

TACKLING POPULISM IN EUROPE WITH A NEW FORM OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Western pluralistic democracies as we know them seem to be dissolving. Even before Brexit, the idea of “Europeanness” was being questioned. But what is weakening European democracies, and who is attacking it? Do we need less integration in Europe just because transnational democracy is not possible anymore? Or is the crisis mainly rooted in the weakness to fight populism? How much is the political leadership and the establishment responsible? How can cross-border actors and modern diplomacy keep a democratic Europe together and strengthen democracy where it is under attack? A new form of public diplomacy might be needed to strengthen cross-border pluralism and democracy.

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Giovanni Sartori underlined rightly that democracy needs to be complicated but must be still easy enough to be explained.

Europe's landscape of societies is very diverse. The idea that "there are not Member States, but Member Countries," is an often-undervalued reality in most of the EU and its candidate countries.¹ There are mixed private-public systems including many more actors than just state authorities, with extensive differences. The classic example of a "statist country" is France, with a strong technocratic leadership which gains public support by a simple majority of the electorate. The 5th Republic was created in reaction to a terror-driven civil war and a colonial war; it aimed to provide minimal space for consensus-seeking, self-organized entities, and parliamentarism. Other countries are associated with a traditional European corporatism. The classical example is Austria, where employers' and employees' associations are still an integral part of the state's governance and are criticized as being dusty. The old Scandinavian model, but also the Dutch "polder system" including a strong welfare state, is a pluralistic-corporative model where a "big" parliamentary democracy is backed by smaller democratic checks and balances throughout society. The Danish call it *lille demokrati*, meaning "small democracy." "Big democracy" with elections and parliamentary decision-making is also based on citizens' democracy, which is day-in-day-out compromising at school, at the workplace, or in associations. With its strong pluralistic corporatism, Germany is also an example of democratic complication; checks and balances are getting even more complex through federalism.



Corporatist systems have the tendency to foster "closed shops," providing a monopoly for certain interest groups and to weaken pluralistic competition between stakeholders.² Due to this lack of flexibility, during the 90s and 2000s many countries followed the British example of economic deregulation and less social participation – even in formally corporatist Sweden and the Netherlands. Corporatism and

¹ Rinus van Schendelen, *The Art of Lobbying the EU: Machiavelli in Brussels* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013).

² Mancur Olson, "The Logic of Collective Action: Public goods and the Theory of Groups," *Harvard Economic Studies* 124, (1965).

pluralism with strong social partners and democratic associations came under threat in most countries. The outcome was a mixture of deregulation with a “neoliberal” agenda, where opaque “political networks” and statist technocrats gained ground.

Pluralism and the European Union

Is the European Union a pluralistic democracy? For sure, the multilevel system has a pluralistic character. The impact of single market regulation provides a substantial role for interest groups in the European Commission and Parliament. Today, a large number of groups act as intermediaries between EU institutions and citizens. The trans-

parency register gives the impressive figure of 11,222 organized actors, who want to lobby EU legislation acting for self-centered interest and/or the common good. Already at the beginning of today’s European Union, the cognac producer and not “highly educated” Jean Monnet underlined the general importance of non-statist interest groups, for example with his “Action Committee for the United States of Europe,” including trade unions and business men. And the origin of the European Movement, the Congress of Europe in The Hague, was established with a pluralistic identity in 1948.

“The EU’s complexity and pluralism is provoking both radical populists and national technocrats.”

However, national governments and their diplomacy arms remain considerably strong. This intergovernmentalism interacts with a neo-functionalism which fosters spill-over effects from one policy field to the other. But, this multilevel system becomes a heterogeneous political network of parliamentarism, pluralism, and corporatism, including statist and technocrat actors via national governments and the European Commission.

Not only *de facto* but also *de jure*, the EU system is to a large extent non statist. The Lisbon Treaty consists of many articles which demands for a pluralistic and even corporatist democracy. Just recently, the 2017 Rome Declaration underlined the non-statist concept of “social partnership” between employers and employees. The German word “*Sozialpartner*” became a part of the EU’s mindset.

Populists and Technocrats vs. Pluralism

If many national democracies – and even the EU – are at least to a certain extent pluralistic systems, how is it possible that extremism and populism arise? Contrary

“*Public diplomacy is rarely linked to a pluralistic democracy.*”

from 100 years of European history, is that wars and genocide not only killed millions of people, but also broke democratic structures. Clearly, the collapse of democratic systems did not impact the relative stability of political ideas.

