

Recognising the Significance of Culture in Government and EU External Relations

By Rod Fisher

Foreign policy and mobility programmes – what is at stake?

The following text is taken from a presentation made by Rod Fisher, Director of International Intelligence on Culture, to the 5th European Forum on Culture & Society – “Cultural Co-operation & Mobility in Europe”, held in Luxembourg, on 27th June 2008

Peter Hewitt, until recently Chief Executive of Arts Council England, has observed that

“Internationalism is a state of mind intrinsic to modern life. It requires an approach that is informed by respect, curiosity and humility” (1).

Now my perception is that governments in their foreign policies are not good at humility! True, humility is not always a strong characteristic of artists either! But, in their defence, at least the interest artists have in engaging with creative people in other countries is driven by curiosity and is unencumbered by strategic national interests.

A decade or so before Hewitt’s observation a former Chairman of the Arts Council in England, who was also a previous Minister for the Arts, remarked that “trade follows the dance troupe, where once it followed the gunboat” (2). I find that comment revealing, not only because it acknowledges that the arts can be a tool to serve other interests of government, but because of the implication that ‘soft’ power can be a more effective way for governments to pursue influence than threats of aggression. What this suggests is that although the aims of governments and artists are likely to diverge, it is very much in the interest of governments to encourage and promote artistic mobility.

This short paper falls into two parts:

- foreign policy and cultural mobility as viewed from a national perspective; and
- the potential for a cultural dimension to the European Union’s external policies.

Historically, cultural diplomacy was both a tool to promote the liberal values of democratic societies and to combat the ideologies of totalitarian states. For the Soviet system, cultural co-operation was strictly regulated during the “Cold War” years in terms of who was allowed to be a cultural “ambassador” for the Eastern bloc countries who, in Soviet eyes, it was acceptable to host in respect of the reciprocal gestures from the West. I can recall occasions in the first half of the 1970s – a period when I was involved in managing festivals and cultural events in London – that celebrated Russian pianists, vocalists and string quartets would always be accompanied by an individual who never seemed to contribute to the performance. This was the “minder” whose job was to ensure, among other things, that the artist(s) would not defect! Whether the Western cultural effort had much impact on weakening the Soviet system compared with, for example, Gorbachev’s introduction of Glasnost in 1986 is open to conjecture. But perhaps it was one of the factors that created an environment for change. It certainly produced some rather bizarre consequences, as David Caute pointed out in his novel about Cold War cultural politics, not least the fact that American Abstract Expressionism was heavily promoted abroad by the USA, because the US Congress would never have voted to use taxpayer’s money for the domestic consumption of such controversial art! (3)

Following the end of the Cold War, some governments and national cultural institutes have tried to distance themselves from the notion of cultural diplomacy. ‘Cultural relations’ has been the preferred term of national cultural institutes such as the British Council and Goethe Institut in recent years.

'Cultural relations' seeks mutual benefit rather than one-sided advantage - more cultural dialogue than cultural monologue. However, that term too may also be going out of fashion. The term 'public diplomacy' is now back in the agenda of many involved in the work of foreign offices or national cultural institutes. 'Public diplomacy' is the public face of traditional diplomacy. It is about building relationships, but with a broader range of partners to pursue interests that may extend beyond those of government. Thus while it embraces cultural diplomacy, it also encompasses other forms of diplomacy such as 'NGO diplomacy', 'business diplomacy' and, increasingly 'diaspora diplomacy' (which seeks to capitalise on the linkages new generations of migrant communities have with their countries of origin) (4).

The past decade has been a challenging time for the international cultural departments of both foreign and cultural ministries and, where they exist, for national cultural institutes. Is their role diminishing, or is it simply that the space which they once dominated is now the territory of many other involved in European mobility and cultural co-operation, such as regions and cities, networks and foundations? Cultural diplomacy is no longer the monopoly of the nation state. Museums, orchestras, opera and dance companies, especially those characterised as 'national', are also players in the global arena. We know that much European mobility takes place without government support or even awareness. With the rise and rise of non-state actors, questions are increasingly being asked in some countries about the purpose and value of governmental intervention, whether the focus is on cultural diplomacy or cultural relations. Moreover, the fact that many other actors are involved in international engagement can represent a challenge for any government foreign ministry that wishes to maintain a reasonably coherent national story or global image.

