

The Trap of Geopolitics: Rethinking EU Strategic Communication

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Executive Summary

- > As part of the European Union's current 'geopolitical turn', strategic communication – combining reactive messaging and proactive narrative-building – is a key element of the EU's response to increasing global contestation.
- > Through its reactive component, the EU's strategic communication is very much focussed on Russia, but still largely neglects that many other foreign and domestic actors deploy disinformation techniques, too.
- > With its proactive component, the EU uses narrative-building and, in so doing, resorts to aggressive 'othering' – disregarding the role of 'listening' practices in building trust and mutual understanding with third parties.
- > Instead of focussing on Eurocentric and securitising narratives, the EU should engage with the world on an equal footing in order to communicate even more strategically.
- > To this end, a more self-reflexive top-level political discourse should be coupled with a holistic and joined-up approach to disinformation and a greater emphasis on 'listening' practices.

"My Commission will not be afraid to speak the language of confidence. But it will be our way, the European way. This is the geopolitical Commission that I have in mind, and that Europe urgently needs", announced Commission President von der Leyen in 2019. Although nearly every new European Commission has promised to improve European Union (EU) external action, none has displayed a comparatively strong and early commitment as hers. In an increasingly 'contested' world, in which disinformation techniques are used to undermine the

European Union's legitimacy, strategic communication – a combination of reactive messaging and proactive narrative-building that underpins policy priorities – can be considered as the lynchpin of the EU's new geopolitical approach.

This policy brief analyses the EU's strategic communication. It first situates this communication into the broader geopolitical rationale and then follows its evolution until Covid-19 times. While acknowledging some virtues of this policy, it cautions against important shortcomings that may endanger EU foreign policy in the long run. The current EU approach mainly frames disinformation as an external threat stemming from Russia but ignores other foreign and domestic actors involved in this practice. This stance compromises the EU's capacity to build consensus around its norms and values and neglects the role that 'listening' practices can have to engage on an equal footing with foreign audiences. Against this backdrop, the policy brief proposes a set of recommendations addressing EU top-level discourse, strategic communication practices and broader foreign policy actions, with the objective of rethinking the current approach and allowing the EU to communicate even more strategically.

Geopolitics à l'européenne meets soft power

Since the establishment of the new Commission, 'geopolitics' has been a hot topic in EU policy circles and the media. To respond to external threats, from the growing competition between the US and China to the instability in its own neighbourhood, the new executive has pledged to restore the European Union's role in the world by declaring that geopolitics should become part and parcel of the EU's playbook.

On the Commission's agenda, the term 'geopolitics' has little to do with Rudolf Kjellén's initial conceptualisation that looked at the geographical dimension of power and the influence of variables such as climate, territorial

configuration, and access to the sea. Beyond environmental determinism, the contemporary use of geopolitics in the EU seeks instead to emphasise two characteristic features of global politics: 1) that power matters in international relations, and that this is why actors are ready to compete for it; and 2) that the structure of international politics matters more than its agents. As such, geopolitics *à l'européenne* seeks to acknowledge the existence of global competitors and the need to increase the EU's focus on external action through various ways of using power.

Importantly, the scope of the EU as a geopolitical player is not limited to 'hard' spheres and material interests and threats. Conceptualising contemporary global politics as a contested arena places emphasis on the role of 'soft' tools in international power struggles. From this perspective, for instance, Russia's and China's sophisticated communication campaigns to win public support not only among domestic constituencies but also foreign audiences could be seen as the continuation of 'politics' through other means. With its own emphasis on strategic communication and narrative-building, the EU tries to become a stronger actor on this novel playing field.

When communication becomes 'strategic': EU versus external disinformation prior to Covid-19

The development of an EU policy on strategic communication dates to the mid-2010s and the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. Following its annexation of Crimea and the support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, Russia heavily boosted its investments in a diversified media outlet toolbox designed to target foreign audiences. In its March 2015 Conclusions, the European Council sought to challenge Russia's actions and reach out to people both inside the EU and in its neighbourhood to share the European Union's narratives. The Conclusions called on the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy (HR) to, in cooperation with Member States and EU institutions, develop an action plan on strategic communication and to set up a team for this task.