In early modern times, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s concept of natural educated citizens was to a great extent based on rivalry with Voltaire’s enlightened elitism where high education and borderless liberalism should rule societies. Rousseau and Voltaire’s ideas are still part of the political mindset. And some even go as far as to describe Brexit and Trump as a result of the old rivalry between Rousseau’s “people’s will” and Voltaire’s elitist leadership in populism and technocracy.⁴

Populists and technocratic elites share common ground. Both favor efficiency, simplification, and faster decision-making at the expense of associative and corporative decision-making processes. Their common enemy is pluralism.⁵

It was Alexis de Tocqueville who warned against a populist “tyranny of the majority.” But he shared Rousseau’s skepticism towards a technocrat elite, and proposed a pluralistic society with a strong associative democracy where natural talent can compete with excellence.

In the past decade, democracies have been tempted to simplify decision-making by referenda, simple bipolar majority voting, centralization, or presidential leadership. All of this simplification provided fertile ground for populist uprisings. This has manifested itself in different ways: In Britain, a mediocracy of media tycoons made the Brexit decision possible, whereas in France, a strong meritocracy of well-educated elites has been widening the gap between the people and the ruling class for many years.

The Comeback of the Pro-European Center

The EU’s complexity and pluralism is provoking both radical populists and national

³ Recently put together by Simon Hix and Giacomo Benedetto in one chart: <https://twitter.com/simonjhix/status/833679900678750209>

⁴ Pankaj Mishra, “Down With Élites!” *The New Yorker*, 1 August 2016.

⁵ Jan-Werner Müller, “Parsing populism: Who is and who is not a populist these days?” *Hoboken*, 13 October 2015, <http://www.ippr.org/juncture/parsing-populism-who-is-and-who-is-not-a-populist-these-days>

technocrats. The more the EU's political system becomes a pluralistic democracy, the more it comes under attack. National elites and/or technocrats are tempted to use Brussels as a scapegoat when the former fail to achieve their goals. Intentionally or not, they foster unreflected sentiments, which explains to a great extent anti-European populism. The target is not Europe per se; rather, it is its pluralistic democratic nature and its national elites. Overall trust in national governments and parliaments remain lower than for EU institutions.⁶ It is also true that the lack of European solutions for economic threats, the refugee situation, rising terrorism, and climate change have strengthened "Euroscepticism." While most populist anti-establishment movements are not anti-European per se, they often target "Brussels henchmen" in their attacks against national elites.

Despite these challenges, the pro-European democratic center is pushing back. Following Brexit, opinion polls indicated that support for the EU is rising strongly across the continent.⁷ The expectation that other countries would follow the UK's example has largely been proven wrong. The Netherlands and Denmark are clear examples that the Brexit domino effect was conjured up and never had a chance in these pluralistic and corporate countries.

Rising populism in France provoked pro-European movements, especially in Germany. The weekly demonstration, "Pulse of Europe," became a protest of "silent majority" against the nationalistic "Pegida movement." Additionally, in countries like Poland, Hungary, and Romania, European flags were waved as a symbol for a stronger pluralistic democracy and against corruption and authoritarianism.

Even in centralistic statist France, the "liberal centrist" candidate Emmanuel Macron won over far-right candidate Marine Le Pen by a decisive margin in a country which normally is not used to centrists. However, Macron's victory does not necessarily pave the way for a new consensus-oriented and pluralistic society in France, because by European standards, the "French center" has a specifically weak basis.⁸

At least, the trend for the simplification of democracies seems to have slowed down. It was in the 90s that the first "early European Trump," Silvio Berlusconi, tried to simplify a country and failed: He preferred a *bipolarismo* of two big party families, but most importantly he aimed for a presidential system. Italy is still suffering from

⁶ European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 86 (Autumn 2016), Public opinion in the European Union, First results, p. 14.

⁷ Isabell Hoffmann & Catherine de Vries, "Brexit has raised support for the European Union," *Bertelsmann-Stiftung*, November 2016, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/user_upload/EZ_flashlight_europe_02_2016_EN.pdf

⁸ Catharine de Vries & Isabelle Hoffmann, "Ist Rechts das neue Links?" *Bertelsmann-Stiftung*, 3 May 2017, <http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/publikationen/publikation/did/ist-rechts-das-neue-links/>

Berlusconi's experiments. However, the temptation to simplify political systems, dissolve checks and balances, and to weaken democracy still exists within the leadership of many EU and candidate countries.

Public Diplomacy and Pluralism

What the above-mentioned philosophers could not foresee is the complexity of today's international multilevel democracy. Diplomacy between nation states still claims to have a monopoly in managing international relations between national governments. Still, within the EU, traditional diplomacy alongside the efforts of civil servants – from ministries and the Commission – remain an integral part of the decision-making process. This is without a doubt safeguarding the interests of national democracies, but the monopoly diplomats of nation states claimed to have seems to be over.

