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# Public diplomacy in Europe: Fight fuzziness with strategy and one vision

By Verena Nowotny

The Austrian Habsburg monarchy did not enjoy a high reputation for being the most successful military power in the world, rather on the contrary. However, the dynasty was admired and envied for its ability to build and enlarge its empire by expanding the family network through carefully arranged marriages. *Bella gerant alii, tu felix Austria nube* was a phrase coined in the 17th century which nicely described the "soft power" approach of the Habsburg family: "Others may be engaged in war, you fortunate Austria marry!"

Matchmaking is not the topical tool anymore to increase a country's influence but present infatuations with countries can also reveal some whimsical traits. Currently, Denmark ascends towards a European master in becoming a cultic destination. Not long ago, the Times of London published an article titled "It's cool to be Danish", praising Danish fashion and lifestyle, Danish décor and - Danish sperm donation. In 2012 alone, more than 500 British women were artificially inseminated in Denmark where also the world largest sperm bank is located. An ad for one clinic actually read, "Congratulations, it's a Viking!"

## Why we want to be Danish

Denmark's most popular and most talked about export article, however, are TV shows such as "The Killing" or "Borgen" that have kept millions of viewers around the world glued in front of their TV sets. The fact that BBC aired the episodes of detective series "The Killing" in Danish with English subtitles did not at all lessen its appeal for British viewers. The next success came with "Borgen", a drama series about Danish coalition politics that drew prominent admirers such as David Cameron, the British Prime Minister. For those who want to visit the places where Sarah Lund tries to find out the truth behind grisly murder cases or Birgitte Nyborg fights for her political survival as Danish Prime Minister, the city of Copenhagen has quickly developed tourism packages that are highly appreciated by foreign visitors.

Jan Melissen, Director of the Clingendael Diplomatic Studies Programme at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations, states that most countries' interest in public diplomacy was triggered by some kind of crises<sup>1</sup>: "The rising popularity of public diplomacy was most of the time a direct response to a downturn in foreign perceptions. Most successful public diplomacy initiatives were born out of necessity. They were reactive and not the product of forward-looking foreign services caring about

relationships with foreign audiences as a new challenge in diplomatic practice." Numerous countries have experienced such a wake-up call at some point in their recent history; and Denmark is no exception to that: when Danish newspaper cartoons depicted the Islamic prophet Mohammed in 2006, the publication led to a wave of protests in Muslim-majority countries, including violent ones. This crisis made it clear to Denmark's government that it needed to reach out directly to citizens in other countries. Consequently, the Danish government launched a public diplomacy programme in 2007.

During informal talks with the Danish Ministry for Foreign Affairs on the subject of nation branding I conducted last winter, it becomes clear that Denmark has two important lessons to share that seem to be crucial for the current success story of Denmark's public diplomacy efforts:

1. Clearly defined goals and target groups<sup>2</sup>
2. Government acts as facilitator and not as a gatekeeper of information

These principles are mirrored in answers to questions how the Danish public broadcaster DR could produce these highly successful shows that earned the broadcaster global recognition. DR representatives do not cite a specific recipe for success, however, they stress that there is a principle called "one vision", which essentially means that the writer of the script has absolute control over the content. Obviously, also in the case of DR the government acts as a facilitator and has no ambition to intervene.

Another insight of one of "Borgen"'s writers is worth sharing: They make a clear distinction between the esoteric world of a show like the US series "24", which strives for fascination, and the relatable world of their show, which aims to foster identification. Peter van Ham, a Dutch place branding expert, sings from the same hymn sheet when he talks about nation branding: "Branding goes beyond PR and marketing. It tries to transform products and services as well as places into something more by giving them an emotional dimension with which people can identify. Branding touches those parts of the human psyche, which rational arguments just cannot reach."<sup>3</sup>

1 Melissen, Jan. *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations. Palgrave, 2006.

2 Denmark made the following target groups its priority: Innovation and creativity, tourism, global talents, exports and investments

