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MUTUALITY ABOVE GEOPOLITICS
Reshuffling EU strategic communication in COVID-19 times

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the past years the word ‘geopolitics’ has been buzzing around a lot in the halls of EU buildings. In an increasingly connected and contested world, EU strategic communication has become the lynchpin of a new geopolitical approach, as part of an effective response to disinformation campaigns that seek to deceive domestic and foreign audiences. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this trend. While acknowledging some virtues of geopolitics, this paper warns against existing shortcomings in EU’s foreign policy approach. The EU’s temptation to use “the language of power” (Borrell) aggrandises differences, instead of similarities, and endangers international cooperation. Going beyond strategic communication and ‘messaging’, which conceive foreign audiences as passive recipients, this paper suggests that the EU should enhance the ‘listening’ dimension of its foreign policy, with the objective to engage with the world on an equal footing.

Short bio

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
1. From the EU Global Strategy to von der Leyen's Commission: the EU's venture into geopolitics	6
2. Geopolitics meets strategic communication: Countering disinformation.....	6
3. COVID-19 and the new world: Arming the EU with facts	7
4. Four limits in EU geopolitical approach to strategic communication	8
#1 Disinformation is not (just) an external threat	8
#2 Aggressive fact-checking endangers EU normativity	9
#3 Listening matters	10
#4 Eurocentrism is part and parcel of the EU's playbook	10
5. Revising EU foreign policy: A set of recommendations	11
Conclusion.....	13
Bibliography.....	14



Introduction

“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” (von der Leyen, 2019). Even if nearly every new European Commission has promised to improve its external action at some point during its mandate, none have displayed such an early commitment as von der Leyen’s. In what the EU has framed as a connected, complex and contested world, strategic communication¹ has become the lynchpin of the new geopolitical approach, as part of an effective response to disinformation campaigns that seek to deceive domestic and foreign audiences. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated this trend.

This paper does not deny the virtues of geopolitics. Recognising the existence of competitors is in fact the first important step to understand and embrace the diversity of the world beyond EU borders, and the different norms and values that guide international actors. However, we emphasise that in the EU’s current approach, mixing geopolitical ambitions and strategic communication instruments, four important limits can be observed. First, current EU policy frames disinformation as an external threat, thus disguising how domestic actors are actually nurturing it within EU borders. Second, aggressive fact-checking practiced at the institutional level compromises EU normativity. Third, the focus on ‘messaging’ looks at third actors as rather passive recipients and neglects the role that ‘listening’ practices have in order to engage with foreign audiences. Fourth, despite the geopolitical turn EU’s playbook remains heavily Eurocentric and endangers international cooperation, particularly with post-colonial realities that look at EU engagement with increased scepticism.

In an attempt to counter existing shortcomings, this paper advances a set of recommendations addressing EU top level discourse, strategic communication and broader foreign policy action. First and foremost, we suggest the EU should refrain from adopting a securitising vocabulary and from proclaiming the superiority of its model, leaving such assertions to those illiberal models that EU has pledged to counter.

When it comes to strategic communication, the geographical realm of current EU practices should be expanded in an attempt to reflect the full scope of existing trends. Also, fact-checking should privilege a more neutral and less aggressive stance, focusing on key facts and leaving aside statements that are perhaps questionable but cannot be ‘fact-checked’. In the long term, ‘de-externalising’ disinformation policy should become the priority.

In terms of broader foreign policy trends, this paper argues that EU external action should counter existing criticism of Eurocentrism and make listening a priority of its foreign action. This should start with the implementation of the EU strategic approach to its international cultural relations, with the objective to increase existing staff, expertise and financial resources in line with the 2019 Council Conclusions.

¹ For the purpose of this paper, strategic communication is defined as the “purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals”. (Zerfass et al, 2018:493).



1. From the EU Global Strategy to von der Leyen's Commission: the EU's venture into geopolitics

Since the establishment of the new Commission, the word 'geopolitics' has been buzzing around a lot in the media and the halls of EU buildings. To respond to external threats, from the growing competition between the US and China to the instability in the Neighbourhood, the new executive has pledged to restore the Union's role in the world and declared that geopolitics should become part and parcel of the EU's playbook.

