Pact and the New European Bauhaus – are particularly relevant and worth carrying over into the EU's cultural diplomacy.

IN SEARCH OF A STRATEGY

Since its inception, the EU's cultural diplomacy has had to deal with two sets of obstacles, one of which is structural. Culture may appear to be a rather natural topic for the EU's external relations given Europe's rich history, contribution to the arts and sciences, as well as the size of Europe's cultural and tourist industries.

At the same time, in the process of European integration, cultural policy has been retained under the sovereign competence of EU member states. The Lisbon Treaty of 2007 defines that the EU and its member states may *together* foster cooperation with third countries and international organisations in the sphere of culture. The European institutions are meant to complement national cultural policies and diplomacies, not to steer them in a particular

direction. In this respect, the EU's cultural diplomacy is akin to European defence. While collectively the European countries present a formidable military might, the European Union lacks an army of its own. In the cultural domain, member states also prefer to showcase European culture, heritage, and arts under their national banners. Striking a balance between national and EU levels, and carving out a role for the EU's own cultural diplomacy has been a challenge for Brussels.

With the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2010, cultural diplomacy has found an institutional home where it remains under the broad rubric of public diplomacy. This gives rise to the second set of obstacles, namely that of defining the scope and content for this branch of the EU's external relations.

Significant steps were taken in 2016–2017 to define what the EU's cultural diplomacy should entail. The Joint Communication of the European Commission and the EEAS of 2016 states that EU stakeholders should work together to 'advance successful cooperation with partner countries in the three work streams: culture as an engine for sustainable social and economic development; intercultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations; and reinforced cooperation on cultural heritage'.

The European Parliament, in an own-initiative report in 2017 prepared by the Foreign Affairs and Culture Committees in response to the Joint Communication, defined the scope of cultural diplomatic action around two main strands: as a complementary tool to implement the EU's Global Strategy, an overarching concept for the EU's external relations, and as a way for the EU to develop its public people-to-people diplomacy.[4] The Parliament's report also included a substantial list of various activities where culture can play a role, from human rights to the rule of law, freedom and democracy, youth, sports, scientific

cooperation, heritage protection and many others. This Christmas tree-like assortment of missions and goals is also visible in the Conclusions of the European Council, which provided the Council's view on that subject in 2017. The Council added that cultural diplomacy should be a bottom-up process that needs to respect the independence of the cultural sector. The Council also stressed that cultural diversity within the EU would need to be acknowledged in the EU's cultural relations with third countries.

The stock-taking of 2016–17 led to a conclusion among policy actors that a strategic framework for the EU's cultural diplomacy was necessary. As an EU policy that had to find a standing of its own and which was also lacking in political prioritising, cultural diplomacy had to absorb what was delegated to it. A wide range of goals and topics need not be a critical aspect in itself, particularly because all of these topics are rather attractive and certainly resonate with different European and external audiences. A sharpening of the agenda would certainly be welcome, however.

The practical issues of competence and subsidiarity – the division of labour between the EU and member states – are also not that critical as they need to be dealt with in every aspect of the EU's policies. Seemingly being a low-politics area, cultural diplomacy may even escape being stuck in narrow high-politics bottlenecks like European defence.

That said, there seem to be deeper problems vis-à-vis the EU's cultural diplomacy than those of coordination and focus. These questions concern the strategic premise of such diplomacy and its expected impact. One set of expectations is based on the premise of the EU's public diplomacy being a soft power tool. Another set of expectations proceeds from the premise of cultural diplomacy as a tool to engage with others

on a broad range of developmental issues. The expectation in this context is that this engagement takes place by means of co-creation on an equal footing with partners.

In both instances, the expectations don't appear to match the realities on the ground. The rise of authoritarianism in Russia and Turkey is often cited as an example of the EU's weakness in projecting the soft power of its democratic model to neighbours. In development policy circles, the EU is criticised for clinging to an outdated 'top-down' approach in dealing with partners.

