

## ***Towards a more effective European Global Strategy: Insights from an interculturalist perspective***

*Essay by Angeliki Alexopoulou, based on the presentation for the ELIAMEP-NATO Symposium “Why Defense Matters”, Athens, 8-9 December 2025.*

Many scholars have been discussing the current position of Europe/EU in the world lately, arguing that even its very existence is threatened. At the same time, a climate of fear and suspicion has been fostered towards diversity and intercultural interactions if we consider the backlash against DEI and/or the publication of the new NSS (National Security Strategy) in the US recently. In this context, it is noticeable that Europe appears alone within the global public opinion. A global survey for the research project “Europe in a changing world”, conducted directly after the last US presidential election, showed that much of the world welcomed Donald Trump’s return to the White House. This poll, taking place across 24 countries, revealed that “Europeans are almost alone in mourning Trump’s election”. In countries from India and China to Turkey and Brazil, more respondents welcome Trump as he “will be good for America, for their country and for peace in the world” than think he will be bad for them (ECFR 2005: 2). However, the global survey also reveals that “many in the world regard the EU as a player equal to the US and China”. In any case, the results of the survey indicate the great power of cultural characteristics/differences in international communication and ultimately international politics. Besides, culture affects and reflects the values of the members of a society, the centrality of which Schwartz has highlighted. Other approaches to explaining intercultural differences have been suggested by theorists such as Triandis, Inglehart and Hofstede, who have contributed to the field of intercultural communication.

Naturally, intercultural relations have played an important role in international politics and the diplomatic practice of states over time, especially as some of the contacts and exchanges between people and cultures are initiated by states and some are spontaneous. This essay will aim to highlight the growing importance of cultural competence and/or intercultural awareness in international relations and more specifically in public diplomacy and/or the EU's 'image' in particular. What is being argued is that a culturally responsive European public diplomacy can be a smart approach, which would be of utmost importance given the international environment that now pressures the EU to develop material power, beyond the hitherto acknowledged normative power it possessed. Drawing ideas from the theory of intercultural communication as well as specific tools it provides, we intend to explore ways EU public diplomacy could be enhanced by an intercultural approach. Although it is clear that the appropriate theoretical framework for dealing with soft power is that of liberalism/idealism, we will examine to what extent this is feasible within the current global landscape.

## Public diplomacy by a hitherto civilian power

The EU has always been considered a soft power, as it exercised power almost exclusively without military means. “Europe as civilian power” was, after all, the term that dominated the discussion about Europe’s role in the world since the 1970s. Manners (2002) saw Europe as ‘normative power’ as it acts in an ethically good way, based on principles such as peace, liberty, democracy etc. Indeed, the EU acts as a rule maker by defending liberal democracy especially if we take into consideration the thousands of pages of the *acquis communautaire*. The European project was born and developed based on the idea of connecting nations and people and bringing peace and prosperity. Moreover, the EU on the other hand also preferred always to be called ‘civilian power’, which is maybe a reason for the over-confidence in its own charm and model that, according to some, has “distorted and undermined the EU’s perspective on itself and the rest of the world” (Frangonikolopoulos & Spiliotakopoulou 2022: 18).

With the Lisbon Treaty and the CFSP that was established, the foundations of the geopolitical/defense/military arm of the EU were laid while with the “Global Strategy” (2016), the EU acknowledged the need to be not exclusively a non-military power as well as the need to have smart approaches to its foreign policy, for example in the economic field (both resources for development and sanctions). Bianca Baumler, with experience in developing EU public diplomacy guidelines and managing outreach activities since the launch of the European External Action Service, describes the progress of EU public diplomacy around the EU Global Strategy. “The EU, following the recommendation to develop a more centralized public diplomacy strategy and with the pilot global European Policy and Outreach Partnership (EUPOP), launched in 2016, took the first steps to build a coherent public diplomacy” (Baumler 2019: 9).

