



Opinion Piece

Branding European power

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Europe lacks *der Wille zur Macht*, and is proud of it! In contrast to America's image as a trigger-happy capitalist crusader, Europe's foreign and security policy radiates a 'cannot-do mentality'. Europe's achievements abroad are modest, and the few successes lousily marketed. In the public mind, who has won the Cold War? Ronald Reagan! Who pacified the Balkans? NATO! Why did Libya flip-flop on WMD? Washington's military pressure! Arguably, Europe's soft power has played some role in all these episodes, but to the general public this has gone largely unnoticed. Over the past decades, Europe has sold itself short. This has undermined public confidence in the EU as a potential European superpower. Little surprise, therefore, that outside Europe expectations of what the EU could do to address global threats are flagging as well.

For Europe, the biggest threat is its own lack of confidence, which is reflected in its modest international prestige. It is therefore time to refresh Europe's image, to restyle its PR and to start a serious effort to brand the EU as an effective force for good in the world. As any humanitarian NGO can tell you, it is not sufficient to just *do* good, but it is crucial to be *seen* doing good! Don't just build bridges, open them with much fanfare; don't just fight terrorism, take as much credit for it as you possibly can;

don't just prevent conflicts, milk the EU's peace missions till the last drop. In the light of these branding challenges, the EU's information and communication strategy is woefully insufficient and underfunded with both financial and political capital. What follows are a few necessary starting points for a strategy to create a new brand of Europe as the champion of 'effective multilateralism'.

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. Institutionally, the European project is progressing quite nicely. But like the Tower of Babel, every advance in Europe's architecture seems to escalate the cacophony even further. Moreover, 'Europe' has been the scapegoat of last resort for its member states for decades now, with a miserable image as the inevitable result. The EU is clearly not merely pooling its member states' sovereignty, but also their collective spleen. Europe's task is to find a new, post-modern *raison d'être* which inspires its own populace and appeals to the wider world as well. But please do not send us another glossy leaflet with 'facts and figures' about the EU; we can no

longer stand them. Branding Europe is less about *knowing* the EU than it is about *loving* it.

Europe has therefore to turn itself into what Kevin Roberts from advertising firm Saatchi & Saatchi calls a 'lovemark', generating 'loyalty beyond reason'. And this is where branding comes in, since a strategy to brand European power would serve two purposes. First, it aims to make European citizens feel better and more confident about themselves by giving them a sense of belonging and a clear self-concept. By creating an aspirational lifestyle, branding offers a kind of *ersatz* for ideologies and political programmes that have lost their relevance. It is not enough to endow Europeans with a continental citizenship; these new-born Europeans have to be proud of it and carry their stylish burgundy-coloured EU passport with distinction. Europe's younger generations are predominantly post-materialist, which implies that they are well-off enough to value highly tolerance and diversity, and all care more about self-expression than deference to authority.

This may all be a bit decadent, but there is no denying that these younger generations no longer buy Europe's 'founding myth' ('European integration brings peace'). This myth is dead now that the prospect of another Franco-German war (or basically *any* intra-European war) is too ludicrous to serve as Damocles' sword, begetting both discipline and respect. For most non-Europeans, the EU's influence derives from its affluence, its continuous peace and prosperity. But for most Europeans, any attempt to resuscitate the story of the EU as the zone of 'peace and prosperity' is pretty useless; that story just won't wash any longer. European citizens long for an EU which reflects and stands up for their values, be it gender equality, the abolition of the

death penalty, or avoiding market access to GMOs.

But branding does more, since it aims to boost Europe's credibility and attractiveness *vis-à-vis* the outside world. Why would the world listen to what the EU has to say? Why would others endorse European policy proposals? Branding should offer clear and credible answers to these existential questions, since a good brand combines great performance with respect; it combines hard and soft power. According to Roberts, these 'lovemarks' even go beyond 'respect' and go for love. It will surely take some time for the EU to combine Roberts' three ingredients of the lovemark: mystery, sensuality and intimacy. But what is wrong with *today* to start giving it a serious try?

Indeed, states, cities and regions are already 'buying' these arguments, hiring branding experts to upgrade their sense of purpose and reposition themselves in a globalising world. To brand or not to brand is no longer the real question. The EU is already lagging behind in this place-branding trend, being the odd place out, so to say. Suggestions to brand the EU usually set people's teeth on edge and are discarded as futile window-dressing and spindoctoring. 'Europe' should be beyond branding, it is argued, since it carries specific dignity quite unlike a marketed product. This is rubbish. All states have invented and reinvented themselves over the centuries, replacing the *fleur de lys* with the *tricolour*, celebrating the German *Kultur* or changing from Ceylon to Sri Lanka, from Gold Coast to Ghana, from Southern Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, from the Ottoman empire to Atatürk's modern Turkey, from the USSR to the Russian Federation. To reflect these changes, these states have rebranded themselves, using (and abusing) all the paraphernalia of statehood, using all the media

available and pursuing these efforts relentlessly.

Now that the EU is going through a similar period of change, we should not be surprised that its 'old image' no longer reflects today's European reality. Geopolitically, Europe is reaching adolescence and needs to think carefully about its role as a mature global actor. This aversion to branding Europe is also a shame, since the EU's soft power derives as much from style as from substance. The EU is a global player in areas such as trade, finance, agriculture and humanitarian aid. In general, EU policies have a bad name and are even often depicted as the products of an overburdened European nanny state which is being kept together by red tape. But like Wagner's music, EU policies are way better than they sound.

