

Public Diplomacy - research on country reputation

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I have studied the American way to win hearts and minds abroad at one of the most interesting times regarding US image: during the election period that resulted in the establishment of the Obama reputation.

Public diplomacy has a long history in the United States but it is just as important for smaller states, like Hungary. Yet in my country public diplomacy is a rather undiscovered field at the crossroads of international relations and communications but I believe that public diplomacy is the way to ameliorate our international reputation.

I had the chance to study public diplomacy as a visiting researcher in Washington D.C. between September 2008 and February 2009.

Personal Impressions

From the beginning of the program I was aware of the fact that I'm actually part of US public diplomacy efforts as a Fulbright grantee which made me even more curious to experience my field of study in practice. I applied to carry out my research in Washington D.C. because I was convinced that the political heart of the US would be the perfect spot to discover public diplomacy efforts and meet public diplomacy experts on the spot.

I arrived in the sunny, humid capital at the end of August. As the semester started I also got involved in the life of the Public Diplomacy Institute at the George Washington University among American students as well as visiting researchers and students from around the world – from Germany to Serbia and India. Although in the first months I spent most of my time reading and studying public diplomacy literature I was interested in and advised to read by my wonderful advisor, Mark Taplin, and the well known, always helpful public diplomacy expert, Bruce Gregory, it was also interesting to sit in for lectures where challenging questions from overseas students were always welcome.

After a few weeks reading literature and listening to various conferences on public diplomacy topics organised by the Institute I was ready to approach public diplomacy experts on the spot. I met with State Department officials and even lobbyists with the help of my advisor, not to mention that the fact that I was a Fulbright grantee opened many doors. I also learnt about US-EU relations and EU public diplomacy efforts in the US thanks to consultations with Mattias Sundholm at the EU Delegation.

During my stay I was always interested to gather information about how Americans think about Europe and especially about Hungary. I was surprised to discover that people in many cases did know, where I came from - which I think was also due to the fact that I was in the capital.

I also had the chance to visit an other capital, the capital of country music, Nashville, when I took part at the Fulbright Enrichment Seminar about public entrepreneurship. This world was just the opposite of what I experienced in Washington.

I got the most interesting insights about Americans due to my work at Meridian International, where I gave short, interactive lectures for school children and residents of homes for the elderly. I was happy to contribute a little bit to my country's public diplomacy by introducing Hungary to the eager audience and to prepare a small dish for them that would bring our culture a bit closer to children and elderly people.

About my research

Public diplomacy deals with attitudes of foreign audiences in order to support foreign policy goals. While traditional diplomacy consists of interactions between diplomats and governments, public diplomacy stands for the same goals by influencing and convincing foreign publics.

Besides studying the history and present of US public diplomacy I also had the chance to learn about how public diplomacy may work for Europe, which lead me closer to how Hungary could develop its own public diplomacy strategy.

The first European Union institution to actually feature public diplomacy in its name is the Press and Public Diplomacy (PPD)¹ Section of the Delegation of the European Union to the United States of America, in Washington D.C. The PPD Section has been launched as a pilot project and may serve as an example for further similar projects.

A Pilot Project – EU Public Diplomacy in Washington

The PPD Section of the Washington delegation was opened in January 2006. The United States is a key political and economic partner for the EU which must have been one of the main reasons to launch the first PPD at this location. EU-US economic relations are important: 37% of global merchandise trade and 45% of world trade in services exist between the two entities.² Moreover the values shared on both sides of the Atlantic – such as democracy, human dignity or economic prosperity – serve as a solid basis for EU communications efforts. Despite these facts the EU still lacks visibility in the US: 57% of American adults do not know what the EU stands for.³

The task of the PPD Section is therefore to inform the American public and decision makers about the EU and also to engage them with special EU policies such as fight against global warming or the abolition of the death penalty.

Messages Formed

Communication carried out at the PPD Section is based on a three-level decision making process. First the members of the RELEX⁴ family that are all involved in communication outside of the EU agree on the basic messages.⁵ The document titled „EU in the World” – that was adopted by the College of Commissioners in February 2006 – underlines two core messages: the introduction of the EU as (1) an important international player and (2) a leader of the fight against global warming.

¹ *Press & Public Diplomacy (PPD) Section*

² *The European Union – A Guide for Americans* pg.10.

