

POLICY MEMO

The Death of Diplomacy? Opportunities for EU Democracies in a Foreign Service Crisis

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Executive Summary

Fundamental changes in politics, society, and technology have made the traditional structures and tools of diplomacy obsolete. In this memo, we examine how diplomacy and domestic politics can usefully intersect in the EU, while borrowing insights from the experiences of Canadian and US foreign services. The subject is worthy of sustained discussion because a world order premised on peacefully expanding contacts, exchanges, and multilateral commitments cannot ignore the systems, formal and informal, of diplomatic discourse. To do so would risk a more volatile international order and weaken good governance at home.

Simply noting the shortcomings of old-fashioned diplomatic engagement is hardly groundbreaking. What this memo offers, however, is a way of rethinking diplomacy which also strengthens democracy on a domestic level. Globalization has tied the foreign to the domestic more closely than ever before. Today, what happens outside a nation-state's borders matters profoundly to the conduct and durability of institutions within those borders. Accordingly, governments must deeply engage with the external world. More basically, the state to state paradigm is no longer suitable, and diplomacy must seek public, cultural, economic, and social input for its foreign policies. For Europe, this change would not mean a battle-royal of competing soft-power hegemony, but a sustained effort to craft channels for the exchange of information and experience. Beginning at the national level, rather than the supranational, would entrench a stronger sense of European identity.

We offer four recommendations. First, the improved funding of foreign ministries. Second, recruitment must be improved to meet the need for both youth and experience. Third, all nations must articulate clear goals for the short-, medium-, and long-term, and integrate these goals more consistently into the work of foreign missions. And fourth, *public diplomacy* tools must be repurposed and energetically employed in this endeavor.

The Policy Memo

Background and research question

Traditionally, diplomacy was a form of statecraft, a means to facilitate state to state interactions, gain advantages, and resolve disputes. This conception still dominates. A recent compilation of research on the EU defines diplomacy as “a pragmatic approach to manage the relations between states and other institutions in the intergovernmental space with the aim of arriving at peaceful conflict resolutions” (Stanzel 2018, 7). The EU's common foreign and security policy, including its diplomatic corps (the European External Action Service), echoes this vocabulary (Legrand and Turunen 2020; Kuus 2014, 86).

However, this type of diplomacy is in crisis. As Cold War verities faded and a new war on terror threatened, militaries took on new prominence in foreign policymaking, while diplomatic channels were marginalized and their resources dwindled.

More fundamentally, the purpose of diplomacy has become muddled. Tectonic shifts in the international system push the traditional state towards obsolescence – or at least leave it far less homogenous and autonomous – as globalized economic, information, and cultural ties override traditional borders and overwhelm national identities. In this world of air travel and reliable video conferences, embassies appear as awkward middlemen, dispensing visas and arranging high-level delegation visits. In crafting and implementing policy overseas, they have become “virtually obsolete in the 21st Century” (Van Buren 2020). Reacting to this development is made difficult because successful diplomats are usually defined by a series of intangible personal skills, a certain ‘diplomatic character’ (Stanzel 2018, 8). Thus, replacing them or abruptly changing their function is no simple task. The personal demands of the job – living far from home, frequently uprooting one's family – and need to cultivate often esoteric expertise put off many potential candidates. Indeed, most foreign missions host just a handful of proper diplomats, while most routine functions are kept running by local hires or civil servants. Further, effective foreign policy is often complex and contradictory; diplomats struggle to provide the easy, sound-bite solutions that homegrown politicians and bureaucracies crave.

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Diplomats, by the very nature of their far-flung work, usually lack reliable domestic constituencies to argue their case at home. Their concerns are often dismissed, and institutional tension between foreign ministries and the rest of government is common.

In response to this crisis, some have drawn on an alternative approach to diplomacy and promoted its merits. This is *public diplomacy*. While it has been used for different purposes at different times, generally *public diplomacy* recognizes the need for public messaging to foreign audiences and expanding citizen-to-citizen exchanges in the shaping of foreign policy. Its guiding philosophy is that, especially in democracies, much can be learned and achieved by engaging foreign citizens and addressing their concerns directly. *Public diplomacy* has gained credence as individuals are more aware of and concerned about the international community than ever before (Stanzel 2018, 7). However, many writers just rebrand on-going diplomatic activities rather than thoroughly understand and integrate the concept (Melissen 2005, 40). Often, it is described as little more than a facet of Nye’s ‘soft power,’ a non-military means of projecting influence.

In reality, *public diplomacy* is more about cultivating a common identity across borders and the genuine exchange of personal insights and social understanding. For the EU, where integration is a top priority, this has an obvious appeal. To be sure, the EU has sponsored projects all over the continent to promote public interactions. Nevertheless, so far the effects have been disappointing and transnational identities in the EU remain flimsy (European Parliament 2019). Europeans are close, but divisions between North and South and East and West remain, as the varied responses to the refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate.

This matters for democracy. Recent events, both within the EU and elsewhere, are shaped by the flagging public legitimacy of international systems and whether or not citizens can find their personal identities within them. Indeed, populism was acknowledged as the most challenging political phenomenon facing democracy today at a recent conference at the University of Victoria. Populism is driven, in part, by a fear of the foreign and a failure to accept changing cultural norms. *Public diplomacy* can respond to these forces, and so help preserve democratic vitality; because “smart foreign policy not only begins at home, in the strength of our political and economic system, but ends there too – in better jobs, more prosperity, a healthier climate, and greater security” (Burns 2019).

Accordingly, the research question that concerns us is whether and how diplomacy can be reformed and refitted as a more public enterprise for the benefit of European and other democracies.