So perhaps we should briefly remind ourselves for whom foreign cultural policies are designed? We can best do this by looking at the principal objectives of foreign cultural policies, in most European countries. Generally, such policies are intended to:

- 1) promote cultural diplomacy;
- 2) develop cultural relations;
- 3) support the export of a nation's cultural products and creative industries;
- 4) underpin the development of beneficial new trading arrangements;
- 5) attract tourism and perhaps inward investment;
- 6) enhance programme aid in developing countries; and
- 7) create an informed and primarily favourable picture of country to the 'outside world'.

Some way down their hierarchy of objectives we might find the mobility of cultural practitioners. So in foreign policy terms the arts and artists are instruments that can help to promote a dynamic image of a country or region. They can help to restore trust in circumstances when a country needs to mend fences with people or nations that its external actions may have offended.

In addition, there is increased political awareness that the arts/artists can contribute to the economy of a nation. If that were not the case, why is it that in so many EU countries the geographical priorities for culture include China and India – two of the faster growing economies in the world (and this applies to EU Member States with sometimes very little historical or cultural connections with those two countries, eg Latvia and Denmark)? The extent to which the mobility of arts/artists features as a foreign policy concern will often depend on whether it has a strong network of national cultural institutes (such as the British Council or Institut Francais) or whether the Ministry of Culture has a strong policy relationship with the Foreign Ministry, so that external policies can be influenced by cultural and not simply foreign interests.

However, even having a cultural ministry active in external relations does not guarantee that the interests of artists and cultural organisations are pre-eminent. I recall sitting in meetings of the cultural committee of the Council of Europe in the first half of the 1990s when the position of the UK representative was so conditioned by the Treasury ruling for government spending departments not to agree to any initiatives at European level that would have financial consequences, that it led to the civil servant dutifully objecting to any programme proposals whether or not they would have enhanced the mobility of UK cultural professionals.

Moreover, if foreign policy agendas are set without inter-ministerial consultation and without dialogue with the artist's community, you can end up with problems such as the ones we have experienced in the UK recently over adverse rules on immigration and fees for visas for visiting cultural professionals.

So is there a fundamental disconnect between foreign policy and the mobility needs of cultural practitioners? Not necessarily. Nevertheless we have to acknowledge that different agendas are operating. The cultural interests of foreign ministries are most unlikely to be artist-centred. Realistically, when culture is used for diplomatic ends, cultural interests will always be secondary to political and economic ambitions.

Without attempts to seek common ground we jeopardise the exchange of ideas and comparisons of practice that artists seek through mobility programmes. However, without mobility assistance we deprive artists and cultural organisations of opportunities to broaden their experience and professional development. Without support programmes for mobility we make it difficult for artists and cultural organisations to develop fruitful creative partnerships. Without financial assistance for artists and cultural organisations to visit other countries we deprive venues, theatres, galleries and festivals of programme variety. Similarly, if there is no reciprocal support for hosting foreign artists in our countries we deprive domestic audiences of new and potentially enriching experiences.

Mobility provides artists with the space to be more reflexive. Cultural theorist Nikos Papastegiadis has described how the "temporary migration" of the artist can enable further level of unpredictable interaction to enter into the creative process". (5)

The dominance of *realpolitik* in foreign policy, as a report published last year by Demos points out, means that culture is too often regarded as desirable rather than essential in international relations (6). Yet, as the same report argues, culture is "a central component of international relations. It's time to unlock its full potential".

Culture as a dimension of EU's external relations

So far, the focus of this paper has been primarily on cultural mobility as an instrument of national foreign government policies. However, mobility of cultural professionals in Europe and beyond begs the question of the role of the European Union. Is there a strong case for a cultural dimension to the EU's external policies – foreign affairs, development aid, security and trade?

