POLICY PERSPECTIVE

A Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations (2016) by the European Commission

http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=JOIN:2016:29:FIN

Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations is a proposal by the European Commission and the European External Action Service. It was issued through a Joint Communication to the European Parliament and Council by Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, on 8 June 2016. Its aim was to put "culture at the heart of the EU international relations" (European Commission, 2016b). Although its implementation has already started, technically, it only becomes a formal strategy once it has been approved by the Member States (along with the even more recent *European Union Global Strategy*) at the next Council meeting, in Winter 2016.

This aspirational document is the fruit of over a decade of work and lobbying by European Union (EU) officials, Member State representatives, and civil society activists. Their concern was to mainstream culture in EU external relations, which the Joint Communication variously refers to as " international cultural relations", "cultural relations" and "cultural diplomacy" - none of which are defined.

Culture is regarded as a competence of the Member States, implying that the EU only has a subsidiary competence in the area (as stipulated in the Lisbon Treaty, article 167). It follows that the EU's cultural policy and practices have been characterised by fragmentation, which has hampered the efficient use of resources and the development of a visible EU strategy. (For a detailed account of the evolution of the situation see Fisher, 2007 and Isar *et al*., 2014). The context within which this initiative developed includes the 2007 European Agenda for Culture, that aimed to promote culture as a vital element in the Union's international relations; the Preparatory Action '*Culture in External Relations*' (Isar *et al*. 2014) that focused on the potential for the EU's engagement with the rest of the world; and a range of civil society initiatives illustrated, for example, by the work of More Europe (www.moreeurope.org/).

The given aim of the Joint Communication is to propose "ways to develop the EU's international cultural relations in order to advance the Union's objectives to promote international peace and stability, safeguard diversity, and stimulate jobs and growth" - this ties in nicely with the *European Union Global Strategy*, the proposed overall

strategic framework for the supranational organisation, which is discussed later in the text. The strategy is a shift in EU policy regarding culture: it sets a vision and aims for a coherent and structured approach, based on a complementarity principle with the Member States. Nevertheless, at the same time that this new strategic vision represents a positive development for policy, the proposal comes across as conservative, reinforcing accepted discourses, and acting effectively as an envelopment strategy of existing mechanisms and activities - thus, although a huge step for the EU, I would not regard it as policy innovation.

In the text of the Joint Communication, the strategy is justified by instrumental links between culture and conflict and culture and the economy – which mirrors dominant Western policy discourses. Regarding conflict, the importance of culture is mentioned in relation to the contribution of inter-cultural dialogue to addressing global challenges such as conflict prevention and resolution, integration of refugees, countering of violent extremism and protection of cultural heritage. In what concerns the economy, the document emphasises the benefits culture can bring, for example through the global trade of creative products, and, in the case of developing countries, the links of the cultural and creative sector to promoting sustainable development and inclusive growth. These justifications align with other international affairs and policy developments. For instance, the protection of cultural heritage in conflict areas has been a major concern of international actors, particularly considering current events in the Middle East. Additionally, the link between culture and development has been given considerable attention in the process leading to UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, to which the EU has positively contributed (see European development policy at http://ec.europa.eu/). These two areas - protection of cultural heritage and culture and development - feature heavily in work streams of the strategy proposal.

The Joint Communication proposes three pillars for the development of the strategy. The first is a series of guiding principles of the EU action; the second pillar is a triptych of strands to focus the development of cultural cooperation with partner countries; and the third pillar is a strategic joint approach to the work of the European actors in non-EU countries. A brief analysis of each pillar follows.

The first pillar of the strategy rests on five principles proposed for guiding the EU action in international cultural relations, which are: promoting cultural diversity and respect for human rights; fostering mutual respect and inter-cultural dialogue; ensuring respect for complementarity and subsidiarity; encouraging a cross-cutting approach

to culture; promoting culture through existing frameworks for cooperation. These principles are in line with international and/or organisational ethos – some have been alluded to before thus my comments here are partial. A key principle is cultural diversity, a corner stone value of the Union, which, since 2000, has as motto 'united in diversity'. The EU is also the only international organisation that has subscribed to the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Hence it is not surprising that cultural diversity is so central to the proposed strategy. Likewise, the concern with the work developed by the EU 'when it can be more effective than action taken at national, regional, or local level' and its role as enabler is also understandable. This seeks avoiding tensions over competencies with the Member States, as well as aiming to be economically efficient using existing resources. Also worth stressing is the encompassing concept of culture that is adopted in the Joint Communication ('not just about the arts or literature') and the encouragement of promoting culture within different EU frameworks for cooperation, both thematic and geographical (e.g. Partnership Instruments, Creative Europe programme, and specific enlargement and development policies). As outlined, we can see that the scope is broad and a joined-up approach will be crucial to deliver a coherent and effective strategy.