³ *USA Today*, 10/10/2008

⁴ DG Development, DG Enlargement, DG Trade, EuropeAid Co-Operation Office, European Commission's Humanitarian Office (ECHO).

⁵ „EU in the world” document, February 2006. <http://ec.europa.eu/world/>

On the second level key messages are adopted in each country and region in line with the attitude and interests of the audience. In the US investment, commerce and security are in focus of the communication. According to that PPD Section members stress the important economic ties between the EU and the US. For instance the fact that all EU investment in Texas exceeds the value of all US investment in China draws the attention of US audiences. The section also focuses on security aspects of the EU and outline the work of EUROPOL, EU peace corps and especially the EU-NATO relations.

EU messaging in Washington is further refined according to two key audiences inside and outside „the Beltway”⁶. Outside the Beltway communication focuses on basic information about the EU and EU-US relations. In the case of communication by PPD Section members themselves common ground may be easily found to create sympathy by some previous research and focus on the European background of the audience. For instance when communicating with a community of primarily German ancestors the PPD Section delegates a colleague from Germany. Although focus is on common ground negative aspects must not be neglected – the PPD Section does not avoid conflict areas such as Airbus or Microsoft affairs but stresses the fact that EU-US relations are 98% conflict free.

Unlike the overall public, decision-makers inside the beltway are very well informed about the EU. The key task of the PPD Section is to inform and engage them with policies of special interest to the EU such as the abolition of the death penalty or the liberalization of air traffic. These policies are also communicated to the overall public – but to much swallower extent.⁷

Finally, the communication is influenced by the personality and communication style of those who carry out the strategy – with special regard to the ambassador.

Public Diplomacy at Work

Going down to the strategic level the PPD Section carries out such classical press office tasks as publishing press releases, organizing interviews and columns such as the EU Insight in the Congressional Quarterly read by the majority of senators as well as the EU Focus in Foreign Policy Magazine.

Besides these efforts the work of the PPD Section also features long term public diplomacy initiatives such as the European Union Visitor Program or the European Centers of Excellence.

⁶ The „beltway” refers to the Capital Beltway in D.C. that surround governmental and other key decisionmakers’ headquarters.

⁷ Interview with M. Sundholm

The European Union Visitor Program⁸ was launched back in 1974 and originally targeted Americans exclusively. Over the years the scope of the program had been broadened but even nowadays most visitors – primarily young decision makers – come from the US to gain first-hand experience of the values and functions of the EU.⁹

The European Centers of Excellence established in selected universities provide information and assistance for education programs, research and information activities. The first centers were opened in 1998 and every four years institutions compete for the right to establish a Center. Since 2005 the Centers feature „excellence” in their names to acknowledge the outstanding work carried out at the selected institutions. At the selection period in 2008, 23 institutions from around the US applied of which 11¹⁰ obtained the right to run the Centers and receive financial support of 3.42 million Euros total.¹¹

EU Communication – a Coordination Effort

Besides its own communications, bringing together EU Member States’ representatives to tell the European story is also the task of the PPD Section. Each year the EU Film Festival, the EU Open Doors Day, the School Program and the EuroKids Festival are carried out in cooperation with Members States’ embassies and cultural institutions. The number of joint projects coordinated by the PPD Section is slowly increasing.

The most important joint public diplomacy effort so far is the 50th anniversary of the European Union. Communication and celebrations had been coordinated by the Commission’s delegations. In Washington the PPD Section carried out major coordination work by inviting EU related events to appear in the official brochure of the anniversary. Interest was so high that all applicants could not be featured among the anniversary’s 50 events.¹² Organizations, universities and even business entities applied and gained publicity while the PPD Section built new relations and created a major series of events. By creative coordination the PPD Section’s budget covered mainly coordination and communication efforts and only minor resources had to be devoted to event organization.

⁸ European Union Visitors Program (EUVP)
http://www.eurunion.org/eu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2928&Itemid=9

⁹ http://www.eurunion.org/eu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=23&Itemid=39

¹⁰ Among others: University of Michigan, University of California és a Washington, DC, Consortium (American University, George Mason University, George Washington University, Georgetown University, The Johns Hopkins University).

¹¹ http://eurunion.org/eu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2872&Itemid=9

¹² Intview with M. Sundholm

In the US common values create a solid basis for public diplomacy work. In other parts of the world EU communication with publics may require even more efforts to overcome cultural differences.

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