
Joining up or falling apart: towards a networked communications model for EU foreign policy

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"A joined-up approach is needed today, not only in external conflicts and crises, but in virtually every aspect of the EU's presence in the world."¹ The European External Action Service's (EEAS) first report for the Strategic Review outlines the European Union's (EU) role in a changing global environment. It emphasises the need for more comprehensive strategies in the face of increasingly complex, interdependent and globalised challenges. With the different policy departments "all developing their own strands of diplomacy"², the capacity to coordinate between all relevant fields and stakeholders and to communicate coherent policies within the EU has become even more crucial. Only through effective communication can the EEAS realise its true potential as a central coordinator for EU external action. As part of this "joined-up approach" that the EEAS mentions in its report, the EU needs a truly networked communications model in the realm of external action in order to shape comprehensive foreign policy strategies.

BACKGROUND

Communication is a key element of diplomatic activity, which means that the EU needs effective communication at all levels for the implementation of a meaningful diplomacy. In the 21st century, a progressive shift is taking place from the traditional model of state diplomacy to a post-Westphalian, multi-stakeholder network diplomacy, which provides ample opportunity for new actors, like the EEAS, to participate on the international scene.

In terms of communication, this change theoretically translates into a move away from the strict internal hierarchy and secrecy of diplomatic systems, towards flatter organisational structures and more transparency. Instead of reinforcing mostly top-down communication, a networked approach offers a more multidirectional way of communicating. Thus, information is shared more openly and rapidly between all relevant stakeholders within the system – including civil society, media, experts, business, and government – in order to grow networks and pool expertise. Through dynamic coordination, stakeholders mutually benefit from the knowledge distributed and receive exactly the information they need. On a technical level, the effective use of technology and best practices supports the network, which therefore needs efficient channels and databases. On a personal level, crucial skills and training are needed to maintain this network.

In order for such a network to function properly, a central actor needs to link all stakeholders. The Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA) have been the obvious coordinators of the comprehensive national system of foreign policy. While the EEAS is not an MFA at the EU level, it is most suitably located within the EU system to coordinate all stakeholders of EU external action and develop a "joined-up approach", for which effective communication is absolutely crucial.

STATE OF PLAY

Communication in the realm of EU external action takes place in three spheres: within the EEAS, within the EU (between different institutions and with the member states), and with the wider European public.³

Communication within the EEAS

The EEAS and the 139 EU Delegations to third countries and international organisations already constitute a network in themselves, which has significantly improved its internal communication during the last years, although it still struggles in numerous ways.

Paradoxically, information is both difficult and easy to obtain at the same time. On the one hand, the EEAS lacks clear structures on what has to be communicated to whom in certain situations, so that personal relations still play a great role in receiving information, which often has to be actively sought for. On the other hand, contrary to most MFAs' need-to-know principle, many EEAS officials receive information based on their position, although it might not be relevant to them, and information is often easily provided if requested.

Its rather heavy hierarchical structure and unclear chains of command complicate the flexible flow of information. At the same time, the EEAS performs quite well in terms of openness and transparency when compared to national MFAs. Most staff work on a first-name basis, do not have their titles on the door and attend regular staff meetings during which everyone can contribute. This open approach can be quite time-consuming though, which has already led to a scaling-down of these meetings in some cases, in turn resulting in complaints about a lack of transparency and communication.

A multidirectional flow of information between Brussels and the Delegations is well established, with the latter presenting frequent reports and Brussels providing daily lines and press briefings, as well as general guidelines. Nonetheless, some officials are still concerned over the insufficient information flow from the Brussels desks to the Delegations.

Furthermore, the EEAS has recognised the importance of new technologies, but their use greatly depends on individuals' ease and skills. Video conferencing facilities are used frequently and a multimedia intranet was developed, which features basic applications but also video messages, rendering it more professional and digitally advanced than some member states' systems.

Communication within the EU

Information-sharing still greatly depends on personal relations in this sphere as well, creating an informal multidirectional flow of information, especially at the lower levels of EU institutions.

