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EU Cultural Diplomacy: time to define strategies, means and complementarity with Member States

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On the 23rd of May 2017, the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions on *Culture in the European Union's external relations*¹, by welcoming the Joint Communication *Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations*² presented by the European Commission in June 2016. Besides calling for a bottom-up perspective including cultural actors – and based on the promotion of cultural diversity – the conclusions envisage the establishment of a working group to design an integrated EU strategic approach, bringing together all the relevant policies and players. **Complementarity with Member States and their cultural institutes is re-affirmed as a vital component of this process, but its content and modalities mostly remain to be defined.**

The 2016 Communication represents the most important step of a process of policy formulation initiated in 2007, when the *European agenda for culture in a globalizing world* identified culture in external relations as a fundamental pillar. **The 2016 Communication** seeks to define a strategic framework which assigns to cultural cooperation with EU partners an important role in supporting EU's goals with regard to economic and social development, peace and stability and the promotion of cultural

diversity around the world. This document also **mentions the role of Cultural Diplomacy (CD) in European external engagement. However, it does not provide a clear definition of this concept at the EU level. Also, it takes complementarity with Member States' activities for granted**, without further exploring a specific focus for cooperation or explaining the potential added value of this partnership.

This contribution argues that, if the EU wants to define a real strategy for its external cultural action, it needs to respond to these challenges by providing a clearer definition of what 'culture' it is promoting (and how), and of what 'complementarity' means. First, EU Cultural Diplomacy should build upon EU's experience in intercultural dialogue and capacity building rather than try to showcase European culture as a Soft Power tool. Consequently, cooperation with Member States and their cultural institutes should be sought on intercultural dialogue and capacity building, by jointly using MS' networks, resources and connection with local actors to build locally-tailored strategies in co-ownership with target countries. Finally, the EU should identify specific financial means supporting cultural capacity building and intercultural

dialogue, both in its own external relations as well as in its enhanced cooperation with Member States and their cultural institutes.

Increased coordination and cooperation with Member States and their cultural institutes is fundamental in order to tackle the shortcomings of EU external cultural action and to improve its impact. A series of instruments facilitating this joint work have started to be established through progressive steps. First, the creation in February 2016 of a Cultural Diplomacy Platform³, bringing together some key European cultural institutes and other actors to guide, support and advise EU external cultural actions in the next years. Second, the definition of a partnership arrangement between the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) Network, the Commission services and the EEAS to join forces and ensure complementarities and synergies⁴. Third, the *potential* (but difficult) establishment of focal points in EU Delegations and the creation of European Culture Houses, to provide better and coordinated services to local actors.

The aforementioned partnership arrangement envisages a work on a 'variable geometry' basis at the target-country level, without committing the two parts to an excessively structured cooperation or any specific obligation. Nonetheless, it constitutes a first basis for creating and integrated EU approach based on (1) a broad definition of culture, including intercultural dialogue and development cooperation, and (2) a bottom-up approach, including local cultural actors and national authorities. The process having started, the Commission, the EEAS, the European Parliament and the Council should clearly define what will be the EU's role, responsibilities and instruments in it, in order to avoid getting lost along the way and watering down the ambitious goals defined so far.

A. The challenge of defining Cultural Diplomacy

The EU's ambiguous discourse: what Cultural Diplomacy?

By echoing the concept of 'smart complementarity' among actors, proposed by the 2014 Preparatory Action

for Culture in External Relations, the Joint Communication suggests that the EU should act in line with the principle of subsidiarity and the supplementary competence attributed to it by the TFEU, and represent an 'enabler' encouraging cooperation among Member States and civil society.

In this context, which mostly speaks about 'International Cultural Relations', Cultural Diplomacy remains an ambiguous concept, which is not sufficiently defined.

On the one hand, CD is seen as a broad conceptual instrument supporting culture as a factor of development, capacity building, exchange and dialogue between people. Its final aim is to help ensuring comprehensive well-being, social and civil rights and peace in target countries – while also building a lasting inter-cultural dialogue with the EU. The CD section of the Joint Communication states that EU stakeholders should work together to 'advance successful cooperation with partner countries in the three work streams proposed': culture as an engine for sustainable social and economic development; inter-cultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations; and reinforced cooperation on cultural heritage.

On the other hand, a more traditional and 'realist' approach to Cultural Diplomacy co-exists with the former within the document. When looking at the instruments in place for enhanced EU-Member State cooperation, tools aimed at 'branding the EU' – that is, promoting the EU's image abroad and showcasing European cultural production – seem to be the main focus of attention. Here, EU cooperation with Member States mostly takes the form of joint EU cultural events (e.g. film festivals), the creation of European Culture Houses and of cultural focal points in EU delegations and the (achieved) establishment of the Cultural Diplomacy Platform financed by the Partnership Instrument. This last programme has the explicit aim to advance and protect EU interests abroad⁵. Inclusion of civil society, capacity building and cultural exchange are cited, but they are left without a clear presentation of instruments in their support (e.g. the establishment of new funding programmes or the partial adaptation of existing ones).