Crucially, some political observers have noticed continuity rather than change in von der Leyen's new Commission (Blockmans, 2020). The EU Global Strategy (EUGS) has in fact been considered as a paradigmatic example of a policy that moved the EU away from the traditional post-political and cosmopolitan understanding of the world to an approach that recognises the existence of global competitors and the need to respond to external threats (Biscop, 2016; Juncos, 2017). To reflect this shift, Biscop referred to the new approach as "Realpolitik with European characteristics", since the EUGS represented a return to a certain realism, outlining not the rejection of liberal ideals as such, but that of liberal utopianism. Another cornerstone of the 2016 EUGS was that of 'principled pragmatism', the idea that EU principles stem "as much from a realistic assessment of the current strategic environment as from an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world" (EU, 2016:8).

The salience of this geopolitical shift is even more significant if one compares the sober opening lines of the 2016 EUGS with the enthusiastic ones of the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS). Whereas the latter emphasised that "Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free" (Council, 2003:27), the former recognised that a stronger Europe is needed because "we live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union" (EU, 2016:13). Looking at it retrospectively, the enthusiastic tone of the ESS is close to that of Fukuyama's end of history (1989), a world in which challenges still exist but serious antagonists no longer do. Compared to the 2003 document, the EUGS acknowledges that the world has not ended in Fukuyama's terms, and that global and regional contenders are there to keep the EU busy in the future.

2. Geopolitics meets strategic communication: Countering disinformation

Geopolitics *à l'europpéenne* does not frame interests and threats only as material. In a world where state and non-state-actors are increasingly relying on ways to influence – and often deceive – public opinion, a capacity to counter these attempts and increase positive attitudes towards the EU is considered vital. As a practice in perpetual adaptation, diplomacy has hence looked into digitalisation to create new channels to engage with foreign audiences, and the spectacular rise in social networks has become a game changer for the conduct of global affairs.

EU's appetite for strategic communication goes back to its response to the Ukraine crisis and Russia's attempts to destabilise the shared neighbourhood. In the Council Conclusions of 19 and 20 March 2015, the European Council emphasised the need to challenge Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. It called on the High Representative (HR), in cooperation with Member States and EU institutions, to prepare an action plan on strategic communication with a view to



establishing a team for this task. The document presented in June 2015 – the first of its kind at the EU level - had three overall objectives that combined defensive and pro-active strategic communication measures: enhancing the promotion of EU policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood; strengthening the overall media environment in the region; and improving EU capacity to forecast, address and respond to disinformation activities by external actors (EEAS, 2015). The East StratCom Task Force, a dedicated team within the Service to counter Russia's disinformation campaign, started to release regular Disinformation Digests and eventually Reviews to debunk fake news as well as biased news and manipulated information from pro-Kremlin media.

Between 2015 and 2017, two more task forces were created to expose disinformation in the Western Balkans and in the Middle East, Northern Africa, and the Gulf region. In 2018, a new 'Action Plan Against Disinformation', a Commission and HR's joint communication, clarified the scope of its action and defined disinformation as “verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm” (2018:1). It also outlined four pillars for action: improving EU institutions' capacities to detect and expose disinformation; strengthening coordinated and joint responses; mobilising the private sector; and raising awareness and improving societal resilience.

Overall, in what the EU represents as a contested world (EU, 2016) due in part to disinformation operations from Russia, Brussels has increasingly framed itself as the actor that should debunk false claims and prove to foreign audiences that when the EU engages in the global stage, it stands on the right side of history.

3. COVID-19 and the new world: Arming the EU with facts

The 'geopolitical commission' has given strategic communication an even more important place in its portfolio in 2020. In February, Borrell warned, “Europeans must deal with the world as it is, not as they wish it to be” (2020a). This required a need to “relearn the language of power” and combine “the European Union's resources in a way that maximizes their geopolitical impact” (Borrell, 2020a). Crucially, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic narrative-building has gained further momentum. In a March blog post, the HR, Borrell, cautioned against the emergence of “a global battle of narratives going on in which timing is a crucial factor” (2020b). The HR's post appeared a few days after Russia launched a heavily mediatised healthy diplomacy campaign in Italy. On 23 March, nine Russian military planes travelled to the north of Italy to provide medical military specialists and equipment (Valenza, 2020). In a world currently witnessing “a struggle of influence through spinning”, Borrell urged EU institutions and its member states to be “armed with facts” and “defend Europe against its detractors” (Borrell, 2020a).

