

A cosmopolitan vision for the future Emerging economic powers such as India, Brazil and South Korea have grasped the potential of culture and the value of soft power. They are stepping up the cultural component of their public diplomacy with a view to boosting their reputations as dynamic, attractive, self-confident and trustworthy nations. So where does this leave the 'old' continent of Europe in this age of new global players?

By Isabelle Schwarz



With globalisation becoming ubiquitous and new global players emerging, Harvard political scientist Joseph S. Nye's concept of "soft power" – "the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce as a means of persuasion" – is gaining in complexity and validity. If Europe wants to remain relevant in the world rather than turning the notion of a 'dwarfing Europe' into cruel reality, it needs to use its key assets much more strategically and effectively. Culture and cultural diversity are fundamental and powerful assets when it comes to Europe's engagement with other continents. The EU has become more sensitive to the potential of culture in international relationship-building and has developed a novel policy framework with dedicated instruments and resources. Yet,

for Europe to become a genuine 'smart' power and for culture to blossom to its full potential, a more visionary, courageous, coherent and sustainable approach to its external cultural relations is needed. At national level, officials need to stand by Europe and avoid succumbing to provincialism and populism.

A brief reminder of the European policy context: since the adoption of the European Agenda for Culture in 2007, a new institutional framework for culture in the EU's external relations has emerged in which culture is referred to as a strategic factor of political, economic and social development rather than as a means of showcasing individual cultural events and projects. The ratification of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and the Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions by the EU and most Member States strengthens this new approach to culture. Moreover, article 167 of the Lisbon Treaty stipulates that the EU and its Member States "shall foster cooperation with third countries and competent international organisations in the sphere of culture". In an effort to ensure greater coordination and consistency in EU foreign

policy, in 2009 the treaty established the European External Action Service (EEAS) that has a triple obligation regarding culture: to include culture in its strategic thinking and action (in response to the treaty); to implement the 2008 Council Conclusions on the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue; and to reflect – and act in the best way possible – upon the European Parliament recommendations on the cultural dimensions of the EU’s external actions (Resolution of 2011). However, for the EU to deliver effectively in the field of external cultural relations, several conditions are required: structural capacities must be created within the EEAS; coordination between the EEAS and the various Commission services, as well as between the EEAS, the Commission and the Member States’ ministries of culture and foreign affairs must be secured; cultural focal points must be established within the EEAS and EU Delegations across the world; diplomats and desk staff must be trained; thematic and geographic priorities must be clarified; and efficient dialogue channels with civil society must be established. All this is challenging but worth the investment if the EU is serious about its desire to engage meaningfully with other cultures in the world and to remain a credible partner on the global stage.

Emerging economic powers such as India, Brazil and South Korea have grasped the potential of culture and the value of soft power (although their state cultural budgets are still relatively modest) and are stepping up the cultural component of their public di-

plomacy with a view to boosting their reputations as dynamic, attractive, self-confident and trustworthy nations. To quote Celso Lafer, Brazil’s former minister of foreign affairs: “cultural dynamism, the monetary stability, the process of social inclusion – all of that makes Brazilian culture a valid pathway for the exercise of soft power, a way to make our society better known and better understood by others” (New York Times, March 27, 2012).

The Chinese precedent

China – one of the EU’s strategic partners – holds a particular place in this context. In 2007, it started a programme of massive investment in the country’s soft power infrastructure. This has led to the mushrooming of the state-run CCTV international TV broadcaster, cultural and language centres and Confucius Institutes all over the world. Although it is non-democratic and led by an authoritarian regime – which raises the issue of what the EU considers to be a strategic partnership and who it is prepared to engage with – it would of course be not particularly smart for the EU to downgrade its relationship with China, one of the world’s biggest economies and soon to be the EU’s most important trading partner. China therefore constitutes a test case for the EU. With the aim of promoting rapprochement and exchanges between civil societies in the fields of culture, education and youth, the EU-China Summit of February 2012 estab-

lished the High Level People-to-People Dialogue, complementing its High Level Economic and Trade Dialogue (2009) and High Level Strategic Dialogue (2010), in order to enhance political communication on bilateral and global issues.

