

## «Italy Abroad»: for an Italian Public Diplomacy

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A country plan for Public Diplomacy is important for long-term relationships as well as for creating a positive image of a country. Its success requires an information service and academic skills.

1. Public diplomacy aims at creating an environment making for better comprehension of a country and its policies. Public diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy in that it involves interaction with foreign people and non-governmental groups. It mainly aims at: (i) building long-term relationships (e.g. by promoting cultural exchanges and the diffusion of a country's national language); (ii) creating a country's positive image (e.g. using mass media to spread knowledge of the country's ideas, ideals, culture and institutions among foreign audiences, as well as to describe its economic goals and current policies).

European governments have a sound historical background as far as promotion of external culture is concerned. One element common to all European countries in their cultural activity abroad may be

seen in the institutes of culture many governments established at the beginning of the 20th century. This “Institute model” was based on an academic cultural mould. A second point of similarity is to be seen in the mix of non-governmental and/or private activity implemented by autonomous agencies, on the one hand, and public funds provided by the ministries of foreign affairs, on the other. A further point of similarity is to be seen in the lack – at least up to now – of any relationships between external and internal cultural policy.

An information-based style of public diplomacy is located at the end of a scale that begins with pure cultural policies or mutual benefit co-operation in cultural relations between countries. During the first half of the 20th century, their political and commercial eminence, enhanced by an ever-increasing cultural influence and awareness overseas, led European countries to broadcast news and information (i.e. propaganda) in order to obtain direct material benefits. But after World War II, the role of news management and strategic communication as instruments for the exertion of mild power changed: countries began to manage news on particular events (international conflicts, environmental crises, etc.) in such a way as to defend their international image; news agendas were created through activities and events designed to reinforce and influence people’s perception (exhibitions, sport events, etc.).

Summing up, three or four models of cultural relations and public diplomacy emerged in the past: (i) state control through a ministry or an official agency (French model); (ii) non-governmental or autonomous agencies acting with funds provided by the government (British model); (iii) a mixed system with government responsibility over agencies’ activities (German model) and (iv) a voluntary or ad hoc system, whereby institutions and agencies adapt their activity to contingent circumstances and needs (Italian model).

The Italian model presents some problems. There are many opportunities for engaging in dialogue with foreign target audiences and constituencies about cultural, political and economic matters. Ad hoc programs could be useful in communicating with Italian citizens and foreigners who are sceptical or not well informed about Italy. Not only could the country’s appeal be used to boost Italy’s image abroad; it could also represent a means to consolidate internal legitimacy and consensus. But if we move toward the information dimension of public diplomacy, the Italian model does not work. Reactive pieces of news follow one another every hour and day, proactive strategic communication is planned over weeks and months: these activities require dedicated organisms.

2. One recent example of Italian public diplomacy is the exhibition “Italian Style dressing body and daylife”, organized in Doha (Qatar) by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture, which opened on November 12th, 2007. The same day, the Italian President, Giorgio Napolitano, inaugurated an event about Leonardo, organized by the Ministry of External Commerce. Qatar is a key country for international relations both in the economic and in the political field. The Emir of Qatar successfully uses Al Jazeera as an instrument for his public diplomacy in the Arab and maybe the entire world. Al Jazeera is the only Middle Eastern mass medium that uses satellite broadcasting infrastructures and a transnational language to address a wide regional audience. This may be the sole example of inverted information flow, i.e. communications from South to North. Thus, its TV studios and schools of journalism make the Emirate a strategic country. But Qatar is also a strategic country because of its gas. Napolitano presented the Emir’s wife, Moza bint Nasser al Missned, with a Bulgari hand-bag (a famous Italian brand). For the country’s foreign policy, Italian Style represents an added value of a non-tangible nature: it cannot be measured so easily! National brands are useful ways of attracting people’s attention to a country and displaying its quality. In my opinion, ad hoc programmes like the one I have just described could work.

Let me briefly refer to another example. As the chancellor’s delegate for cultural relations of Perugia’s University for Foreigners, the main Italian centre for promoting Italian language and culture abroad, I am going to visit Brazil and Argentina with the support of the Umbria Region and Umbria Jazz (a famous Italian musical brand). I am to make a speech on cultural relations and the



promotion of Italy at the Italian Institutes of Culture in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. Concerts and happenings are part of this new kind of territorial promotion. In today's globalized world, the development of decentralized international relations is inevitable and essential for the growth of a nation and its territories. Both in Argentina and in Brazil there are big communities of Italian expatriates and it is expedient that they should reinforce awareness of their common cultural and linguistic heritage. Establishing long-term relationships with emigrants is a good way to gain a foothold overseas. The Italian government could organize events and undertake comprehensive nation-promoting programmes involving its best regional or territorial brands, with the ultimate aim of providing guidelines for Italy's external cultural relations, through the promotion of single regions as well as national language and culture. Regional external relations are not in competition with traditional diplomacy, nor do they represent any imitative replay. On the contrary, they can be understood as an effect of the reshaping of interests and constituencies. In my opinion, ad hoc programmes like the ones organized in Brazil and Argentina could work.

3. Only if it is able to capitalize on its improved reputation and build it into something more solid can a country enjoy an enhanced reputation for programming events. As a first step in any cultural or brand promoting programme, ministries should cooperate to issue lists of activities and target-countries. Another important element allowing public diplomacy to work as an effective tool in foreign affairs and cultural-economic relations is an informed and productive interaction between ministries and other institutions, so that they can identify the positive effects of each other's activities, and calculate how to boost any effective contributions, while scaling down things that do not work.

Italy needs a coherent public diplomacy. It can be obtained through a sort of "Wireless File" providing both an information service of past activities and a news service for the press. In the first case, public diplomacy's potential contribution to Italian foreign policy could be enhanced if its announced goals were put into a clear programme or country plan. In order for Italy to be better understood, a specific national Agency should manage the plan and the Wireless File. The communication process underlying the conduct of the Agency for public diplomacy should aim at promoting international dialogue as a two-way relationship, informing and understanding, rather than making points.

A country plan is important for long-term relationships as well as for creating a positive image of a country. But it is much more important to relatively short-term issues of immediate foreign policy. In this second case, activities relating to strategic communication are needed, which require specific organisms. I am not thinking of a centralized Press office devoted to the management of foreign news! I am referring to a particular branch of the Agency, which could serve as a resource for framing and advocating teaching of and training in public diplomacy (and strategic communication) as an academic subject. Framing means selecting and highlighting some facets of particular events or issues and making connections among them so as to enhance the evaluation of specific geopolitical areas. Training means simulating activities and action-plans in the different geopolitical areas by the various institutions.

Public diplomacy is a "learning experience" among countries. Its success requires an information service and academic skills.

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