



A Challenge for EU Public Diplomacy in India: Why the Union Needs a Europe House

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A series of crises affecting the EU since 2008, in particular Brexit, have strengthened India's view of the bloc as an organisation with a diminishing role in the world. The lack of knowledge and underestimation of the EU are important barriers to deepening the strategic partnership and accelerating cooperation with India, which are objectives of the EU strategy towards India adopted in December 2018. To succeed, the EU would need to improve its image and intensify public and cultural diplomacy. The establishment of a Europe House in New Delhi, as an institution promoting cooperation and knowledge of the Union, could play an important role in this.

On 20 November 2018, the European Commission presented its first strategy on India, indicating the need to build “a partnership for sustainable modernisation and rules-based global order.”¹ Once adopted by the Council of the European Union on 10 December 2018, the strategy became official policy of the EU and its Member States, and will remain so for the next 10 to 15 years. The document aims to strengthen EU cooperation with India on bilateral, regional and global issues, and goes beyond the traditional focus on the economy. It recognises that the EU has for too long prioritised its relations with China, and suggests that “a strong partnership with India is a key for a balanced EU policy towards Asia as a whole.”²

In the times of growing challenges from authoritarian China and Russia, and with uncertainty about U.S. foreign policy under President Donald Trump, the EU sees India as an emerging global player and a potential like-minded partner in stabilising the liberal international order. The Commission calls India an “emerging global power” and declares it “has an interest in India playing a greater role in a multipolar world, which requires a multipolar Asia.”³ The European approach is also driven by economic considerations. India's rapid economic growth (exceeding 7% of GDP a year over the last a few of years) and the liberal economic reforms undertaken by prime minister Narendra Modi offer new untapped potential for bilateral commerce and investments. The EU's trade in goods with India (the world's fifth-

¹ *Elements for an EU strategy on India. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council*, European Commission, Brussels, 20 November 2018.

² *Ibidem*, p. 1.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 2, 11.

largest economy by nominal GDP) stood at €91.5 billion in 2018, but this was still only 2.3% of total EU external trade and several times less than its trade with China (€604 billion).⁴

The strategy presents a set of tools and practical steps that should be taken if the EU is to deepen engagement and form a truly strategic partnership with India. Yet, the success of this policy will depend on overcoming a number of political, economic and technical problems, including one linked to mutual perception and understanding.

Perception of the EU in India

One of the traditional impediments to stronger cooperation between the European Union and India has been the information deficit, lack of knowledge and misunderstanding of the Union as a political entity.⁵ Indian experts have observed for years a big gap between self-perceptions of the European reality and how “outsiders” perceive it.⁶ The EU attracts limited attention in Indian media. One study carried out for the European Commission in 2015 found that “by way of comparison, the volume of EU coverage was more modest than that found in the other countries” (these being strategic partners of the EU).⁷ Indians are more likely to learn about the biggest EU Member States rather than the EU as a whole. The Union is hardly present in Indian political, expert or academic debates, and books on Indian foreign policy written by domestic authors rarely dedicate any attention to the EU. This all reflects the bloc’s low priority in the Indian worldview.

The EU is seen in India primarily as a regional economic organisation and a trade partner. Its competences in the political, strategic and security dimensions are often ignored. The distinctive activity of the Union in the field of human rights and promoting democracy is more a source of irritation than appreciation among Indian partners.⁸ As a result, India prefers to develop political and strategic cooperation with the main Member States (mostly Germany, France and the UK) than with the EU as a whole.

This is further underpinned by limited cultural cooperation between India and the EU. While Indians can know the culture of individual European countries well, they do not perceive the EU as a single cultural area with a common identity and a historical legacy. Hence, though both partners are “political unions” sharing many similarities, including the motto of “unity in diversity,” Indians look at the EU, in the first place, through the prism of its nation-states.

The image problem is not constrained to Indian elites but pervades general public opinion. One poll from 2015 showed that “there was relatively limited recognition of the EU, with the survey respondents ranking the EU below all of the countries used for comparison” (the United States, Russia, China, Japan and Brazil).⁹ However, “the EU was generally viewed positively (although less so than the U.S. and Japan), and rarely negatively (particularly in comparison with attitudes towards China).”¹⁰ Approximately two-thirds of sample respondents held mostly positive attitudes towards the EU. However, the study concludes that “Indians understand EU Member States better than the EU. People are aware of the EU as a holiday destination but not as a political entity. Simply, EU public diplomacy in India needs to be spruced up.”¹¹

This challenge has grown in recent years as the EU has faced a number of challenges. The image of the bloc as a weakening organisation and a declining global player has been strengthened by a series of crises since 2008.¹² These have been characterised by financial and economic issues, migration, the rise of populism

⁴ *European Union, Trade in goods with India*, European Commission, DG Trade, 3 June 2019.