3 Ham, Peter van. *Branding European Power*. Place Branding, Vol. 1. Henry Stewart Publications, 2005.

## We don't want to be European (yet)

While Denmark offers an exciting example how the creative power of its citizens can be unleashed and put a country on the world stage, the European Union as such has not reached that point. In April 2013, the College d'Europe together with the Committee of the Regions organized a conference on "EU-China Soft Diplomacy" to examine the status quo of current relations. In preparation to my speech at this conference it was part of my research to map existing public diplomacy efforts between the EU, selected member states, and China. The reason for this approach was that a vast number of initiatives in the field of public diplomacy are already taking place. These activities and efforts have often developed bilaterally, and hardly any of them have been coordinated. Comprehensive knowledge, exchange and coordination of EU-China activities are missing – although they would precondition any strategic assessment. I assume that some of my observations and findings as well as conclusions not only relate to the specific relation between the EU and China but might be helpful in a broader context as well.

As Simon Anholt, internationally renowned expert on nation branding, pointed out in a speech to the Club of Venice in 2009, good public diplomacy rests on three ingredients: strategy, substance and symbolic actions. The EU's deficit seems less a lack of substance but that of strategic focus, or "one vision" as the Danes call it. Kerry Brown for instance, Team Leader of the Europe China Research and Advice Network (ECRAN) at Chatham House, points out that there already is ample talk between the EU and China – China has no less than 56 separate strategic dialogues with the EU – "but what seems to be lacking, strangely enough, is political will and focus on the side of the Europeans, who profess to be seeking a broader global voice."

Secondly, most of the activities on EU level or carried out by member-states focus on cultural diplomacy and student exchange. And even in these areas, we lack a comprehensive overview (although first studies have tried to provide reliable data), which poses severe challenges as to correctly assess the quality and effect of these efforts. Furthermore, considering the current toolbox of public diplomacy (according to the political scientist Joseph Nye) that encompasses other elements such as listening, advocacy, international broadcasting and engaging the publics, the EU and its member-states use a rather limited range of channels to reach out to non-EU citizens.

Although one might concede that practically all public diplomacy efforts imply some kind of "listening" as well, it is evident that listening in the sense of engaging people by collecting and analysing their value debate and opinion formation rarely goes beyond cultural exchange so far. The EU and its member-states need to engage more in an honest outreach and act as a facilitator to convey these findings to a domestic audience. Jan Melissen suggests that "European powers could involve their citizens more in discussions on international politics and foreign policy, transforming the ministry of foreign affairs into more of a domestic department" – an idea that is worthwhile considering.

The mapping exercise brought to light a further area of cooperation that could be considered another means of public diplomacy: a huge number of activities takes place on the basis of cooperation in science and research, involving student and scholar exchanges, educational programmes and joint research projects. These activities frequently address specific, timely, and inter-disciplinary challenges and foster collaboration on issues that reflect core aims and values of the EU (e.g. sustainability). Within these frameworks of scientific cooperation the EU and its member-states have the opportunity to promote European values and priorities, which allows qualifying them also as advocacy efforts in the sense of public diplomacy. One might classify cooperation in science as a "hidden champion" of European efforts in public diplomacy.

In order to improve effectivity of public diplomacy efforts and to strengthen Europe's soft power, the following recommendations may be suggested that not only apply to the EU's efforts towards China but also to other non-EU countries:

- first, the EU and its member-states have some homework to do in terms of coordination and cooperation;
- secondly, as long as Europe does not address the current lack of strategy and vision all activities will remain scattered, incoherent, possibly lukewarm, and surely meagre in their effect (that these two efforts will have to precede by successful public diplomacy efforts directed at Europeans to promote a common European vision among European citizens would be a topic for another article and shall not be overlooked without being elaborated here);
- thirdly, having defined some goals and respective target audiences combined with the willingness to dedicate reasonable resources to this endeavour will allow to orchestrate a coherent outreach to foreign publics.

In order to achieve these goals Europe might look at Denmark again and consider a statement of an editor at the public broadcaster DR who explained that owing to the nature of Danish politics, the show "Borgen" almost did not get made. "We are not as colourful as the US or Britain; we don't have huge sex scandals", the editor recalled the early discussions. "Our ambition was always: Can we make people watch something as boring as Danish politics?"

In Europe, the challenge might be similar. But fortunately there are Europeans who strongly believe that public diplomacy efforts can help to engage citizens in something as complicated (but tremendously exciting) as the European Union... ■