Given the recent "no" vote in Ireland it is clear that many Europeans have insufficient sense of political engagement with the European Union to provide it with an adequate democratic basis. Had there been a referendum in the UK or the Czech Republic or Denmark they are just as likely to have resulted in a negative vote; and who is to say that French and Dutch voters would not have rejected the Lisbon Treaty as they did the European Convention? The EU's democratic deficit is also a cultural deficit, because not enough citizens in the Union consider themselves to be Europeans. They have forgotten or are unaware that the more visionary founding fathers of the European project saw it as an instrument to further co-existence and to save Europeans from any repetition of the disastrous conflicts that characterised the first half of the 20th century. If the success of the European Community was

predicated on its economic power, it has long been evident that economic might alone will not make the European Union popular with its citizens. We need to be confident (as Manuel Barroso has said) that the European Union is not only acting in the name of its citizens, but in their interest (7).

It is increasingly accepted that if the European Union is to work well as a system of governance and if the frequently repeated mantras of a Europe 'united in diversity' are to have any meaning, the mission must be underpinned with a set of shared values. Arguably, the arts are great value carriers. They can contribute to the process of strengthening cohesion and sense of belonging to our imagined community of Europe.

In 2005 Douglas Alexander, then Minister for Europe at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office of the UK Government, made some pertinent observations about culture and the EU. Questions of identity (he said) underlie many of the contemporary issues affecting the legitimacy of the EU.

“The European Union provides a new framework in which to uphold nation states and national identities, while at the same time symbolising and encompassing common European ideas and values. It also makes it easier for regional political identities to develop in a way which does not threaten national and regional identities... So in the months and years ahead the EU must confidentially assert its own identity as neither a nation state not a super-state, but a distinctive institution that adds value to the lives of its citizens”(8).

Of course, when we talk of a common value system we are entering dangerous territory. Experience has shown us that each nation or part of a nation, each culture, usually represents the fruit of the convergence of a range of attributes generated by the human condition. It is tempting to try to reduce this great diversity to a fundamental set of core values or basic cultural or social principles that is common to us all as Europeans. It's a temptation best avoided.

Despite the legitimisation granted by the Maastricht Treaty for EU action on culture to complement the actions of Member States, culture is a sensitive area on the political agenda at European level. But, without some common cultural underpinning it is difficult to see the 'European Project' acquiring a widely accepted democratic legitimacy and, surely, our cultural aspirations for Europe go beyond the financing by the EU of a modest programme for cultural co-operation - the Culture 2007 programme?

If there were to be a stronger cultural component of EU external policies, the intensification of cultural co-operation and the promotion of cultural mobility could be at its heart. It could aim to protect the diversity of cultures, traditions and languages within the Union. It could promote trust building cultural measures and seek to convey a European model and community of values externally. It would need to be a 'soft' policy instrument. It should not be about creating a new tier of European cultural diplomats or a network of EU cultural institutes as some have suggested. New structures are expensive and would certainly be resisted by some EU countries.

Hitherto, of course there has been little evidence of the attitudes of EU Member States concerning the degree of acceptance a cultural component of the EU's external policies might enjoy, nor any preconditions on which national governments might insist. Consequently in 2005, the ECF and Laboratory of European Cultural Co-operation (LabforCulture) commissioned a preliminary mapping of the position of EU Member States through official papers, websites, public pronouncements and literature to ascertain:

1. Whether Member States agree or disagree that a cultural component of the EU's external relations could provide added European value;
2. Whether national governments' different geographical and other priorities leave enough room for joint European cultural action;
3. Whether any common grounds for action can be found.

Not surprisingly, the trawl of official documents in the report of this study – *A Cultural Component as an integral point of the EU's foreign policy?* – did not reveal any serious objection or obstacles to the development of an EU approach; but neither was there any particular focus on it (9). It was clearly necessary to probe a little deeper. So the next step in this investigation was to undertake a reality check, to answer further questions such as:

- Are there unexpressed concerns on the part of individual Member States to a larger cultural role for the EU in its external policies?
- What issues are truly 'European' and what remain of national interest?
- In which areas can the EU be an initiator and where should it be a promoter or supporter?
- What criteria are necessary for the development of a complementary cultural dimension to EU foreign policy?
- How can the EU balance the interests of larger and smaller EU States in their cultural co-operation actions with so called 'third' countries?