⁵ R.K. Jain, S. Pandey, “The European Union in the Eyes of India,” *Asia Europe Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2010.

⁶ R.K. Jain, S. Pandey, “The Public Attitudes and Images of the European Union in India,” *India Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2012, p. 343.

⁷ *Analysis of the Perception of the EU and EU’s Policies Abroad*, Final Report, study requested by the European Commission’s Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), 7 December 2015, p. 110.

⁸ R.K. Jain, “India, the European Union and Human Rights,” *India Quarterly*, vol. 73, no. 4, 2017, pp. 411–429.

⁹ *Analysis of the Perception...*, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 132.

¹² G. Sachdeva (ed.), *Challenges in Europe: Indian Perspectives*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 2.

and nationalism, divisions between Eastern and Western Europe,¹³ and, most importantly, Brexit. The withdrawal of the United Kingdom will not only reduce the economic and political attractiveness of the EU but will also limit the main information channel through which Indians have been learning about European affairs.

However, the fact that the British have often painted the EU in rather grey colours means that Brexit also offers an opportunity to promote a more adequate and positive view of the EU. Nevertheless, discussion in India on ongoing challenges in Europe has in recent years overshadowed other positive developments, such as the recovery of European economies, defence cooperation, and Europe's growing interest in the security of the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁴ The fact that the EU's challenge to improve its image in India is still growing, at a time when the bloc has recognised the growing importance of this potential partner and decided to intensify bilateral dialogue, poses a serious risk to the implementation of EU strategy.

Promotion of the EU in India

The perception problem is recognised by the EU. For years, it has been taking action to improve its visibility in India and understanding among Indian society. European Institutions have supported European studies centres at several Indian universities,¹⁵ and Indians are the most numerous beneficiaries of the Erasmus Mundus/Erasmus+ students' and researchers' mobility programme.¹⁶ Under the Partnership Instrument, the EU finances cooperation and contact between experts, think-tanks and universities.¹⁷ The establishment of the EU-funded European Business and Technology Centre (EBTC) in New Delhi in 2008 was an important attempt to promote the EU as a source of modern technologies and to support cooperation between European and Indian companies.

The task of promoting the EU and fostering cultural cooperation is carried out primarily by the EU Delegation in New Delhi, in particular its small Press and Information Section (three or four people). It cooperates with public and private partners and outsources some bigger projects to consulting companies. The EU Delegation, among other issues, coordinates cooperation between nine EU Member State national cultural institutes associated in the network of European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC). It also prepares European education fairs, organises public diplomacy events (such as lectures by the EU Ambassador, European Day celebrations, European Climate Diplomacy Day, etc.) and prepares cultural activities such as the recent meeting of European and Indian authors as part of week-long exchanges with three winners of the EU Prize for Literature (EUPL).¹⁸ One of the most successful undertakings is the annual European Union Film Festival (EUFF), which has been run in cooperation with the Member States for more than 20 years.

¹³ S. Kanwal, "India and the European Union: Perceptions and Misperceptions," in: R.K. Jain (ed.), *Changing Indian Images of the European Union. Perception and Misperception*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 61–79.

¹⁴ This is well reflected in the Raisina Dialogue, the main high-level platform of discussions on international affairs organised in New Delhi annually since 2015, where Europe attracts more attention year by year, but mostly in the context of its struggles with multiple crises and as a source of instability.

¹⁵ There were in total 14 Jean Monnet projects realised in India until 2018 (mostly funding Jean Monnet Chairs). In addition, since 2018 the first two Jean Monnet Centres of Excellence for European Union Studies have opened in India with financial support of the EU. These are at Manipal Academy for Higher Education and at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. See: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/india/59456/launch-jean-monnet-center-excellence-european-studies-jawaharlal-nehru-university-ambassador_en.

¹⁶ Since 2004, when the Erasmus Mundus programme opened up for partners outside Europe, it has benefited more than 5,000 Indian alumni. In 2019 alone, 450 Indian students have been awarded Erasmus+ scholarship and mobility grants (the third biggest group internationally), including 89 for Erasmus Mundus Joint master's degree programmes (EMJMD). See: "Number of Indian students, varsities among recipients of EU-funds this year shoots up," *The Economic Times*, 6 August 2019.