EU practice of Culture Diplomacy

While EU CD remains an underspecified concept in recent strategic documents, EU programmes and policies provide a clearer picture for the use of culture *in support of foreign policy goals*. This picture clashes with a strict definition of Cultural Diplomacy as a state-driven process of display and showcasing, definable as ‘the accrual by nation-states of symbolic capital through the placing of their ideas and cultural properties in the global economy of prestige’⁶. So far, EU money has been invested, although insufficiently, in regional and bilateral programmes supporting social and cultural development, capacity building, inter-cultural dialogue and cultural exchanges. This was done by creating specific geographical instruments, most notably in the case of EU neighbours through regional (e.g. Culture and Creativity Programme, Media and culture for development in the Southern Mediterranean region) and bilateral (e.g. Supporting the Strengthening of Tunisia’s Cultural Sector) programmes and projects. Most importantly, cultural cooperation with third countries with a focus on capacity building, development and peace has been promoted through programmes addressing overlapping issues, like Erasmus +, the Development and Cooperation Instrument and its sub-programmes, the Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the ENI Cross Border Cooperation, the Civil Society Facility and others. Although not focused on display, showcasing or other traditional Soft Power tools – these activities still serve diplomatic purposes and foreign policy objectives. Labelling them as International Cultural Relations as a less contested and allegedly value-free term (rather than Cultural Diplomacy) does not make their *legitimate* security, political and economic goals disappear.

Clarifying what EU Cultural Diplomacy can/does mean

The continued popularity of the idea of an EU soft power and, to a minor extent, of concepts like ‘Normative Power Europe’ – partly represented by the creation of tools like the Partnership Instrument –, should bring policy mak-

ers and analysts to ask the following questions: is there room for a *European* traditional cultural diplomacy? Is a regional organisation which is based on ‘unity in diversity’ of national cultures prepared to showcase a truly European cultural image abroad? Answering this does not require to make a statement about the intrinsic superiority of capacity building and intercultural dialogue over traditional showcasing. Nonetheless, the former seem naturally more suitable to a regional integration project like the EU, which has increasingly tried to sustain itself by promoting narratives of common cultural heritage and understanding between cultures after centuries of conflictual relations. The EU is an actor with a strong internal need for intercultural dialogue and negotiation of shared identities. The experience, knowledge and practices developed in this process can and should be used when approaching other regions, especially those characterised by geographical proximity and a shared history of cultural exchanges.

Focusing on capacity building in culture and intercultural dialogue does not mean renouncing to defend EU’s interests abroad, but rather to create better lasting conditions for their pursuit in cooperation with the target countries. Despite insufficient resources, EU practice already speaks for itself. For example, a communication programme like OPEN Neighbourhood (2015-2019) – specifically aimed at ‘increasing the sense of interest and ownership of the partnership between Europe and countries and societies in the Neighbourhood area’⁷ – dedicates almost 8 of its 18 Million Euro to the Project Media Hub, which trains journalists and media specialists to reinforce an independent and competent media sector in ENP Countries.

B. Operationalizing complementarity and allocating resources

In developing a partnership to join efforts with MS and other actors, the EU should clearly define its role within this ‘smart complementarity’. This partnership is needed as EU external cultural relations show many fragilities, and beyond political commitment there is both a lack of

regionally tailored strategies and, most importantly, specific financial means.

In this process of definition of means, cooperation with Member States and their cultural institutes should not only be sought for mere communication, outreach activities and showcasing of EU Culture. National cultural institutes often have – with various degrees in different countries – strong capabilities and expertise in cultural capacity building, support to local networks and intercultural dialogue. This is particularly true in their common activities through the EUNIC Network, which almost exclusively supports projects that address capacity building, people-to-people contacts and initiatives involving co-ownership with local actors. Cooperation between EUNIC and the EU in this respect has already taken place both in Brussels and on the ground, through projects like the long-term EUNIC MENA Project and, more recently, through the EU-funded network Crossroads for Culture. This vision is also supported by the recent partnership arrangement with EUNIC, which endorses a broad definition of culture, including aspects like intercultural dialogue and development cooperation. The arrangement centres cooperation with Member States on the three abovementioned work streams of sustainable development, intercultural dialogue and cultural heritage.