EU strategic communication mentality has spread over several areas of external policy, and an example is provided in the 2020 Work Programme for information outreach on EU External Relations, which emphasises the increased importance of narratives and the speed of messaging (EC, 2020). The Programme stressed the role of EU Delegations in developing a “joined up and coherent narrative” and “shift[ing] to a storytelling approach with a focus on campaigns, rather than showcasing isolated initiatives or projects” (EC, 2020). In this view, civil society actors, including academia and cultural operators, have the ability to express more effectively the fundamental principles that guide EU foreign policy. Amidst the pandemic and the “worrying trends” witnessed, culture is in particular meant to be an engine for change: in the words of a EEAS



official, “this is not the time to invest less in culture but rather more” (EEAS official in EUNIC, 2020a).

4. Four limits in EU geopolitical approach to strategic communication

As a reaction to an altered global security environment, the emergence of a more realist foreign policy thinking in EU circles has some virtues. From the 1990s, scholars looked at the EU as a post-political actor, seeking to promote itself as a cosmopolitan peace project (Makarychev and Yatsyk, 2019) that uses its power to separate the normal from the deviant (Manners, 2002). This depoliticised approach, however, determined an inability to “understand the world beyond its borders – that is, the world as *pari passu*” (Korosteleva, 2017) and, more notably, to realise that spaces of contestation were opening and questioning the validity of the Western-based world order. Russia’s regional rise from the late 2000s is a primary example of this trend, with the Kremlin increasingly resorting to what Simão named as “Tricks of the Weak” – a set of tactics “recognising the dominant rules of the game but seeking to subvert them” (2017:348). In many ways, the Ukraine crisis and the Union’s reaction set the stage for the return of the political in Europe.

Recognising the existence of competitors in the global arena is the first necessary step to treating them not as we want them to be, but as they would like to be treated, in an attempt to meet their specific expectations, valorise their role, and to find common ground. But in the EU’s current approach, mixing geopolitical ambitions and strategic communication instruments, four important limits can be observed.

#1 Disinformation is not (just) an external threat

Let us be clear: disinformation is not an imaginary challenge, nor should it be framed as an attempt of the Western-based order to reassert its power. As Gunitsky noted in his timely analysis, spreading false accounts and, more notably, diluting existing information undermines the social consensus that democracies need in order to function properly (2020). As such, disinformation aims to provoke “overwhelming distrust of all news sources, and the fragmentation of a shared social reality” (2020). From this perspective, Brussels’s increasing awareness is the proof that the EU is striving to adapt to the ‘contested’ world that it promised to face in the EUGS.

Problematically, however, the EU’s narrative remains one-sided. Since 2015, Brussels has in fact framed disinformation as an external threat, namely as a threat that originated far away from EU member states, and Russia was positioned as the major source of this threat. Because of its foreign nature, the threat required the involvement of an actor that focused specifically on external relations, namely the EEAS, rather than one with a domestic agenda. The emphasis was, in other words, on ‘foreign destabilisation’ while domestic sources of disinformation were not targeted as a priority, nor was the domestic audience who consume this inaccurate information. Through these representations, the Union came to produce the image of a ‘self’ that is threatened by a certain number of ‘others’ and that is doomed to debunk false claims and re-establish the ‘facts’.

In many ways, the EU’s strategic communication policy is a textbook example of a securitising action that situates threats beyond the borders of an otherwise safe social space. This reading is nevertheless as problematic as the threat that the EU has committed to counter. US observers have long acknowledged that, in the past, the most serious informational menace came



not from some troll factories in the Russian countryside but from the man that sat in the Oval Office for four years (Gunitsky, 2020; Landon-Murray, Mujkic and Nussbaum, 2019).

Beside showing that ‘fake news’ are first and foremost a domestic problem, Donald Trump’s example also highlights that disinformation is produced not only in consolidated authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, but also within the border of a seemingly ‘pure’ democratic community. Distinguishing between domestic heroes and foreign villains, while a politically handy narrative, disguises the real causes of the problem.