¹⁷ An example is the EU-India Twinning Initiative, run since 2015 and supported by the EU as part of the EU Public Diplomacy and Outreach Project (EUPOP) to India, which brought several research institutions and dozens of experts from the EU and India together and produced high-quality quality policy-oriented analysis projects in diverse areas of EU-India cooperation. See more at: <https://euindiathinktanks.com/>.

¹⁸ "EU-India Cultural Relations: wide European literature in India," *Cultural Diplomacy Platform*, 12 September 2019.

Yet, despite these valuable contributions to cultural cooperation between the EU and India, both resources and a strong institutional framework for the more robust promotion of the EU in India are lacking. Most importantly, the EU has no cultural institute in India (or any other country) to promote European culture, values, priorities and heritage.

Nine Member States do have culture institutes (CI) in New Delhi, and many of them (for example, Germany, France and the United Kingdom) have offices in several cities across India.¹⁹ A recent study for the European Parliament has confirmed that these institutions' "main mission is to represent national interests, and European issues and diplomatic priorities are rarely integrated into the overall strategies and work programmes of each individual CI."²⁰ As a result, pan-European themes are promoted only through ad hoc and project-based activities, scattered among many different institutions and dependent on collaboration with individual Member States.

Moreover, the EU looks less favourable when compared to other global powers, which are building their positive image through their own institutions. For instance, the U.S. runs the big American Centre and Library in the very centre of New Delhi, along with five more centres in major Indian cities. Russia has a huge Centre of Science and Culture in New Delhi, together with four smaller ones in other cities.

In Search of New Tools of Cultural Diplomacy

The European Commission recognises that the actions taken thus far have been insufficient and that further efforts are needed. That is why the Strategy towards India acknowledged that "the EU and India would benefit from enhanced intercultural dialogue and people-to-people exchanges, building upon cultural diversity and multilingualism," and set a goal of "enhancing understanding of the EU in India."²¹ The document says "more dynamic EU public diplomacy is needed, with initiatives targeting decision-makers, influencers, opinion shapers, civil society and academic circles." It calls for "clear EU branding in India, with more targeted public and digital diplomacy initiatives, including by systematically reaching out jointly with EU Member States at national and regional levels."²² The strategy also proposes the establishment of "a European Innovation Centre to promote European science, technology and innovation interests in India."²³

Understanding the importance of culture in relations with India is in line with the general trend in EU thinking on external affairs. There is a growing awareness of the benefits of greater integration of cultural cooperation to promote bilateral relations. On 8 June 2016, Federica Mogherini, the EU high representative and vice-president, and Commissioner Tibor Navracsics put forward a proposal to develop an EU strategy of international cultural relations, in order to put cultural cooperation at the centre of the EU's diplomatic relations with countries around the world.²⁴ They also proposed the establishment of European Culture Houses in partner countries.²⁵ Their document called for enhanced cooperation with Member States' Cultural Institutes to nurture pan-European cooperation and increase the visibility and impact of joint actions. In February 2016, the Cultural Diplomacy Platform was launched (funded by the Partnership Instrument and operated by a consortium of Member States' Cultural Institutes and other partners) to foster the EU's international cultural relations.²⁶ On 22 May 2018, the European Commission adopted a proposal for a New European Agenda for Culture. Among its goals was the intention to "strengthen

¹⁹ *European Cultural Institutes Abroad*, study requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education, January 2016.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

²¹ "Elements for an EU strategy on India...", *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 13.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 14.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

²⁴ *Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations*, The European Commission, Brussels, 8 June 2016.

²⁵ These were defined as: "based on a partnership between the EU and the partner country in question and would enable cultural institutes and other stakeholders to come together and provide services to the local population, engage in joint projects and offer scholarships, cultural and educational exchanges." *Ibidem*, pp. 13–14.