The second pillar of the strategy proposes advancing cultural cooperation between the EU and partner countries across three strands or work streams. The first strand is supporting culture as an engine for sustainable social and economic development. This includes supporting the development of cultural policies, strengthening cultural and creative industries, and supporting the role of local authorities in partner countries. The second strand is promoting culture and intercultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations – this includes supporting cooperation amongst cultural operators and fostering peace building through inter-cultural dialogue. The third and final strand is reinforcing cooperation on cultural heritage. Under each of these sections and subsections, the document details, as in a framing exercise, foreseen and/or existing activities of the EU. For example, in the development of cultural policies there is mention to: the use of the European Capitals of Culture as a structure for dialogue and sharing of experiences and results; the programmes Med Culture (2014-2018) and the new Med Film for capacity building of cultural operators. The strategy is, in such a way, already being implemented: effectively the document mostly frames existing activities. Consequently, the biggest challenge will be the coordination of all the elements to achieve the set strategic vision: "making the European Union a stronger global actor, a better international partner and a stronger contributor to sustainable growth, peace and mutual understanding" (EC 2016a, p.8).

The third pillar of the strategy proposes a new approach to the work of the European actors in non-EU countries. It requires the relevant stakeholders (the EU, Member State governments at all levels, cultural organisations and civil society) to 'join forces' to ensure 'smart' complementarity and synergies. As the document notes, "the potential for cooperation and coordination to advance the EU's cultural diplomacy is considerable" (EC 2016a, p.7) – the future will tell how exactly the EU is planning to ensure that this is achieved. In fact, the section on the 'strategic EU approach to cultural diplomacy' lists recent and proposed projects, along with objectives, resulting in an odd combination of strategy and plan. For example, the Cultural Diplomacy Platform, established in February 2016, to advise on cultural policy, facilitate networking and to carry out activities with cultural stakeholders, is listed along with a generic entry on 'Promoting active civil society'. Perhaps we should not be too harsh judging some conceptual confusion - as the title of the Joint Communication indicates, the document is a development *Towards* an EU strategy for international cultural relations.

This Joint Communication should be read in conjunction with another EU document, the European Union Global Strategy. On the 28 June 2016, a mere 5 days after the UK voted to leave the EU, and 20 days after the Joint Communication, Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, announced the new *Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (EUGS). The Global Strategy aims to provide a sense of common direction to the EU Member States in the proactive pursuit of the protection of European values and interests. Bad timing for the announcement, one could say, as Brexit and its soap opera aftermath grabbed the headlines and launched the EU deeper into existential crisis; or perhaps, as others point out, a well timed reminder that the EU stands for a liberal cooperative internationalist world order in opposition to authoritarian nationalism (Kausch 2016).

Mogherini noted in the EUGS (2016, p.3) Foreword that "[t]he purpose, even existence, of our Union is being questioned" and that we need "a stronger Union … that thinks strategically, shares a vision and acts together" in a world characterised by instability and insecurity. The emphasis was on the need for cooperation between European countries and on the added value of the potential of their common action regarding their role in the world. The given aim of the Global Strategy is indeed 'acting together, united' and thus, as the case of the EU strategy for international

cultural relations, echoes the need for a common vision and complementarity between the activities of the supranational organisation and its Member States.

Considering that the EUGS is the blueprint for the Union's common foreign policy, how is the role of culture conceived in this document? In Mogherini's EUGS statement – which, as explained, was issued after the Joint Communication on EU International Cultural Relations - culture is not explicitly mentioned, but she notes that the meaning of 'Global', in the title of the strategy, refers to a "wide array of policies and instruments" (ibid, p.4). Thus pointing to an encompassing conceptualisation of foreign policy, i.e. beyond narrow strategies of security and defence, and being of concern to all citizens, not just the experts (see Mogherini 2015). Further, the connection to culture in this statement is, in my view, encapsulated in a particular sentence, that also can be interpreted as denoting the EU's official representatives' self-perception of the organisation's standing in the world: "The European Union has always prided itself on its soft power – and it will keep doing so, because we are the best in this field" (EUGS 2016, p.4). If we consider Nye's original conceptualisation of soft power, which includes culture as one of its sources (Nye 2004), we can see here a hint at the use of culture as one of the instruments with potential to achieve soft power for the EU, as a relational outcome. However, the sentence can also be read as denoting a certain superiority/patronising stance, as the organisation is blowing its own trumpet about being 'the best at soft power', which ultimately is not really an encouraging starting point for an equalitarian harmonious relationship with the rest of the world. However, such an harmonious relationship is, to an extent, implicit in Mogherini's depiction of a vision for international society governance based on rules and multilateralism, where "our Union will work to strengthen our partners" because "my neighbour's and my partner's weaknesses are my own weaknesses" (EUGS 2016, p.4).