#2 Aggressive fact-checking endangers EU normativity

While recognising competition in the international system is the first step to dealing with a complex world, turning adversaries into antagonists compromises an actor’s normative stance in the short term, and its capacity to overcome disagreements and engage with the other in the long term. EUvsDisinfo, the East StratCom Task Force’s flagship project, is a good example for illustrating this aggressive stance. The website disclaimer states that the EUvsDisinfo publications “do not represent an official EU position, as the information and opinions expressed are based on media reporting and analysis of the East Stratcom Task Force”. To explain this argument, the Task Force argues that it relies on a variety of contributors that do not include solely EU officials, and so its reviews should not be seen as official statements. But the fact that the Task Force is located within the EEAS premises and is part of a Service division on Strategic Communication has prompted questions around the validity of this argument (see Alemanno et al., 2018).

Wagnsson and Hellmann (2018) remarked that the Disinformation Review, the EUvsDisinfo’s weekly newsletter that summarises the main pro-Kremlin disinformation trends observed throughout the week, represents the Russian other as a violator of universal principles, an existential threat, and an inferior actor. As such, the authors argue that the DD depicted “a Russia that represents everything that the EU is not” (2018:1171). By aggrandising differences between the two actors, Brussels response to Russian strategic communication implies that the EU is actually engaging in counter propaganda and information warfare against Moscow, something that the EU has repeatedly argued it would not do (EEAS, 2018).

Should the EU resort to more neutral language in the near future, would criticism end? In reality the ‘what’ of EU strategic communication, that is, fact-checking, is another cause for concern. Current Task Force rationale relies on the idea that facts always speak for themselves, but neglect to recognise that disputing facts is always part of any political process. In Renner and Spencer’s take, for instance, it is always possible to count the number of refugees crossing a border, but this counting relies on “a pre-defined understanding of a refugee and of a valid line of national borders” (2018, 318). Concepts such as refugee and border are hence highly political. The same goes with the EUvsDisinfo website, where a closer account shows that, in many cases, the Task Force does not highlight factual inaccuracies, but contested opinions that are the result of competing, albeit controversial, political worldviews (Giussani, 2020). The oversimplification of reality and the promotion of a seemingly fact-based world that the EU strives to protect make fact-checking a more subtle, but still problematic, declaration of superiority.

Instead of refuting false claims through fact-checking and narrative-building to showcase a more objective notion of ‘truth’, a more cautious response would be to show how and why this production of unverified and unsubstantiated knowledge takes place and who benefits from it, thus shifting from debunking towards deconstruction.



#3 Listening matters

By emphasising the role of narrative-building and the speed of messaging, EU strategic communication 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 showcase and image-building exercises.

In spite of recent setbacks, since the early 2010s the EU has successfully developed a policy to deal with these priorities. In 2012, the European Parliament (EP) launched a Preparatory Action 'Culture in EU external relations', and a consortium of cultural institutes led by the Goethe-Institut was charged to map existing initiatives in this area. The final report of the Action reflected these new priorities and sought to go beyond understandings of cultural relations as soft power instruments that should attract and co-opt foreign audiences. Rather, the Action advanced a more relational and less instrumental definition, based on the idea that “work done on the ground and in a true spirit of reciprocity is bound to lead to more robust and lasting relationships and results than top-down politics can achieve” (EU, 2014:19).

Crucially, the 2014 Action laid the groundwork for a new document outlining the fundamental principles of EU culture in external relations. In June 2016, a Joint Communication by the Commission and the EEAS sought to capitalise on the previous initiative. The Joint Communication stressed that, in order to fully unleash their “potential bridging role” (2016:4), cultural relations should go beyond showcasing, image-building, and projection to instead “aim at generating a new spirit of dialogue, mutual listening and learning, joint capacity-building and global solidarity” (EC and HR, 2016:4).

Regrettably, however, EU ventures in the area of culture have not been smooth sailing. These recent policy efforts have indeed slipped a new semantic constellation in Brussels circles, but recent emphasis on geopolitics and strategic communication has dwarfed EU foreign discourse. The most recent policy effort on ‘listening’ policies, the 2019 Conclusions on an EU Strategic Approach to international cultural relations, has not had any substantial follow up. From building policy on mutuality and reciprocity and attempting to co-create on an equal footing, the EU has moved towards a communication approach that considers cultural relations as a string to the EU StratCom’s box, and local actors as rather passive recipients of a message that has already been drafted, revised, and proofread in Brussels.