In addition, the European Commission has set up an expert group on culture and external relations with the mandate of proposing a strategic framework for future EU-China cultural relations. Whatever concrete steps will be taken to follow up on the expert recommendations, it is clear that the 'strategic' aspect also requires reflection in relation to the EU's aspiration to being a 'normative power' (a term largely based on the model of enlargement supporting transformation processes through which the EU aimed at spreading its norm), and to promoting universal values such as democracy, freedom, human rights, equality and the rule of law. This applies equally to the EU's relationship with Russia, another strategic partner of the Union. The Arab Spring has forced Europe to rethink its pragmatic approach towards maintaining friendly relationships with dictators in the region as a means of ensuring stability.

The EU is now committed to supporting democratic transformation processes in post-revolutionary North Africa on the principle of 'more for more'. Nevertheless, there is some discrepancy between Europe's ambitions with regard to democracy and

the way it is applying the lesson of the Arab revolutions in its other relationships, and in particular in its strategic partnerships with non-democratic countries. This substantially weakens the position of Europe in the eyes of many actors, and ultimately jeopardises its recognition and appreciation as a global player. If the EU is serious about designing a values-based external relations strategy, it must apply its normative approach to its strategic partnerships by including freedom and democracy in its definition. While culture is vital to the development of foreign relations, meaningful, balanced and genuine bilateral or multilateral cultural exchange can only happen between countries that share democratic values, recognise the value of open societies, and have an authentic dialogue with civil society.

Depending on history, political governance and culture, expectations of European cultural exchange and initiatives differ greatly across world regions and from country to country. They are as varied as our relationships with the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China), MIKT (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey) and MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries and beyond, as diverse as our respective cultural aspirations and priorities. A distinction also needs to be made between expectations on the cultural practice side (artists, cultural operators and creative producers), the policy side (government) and the private sector. Hence, depending on whether we are referring to artist-led cultural exchange, government-led cultural diplomacy, or pri-

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vate support for cooperative cultural projects with third countries, different strategies and approaches towards international cultural relations and exchange are at play.

With the emergence of an increasingly complex global landscape and new centres of influence, the EU and its individual member states have to re-imagine their external cultural engagement with different regions of the world and accept the fact that former hierarchies, privileges and preferences are being challenged. In the Arab countries, for example, Europe has to face the harsh competition of other soft powers such as Brazil, China or Australia when exerting its influence. In order to maintain its rank and image in the league of global players – already much affected by the political, economic and social crisis – but also to address regional and global challenges, Europe will have to build novel alliances, re-assess and in some cases re-invigorate its strategic territorial and institutional partnerships, and develop effective cooperation with regional organisations such as the Arab League and the African Union. Ongoing negotiations between the EU and the US regarding a Free Trade Agreement are promising in this sense. It remains to be seen how culture will be positioned and treated within the framework of these negotiations.

Globalisation has had a major impact on culture and led to the development of new centres of attraction and power, markets, horizontal networks, artistic circuits and cultural practices, which have opened inspiring pathways for international cultural cooperation and exchange. Thus, there

is an increasing capacity and desire on the part of cultural actors to intensify their engagement in the area of international cultural exchange. The translation of this aspiration into concrete, transnational, multi-directional cultural projects needs to be nourished, facilitated and supported. Cultural analyst and scholar Yudhishtir Raj Isar argues that: “cultural interactions are indispensable to the weaving of the complex cultural polyphony our interconnected and interdependent world so urgently requires” (White Paper, Shifting economic power: new horizons for cultural exchange in our multi-polar world, Salzburg Global Seminar, 2012). The imagination of artists, the creative minds of cultural actors, and the mobilising energies of civil societies across the globe will not suffice to unleash the full potential of the arts and culture in international relations.

Smart external cultural policies are needed to create the frameworks and conditions for this kind of dialogue and exchange to happen openly, fruitfully and effectively. Traditional forms of cultural diplomacy are not in tune with cross-cultural and interdisciplinary artistic practices nor with the needs of the artists and agents in charge of external cultural relations. For example, the Member States’ national agencies and ministries for culture often lag behind and assume their responsibility for international cultural exchange simply means organising nice cultural programmes to accompany official foreign state and trade delegation visits. There is much fear, insecurity and clumsiness when it

comes to real intercultural dialogue, cooperation, and especially co-creation. For this to change, new approaches and tools are needed at all levels to forge an inspiring and truly cosmopolitan cultural vision of the future.

What is the Unique Selling Point (USP) of EUNIC (the European Union National Institutes for Culture) in this context? Which forms of European external cultural relations make sense and really add value to the activities of the individual EU Member States?