The EEAS and the European Commission consult with each other frequently in order to pool expertise and foster coherence. Their working arrangements support the flexible flow of information between the EEAS, Delegations, and the Commission. Structured exchange occurs in inter-service groups, which gather expertise on a wide range of cross-cutting issues. The geographical team meetings, in particular, are very interactive and transparent, giving everyone working in a specific area a chance to contribute and receive information. Nonetheless, the high degree of exchange between officials who used to work in the Commission's former Directorate-General for External Relations, which was integrated into the EEAS in 2010, emphasise the importance of personal relations in information-sharing between the Commission and the EEAS. Furthermore, problems of coordination and division of labour still arise with the Commission, as not all areas of EU external action fall into the EEAS' remit.

Communication with the member states has improved during recent years, as they increasingly recognise the added value of the EEAS' wider-reaching network. Similarly, the Service realises that it needs the member states' commitment, resulting in both parties being invested in communicating more effectively. Drawing up the sanctions on Russia, for example, involved extensive debates within the EEAS on how to best get all 28 member states on board. Especially at Delegation level, the EEAS and member states coordinate regularly and pool their expertise, which often results in the improvement of reports. Nonetheless, member states still refuse to share all information with the EEAS, but also *vice versa*, since the EEAS increasingly understands the importance of controlling exclusive information.

While mostly informal information exchange took place and little documentation was shared in the realm of EU external action, the European Parliament (EP) got a greater role in EU external policy with the Lisbon Treaty and greater access to confidential information with the 2010 Framework Agreement with the Commission. However, one should not omit that the EP did not possess any capacity for receiving confidential documents beforehand, as there was no system in place. Structured information flows happen especially at the President, Chair, and Committee levels, with joint consultation meetings or briefings. Informally, interaction also occurs through multiple channels, such as Rapporteurs, Sub-Committees, or the EP Delegations for relations with parliaments of third countries and international organisations.

Communication with the Council General Secretariat still proves to be difficult. With the Secretariat's diminished role in external relations as well as its concern with the EEAS' political legitimacy (as a non-state diplomatic actor), this relationship exemplifies the continued turf battles within the EU. As part of these inter-institutional power games, EEAS officials still experience logistical problems with the Secretariat, despite the service-level agreements.

The lack of a unified secure information-sharing system represents a major challenge to the EEAS' effective communication within the EU. As the Council and the Commission never agreed on a single framework, several systems exist in parallel but are not necessarily compatible with each other and have been criticised for their slowness and lack of user-friendliness. Many officials tend to prefer secure emails instead, although issues have constantly been raised over the actual security of this emailing system. As it lacks functions of structured information-sharing systems similar to virtual floating files, it does not create a real network.

Two more advanced information-sharing systems stand out: AGORA was set up for communication between Delegations and member states, but it is not very secure and EEAS officials in Brussels can only view but not add information; ACID is supposed to rectify this lack of security but is not globally operational yet. Furthermore, ARES (Advanced Records System) is a document registration system that the Commission extended to the EEAS and its Delegations. This archive allows searching for files, managing of workflows, and distributing of tasks. Officials are granted access on a need-to-know basis. As a structured secure network of information exchange, ARES is therefore very helpful, quite transparent and much more advanced than some of the member states' internal systems, but it has also been described as time-consuming and difficult to handle.

Communication with the European public

Communication with the European public is a wide area, but most exchange occurs with public stakeholders in civil society, media, and business as well as with experts and other so-called non-state actors. Despite their growing role, the EEAS still struggles to actively engage with non-state actors in Brussels, whereas the Delegations foster these contacts much more abroad. While there is no consistent approach, the EEAS tries to exchange views with European non-state actors and pool their expertise to a certain extent. Communication remains mainly *ad hoc* in most departments, while frameworks like the Eastern Partnership foster a more institutionalised approach, including policy dialogues or biannual forums with civil society. Although public consultations – like the one on the European Neighbourhood Policy review – represent structured processes, they do not exactly foster a multidirectional flow of information.

Could Mogherini act as a game changer?

Compared to her predecessor, the new High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission Federica Mogherini seems to be a more open public communicator. She seems to understand that better cooperation within the institutions and with the member states necessitates *inter alia* improved communication and more presence and visibility.