In 2006 I was given the task by Lab for Culture to verify whether the relatively encouraging findings that emerged from the first study were a reality in practice, by interrogating stakeholders in six diverse EU countries: Denmark, France, Latvia, Poland, Portugal and the UK. The resulting study broadly endorsed the conclusions of the first survey while attempting to provide some insights of its own about attitudes to, and the potential for, a cultural dimension to the EU's external policies (10). The consensus of this later study suggests no significant overt opposition towards the idea of the EU having a cultural component to its relations with the wider world; indeed, there is evidence of real support for the idea in some countries. True, support was sometimes qualified, but this was to be expected.

The research I led suggests there is room for possible EU actions in most of the world, although the EU Neighbourhood Policy countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean Rim nations and Asia were especially favoured.

Principles for an EU framework policy on culture in external relations

If the EU framework policy is to be developed in this area and mobility enhanced it should be guided, in my view, by the following principles:

- EU actions should complement, not compete with, the actions of Member States;
- EU initiatives should provide "added value";
- While presenting the unity of purpose of the EU, actions must reflect Europe's rich cultural diversity;
- There should be no hierarchies related to population, size, culture or language in the pursuit of EU actions;
- Capacity building is needed for European Commission delegations to equip them with appropriate skills;
- Any policy needs to be underpinned with adequate funds;
- The EU role should be primarily as a facilitator or initiator, not an organiser of cultural action;

- Evaluation mechanisms should be built into all EU initiatives;
- A policy framework for the EU's external cultural role must be coherent to avoid current shortcomings with ad hoc events that are arranged by the Commission offices around the world from time to time;
- Member States and stakeholders in Europe's cultural sector should be fully engaged in the process of elaborating an appropriate cultural policy and strategy for EU external relations.

My belief is that there are at least six areas where collective and co-ordinated action would have beneficial impacts on the global presence of the EU:

- Building sustainable cultural co-operation with countries beyond the EU;
- Strengthening understanding between peoples through intercultural dialogue;
- Disseminating information on and promoting the visibility of the EU and Member States;
- Promoting trade in Europe's cultural industries;
- Promoting Europe's expertise in heritage; and
- Embedding culture in development.

Overall the results of the preliminary studies undertaken in recent years are encouraging. Of course, it will still take time before national pride yields to a more pragmatic approach on the part of all Member States. Nevertheless, potential support for the development of a framework for the strategic development of culture in EU external relations is greater than some of us might have imagined.

Endnotes

- (1) From Foreword in Kirley, S. (editor), (2006), *Artist links 2002-2006*, Artist Links China, Shanghai (in association with Arts Council England and British Council), 2006
- (2) Lord Gowrie, *Arts Council of England Annual Report*
- (3) Caute, D. (2003), *The Dancer Defects – The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- (4) Mark Leonard has written interestingly on the various dimensions of public diplomacy, see for example, *Public Diplomacy*, (2002), The Foreign Policy Centre, London.
- (5) Papasfergiadis, N, (2004), “ Temporary Migration” in *Freefall – Arts Council England International artists fellowships 2001-2003*, Arts Council England, London p6-9
- (6) Bound, K, Briggs, R, Holden, J and Jones, S, (2007), *Cultural Diplomacy*, Demos, London
- (7) From foreword in Fraser, m, (editor), (2007), *European Union: The Next Fifty Years*, Financial times Business, Agora Projects in association with London School of Economics, London
- (8) *Europe in a Global Age*, (2005), Foreign Policy Centre, London
- (9) Dodd, D. and Lyklema, M wirh Dittrich van Weringh, K., (2006), *A Cultural Component as an Integral Part of the EU's Foreign Policy?*, Boekman – Studies and Labfor Culture, Amsterdam.
- (10) Fisher, R., (2007), *A Cultural Dimension to the EU's External Policies – From Policy Statements to Practice and Potential*, Boekman Studies and Labfor Culture, Amsterdam