The “EU Perceptions Study” (2015), a comprehensive analysis of the perception of the EU and of EU’s policies in 10 strategic partner countries, was meant to serve as one of its building blocks. The EU set common objectives for its public diplomacy efforts with the ultimate goal to facilitate future cooperation between the EU and its partner countries. The EU highlighted “mutual trust and understanding” as the foundation for this cooperation (Baumler 2019: 9). Moreover, for her, “the Global Strategy highlights Europe’s experience with its own civil society as a basis to reach out to civil society actors abroad...engagement and inclusion are the words that stand out—the purpose of public diplomacy” (Baumler 2019: 8). Baumler finally characterizes though the importance of listening to improve the engagement implicit but also notes that “two-way communications and a true dialogue have become vital for today’s public diplomacy” (Baumler 2019: 5). Similarly, Frangonikolopoulos & Spiliotakopoulou (2022) suggest that the EU’s public diplomacy should be guided by the logic “power with others” rather than over others. Thus, “the EU must strive to create digital spaces that are not restricted to like-minded areas and countries, but respond, too, to multipolarity and the emergence of forces outside the West” (Frangonikolopoulos & Spiliotakopoulou 2022: 18).

“Public diplomacy needs more interculturalists” (SIETAR Europa 2022)

Cabrera Cuadrado (2022), who is studying Spain’s public diplomacy in the United States and the role of the European Union, is surprised by “the lack of integration of intercultural models in public diplomacy”. For her, these could ease the international relations between governments and people. She believes that “we need more interculturalists researching, practicing and analyzing public diplomacy, while simultaneously acknowledging their own cultural (unconscious) bias” (Cabrera Cuadrado, 2022). Cabrera Cuadrado notices that academics in the public diplomacy field that integrate culture in their studies, do it mostly “by classifying it as part of cultural diplomacy, generally a showcase of national cultures around the world without real intercultural interaction”. Referring to Cull’s book “Public Diplomacy. Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age” (2019), she accepts though two approaches to cultural diplomacy that do promote intercultural understanding and two-way communication (these are cultural capacity building and cultural dialogue), although for her the explanation in these cases is generalized and “does not include any guidelines on how capacity building or dialogue can be conducted across cultures”. In any case, there is a need for public diplomacy specialists to study in depth foreign civilizations, especially the ones they need to deal with. In the case of Europe, stress should be put on examining India and Saudi Arabia, for instance. For Damaso (2025), reinforcing a Eurocentric view of the world should be avoided and “the exercise of humility and an effort to make the EU a forum for understanding the ‘Others’, along with communicating and discussing their differences and priorities, would be useful” (Frangonikolopoulos & Spiliotakopoulou 2022: 18). Finally, Damaso (2025) believes that “the idea of the EU as a global enabler of cultural diversity and global justice can push back against the great power realism that dominates geopolitics today” and suggests that the EU should establish new connections and strengthen its international presence, particularly in the Global South.

The question that certainly arises given the conditions in global communication is how insights provided by intercultural communication science could be utilized effectively. Probably, in terms of the specific field of intercultural studies, we must set aside the ideal of interculturality and keep the tools it provides, although in Europe these have been tested mostly in the business sector up until now. Indeed, the United States had recognized the need and importance of successful communication between their diplomatic personnel and other cultures, establishing, as early as in 1946, the Foreign Service Institute, which would provide training, in which anthropologist Edward T. Hall himself played an active role with his teaching from 1951 to 1955, mainly offering the seminar “Understanding Foreign Peoples” (Leeds-Hurwitz 1990).

Perhaps ultimately public/cultural diplomacy and intercultural communication are – at a first level – two interconnected concepts: Intercultural communication occurs not abstractly between cultures, but between people. Similarly, public/cultural diplomacy has individuals as its recipients and its goal is essentially “the hearts and minds” of the individuals of the respective foreign audience. As the real protagonists of diplomacy are never abstract ‘nations’ or generalized ‘peoples’, but the actors who practice it, it would be suitable to focus on intercultural

communication at the interpersonal level: It should be made clear that intercultural/diversity competence/awareness is not a personality trait but a skill to be developed and there are two important models in this direction to take into account as a beginning. Firstly, Milton Bennett through the introduction of his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), suggested the stages from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism. Ethnocentrism is indeed a challenge at the level of intercultural communication and has to do with the individual's tendency to judge other people and cultures from the perspective of their own culture, adopting the resulting values. Secondly, important insights are offered through the introduction of the Intercultural Competence Model by Darla Deardorff. Intercultural competence is “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and/or attitudes” (Deardorff 2008). Knowledge refers to one’s awareness of operating within a cultural context. Attitudes refer to the emotional dimension of a person, which includes, for example, curiosity and risk-taking. The skills set refers to the behavioral dimension, with abilities such as listening, adapting, and managing stress. It is clear that all of this can be improved once it is realized, and one step towards this is intercultural/diversity training.

