



‘Greening’ EU’s cultural diplomacy: Uncovering the potential of the culture-climate nexus.

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The EU has 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 ‘Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations’¹ made further headway. The Communication and the accompanying preparatory studies² concluded that there existed enormous potential for EU’s cultural diplomacy but a strategy to realize that potential was lacking.

This briefing 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 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 recovery 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 in direct or indirect

response to various shocks.³

A similar observation can be made about 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 but not indispensable. This may not remain so for long. The more climate change and policies of its mitigation and adaptation affect people and the environment in which they live, the bigger will be the role of culture. There is therefore a momentum for 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 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 EU’s cultural diplomacy is actually about. The strategic question can be formulated as to whether EU’s cultural diplomacy is as an instrument to project some

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

The EU's domestic 'green and digital recovery' agenda creates opportunities for EU's cultural diplomacy to move beyond this dichotomy and perhaps also 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. This cultural dimension could be extended into EU's diplomacy to create a mutually reinforcing dynamics. The more progress the EU makes in implementing the EGD, the bigger is 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 EU's cultural diplomacy.

IN SEARCH OF A STRATEGY

Since its inception, EU's cultural diplomacy had to deal with two sets of obstacles. One is a structural. Culture may seem as a rather natural topic for 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 the European integration, cultural policy has been kept 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 steer them in a particular direction. In this respect, EU's cultural diplomacy is akin to European defence. While together the

European countries present a formidable military might, the European Union lacks an army of its own. In the cultural domain, member states too prefer to showcase European culture, heritage, and arts under their national banners. Finding a balance between national and EU levels and carving for the EU a role for its own cultural diplomacy has been a challenge for Brussels.

With the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in 2009, cultural diplomacy has found an institutional home where it remains under the broad rubric of public diplomacy. There comes the second set of obstacles namely that of defining the scope and content for this branch of EU's external relations.

Significant steps were made in 2016-2017 to define what 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 heritage³.

The European Parliament in an own-initiative report on 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 complimentary tool to implement the EU's Global Strategy, an overarching concept for EU's external relations, and as a way for 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 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 which 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 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 EU's cultural diplomacy was necessary. As an EU policy that had to find a standing of its own and also lacking in political prioritizing, cultural diplomacy had to absorb what was delegated to it. A wide range of goals and topics needs not be a critical thing in itself especially because all these topics are rather attractive and certainly resonate with different European and the external audiences. A sharpening of the agenda would be certainly welcome however.

The practical issues of competence and subsidiarity – 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 EU's policies. Being seemingly a low-politics area, cultural diplomacy may even escape being stuck in the narrow high-politics bottlenecks like European defence.

That said, there seem to be deeper problems about 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 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 the 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 the partners.

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

Furthermore, it is important to look critically at the strategic premises, namely these two images of cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool and an instrument to enhance people to people cooperation. While not a priori antagonistic, these images are not perfectly complimentary either. Finally, as this briefing 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 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 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 it is suggested.

In the original Nye's '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 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 Inglehart show, the widespread ‘cultural backlash’ towards populism and against liberal values is not a result of someone’s illiberal soft power. Factors like age, education, urbanization and economic conditions play a role in the rise or decline of certain cultural values.

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, Russia or in the Middle East. But this alone does not provide more room to diplomatic engagement. Suggestions to use culture as a kind of platform for peace and engagement with, for example, Russia has yet to yield any positive result.

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

Finally, one could argue to be successful, the ‘soft power’ diplomacy should keep culture out of the equation altogether. China’s diplomacy is a case in point. Although China has invested significantly into public diplomacy, it’s is ‘soft power’, relies more on China’s 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.”⁵

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AS A DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Another approach to culture in diplomacy is to see it as an enhancer for a transformative, developmental agenda which emerged under the rubric of the 17 UNDEP Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), or Agenda 2030. Here the Christmas tree approach of the Joint Communication might present an opportunity. EU’s cultural diplomacy can be seen as a stem on 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 EU is party (and considers the Convention as an important reference point), defines human rights as one of basic principles for international cultural cooperation. Yet, the 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.’⁶

Despite that culture is often mentioned in policy discourse, it is difficult to measure the impact of cultural diplomacy on 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 poses additional difficulty for the EU to lead by the example.