Methods

This memo compiles and presents recent research and statistics by policy institutes and government bodies on 21st century diplomacy. It focuses on diplomatic challenges in an EU context but takes lessons from Canada and the US as well.

Most accounts on diplomacy are fairly broad in scope – they often concern long-term structural problems and solutions rather than individual failings or prescriptions. Accordingly, alongside broad accounts we looked for perspectives on specific questions. Namely, how do diplomatic systems interact with domestic society and governance; for what aspects of global politics could diplomacy offer innovative solutions; and what fundamental premises or aims of diplomacy most need reconsideration? Certain conclusions were reached by cross-examining the underlying assumptions and findings between sources.

Key Findings

Public diplomacy options aim to network across all levels of society while eschewing grand geopolitical designs. It appeals to smaller countries as a form of niche diplomacy, “concentrating resources in specific areas best able to generate returns worth having” (Melissen 2005, 67). Canada is an icon for this orientation, because they have prioritized crafting a coherent identity for the world stage and focusing on public engagement just as much as interstate relations. Along with Norway, another *public diplomacy* paragon, Canada funds these efforts generously. Some of this money goes into diplomatic backchannels, but Canada very publicly cultivates NGO and civil society networks as well, all while holding to a consistent long-term vision of Canadian foreign policy; the shift from Harper to Trudeau changed little in the overall thrust of Canadian foreign strategy. The United States, meanwhile, has long funded academic scholarships and public exchanges through the Fulbright Program. A semi-independent body entirely dedicated to *public diplomacy* called the US Information Agency (USIA) was created to counter USSR influence overseas but ended up becoming a wellspring of civilian expertise and non-political engagement. It was folded into the State Department in 1999, as a relic of a bygone era. After this, US *public diplomacy* lost direction and purpose.

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EU democracies are geographically bounded and dependent on mutual information and understanding, yet the institutional fabric for managing these relationships is minimal. Embassies are well positioned to tap into these forces, serving, *inter alia*, as think-tanks and cultural exchange hubs, linking citizens to foreigners and vice versa. Small business and NGO ventures ought to be able to seek funding, ideas, and contacts more regular into and through diplomatic channels. All this already happens, but not nearly with the emphasis it deserves. Furthermore, diplomatic infrastructure often lacks eager and creative public servants because traditional pathways to the foreign service are inaccessible for most, involving rigorous, expensive and years-long processes.

Real reform would mean making *public diplomacy* a top priority and reconceiving diplomats as servants of the long-term goal of bringing two nations closer. They would inform citizens more about neighbors and opportunities abroad, would strengthen bonds of mutual dependence, and, over time, thicken the mesh of personal connections crisscrossing the continent. This is the stuff that makes democracy flourish and virulent populism impossible. It is important that this diplomatic networking occur through the actions of individual states rather than from the central EU administration. European citizens already find EU bureaucracy intrusive and its attempts at supranational messaging specious (Wike et al. 2019, 14). If *public diplomacy* initiatives flowed from individual member states, EU solidarity could grow organically from the bottom-up (Kuus 2014, 94).

Such *public diplomacy* outreach is admittedly a gamble, moving government initiative into uncharted territories with unseen costs. As noted above, it is neither possible nor desirable to craft a single strategy for all national contexts; neither can we assume that the political will to devote more attention to a transnational project exists everywhere in equal measure. Furthermore, there is always the risk that European citizens in one country or another will spurn diplomatic efforts as either ham-handed propaganda or Machiavellian intrusion. Any attempt to employ *public diplomacy* tools to further democratic integration should expect to encounter rude setbacks and drawn-out growing pains. Expanding and restructuring foreign missions along suggested lines while preserving diplomacy's most vital asset – a nuanced understanding of peoples and places not available to passing visitors – will be a matter for continual trial and error.

Nonetheless, adapting diplomacy to contemporary change will require reimagining what it is for and what it can accomplish. Perhaps then, we can achieve “a reaffirmation of the classic function of diplomacy adjusted to the demands of globalization” (Melissen 2005, 40).

Recommendations

This analysis has four recommendations.

- ▶ Funding and staffing matters because the scale of diplomatic missions should be substantially increased to support the changes recommended here. The size of any increase will vary by country, as will the costs of making such decisions. We do not pretend that finding the political capital to do so will be easy, but an open diplomacy with greater resources will reduce the need for traditional security and in the long-term make domestic governance more efficient.
- ▶ Meanwhile, the possibilities of a diplomatic career should be more widely communicated and forms of recruitment made less exclusive. Diplomacy must become a more viable body of government employment.
- ▶ Our third recommendation addresses the lack of an organizing principle for most diplomacy. That governments should set out specific and flexible goals over various time frames might seem obvious, but without a carefully considered, clearly stated purpose, foreign ministries are vulnerable to policy drift and short-sighted or deliberately vague priorities. Defining this purpose could roughly follow the Canadian or USIA model (without the Cold War allusions), where long-term national interests guide budgets and activities despite routine fluctuations in political priorities.
- ▶ Finally, a robust *public diplomacy* is the best way to secure domestic benefits in a context like the EU – along with closer multilateral ties. Expanded cultural exchanges and networks managed through embassies could serve to augment a common European identity by building systems of information and experience. This offers the chance to transition diplomacy into a new 21st century role.

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▶ There is no alchemy for resolving the problems of 21st century diplomacy. Taken together, our recommendations are intended to make foreign ministries more flexible and capable of ongoing reactive improvements. We also believe that democracy in the Western world could be significantly improved if governments reoriented around the specific goal of *public diplomacy*. That way, the opportunities of a globalizing world can be better realized.

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Author

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