Furthermore, it is important to take a critical look at the strategic premises, namely these two images of cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool and as an instrument for enhancing people-to-people cooperation. While not a priori antagonistic, these images are not perfectly complementary either. Finally, as this brief suggests, the EU might achieve a more effective and tangible impact by aligning its cultural diplomacy with what appears to be the main priority for the EU's own economic and societal development, namely mitigating and adapting to climate change.

CULTURE AS A SOFT POWER TOOL

Cultural diplomacy is often considered part of the soft power toolbox. The main purpose of applying soft power is, to borrow Joseph Nye's famous definition, to 'get others to do what they otherwise would not', by non-coercive means. Since its coinage in the early 1990s, the concept of soft power has been seen as an indispensable ingredient in the diplomacy of any international actor, perhaps even synonymous with the idea of diplomacy itself. The idea of employing cultural diplomacy as the EU's soft power tool has featured in countless op-eds and political speeches. In practice, for the EU, wrapping culture around the concept of soft power is not as easy as suggested.

In Nye's original 'soft power' concept, 'culture' was understood as something that can be 'projected' onto the other as a sort of ideological treatment. In practice, however, culture is rarely about a homogeneous, one-way streaming of ideology. As the current age of identity politics and culture war suggests, culture is intrinsically linked to social interaction, interpretation and manipulation on all sides. Furthermore, culture is not the only factor that matters. As prominent social anthropologists Pippa Norris and Ronald Ingelhart have highlighted, the widespread 'cultural backlash' towards populism and against liberal values is not a result of someone's illiberal soft power. Factors like age, education, urbanisation and economic conditions play a role in the rise or decline of certain cultural values.[5]

Secondly, even if cultural proximity and exchanges do exist, they may or may not translate into a positive political agenda. For example, Europe continues to remain an attractive tourist destination and a source of high-end consumer and cultural goods for the elites in countries like China and Russia, or in the Middle East. But this alone does not provide more room for diplomatic engagement. Suggestions to use culture as a kind of platform for peace and engagement with Russia, for example, have yet to yield any positive results.[6]

Turning to another part of the EU's cultural diplomacy agenda, namely the promotion of 'European values' such as liberal democracy, human rights or the rule of law in its Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods, the effectiveness of culture as a soft power is limited to the will and capacity of the EU to go further in integrating its neighbours. No matter how intense the inter-cultural dialogue, in the absence of consistent economic and political integration, there is only so much that culture alone can do.

Finally, one could argue that, in order to be successful, 'soft power' diplomacy should keep culture out of the equation altogether. China's diplomacy is a case in point. Although China has invested significantly in public diplomacy, its soft power relies more on its economic attractiveness and investment opportunities. One expert

interprets President Xi Jinping's call for "a community of shared destiny", as 'soft power' turned on its head: "You don't have to want to be like us, you don't have to want what we want; you can participate in a new form of globalization while retaining your own culture, ideology and institutions."[7]

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AS A DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Another approach to culture in diplomacy is to see it as an enhancer of the transformative, developmental agenda that emerged under the rubric of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), or Agenda 2030. Here, the Christmas tree approach of the Joint Communication might present an opportunity. The EU's cultural diplomacy can be seen as a stem onto which various developmental issues representing different SDGs can be grafted. Yet coupling culture with different SDGs is not easy.

One example is culture and human rights. The 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, to which the EU is a party (and considers the Convention an important reference point), defines human rights as one of the basic principles for international cultural cooperation. Yet an analysis of the practical implementation of the Convention shows that human rights and cultural rights are treated as two different things by the parties. As one expert notes, 'human rights are referred to (in the implementation reports submitted by the parties to the UNESCO Secretariat) not as substantive rights or concrete obligations, but more as supporting notions for certain policies.'[8]

Despite the fact that culture is often mentioned in policy discourse, it is difficult to measure the impact of cultural diplomacy on the implementation of various SDGs, such as gender equality, sustainable cities, climate action, and peacebuilding. It is noteworthy that the EU's own record on implementation of the SDGs remains mixed. This

creates additional difficulty for the EU when it comes to leading by example.