The June 2015 Action Plan provided three overall objectives: supporting EU policies and values towards the Eastern neighbourhood; improving the regional media environment; and raising awareness on deceiving disinformation activities while improving the EU's capacity to respond. The East StratCom Task Force, a dedicated team within the European External Action Service for countering Russia's disinformation campaign, started to release regular 'Disinformation Digests' and eventually 'Reviews' to debunk fake news, biased news and manipulated information from pro-Kremlin media. Among its key areas of activity, the Action Plan sought to increase public diplomacy initiatives in the neighbourhood and

engage with local populations (especially young people, academia and civil society) in the framework of the Partnership Instrument and Erasmus Plus.

Between 2015 and 2017, two task forces were added: the South StratCom Task Force, seeking to respond to the propaganda of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and the Western Balkans StratCom Task Force, aiming at challenging Russia's activities in the Western Balkans region. The 2018 'Action Plan Against Disinformation', a Commission and HR Joint Communication, sought to further clarify the scope of the EU's activities and mobilise the private sector in the fight against disinformation.

Defending 'Europe': the EU versus disinformation around Covid-19

Following the work of its predecessor, von der Leyen's 'geopolitical Commission' has given strategic communication an even more important place in its portfolio. The Commission's 2020 Work Programme sought to counter "multiple challenges, both from outside and from within" faced by EU countries' democratic systems in order to improve their resilience in the long term (EC, 2020b). In February 2020, HR Borrell argued that the EU should "relearn the language of power" and combine its "resources in a way that maximizes their geopolitical impact" (Borrell, 2020a). However, it is amidst the Covid-19 pandemic that the emphasis on strategic communication has reached a new momentum. In what came to be described as a war-like scenario, on 23 March 2020, Borrell emphasised the role of narratives: in his view, "whoever is best at organising the response, quickly drawing on lessons learnt from around the world and communicating successfully towards citizens and the wider world, will come out strongest" (Borrell, 2020b). The HR depicted a world witnessing "a struggle of influence through spinning" and urged EU institutions and its member states to be "armed with facts" and "defend Europe against its detractors" (ibid.).

The emergence of a more coordinated European response came days after several shipments of medical aid had landed in the European Union's territory, mainly from Russia, China and Cuba. In what came to be the most heavily mediated campaign, nine Russian military planes travelled to Lombardy, Italy, as the country was at the forefront of the fight against the virus. Stickers with heart-shaped Russian and Italian flags and the motto 'From Russia with Love' were placed on the planes and trucks bringing medical military specialists and equipment.

Well beyond top-level communication, emphasis on strategic communication has spread across other levels and areas of EU external action. The recent work programmes for information outreach on EU external relations stress the importance of positive communication

against disinformation and, to this end, a shift towards a “storytelling approach with a focus on campaigns, rather than showcasing isolated initiatives or projects” (EC, 2020a). Public and especially cultural diplomacy are thus seen as external action tools that help to express more effectively the fundamental principles that guide EU foreign policy.

Overall, in what has come to be framed as a “contested world” (EU, 2016) to which disinformation contributes, the European Union positioned itself as the actor that separates facts and opinion, truth and lies, and, in that way, stands on the right side of history.

The limits of the EU’s strategic communication

In reaction to an altered security environment, the emergence of geopolitical thinking in EU foreign policy has important virtues. Whereas the EU has long framed itself as a cosmopolitan and post-political project, embracing geopolitics represents the acknowledgment of an ‘existential crisis’ and part of a self-reflexive act: the EU cannot arrange the world on its own. This realization points to the need of enhancing its capacity to recognise and respond to existing regional contestations also through stronger engagement with foreign audiences.

Despite this positive turn, several important limits speak against the EU’s current approach to strategic communication.

Disinformation is not (only) an external threat

Any political order requires a shared consensus on its key guiding principles in order to function properly. Disinformation seeks to dilute this consensus, leading some recipients to a problematic agnosticism over everything that gets media coverage. The ‘infodemic’ in COVID-19 times is the latest example of how overabundance of information can harm public health. From this perspective, one should welcome the EU’s attempt to occupy this policy space and hence adapt to the contested world it pledged to confront in the EUGS.

The problem is thus not targeting disinformation as such, but rather the one-sided focus of its current action. Since 2015, Brussels has in fact framed disinformation as an external threat that originates far away from the Union’s territory, more precisely in Russia. The foreign nature of the threat required the involvement of an actor with an external portfolio, namely the EEAS, rather than one focusing on the internal dimensions of EU communication policy. The emphasis has been, in other words, on the ‘foreign destabilisation’ while domestic sources of disinformation or citizens’ media literacy and consumption have received far less attention. Through these representations, the Union came to produce the image of a ‘self’ that is threatened by a certain ‘other’ and

that is therefore doomed to debunk false claims and re-establish the ‘facts’.