²⁶ See more about CDP at <https://www.cultureinexternalrelations.eu/>.

international cultural relations, by making the most of the potential of culture to foster sustainable development and peace.”²⁷

The EU has also created a framework for more effective use of cultural diplomacy. On 8 April 2019, the European Council approved conclusions on the strategic approach to cultural relations.²⁸ These conclusions indicate the need to better include this dimension in the scope of foreign policy instruments and closer cooperation between Member States and EU institutions. The Council also noted preparation of a pilot initiative launched in January by EUNIC-Global with the aim of establishing European Houses of Culture. In June, the first 10 project ideas were selected (out of 44 applications) and will be implemented in 2020 in cities around the world.²⁹ However, this initiative is limited in geographical reach and level of ambition. Out of 10 proposals, five pilot projects designed as ad hoc cultural events will be undertaken between March and October 2020. The entire budget for the whole initiative is €833,000 over two years. None of the proposed actions is to be implemented in India.

Europe House in India

The EU could build on its attempts to create more effective cultural policy in relations with third countries, and strengthen efforts to reinforce cultural cooperation with India by establishing a permanent European cultural institution in New Delhi. This can be done as a follow up to the European Houses of Culture project, or as a new initiative. The European Commission could agree together with the Member States on the structure and name of the new institution (though it is proposed here to call it Europe House).

The institution should work in close cooperation with Member States’ national institutes and embassies, which could participate in financing and planning activities. It is worth drawing on past experience with the EBTC or the European Union Film Festival. Funds to finance permanent operations could be redirected from the EU budget as the Union reduces development assistance to India. Ongoing negotiations about the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021 to 2027 also offers an opportunity to secure funding for such an instrument in the coming years.

This would be an important step towards improving the EU’s visibility in India and bridging the gap in people-to-people contacts. Such an institution could deal with the overall promotion of the EU, and deepen cooperation in the fields of culture, the creative industries, science and education. It could financially support the exchange of artists, scientists, students, others in civil society, and so on. Unlike national institutes of culture, the Europe House would focus on showing the richness and diversity of the pan-European cultural heritage, and on developing the European dimension of cooperation. It could promote dialogue between European and Indian civilizations, highlighting European values, technological and social achievements. It could also help to disseminate knowledge about national culture in individual Member States, provided the pan-European dimension is maintained.

Unlike traditional cultural centres, the EU institution should have a double task. In addition to cultural promotion, Europe House should also serve as a source of information on the EU itself, about its history, functioning and political and economic role in the world. This would provide knowledge for Indian citizens about relations between the EU and India, and share information about programmes and funding opportunities for cooperation in various areas. It could serve a role similar to that of Europe Direct Information Points, which are part of a network across Member States designed to answer all citizens’ needs concerning the European Union.

²⁷ *A New European Agenda for Culture*, The European Commission, Brussels, 22 May 2018.

²⁸ *Council conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action*, Council of the EU, 8 April 2019.

²⁹ “European Houses Of Culture,” *Eunic-Global*, <https://www.eunicglobal.eu/european-houses-of-culture>, accessed 20 October 2019.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In order to achieve the objectives of the EU strategy towards India, it is important to address the problem of information deficit and misunderstandings about the EU among India's elites and society at large. While increasing the visibility and appreciation of the EU's international role will depend mainly on concrete decisions and actions undertaken at the political level (such as leadership meetings and project support in India), intensified public diplomacy efforts and the promotion of the EU as India's partner may play an important supporting role. Europe House could be a valuable tool to fill the existing gap in the system of disseminating knowledge about the EU in India.

With all information on the EU and its policies in one place, located in the heart of New Delhi and easily accessible to the local population, the centre would become an important cultural and public diplomacy tool of the EU Delegation. As an established institution with a physical presence in India, a stable budget and dedicated staff, it would be an opportunity to break from the ad hoc and project-based model and prepare a long-term and more systemic approach to promote the EU and cultural cooperation with the bloc in India. The responsibilities of Europe House should go beyond those of national Institutes of Culture and the proposed European Houses of Culture. Europe House should also serve as an information point about the European Union, its functioning, its international role, and its position as a partner of India.

Over time, it would be worth considering expanding its reach to other cities and regions in India. This would allow information about the EU to reach Indians living in different parts of this vast country. If this pilot project proved successful in India, similar centres could be opened in other strategic partner countries. Ultimately, Europe House could become a new instrument of EU external policy, supporting the bloc's role as a global player.

The creation of this institution is in the interests of all Member States willing to strengthen relations with India, highlight European civilization, and promote the EU as a strong actor in international relations. In particular, smaller Member States with modest budgets for promotion and cultural cooperation would benefit. It would also be valuable for Poland, which has had its own Institute of Culture in New Delhi since 2012, but would gain new funding opportunities for activities promoting Polish contributions to European culture.