Another challenge has more to do with the 'diplomacy' part of cultural diplomacy. While governments play an important role in the world of SDGs, other non-state actors such as civil society organisations and private philanthropies are equally as crucial.[9]

It would be unfair to conclude that the EU does not recognise these challenges. Both the Joint Communication and Preparatory Action 'Culture in EU external relations'[10] make references to people-to-people contacts and multi-stakeholder ownership. In 2016 the Commission organised the Cultural Relations Platform (CRP), designed to support the EU in engaging in international cultural relations 'based on a set of shared principles, and new activities, aiming to promote and facilitate sustainable cultural exchanges, people-to-people activities, and co-creation processes between Europeans and citizens from countries all over the world'.[11] It needs to be said, however, that the CRP activities are first and foremost supportive of the EU's policy and their impact is yet to be evaluated.

Can these EU cultural diplomacy dilemmas be eased, if not resolved? One way of doing this is by focusing on the mutual interests of the EU and other international actors. The many adverse effects of climate change on cultural heritage, industries and actors might help in localising these mutual interests.

'GREENING' THE EU'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

As the European Council underlined in its January 2021 Conclusions on the EU's climate diplomacy, the EU should pursue external policy goals in all policy fields that are relevant for addressing climate change. Moreover, although culture is not mentioned in the Council's Conclusions, it is implied there. One can make this assumption based on the recent initiatives that the Commission undertook in order to bring its green policies closer to the people and to turn them in

this respect into cultural and societal projects. The 'greening' of the EU's cultural diplomacy can be seen as a process whereby culture is moving closer to the EU's climate mitigation and adaptation policies, and could benefit the EU in two respects.

First, by being more engaged with the culture-climate nexus, the EU could generate more cooperation with others based on the common perception of climate change as a threat multiplier. The negative effects of climate change on the culture of the Indigenous people in the Arctic region or the heritage sites across the globe are well known.[12] Many of these heritage sites are located in areas that are going to be hardest hit by climate change, such as the World Heritage sites in Zanzibar, for example. The Commission is currently exploring innovative measures for the protection of European cultural heritage in relation to climate change. This work could be extended to include an external dimension under the EU's cultural and climate diplomacy.

Furthermore, the economic costs of climate change will most certainly affect cultural and creative sectors, as did the COVID-19 measures, for example. Developing and promoting innovative solutions, including digital tools, to help cultural actors adapt to climate change, can be part of the EU's cultural diplomacy agenda.

Second, as international climate adaptation and mitigation policies often appear to be technical and somewhat abstract for the individual, combining them with cultural projects would bring them closer to the local communities. Furthermore, by enabling and helping partner countries (cities, local communities) to work out their own solutions to sustainable tourism, preserving and re-valorising local heritage and integrating migrants would enhance the potential of EU-funded cultural projects to be genuinely transformative.

The European Green Deal has two interesting cultural sub-projects related to it, namely the New European Bauhaus and the European Climate Pact. These two sub-projects could be extended into the new green agenda for the EU's cultural diplomacy.

NEW EUROPEAN BAUHAUS

The New European Bauhaus (NEB) is a relatively recent initiative by the Commission, launched in September 2020. In the Commission's presentation, the NEB 'wants to make the Green Deal a cultural, human centred and positive, "tangible" experience'.[13] The initiative aims to highlight opportunities and hopes, and brings the Green Deal to the people by connecting architecture, design, climate science, as well as policies for social inclusiveness and equality. The NEB's three dimensions are sustainability (including the circularity of materials used in the built environment), quality of experience (including aesthetics), and inclusion (including affordability).