But it is not the EU's above-average quality policies, it is the EU's policy *style* that should be its best asset — its unique selling point (USP) — both abroad and at home. The EU is the only international political space in the world where *realpolitik* has been assuaged by a dense network of law, civility and a commensurate high level of mutual trust. Surely, European political life is not perfect, but all Asians, Africans and Latin Americans would love to have their own EU-like system in place at home. For ordinary people in the Middle East, the EU model for their own region may only figure in their wildest dreams. But if Germany and France can become friends after fighting three bloody wars within one century, why can India and Pakistan, or Israel and the Arab world, not emulate this remarkable success story? Turning the EU into a global lovemark may well be easier than expected.

This is especially true now that the limits of American hard power are on public display in Iraq. This offers the EU

a window of opportunity to cultivate its 'European dream' successfully by branding itself as a civic superpower. Brussels should ask branding specialists to make optimal use of the EU's image as the reasonable global alternative to the up-and-coming *Pax Americana*. Just as the European Commission blocked General Electric's US\$47bn takeover of Honeywell in 2001, the EU can equally block America's other generals from imposing their 'policy style' on the rest of the world. In future the EU should not be afraid of challenging American unilateralism. The EU's security strategy offers a good point of departure for such a more competitive approach. European threat perceptions and policy solutions differ significantly from their American counterparts. Most notably, Europe's positive domestic experiences with taming *realpolitik* through law explains its unrelenting faith in international law and its institutions.

The EU's constitution illustrates that the Union hesitates to formulate clear-cut 'European interests'. Instead, the EU prides itself for the normative foundations of its foreign policy. The EU promulgates and defends its basic *principles* (like peace, democracy and the rule of law); *ideas* (sustainable development, and the social market economy); and *norms* (good governance and institution building). Article 3.4 of the draft constitution summarises the EU's global mission as a fighter for and contributor to 'peace, security, the sustainable development of the earth, eradication of poverty and protection of human rights and in particular children's rights, as well as to strict observance and development of international law, including respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter'. The EU should turn the high motherhood-and-apple-pie quality of these objectives into its main strength, its global USP. Europe's

normative power derives from its ability to shape the notions of what is to be considered 'normal behaviour' in international politics. Intra-European politics now more resembles 'domestic politics' (where order and solidarity are feasible) than classical 'international politics' (where anarchy and mistrust are said to roam). The 'European dream' is to domesticate global politics.

It should be rather obvious that the EU should brand itself as the very champion of effective multilateralism. But branding also serves domestic purposes. The challenge here is that Europe should lead by example and practise what it preaches. Any EU-wide branding strategy should accept that Europe's identity remains mirror-like, reflecting the self-image of each member state. In a sense, the new Euro-branding strategy should emulate the famous Absolut vodka advertisements, where the actual product disappears and only displays a blank bottle-shaped space that can be filled with whatever content a particular audience most wants from it. Branding therefore deals with the style, shape and character of Europe rather than making concrete policy proposals. But what style for Europe?

The EU should shamelessly exploit its multicultural diversity. All EU member states have strong democratic traditions while their national interests are often at odds. From the vantage point of Europe's Tower of Babel, it will be easier to get a good feel for the opinions and interests of others, and to take them into account accordingly. It implies that any EU policy backed by all (or most) member states carries credibility with outsiders. Especially now that accession negotiations will be started with Turkey the EU can label itself as the political, cultural and even religious bridge between Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

This offers the EU credibility and immense political capital and goodwill in the Middle East and beyond. The EU 'at 25' is such a patchwork of traditions, cultures, geostrategic outlooks and national interests that it can believably claim to offer policy solutions acceptable to much of the rest of the world.

Now that the United Nations is not up to the task of dealing with the world's most pressing security challenges, and America's moral authority is at an all-time low, the EU should brand itself as the credible core (and founding father) of an emerging global alliance of democracies (AOD). This AOD — which was first suggested by Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay — is, of course, a virtual political authority, without institutions and official legal status under international law. It should position itself as a network of like-minded countries in which the EU should establish itself as the benchmarking champion, offering its best practices and good offices, facilitating and encouraging networks of the willing who will address regional and global economic, social and security problems. The EU does not offer 'hollow' multilateralism, but can show a remarkable, even impressive, track record of going from antagonistic, via coordinated, to joint EU-wide policies. This is an extremely successful and attractive model for Europeans to admire and non-Europeans to follow.

It will therefore be essential not to be modest, but to be upbeat, outspoken and even boastful about what Europe can offer the world. The EU already *is* the model of effective multilateralism if one applies a global yardstick. Europe's policy style is remarkably civil and mutual trust among peoples as well as governments is beyond comparison. It is therefore astonishing that the EU undersells itself so dramatically. Branding European power will be critical to focus the mirror

of European identity, and to spread the European model abroad. At home fine-tuning of this model is required, but in a world where cooperation and trust are scarce political commodities, the EU has much to offer. Acknowledging Europe as a force for good in the world will bring pride and self-confidence to Europeans, as well as respect and credibility abroad. For Europe, it will be a choice between branding or decline. This should not be a very difficult dilemma.

This is what the new European Commission should do to rebrand European power:

- establish a study group called ‘Branding Europe’, involving practitioners, academics and branding experts to develop a comprehensive branding strategy for the EU
- set up focus groups around Europe and abroad to find out what people want and expect from the EU and how Europe’s soft power could be optimised in future
- rethink and retool the EU’s public diplomacy efforts in order to improve the image of Europe abroad and gain influence with the populations of third-world countries
- ensure that new EU branding strategies are supported (‘owned’) by Europe’s citizens, reflecting not the European Commission’s ideas but those of the ‘European people’
- use the numerous referenda held in ten member states on the European constitution to gain information and experience on popular attitudes towards the EU, and the most effective strategies to sell the ‘Yes’ vote to the electorate.