Within the EEAS, minor efforts to streamline its management have occurred, such as merging the positions of Executive Secretary General and Chief Operating Officer. As the Chair of the Commissioners' Group on EU External Action, Mogherini has the chance to work on a truly “joined-up approach” that involves all portfolios linked with the EU's external relations. Its re-emphasised use helps to boost communication with the Commission and support the EEAS' coordinating task. The same applies to the more regular meetings with the EP's Foreign Affairs Committee, an amplified amount of briefings, and the start of renegotiations on the 2002 Inter-Institutional Agreement involving a greater engagement of the EP in security and defence matters.

Regular visits to the member states and meetings with national parliaments, government representatives, and civil society further foster information exchange. In addition, Mogherini encourages a more open format in the Foreign Affairs Council. Although the Minsk talks on Ukraine only featured the French and German leaders on the EU side, for example, the EEAS was always kept in the loop to ensure the possibility of getting the other member states on board later.

PROSPECTS

Since its establishment, the EEAS has made great progress and a considerable effort to communicate coherently. For the future, there are three main options for the EEAS' approach towards communication. Firstly, the *status quo* would mean that nothing much changes, as the EEAS keeps its already quite networked approach but does not

advance any further. Secondly, Mogherini could act as a game changer and unfold her proactive engagement with communication even further within the EU, fostering a more networked approach in the EEAS Review at the end of the year, including proposals on the improvement of the service's organisation and functioning, and actually following up on it. Thirdly, more integration in the field of foreign policy could shift policy-making competences to the EEAS, which would facilitate coordination and communication on foreign policy within the EU. While the last option under the present circumstances represents an unrealistic objective, the EEAS could still work on further developing its network and technology in order to communicate more effectively.

The EEAS has to work on building trust among its own staff but also between the institutions, as trust is the prime precondition for effective communication, especially in a system that still relies so much on personal relations. The EEAS' current hierarchy would benefit from a more decentralised, bottom-up approach, with all staff getting the opportunity to contribute to improving policies. Furthermore, the multidirectional flow to all stakeholders has to be more structured, in order to be clear and consistent. It is crucial that non-state actors are involved to a greater extent, so that the EEAS can benefit from their expert knowledge in specific policy fields. Nonetheless, there are of course 'natural' limits to information-sharing with the European public, due to the confidential nature of some information.

Another great impediment to the EEAS communicating more effectively stems from the lack of a functioning and efficient secure information-sharing system, a structured network that links Brussels desks and EU Delegations abroad with each other, as well as with the other institutions and the member states. The current virtual communication systems of EU external action only give differentiated degrees of access to the various actors. Linked to that is an underlying problem with the lack of resources, in terms of technology as well as personnel. While ARES could serve as a model, its use often depends on able individuals, implying a need for better-enforced staff training across departments.

Generally, it must become easier for stakeholders to know where to find information and who to contact so that expertise can be pooled efficiently. Although best practices exist in the form of inter-institutional agreements and handbooks, communication still lacks structure and takes a great effort. The EEAS should be ready to share information openly with the EU institutions and member states, if it wants to achieve a comprehensive approach to EU external action.

However, coordinating EU external action and ensuring coherence is no easy task and also depends to a large degree on the readiness of other stakeholders to engage accordingly. Member states' political will still imposes limits on the EEAS' development. Improved communication can help to strengthen trust between actors at all levels and improve the 'European socialisation' of actors involved in EU external relations.

The EU therefore has to work on establishing a truly networked communications model as a whole. In order to conduct meaningful diplomacy and develop a "joined-up approach", all stakeholders of EU external action need to be coordinated in a more networked approach. Effective communication is the precondition for this goal. The EEAS is already placed at the centre of a network that encompasses these stakeholders. It must now strive to fulfil this coordinating role by fully using its potential to communicate effectively. By doing so, it can then aim for an improved role as a policy entrepreneur in the future.

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1 EEAS, "The European Union in a changing global environment", (June 2015), available at: http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2015/150627_eu_global_strategy_en.htm, accessed on: [13/09/2015], p. 18.

2 Ibid.

3 Information was mostly obtained through interviews with officials in the EEAS, the European Commission, and the European Parliament, between 26 May and 7 June 2015 in Brussels.

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