The concept of “public diplomacy” in government relations became important for Western democracies during the Cold War. The origin goes back to the 1960s when it influenced and opened US diplomacy to new forms of communication. The inclusion of the public sphere in traditional foreign policy intelligence is one aspect, with another dimension being the active influence of public opinion abroad. At a later stage, political communication and strategic dialogue between international actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs, corporations, and/or foundations, became increasingly important.

Public diplomacy can work in two ways, involving active or interactive communication: The sender can purely aim for direct or indirect propaganda, or the neutral reporting of its own policies targeting multipliers – or even directly citizens. It can also be accessible for all kinds of public affairs, which involves a great variety of actors. This is often due to pure necessity. No government can control the communication flow with all actors. Public affairs with many stakeholders are seeking a wider concept of “pluralistic public diplomacy” using structural cross-border dialogue or at least consultation. Authoritarian states by definition prefer international public relations in the form of propaganda. “Digital diplomacy” has a high outreach and might serve as a tool for the greater “democratic” involvement of citizens, but it can be also used as a perfect PR tool, if not propaganda.

A much wider concept sees not only governments or international institutions as actors of public diplomacy, but also international interest groups and associations, such as Amnesty International, Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Business Europe, or the European Youth Forum. What is uniting these organizations

is cross-border democracy, quite independent from national governments and the national public sphere.

However, public diplomacy is rarely linked to a pluralistic democracy. The more pluralistic and democratic a country is, the more it needs both: a combination of traditional and soft diplomacy, which can be described as “smart power.”⁹ But how much is diplomacy really reflecting democracy and strengthening cross-border pluralism?

The Culture and Civil Society Trap

When national governments involve external actors in public policy strategies they often use terms like “cultural diplomacy” or “civil society.” When businesses are involved it is described as “commercial diplomacy.” Most national governments aim simply for an economic benefit in terms of investment and seeking new markets. Generally, governmental aircrafts on state visits are comprised of three groups: business, media, and luckily some representatives of the cultural scene.

“Today, civil society in a diplomatic context describes a mixture of citizens’ engagement and non-governmental organization activism.”

In 2016, the European Commission, together with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Frederica Mogherini, published a joint communication called, “Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations.”¹⁰ It recognizes soft “international cultural relations” and the involvement of civil society alongside the private sector. The EU and its young European External Action Service chose careful wording in order to recognize the diverse cultures of EU Member States. But the communication can be seen as a basis for the involvement of all kinds of non-statist actors, in “engaging citizens, state actors and cultural operators” also “for developing market opportunities.”

The European External Action Service is not the only European body seeking new strategic ground. In 2015 after a large review process, the German Foreign Office underlined “better communication” towards the public and “more networking” with

⁹ Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616, No 1 (March 2008), pp. 94–109.

¹⁰ European Commission, “Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations,” 8 June 2016, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52016JC0029&from=EN>

stakeholders.¹¹ The conclusions made clear that the involvement of more actors rather than just state diplomacy is important for the German government. While civil society is mentioned all along, “public diplomacy” as a concept was not a part of the conclusion.

“Democracy is not finished in Europe (...) The central movements are holding the line.”

“Civil society” is at the same time a very fashionable and vague concept. The term’s definition has varied over the centuries. Civil society can stress a *volunté général* against the *volunté particulière*; it can describe the pure citizens’ will; it can be positioned against market orientation; and it can be defined as the crowd’s uprising against the estab-

lishment. Today, civil society in a diplomatic context describes a mixture of citizens’ engagement and NGO activism. Most diplomats do not include business associations or even trade unions in their definition of civil society. By doing this, they exclude important corporatist and pluralist actors within a society.

Businesses or even business associations were not always excluded. Diverse philosophers like Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, or even Karl Marx underlined the role of business associations. A civil society without business-oriented groups is relatively new and goes along with Jürgen Habermas’ normative concept of a deliberative democracy. For Habermas, private businesses could not serve the *volunté general* enough. Since then, mainly left-wing politicians used civil society and its self-proclaimed representatives, not only for civic engagement but also as a counter movement against a market-oriented “neo-liberal” governance.

During the 90s and 2000s, this interpretation also infected the term NGO. Today, NGOs are mainly used in a non-business context, although the NGO concept set-up by the United Nation’s Charter of 1945 allowed even chambers of commerce to fit into the consultation procedures with non-state actors. The narrow interpretation of civil society led to many irritating compromises. For example, the corporatist EU institution European Economic and Social Committee uses the term “organized civil society” to underline that its business-oriented members are somehow an integral part.