#4 Eurocentrism is part and parcel of the EU’s playbook

Whereas recognising contestation(s) is a first step to accepting and engaging with diversity, a more careful scrutiny of the EU’s ‘principled pragmatism’ suggests that, in its attempt to be pragmatic, EU foreign policy remains nevertheless heavily principled. In the EUGS, for instance, the EU engages to “act globally to address the root causes of conflict and poverty, and to champion the indivisibility and universality of human rights” (EU, 2016:8). Similarly, in her most recent State of the Union, von der Leyen stressed, “we believe in the universal value of democracy and the rights of the individual” (2020).

Whereas no one could dispute the presence of these principles in EU founding treaties, dissident interpretations of these norms and values still exist but are left out to serve the traditional EU playbook. Critically, for instance, EU institutions and member states have been accused of turning a blind eye to their human rights commitments during the refugee crisis, and instead adopting militarisation, tighter legal frameworks, and migration agreements with neighbours that



did not uphold the very human rights standards that EU vows to champion (i.e. Turkey, Libya, see Moreno-Lax, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Problematically, EU exceptionalism endangers cooperation not only with those actors contesting Western-based global order and highlighting EU double standards (i.e. Russia and China), but also with post-colonial realities, which have often seen only a fine line between cooperation and forms of neo-colonialism in EU-funded projects. When EU foreign policy neglects existing and deep mistrust and uses the civiliser's 'universal' language, even the most neutral attempt could be perceived as a subversive move. Some have warned against these practices: the 2014 Preparatory Action called for more mutuality in post-colonial contexts, where negative perceptions of former European rulers remain widespread. The report invited the EU to involve third country partners "from the outset in the conception and design of cultural projects and programmes: the joint creation ("co-creation") of new projects is the bedrock of deep and lasting ties" (2014:10).

5. Revising EU foreign policy: A set of recommendations

This brief argued that important shortcomings have characterised the EU's recent geopolitical-inspired stance and its strategic communication practices. But a careful assessment of these limits should not lead us to throw out the baby with the bath water. Geopolitics can be a useful lens for analysing a complex world, provided that the EU's temptation to use the language of power does not lead Brussels to aggrandise irrelevant differences, and endanger current and future cooperation. This set of recommendations seeks to deal with this risk by addressing three areas of work: top level discourse, strategic communication practices, and broader EU foreign policy tools.

#1 Top level discourse: The EU must refrain from using a securitising vocabulary, and from proclaiming the superiority of its model.

The EU commission's change has exacerbated EU foreign policy top level language. The former HR, Federica Mogherini, rarely constructed international actors as existential threats, limiting the latter to international terrorism. Russia's case is illustrating: amidst the Ukraine crisis, Mogherini avoided open confrontation in her speeches and, while strongly condemning Moscow's actions, stressed its importance as a partner in several areas (i.e. Iranian nuclear deal, the Arctic). Compared to the former HR, Borrell has departed from this stance and instead resorted to a tougher approach vis-à-vis great powers. But this posture neglects the notion that geopolitics is all about stability, and that the latter is obtained by recognising that international others have a different set of norms and values, since successful negotiations take place only when parties are able to put aside their differences. The EU should leave securitising vocabulary to illiberal actors.

#2 Strategic Communication Practices: The EU must expand the geographical realm of its StratCom analysis.

Today, there is broad agreement that disinformation is more than a Russia-related problem, and that many other international actors are involved in informational warfare to influence and deceive foreign audiences. For instance, Borrell has explicitly referred to China as an actor attempting to influence EU foreign audiences through spinning and the politics of generosity (Borrell, 2020b). At present, however, EUvsDisinfo's work remains heavily Russia-centered. A more diverse focus would correct this over-emphasis and clarify that EU strategic communication is not against Russia but in favour of a balanced informational ecosystem.



#3 Strategic Communication Practices: The EU must avoid aggressive othering in its disinformation work.

Since the EU seeks to uncover fake analyses and manipulated data, it should limit itself to a deconstruction work without playing the blame game. The fact that Russia has repeatedly violated democratic principles and international law – something that almost any balanced interlocutor would agree on and that EUvsDisinfo has repeatedly highlighted in its analyses – is not a useful reminder in work that should just expose deceptive takes. Similarly, rather than warning against Russia as an existential threat, fact-checking should simply stick to the misleading arguments and show their inconsistencies. Rather than a counter-response, fact-checking should be about checking facts.

#4 Strategic Communication Practices: In the long term, the EU must ‘de-externalise’ StratCom.