EUNIC is unique because of a combination of factors: it is the only European network of cultural institutes – organisations that have been created to represent national cultures and interests abroad – that is globally active. It also has an extraordinary reach thanks to its members, who work in 150 countries with over 2,000 branches and more than 25,000 staff. These members have profound and long-standing experience in international cultural diplomacy, extensive knowledge of country-specific political and cultural contexts, connections to local cultural scenes and awareness of cultural trends. This, along with the network's proximity to civil society and emerging independent

artists, means that EUNIC has a range of assets that are not only enormously valuable in terms of European cultural cooperation and policymaking, but also in terms of international cultural relations.

However, I believe there is one crucial factor that is still missing: a collective vision and creative imagination regarding what the network can achieve. EUNIC already works fairly successfully in collaborative clusters and develops joint projects, but it has not yet attained the maturity to overcome its members' anxieties about losing their sovereignty, visibility and even identity by fully committing to European thinking and engaging with European practice and policy. But the wake-up call is there for all to hear. If EUNIC does not awake from its cosy daydreaming, it will miss its opportunity to fulfil its aspirations by taking a leading role.

EUNIC should be about Europe going forward, about putting in place and implementing a strategy for a cohesive, resourceful, impact-rich and sustainable international cultural engagement. Its remit cannot be subsumed to the coordination of collaborative projects, economies of scale and pushy (or even aggressive) European funding development to compensate for shrinking resources at national level. This network must be about pushing forward, driving the agenda, sharing knowledge, networks and resources to scale up action and effectively impact international relations. Its leitmotif should be 'A culture of sharing as a strategy of influence'. It should not only reflect on European and global issues but also define

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and dare to articulate common European political, cultural, educational and institutional responses. For example, as a European organisation, it could do more to help independent voices in the host countries to gain international exposure and to support democratisation processes through skilled interventions at the crossroads of culture and political determination.

The need for a collective vision

EUNIC already works collaboratively in different formats, in many countries and with diverse partners, both public and private. Now it should go a step further and exemplify how Europe operates cohesively in the world. By listening very carefully to the perceptions and expectations of local communities, responding with political and cultural sensitivity to country and region-specific contexts and needs, creating lasting links between professionals beyond the official circuits, developing fresh ideas for international exchange and collaboration, valuing the hybridism within its own cultures rather than 'exporting' traditional cultural images and forms of expression, investing in transnational artistic research and experimentation, supporting long-term creative processes, and engaging coherently and truthfully in European advocacy (making the link between practice and policy), EUNIC could become an inspiring platform that will introduce to the world a new ethos of sharing, mutuality and reciprocity.

The main obstacle to the realisation of this vision is the diversity of foreign cultural policies, practices and means among EU members and the lack of shared determination and enthusiasm. This makes it extremely challenging to set a common agenda. As stated by one of its members, "EUNIC still needs to prove it is more than the mere addition of individual European actions" (Ruth Ur, Head of Arts and Development, British Council on the occasion of the More Europe debate, Paris, 23 May 2012). If EUNIC is to transform itself into a genuine platform for European practice, learning and advocacy on EU external relations, then this implies new forms of governance and leadership, pilot projects to test out ideas, and increased capacities and resources. At a time when the EU is struggling with austerity measures and budgets are being axed, it seems hardly likely that such a far-reaching approach is on the horizon.

In conclusion, the global shift of power has impacted on the production, distribution and consumption of culture, and resulted in a new and fascinating cultural landscape. Nevertheless, it has not yet significantly reduced imbalances in cultural exchanges, nor has it led to better-resourced transnational and multilateral cultural cooperation. In the light of this reality, Europe cannot just sit back, navel-gaze and wait for others to lead the way. We must look at ourselves through the mirrors being held up by other regions. We must listen to voices from outside Europe, reflect, and come together as Europeans to act coherently and forcefully.

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These are challenging times for all, including the EU, EEAS, EUNIC, the networks and civil society actors who are involved in international cultural exchanges. They all have the urgent task of identifying their particular role in a multipolar world. They all need to find new partners and resources in order to gain critical leverage. But what is needed the most is a common understanding of what is the ultimate goal and desired effect of Europe's cultural engagement with other continents. The EU's developing external cultural relations strategy will have to bring all these partners on board and reconcile national ambitions with European imperatives, as well as public policy interests with civil society practices. "Sharing power as a strategy of influence" would be a smart way forward – valuing the knowledge and experience that each of the partners brings to the table while respecting the creative independence of the cultural sector and civil society.

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