Currently, this initiative is in its co-design phase and is intended to be duly rolled out in five pilot locations in Europe. However, the potential exists to extend it to partner countries outside the EU. One possible area for collaborative architectural design in such an extended framework would be the African countries. As both rural and urban communities in Africa are undergoing complex processes of urbanisation, climate change adds greater urgency. In addition, a host of developmental problems spurred by demographic growth calls for the kind of solutions that the NEB intends to find in Europe, albeit on a much larger scale. Arguably the most innovative element of the NEB is the idea of using culture and creativity to nurture urban regeneration and climate resilience. It would be commendable for the new generation of NEB pilots to be organised in the framework of the EU-Africa partnership, for example.

In April 2021, the Commission launched the 'New European Bauhaus Prize' for projects in the thematic areas of the NEB. While it is not clear whether the prize is going to be awarded on a regular basis, it would be an interesting innovation to include international cooperative projects with European actors realised outside the EU in future competitions.

Should this initiative indeed form part of the EU's cultural diplomacy, some of the criticism that the NEB has received to date will have to be addressed. As one commentator pointed out, in order for the NEB to develop effectively and to be welcomed globally, the significance of its international and intercultural dimensions, through cultural relations, will have to be explicitly stated from the outset as one of its essential components.[14]

Added to this is the weak 'buy-in' of member states into the NEB. Currently, the Commission has been largely in the driving seat, organising events and disseminating information. One could envisage member states integrating the NEB concept into their own climate and cultural networks. Some member states, if not all 27, could act as NEB ambassadors outside the EU.

This brings us back to the issue of the balance of interests in the EU's cultural diplomacy, however. It remains to be seen whether the unique and innovative character of the NEB could help this initiative to be taken over by member states, while retaining it as an EU project. An interesting case in point is the Portugal-based Bauhaus of the Seas initiative.[15] This initiative is inspired by the NEB and takes it further into the field of sustainability of the ocean and coastal communities and their heritage. While it is not a part of Portugal's diplomacy, the Bauhaus of the Seas nonetheless sheds new light on Portugal as a coastal European country with a history of seafaring and exploration, calling for 'continental mobilisation around the first and most decisive global natural space: the sea'.

A CULTURE-CLIMATE PACT?

In December 2020, the EU launched the European Climate Pact. According to the Commission's Communication, the European Climate Pact is an initiative for engaging with different stakeholders and civil society, with the aim of committing them to climate action and more sustainable behaviour. It will offer ways for people and organisations to learn about climate change, to develop and implement solutions, and to connect with others to multiply the impact of those solutions. The Commission intends to create a 'lively space to share information, debate and act on the climate crisis. The Pact will offer support for a European climate movement to grow and consolidate'.[16]

There are multiple commonalities between what the Climate Pact wants to achieve and what is often called for in the field of international cultural cooperation. The active and meaningful participation of citizens and communities is necessary in both climate and culture. In the Climate Pact, participation is regarded as part of the broader collaboration and co-creation of local knowledge. The logic of the Climate Pact with its network of informal climate ambassadors comes close to the idea of multiple ownership, which is often discussed in the context of cultural goods being essentially public goods.

In light of these interlinkages, one idea for further action would be to extend the Climate Pact into a kind of Culture-Climate Pact. This initiative would be based on the joint pledge of addressing climate change through cultural solutions, some of which could be gleaned from the experience and expertise of the New European Bauhaus.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief started by looking at the challenges and limits of the EU's cultural diplomacy. Employing culture as a soft power tool is not unproblematic, particularly for an actor like the EU. Another familiar image of cultural diplomacy is that of building bridges between countries and communities. In this regard, the impact that the EU has achieved is difficult to measure.

Aligning climate goals and culture might give the EU's cultural diplomacy a much-needed focus and, given the urgency of the climate crisis, a sense of leadership. As the Commission has launched a batch of new initiatives within the European Green Deal framework, the moment for a new start in cultural diplomacy has arrived. The coming years will be crucial for the EU to create a working interface for a mutually reinforcing culture-climate action. One goal of this action can be formulated in terms of empowering European cultural and creative actors to engage internationally with tackling the most important challenge of the 21st century.

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ENDNOTES

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