Disinformation is not a threat located far from EU borders. It is as domestic as Orban’s notorious positions and odious narratives (Campbell, 2020) or Poland’s LGBTI-free zones (Ash, 2020). In the long run, addressing disinformation should no longer be the mandate of an actor with a foreign portfolio, but rather be transferred to a new service that joins up the internal and external dimensions of this policy.

#5 EU broader foreign policy: The EU must complete the implementation of its strategic approach to international cultural relations.

In a world where EU narratives are increasingly contested and Eurocentrism is called into question, shifting the focus from ‘messaging’ to ‘listening’ will be a more fruitful long-term strategy to engage in the international arena. The 2019 Conclusions stressed the need for “a new spirit of dialogue, mutual understanding and learning, which entails the cooperation with local stakeholders and civil society at all levels (planning, design, implementation) and on an equal footing”, as well as that for “a decentralised approach, requiring policies and projects adapted to local context, needs and aspirations” (Council, 2019:7).

Among others, the framework for action (F4A) of the 2019 Conclusions called on the Commission and the HR in particular to increase existing capacities in the field of cultural relations. On the one hand, this included the designation of cultural focal points in any Delegation in order to ensure adequate competencies, something that the Commission and the EEAS already committed to do in the 2016 Joint Communication. On the other hand, the F4A called on the EU to strengthen “appropriate expertise” (2019:8) in this area, also through the preparation of trainings on cultural relations for EU officials dealing with this policy area. At a time of foreign policy re-thinking, the F4A should now be fully implemented, with cultural relations receiving more space in the training agenda for EU officials. In the long term, the secondment of the European Union Network of Institutes of Culture (EUNIC) staff in EU Delegations as cultural focal points should be the way to move forward.

#6 EU broader foreign policy: The EU must increase existing funding in external projects with the participation of Member States.

In line with the previous recommendation, more efforts should be devoted to designing decentralised external action. The 2019 F4A invited member states to strengthen their participation in the preparation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of common projects. Together with diplomatic and consular representations, EUNIC clusters can complement the activities of EU delegations on the ground. Since 2012, clusters can receive funding through the Cluster Fund, that



is, EUNIC's most important internal instrument for supporting initiatives. The 2020 Call for Applications received a financial support of 313,370 EUR from 20 members to support proposals up to a maximum of EUR 15,000, representing up to 50% of the total budget of the project (EUNIC, 2020a). While a general increase in the resources available has been observed over the years, the current amount greatly limits the potential of EU people-to-people contacts. Similar opportunities and challenges can be found in another EUNIC-implemented project, the European Spaces of Culture that were launched under the impulsion of the EP (as 'Houses of Culture'). The first phase of this project has an envelope that limits the number of successful projects (six) and the budget devoted to each of them (max EUR 50,000).

More recently, in an open letter initiated by More Europe – external cultural relations, 20 European cultural institutes and organisations urged the European Commission to “put adequate efforts and resources to further strengthen cultural relations”, including through the incorporation of international cultural relations in the Proposal for the establishment of the Neighbourhood and the allocation of resources within the Next Generation EU (More Europe, 2020).

Conclusion

Against an increasingly insecure background, in the past years the EU has resorted to a geopolitical outlook and vocabulary in the conduct of its external action. As part of its toolbox, a strategic communication policy was designed to effectively respond to disinformation trends. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated these developments.

Moving away from Fukuyama-inspired understandings of a world without contenders, the geopolitical lens can be a first step to recognise the diversity of the world beyond EU borders, and the fact international actors are guided by different norms and values. But in order to fully face – and engage with – “the world as it is” (Borrell, 2020), this paper advanced four areas of work stemming from current limits in EU approach: a) de-framing disinformation as an external threat, b) avoiding aggressive othering, c) listening more and d) overcoming Eurocentric narratives and practices.

The EU's temptation to use the language of power may in the end aggrandise differences, instead of similarities, and endanger international cooperation at a time when nationalist tendencies are gaining momentum. The set of recommendations proposed in this paper sought to address these risks by tackling three areas of work: top level discourse, strategic communication practices, and broader EU foreign policy tools. As part of the measures proposed, culture in external relations – an approach that the EU has pledged to implement in its foreign policy – will be the most suitable toolbox to shift the focus away from messaging to listening, with the objective to engage with the world on an equal footing.



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