The Missing Link: Intermediate Democracy

Today’s understanding of civil society overshadows a great landscape of intermediate actors between politicians/civil servants and citizens. At the same time, the EU

¹¹ Auswärtiges Amt, “Review. Crisis, Order, Europe 2014,” 27 February 2015, <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/699442/publicationFile/202970/Schlussbericht.pdf>

started its regulation and transparency policy with a strong focus on day-to-day lobbying of all kinds of stake-holders in Brussels' decision-making machinery. The transparency register allows for the identification of a great variety of interest groups which try to influence/lobby The Parliament and The Commission: from professional consultancies to asso-

ciations, or charity organizations. Most organizations of this pluralistic landscape do not want to be called "lobbyists." But more and more, activists, scientists, politicians, and the public are using the term "lobbying" positively for a pluralistic democracy: "Ethical and transparent lobbying helps policy development."¹²

"A new 'Democratic Public Diplomacy' will strengthen European democracy – on all levels."

While the EU slowly caught up with the pluralistic system of checks and balances, *lille demokrati* in nation states was already in decline in Western democracies long before the Berlin Wall came down. Consequently, accession countries never had a chance to build up an associative or corporative democracy outside parties or state elections.

In 1993, the "Copenhagen Criteria" for accession to the EU underlined democracy but never set extensive standards for internal democracy. In its aftermath, political statements and programs supporting the establishment of democracy seldom supported a strong and sustainable self-governance of civil society organizations. Only few commentators dealt with the missing link between democracy promotion and civil society.¹³ Moreover, there was neither a promotion of associative nor of representative democracy. Instead, state or private programs preferred to promote charity projects and citizens' engagement.

Sadly, the existing lack of democratic legitimacy of many civil society actors now allow authoritarian states or governments to attack i.e. philanthropic foundations for not being rooted in the home society and being "driven" from abroad. Russia is the most known example, but Hungary also shows alarming assaults against external civic aid. Also in the case of Turkey, the Copenhagen Criteria did not lead to strong support of democratically organized organizations. But this could have helped and could still help to keep the much-needed European dialogue multi-faced and independent.

It goes without saying that foundations or social entrepreneurship are cornerstones in a free democratic society. But the sustainable promotion of self-organized

¹² Transparency International, "Lobbying in Europe: hidden influence," 14 April 2015, https://issuu.com/transparency-international/docs/2015_lobbyingineurope_en

¹³ Timm Beichelt, Irene Hahn-Fuhr, Frank Schimmelfennig, and Suusann Worschech, *Civil Society and Democracy Promotion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

democratic associations is neither sufficient in the EU nor in candidate countries. And the exclusion of business associations in the concept of civil society never allowed for the creation of a real social partnership in accession countries.

Forging a New Partnership between Diplomacy and Pluralism

Democracy is not finished in Europe. The central movements are holding the line. But the multilevel political system of the EU is young and fragile and can be easily threatened by rising authoritarian governance; candidate countries are also vulnerable. At the same time, cross-border communication was never as easy as it is now. The more a government ignores external actors, challenges, and threats, the more it is at risk of failing. Traditional governance and diplomacy must react to increasing dynamism and diversity. Conservative standstill leads to failure.

Diplomacy has a clear tendency to control or even streamline external actors. The more politicians and government representatives are disconnected from democratic processes, the more they become technocratic managers of policies and can easily misuse power through cross-border propaganda. Technocratic answers to external threats do not have a high reputation in pluralistic societies. Technocratic governance provides a window for populism.

Diplomacy acting on behalf of a pluralistic and corporative democracy must involve a wide range of actors by supporting associative democracy, and including representatives from business interest groups. This can also help to multiply cross-border communication and can become the foundation for democratic networks between countries and the EU level.

Democratic business associations and trade unions must be an integral part of a modern public diplomacy, as well as other representative associations. They can help in maintaining the line of communication, even in times of authoritarian governance in partner states. The division in cultural, commercial, and public diplomacy is artificial, and a new narrative of civic engagement is needed. Civil society organizations need to get a democratic DNA. By now, hierarchic and efficient organizations give too little space for the democratic responsibility of citizens.

A state which wants to promote pluralism and fight populism needs to provide an intelligent infrastructure for self-governance and healthy competition of democratic associations, as well as transnational associations. A clear horizontal connection between sister organizations in different countries, supported by their European umbrella organizations, is needed. This could connect national democratic associations

with their foreign partners. Without a democratic factor, civil society organizations should not be financed by foreign aid. Bilateral or multilateral aid should take democratic self-governance as a precondition.

Nationalistic, populist, and technocratic governance has less of a chance when cross-border pluralism and democracy is strengthened. Public diplomacy in this meaning has yet to be initiated and elaborated on. It is time for a new strategy in diplomacy; diplomacy of democratic states has a high responsibility to reinforce pluralistic governance at home and abroad. By this, a new “Democratic Public Diplomacy” will strengthen European democracy – on all levels.