It is through this lens that EU strategic communication can be considered a textbook example of ‘securitisation’, a move that situates threats beyond the borders of an otherwise safe social space. What is questioned here is not the threatening essence of Russia’s campaigns, but the political decision to locate this threat away from EU ‘safe’ borders, thus neglecting domestic sources of disinformation. For comparison, the example of the United States is telling, where domestic observers acknowledged that the most serious threat for US democracy came not from some Russia-based troll factories, but from the man that sat in the Oval Office for four years (see, for instance, Gunitsky, 2020). This underscores that no binary opposition between Western-made truth and non-Western-made lies exists.

Disinformation is not only a Russia-centred problem

Russia remains a central actor in contesting the EU norms- and values-based order, and any EU strategic communication action should take this into consideration and respond accordingly. The recent vaccine campaign proves to be an excellent case in point. Russian authorities have attempted to undermine Western-produced vaccines while at the same time betting hazardously on Sputnik V, even at a time when its clinical trials remained incomplete (Valenza, 2020). Even more interestingly, Russia was willing to play the ‘vaccine race’ after years of dissemination of anti-vaccine messages.

Yet, in the middle of the pandemic, disinformation is not only a Russia-centred problem. High Representative Borrell has in fact also explicitly referred to China as an actor that is attempting to influence EU foreign audiences through spinning and the politics of generosity (Borrell, 2020b). At the same time, EUvsDisinfo’s work remains heavily Russia-centred, and the activity of the East StratCom Task Force dwarfs that of the other Task Forces. Amidst COVID-19, Chinese self-promotion has received real attention for the first time, with the publication of an EEAS special report on conspiracy narratives and disinformation coming from sources related to various governments, including Russia and – to a lesser extent – China. Allegations that China sought to block or tone down the report were denied by EU authorities. The quarrel, however, highlighted the difficulty of developing EU strategic communication that goes beyond Russia’s disinformation attempts.

Fake news or unwelcome opinions?

While recognising competition in the international system is the first step in dealing with a contested world, at present the EU denies the political dimension of this

contestation and resorts instead to a polarisation that separates neatly between ‘facts’ certified by the EU and ‘fakes’ fabricated by its antagonists. The welcoming words of Borrell’s blog subscribe to this neat separation: the HR cautions against the relativism of the Spanish philosopher de Campoamor, “claiming in a famous poem that nothing is true or false and that everything depends on ‘the colour of your glasses’” (Borrell, 2021). In a similar vein, EU strategic communication relies on the idea that ‘facts’ always speak for themselves, although it neglects to recognise that disputing ‘facts’ is part of any political process.

EUvsDisinfo, the EEAS East StratCom Task Force’s flagship project, is a good case in point for illustrating this stance. An example is offered in a report published on 26 April 2020. Facing allegations from Russia 24, a Russian state-owned channel, that Western values have collapsed amidst the pandemic, the website provides a “disproof” saying that “the European Union is focused on overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains committed to its values, including human dignity” (EUvsDisinfo, 2020). In a more recent case, EUvsDisinfo opposes a critical outlook on the approval of new EU sanctions, with the expert claiming that these are “a political decision that are made to punish those who do not comply with the rules of the game” (EUvsDisinfo, 2021). These and other cases underscore that EUvsDisinfo reports do not primarily highlight renowned conspiracy theories or manipulations of figures but rather negative opinions of the EU. These opinions, as noxious and tedious as they may sound, are however perfectly legitimate and require no ‘disproof’. The EU’s internal public sphere, not a disinformation report, is the appropriate place to disarticulate them and build consensus around the achievements of the EU.

The risks of ‘messaging’

The EU’s solution for navigating the troubled waters of a complex world strives to be a pragmatic one: in the words of Borrell, “Europeans must deal with the world as it is, not as they wish it to be” (Borrell, 2020a). At the same time, pragmatism finds itself in an uneasy coexistence with the emphasis on principles: in the EUGS, for instance, the EU engages “to champion the indivisibility and universality of human rights” (EU, 2016: 8).

This pragmatic solution is well-reflected in EU strategic communication, where narrative-building and the speed of messaging are considered to play primary roles in spreading the EU’s positive story. Problematically, however, this messaging approach disregards the fact that successful people-to-people contacts take place only when the principles of mutuality and reciprocity are fully reflected in the implementation of external action, in an attempt to go beyond power-showcasing and image-

building exercises. Such an approach aimed at mutual understanding has informed the development of a strategic approach to EU cultural relations, with the most recent Council Conclusions on an EU Strategic Approach to international cultural relations (2019).