As public/ cultural diplomacy is about influence, attraction and persuasion, it is clear that the field of intercultural studies (which deals with analyzing and enhancing negotiation or leadership patterns inter alia), could make a significant contribution to its effectiveness. Grounding public diplomacy in an anthropological framework would be meaningful in any case if we consider intercultural communication from the perspective of the psychology of communication and the universality of human feelings, which can transcend boundaries and borders. Zaharna, who advocates for a ‘humanity-centered public diplomacy’ in her recent article uses a lens of connectivity to trace two parallel tracks in public diplomacy, one driven by fierce competition and the other by growing global collaboration. She notices that “in post-9/11 public diplomacy, individual states sought to influence foreign publics; in post-pandemic public diplomacy, publics are organizing and collaborating to influence foreign governments” (Zaharna 2024: 31).

#### A culturally responsive EU public diplomacy and its global implications

As public diplomacy is, just like cultural diplomacy, ‘soft power’ activity and Nye argued that soft power alone cannot produce effective foreign policy (and therefore coined the term ‘smart power’, which has the evaluation built into its definition), it would be useful to also consider the British Council's 2024 findings on public and cultural diplomacy, a comparative analysis of the British Council and its international counterparts. These highlight that most countries-from Turkey to Brazil-, are “increasingly prioritizing national interests over multilateralism and the global order and there is more alignment of soft power activities with foreign and economic policy goals, and less emphasis on shared global challenges” (British Council 2024: 4). Moreover, two major emerging trends according to this research is that on the one hand “there is an increase in activity designed to appeal to domestic audiences” and on the other hand, “soft power is increasingly being

mobilized to promote national identities, sometimes assertively or controversially” (British Council 2024: 4). This brings forth the question of whether national interests can coexist with interculturality and diversity. Thus, there is need to investigate the legitimacy and potential value of implementing an “intercultural cultural diplomacy” or rather a national culture-oriented cultural diplomacy within the current global landscape.

The European Union's power management is inherent to its very existence, underlining the central role of power in international relations. A fundamental debate that has existed in the history and theory of the field, and which is also appropriate in this particular case, is that of liberalism in contrast to realism: for many, a key concern of International Relations regarding the central issue of power is "what is the best way for our power to be effective and influence others?". According to interdependence theories, closeness is the key to all relationships, as people's nature is to always try to maximize the rewards with the least costs at the same time. However, Mark Leonard (World Economic Forum 2025) believes that those liberal beliefs that we used to take for granted can no longer ensure peace and stability, as these same interdependencies, for him, both connect and divide the world. Hence, it is possibly logical that some wonder whether ‘soft power’ should be abandoned and the time for ‘hard power’ has come (Frangonikolopoulos & Spiliotakopoulou 2022: 17). Of course, another question could deal the fate of the state and national interests according to a ‘soft power’ approach on foreign policy, although for Nye, “there is no contradiction between realism and soft power. Soft power is not a form of idealism or liberalism. It is simply a form of power, one way of getting desired outcomes. Legitimacy is a power reality and competitive struggles over legitimacy are part of enhancing or depriving actors of soft power” (Nye 2013: 7).

The EU Global Strategy was considered as “Realpolitik with European characteristics” (Biscop 2016), but that was about ten years ago. Europeans should now focus more on understanding and seeing opportunities in the new world, which is an even more transactional world. The post-cold war liberal order has passed irrevocably. Europeans should understand their own strengths and deal with the world as they find it rather than “attempt to lead a global liberal opposition to Trump” (ECFR 2025). As Biscop put it in 2016 and still applies, there is a need for a return to Realpolitik in its original sense, namely “a rejection of liberal utopianism, but not of liberal ideals themselves”, as the German liberal Ludwig von Rochau coined the term in 1853. To sum up, a culturally informed EU public diplomacy, which balances national realities with the power of intercultural communication, represents a smart strategy aligned with current global dynamics and practically this could be achieved by raising cultural and/or global awareness of Europeans, together with the appropriate pragmatism.

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