Overall, the goals set out in the 2016 Joint Communication seem quite ambitious when compared to the currently available resources. EU delegations cooperate on the ground with regional programmes and projects, often in the dissemination and advertisement of activities, but their human and financial resources are not sufficient in every country and cultural posts are still missing. Also, the biggest multi-country financial resources for cultural initiatives come from programmes which address issues like institutional cooperation, development, civil society, education or women and gender issues – while culture-specific programmes remain relatively small and few. The EU's main programme for culture, Creative Europe, still has a small minority of participating third countries, possibly because of the presence of an 'entry ticket' fee based on GDP size and specific eligibility criteria for its Media sub-programme.

The means and resources to implement the 2016 Communication will have to be further defined, as almost all the programmes cited in the document will soon come to an end. Similarly, in a key speech on CD to the European Parliament, Commissioner Navracsics mostly talked about ongoing, short-termed or closing programmes⁸. In addition, the recent arrangement with EUNIC does not commit any specific resources to EU's 'enhanced cooperation' with cultural institutes, and rather invites to explore alternative financing methods and to rely on more co-financing from different sources.

C. The way ahead

Forward-looking concepts, strategies and instruments for an EU CD need to be identified. In doing so, the EU should consider at least three factors.

First, EU Cultural Diplomacy should put emphasis on the links between culture and empowerment of local actors and culture and development. In this respect, the role of capacity building and training is essential. Also, intercultural dialogue remains fundamental to respond to challenges such as religious radicalism and to promote a culture of democratic participation. Without a single clearly-defined culture to showcase, the EU should build upon its experience in the three work streams identified in the 2016 Communication and seek an ever-increasing co-ownership with target countries. The partnership arrangement with EUNIC signed in May 2017 constitutes a good basis for such an approach as it values intercultural dialogue and development cooperation.

Second, the EU should develop its cooperation with Member States on these topics rather than on pure display of European culture(s). EUNIC has acknowledged the will of the EU to adopt a wider definition of culture encompassing, inter alia, intercultural dialogue, development cooperation and education, and it has identified EU's 'tendency to showcasing events, particularly through the use of Communication and Press budgets' as a challenge to be faced⁹. This broader CD approach can be facilitated by Member States and their cultural institutes, which of-

ten have the networks, expertise and resources to work in closer connection with local actors. This partnership should be developed by bringing forward and translating into policy the analysis and recommendations set out in the 2016 EP study *European Cultural Institutes Abroad*¹⁰, which unveiled the potential of enhanced cooperation between EU Delegations, Cultural Institutes and EUNIC. This need is recognised in the partnership arrangement, which indicates that EUNIC locally-tailored strategies will form the basis for joint pilot activities between EU delegations and cultural institutes.

Third, the EU should identify specific financial means supporting cultural capacity building and intercultural dialogue, both in its own external relations as well as in its enhanced cooperation with Member States and their cultural institutes. Cultural cooperation activities with third countries have often been financed through generic or short-termed instruments, which hinder the definition and implementation of lasting strategies and create uncertainty among local cultural actors. For the coming years, the experience, networks and expertise developed by regional and bilateral cultural programmes should be brought forward by new, long-lasting, funding instruments. Also, the regional approach used for the Neighbourhood should be strengthened and replicated in other regions of the world.

Read more in [EL-CSID Working Paper 2](#), focusing on the MENA Region.

About the author



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Footnotes

- ¹ Council conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations, Adopted on 23 May 2017
- ² JOIN(2016) 29 final
- ³ See <http://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu/>
- ⁴ Administrative arrangement for activities to be developed by the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) in partnership with the European Commission Services and the European External Action Service, 16 May 2017, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/2017-05-16_admin_arrangement_eunic.pdf
- ⁵ See http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/fpi/what-we-do/partnership_instrument_en.htm; see also PI Regulation, No 234/2014
- ⁶ Isar, Y. R. (2010) 'Cultural Diplomacy: An Overplayed Hand?' Public Diplomacy Magazine, <http://www.publicdiplomacymagazine.com/cultural-diplomacy-an-overplayed-hand/>
- ⁷ EC (2014) Commission Implementing Decision on an Individual Measure 2014 in favour of the ENI East and South countries for a Regional Communication Programme Phase II to be financed from the general budget of the European Union, 7/10/2014, C(2014) 7109 final, p. 2
- ⁸ See Tibor Navracsics (2016) 'Building blocks of a new EU strategy for cultural diplomacy', https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/navracsics/announcements/building-blocks-new-eu-strategy-cultural-diplomacy_en
- ⁹ EUNIC-EU Neighbourhood South Meeting report, 27-28 October, Rabat, Morocco, p. 8 https://www.eunic-online.eu/sites/default/files/imce/u6358/eu_neighbourhood_south_rabat_final.pdf
- ¹⁰ Smiths, Y. et al (2016) Research for Cult Committee - European Cultural Institutes Abroad, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/563418/IPOL_STU\(2016\)563418_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/563418/IPOL_STU(2016)563418_EN.pdf)

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