With the recent emphasis on geopolitics and strategic communication the promising ideas around two-way communication, notably through cultural exchanges, have however been dwarfed. From building policy on mutuality and reciprocity and attempting to co-create between equals, the EU has moved towards a communication approach that considers cultural relations as a tool in the above-mentioned EU StratCom’s box, and local actors as rather passive recipients of a message that has already been drafted in Brussels.

The ensuing Eurocentrism undermines the very positive commitment to an engagement with the world on an equal footing. This concerns not only those actors contesting the Western-based global order but also stakeholders in post-colonial realities, which often recognise only a fine line between cooperation and forms of neo-colonialism in EU initiatives.

Rethinking EU strategic communication: recommendations

Even if the EU’s current strategic communication has important flaws that this brief has highlighted, one should not throw out the baby with the bath water. A renewed focus on EU foreign policy and the willingness to communicate more strategically are important objectives, provided that the temptation to use the language of power does not lead Brussels to aggrandise irrelevant differences, proclaim the superiority of its model, and endanger current and future cooperation.

First, top-level political communication must change. There is no doubt that with the transition from the Juncker to the von der Leyen Commission the discourse of key EU foreign policy figures has hardened. Compared to his predecessor Mogherini, Borrell has significantly accentuated the ‘realpolitik’ spirit that had already materialised in the European Global Strategy and resorted to a tougher securitising vocabulary (‘struggle’, ‘influence’, ‘armed’, ‘defend’, ‘detractors’), framing the issue in binary terms as ‘truth versus spinning’. The reasoning behind this turn seems clear: as the EU needs a united approach in foreign policy, ‘othering’ of this type can help reproduce a stable identity within. What can be questioned is not the HR’s legitimate objective, but rather the discursive means that are used. If anything, the diplomatic turmoil around Borrell’s recent visit to Moscow proved that, no matter how geopolitical the EU wishes to be, more skilled actors will drag it down to their level and beat it with experience.

The EU should hence leave securitising practices to illiberal actors.

Second, the EU's current approach to strategic communication over-prioritises foreign interference, particularly Russia's. In the short term, EUvsDisinfo should go beyond its Kremlin-centred approach and offer a wider analysis of existing disinformation actors. Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, China's rise and engagement with EU audiences remain under-explored. Since other spaces of contestation have opened across Europe (such as the Eastern Mediterranean), a comprehensive reflection on the EU's major competitors should also find its repercussions in the EU's strategic communication.

Importantly, the EU should limit itself to deconstructing arguments without playing the blame game. While there is no doubt that Russia has repeatedly violated democratic principles and international law, fact-checking should simply stick to misleading arguments and show their inconsistencies. Rather than providing a political response, fact-checking should be about checking facts. The political debate must be left to other means of exchange within the EU's internal public sphere.

Third, and in the long term, a serious reflection on disinformation as 'foreign interference' should be advanced. Disinformation is definitely not a threat that is only located far away from EU borders. Many problematic positions and narratives have been nurtured in EU countries, including for instance Orban's "logical connection" between the pandemic and illegal migration (cited in France24, 2020). Perhaps worse, sometimes 'fake news' emerging from social media can reach high coverage through sensational headlines and framing by mainstream news media. Overall, a neat distinction between 'domestic

heroes' and 'foreign villains' can represent a politically handy narrative, but it disguises the real causes of the problem. The current mandate of fighting disinformation given to an actor with a foreign affairs portfolio, the EEAS, confirms this problematic separation between domestic and external dimensions. In the long term, a holistic and joined-up approach to disinformation should be the way to go.

Finally, a broader reflection is needed on whether 'messaging' is the right strategy to engage with foreign audiences. In a world where EU narratives are increasingly contested and Eurocentrism is called into question (e.g., calls to decolonise cultural heritage), shifting the focus to 'listening' practices will be a more fruitful long-term strategy for engaging with other actors in the international arena. The 2019 Council Conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations stressed the need for "a new spirit of dialogue, mutual understanding and learning", involving the cooperation with local operators at all levels (planning, design, implementation), and called for "a decentralised approach, requiring policies and projects adapted to local context, needs and aspirations" (Council, 2019: 7). As part of the measures proposed, international cultural relations – a truly two-way approach that the EU has repeatedly pledged to implement in its external relations – remains the most suitable toolbox to shift the focus away from messaging to listening, with the objective of engaging with the world on an equal footing.

Further reading

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