Another challenge has to do more 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.⁷

It would be unfair to conclude that the EU does not recognize these challenges. Both the Joint Communication and Preparatory Action ‘Culture in EU’s external relations’⁸ make references to people to people contacts and multi-stakeholders ownership. In 2016 the Commission organised The Cultural Relations Platform (CRP) designed to support the EU to engage 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’.⁹ 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 dilemmas of EU’s cultural diplomacy be eased if not resolved? One way of doing this is by focusing on mutual interests of the EU and other international actors. The many adverse effects of climate change on cultural heritage, industries and actors might help localizing these mutual interests.

‘GREENING’ EU’S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

As the European Council underlined in its January 2020 Conclusions on EU’s climate diplomacy, the EU should pursue external policy goals in all policy fields that are relevant for addressing climate change. And although culture is not mentioned in the Council’s Conclusions, implicitly it is present 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 turn them in this respect into cultural and societal projects. The ‘greening’ of EU’s cultural diplomacy can be seen as a process whereby culture is moving closer to EU’s climate mitigation and adaptation policies. This ‘greening’ of EU’s cultural diplomacy could benefit the EU in two respects.

First, by being more engaged with the culture-climate nexus, the EU could generate a more generate 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.¹⁰ Many of these heritage sites are located in the areas that are going to be hit by climate change the hardest, 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 EU’s cultural and climate diplomacy.

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

Second, as international climate adaptation and mitigation policies often appear to be technical and somewhat abstract to an 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-valourising local heritage, 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 EU’s cultural diplomacy.

NEW EUROPEAN BAUHAUS

The New European Bauhaus (NEB) is a relatively recent initiative of the Commission launched in September 2020. In Commission’s presentation, NEB ‘wants to make the Green Deal a cultural,

human centred and positive, “tangible” experience’.¹¹ The initiative aims to show the 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. NEB’s three dimensions are sustainability (including circularity of materials used in 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 then rolled out in five pilot locations in Europe. However, there is a potential there to extend it to partner countries outside the EU. One possible area for collaborative architectural design in such extended framework would be the African countries. As both rural and urban communities in Africa are going through complex processes of urbanization, climate change adds more urgency to it. In addition, a host of developmental problems spurred by demographic growth calls for the kind of solutions that NEB intends to find in Europe, albeit on a much bigger scale. Arguably the most innovative element of NEB is the idea of using culture and creativity to nurture urban regeneration and climate resilience. It would be commendable that the new generation of NEB pilots would be organized, for example, in the framework of EU-Africa partnership.

In April 2021, the Commission launched the “New European Bauhaus Prize” for the projects in the thematic areas of 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 realized outside the EU in the future prize competitions.

Should this initiative indeed go as part of EU’s cultural diplomacy, some of the criticism that NEB so far has received will have to be addressed. As one commentator pointed out for NEB to effectively develop and be welcomed globally, the significance of

its international and intercultural dimensions, through cultural relations, will have to be thoroughly stated from the outset as one of its essential components.¹²

Added to that is the weak ‘buy in’ of member states into NEB. Currently, the Commission has been mostly in the driving seat organizing events and disseminating information. One could envisage member states integrating 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 however brings us back to the issue balance of interests in the EU’s cultural diplomacy. It remains to be seen whether the unique and innovative character of NEB could help this initiative to be taken over by member states whilst retaining it as an EU project. An interesting case in point is a Portugal-based Bauhaus of the Seas initiative.¹³ This initiative is inspired by NEB and takes it further into the field of sustainability of the ocean and coastal communities and their heritage. While not being part of Portugal’s diplomacy, Bauhaus of the Seas nonetheless casts a new light on Portugal as a coastal European country with the history of seafaring, exploration, calling for ‘continental mobilization 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 to engage with different stakeholders and civil society with the aim to commit 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.’¹⁴

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. Active and meaningful participation of citizens and communities are necessary in both climate and culture. In the Climate Pact, participation is regarded as part of a 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 interlinks, 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 the climate change through cultural solutions, some of which could be taken over from the experience and expertise of the New European Bauhaus.

CONCLUSIONS

This briefing started by looking at the challenges and limits of 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 the EU has achieved is difficult to measure.

Aligning climate goals and culture might give 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 is there. 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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