Unsurprisingly, there is a significant leaning towards hard power in the EU Global Strategy document, which notes: "In this fragile world, soft power is not enough: we must enhance our credibility in security and defence" (EUGS 2016, p.44). Nevertheless, the vision for external action also includes becoming more joined-up, with cultural diplomacy being one of the new fields of action (ibid, p.49). Culture is also explicitly mentioned supporting the priorities of the EUGS (see ibid., p.21, 23, 27, 31, 32, 37). This includes, for example, the following instrumental issues of culture: intercultural dialogue and work on culture to counter violent extremism contributing to the security of the Union; fostering of societal links through cultural exchange to develop societal and state resilience in third countries; creative approaches to

diplomacy including recourse to cultural diplomacy; integrated approaches to conflicts and crisis to include fighting of illegal trafficking of cultural goods; regional governance to include consideration for cultural identity.

The instrumental use of culture in foreign policy permeates both strategies. Back in April 2016, before the release of the strategies, Mogherini at the European Culture Forum in Brussels presented briefly the strategy for culture in the EU external relations (to use the previous terminology). Then she stressed that culture was at the core of the EU's foreign policy and external action: "Culture can help us fight and prevent radicalisation. But it can also foster economic growth. It can strengthen diplomatic relations and mutual understanding. It can help us stand together to common threats and build partnerships and alliances" (Mogherini 2016, p.1). This instrumental view of culture consistently underlies EU policy and action, as we saw in the above analysis of both proposed strategies. Culture definitely seems to be a European policy domain that is here to stay and be developed.

However, at the time of writing, in summer 2016, the political climate in Europe is unstable and the Union is under threat from within and beyond: consider, for example, the recent UK Brexit vote, terrorist attacks in the continent, economic pressures and political dissent in different countries. It is still to be seen if this could trigger additional contagion fractioning of the Union – particularly from populist parties in Italy, France, Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden (see for example Navarria 2016). This fluid context will impact on the interaction and implementation of the EU strategy for international cultural relations and its global strategy. Culture is, no doubt, important as a fundamental part of our identity and enjoyment of life, but as a public policy it cannot be, on its own, an aliment for the wrongs of the world.

Carla Figueira
Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship
Goldsmiths, University of London
c.figueira@gold.ac.uk

References

[EC] European Commission (2016a) *A Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations.* JOIN/2016/029 final. Retrieved from http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=JOIN:2016:29:FIN

European Commission (2016b) *A new strategy to put culture at the heart of EU international relations*. Press release, Brussels 8 June 2016. Retrieved from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-2074_en.htm

[EUGS] European Union (2016) *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy.* Retrieved from https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/eugs_review_web.pdf

Fisher, R. (2007) A Cultural Dimension to the EU's External Policies: from Policy Statements to Practice and Potential. Amsterdam: Boekman*studies*

Isar Y.R. with R. Fisher, C. Figueira, D. Helly and G. Wagner. (2014) *Preparatory Action: 'Culture in EU External Relations'. Engaging the World: Towards Global Cultural Citizenship*. Brussels: European Commission. Retrieved from http://cultureinexternalrelations.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Engaging-The-World-Towards-Global-Cultural-Citizenship-eBook-1.5_13.06.2014.pdf

Kausch, K. (2016) *The EU Global Strategy in the Shadow of Brexit*. Post 7 July 2016. Carnegie Europe. Retrieved from http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/?fa=64034

Mogherini, F. (2015) *Keynote for the European Union Institute for Security Studies Annual Conference 'Strategy Matters'*, 9 October 2015. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/vVaqMudi9mk

Mogherini, F. (2016) *Putting culture at the heart of Europe's external action* Speech of the HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the Culture Forum in Brussels. 20 April 2016. Retrieved from http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2016/160420_03_en.htm

Navarria, G. (2016) *After Brexit, keep a close watch on Italy and its Five Star Movement*. The Conversation. 25 June 2016. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/after-brexit-keep-a-close-watch-on-italy-and-its-five-star-movement-61589

Nye, J.S. Jr (2004) Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. New York: Public Affairs