

Public diplomacy and the NATO brand



The Alliance's ongoing battle for hearts and minds in an ever more clustered media environment

Dr. Stefanie Babst

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We are living in an age of globalised communication where information has become more fragmented than ever. Every day millions of videos, images, news and personal comments are uploaded on websites, chat rooms and other social web applications, making it hard for the average citizen to find his way through the overflow of information. This evolving communications environment also has a number of downsides; for national governments and international organisations it is now much harder to get their messages across. The top-down communication patterns of the Cold War era are increasingly being replaced by people-to-people diplomacy and peer-to-peer relationships and networks. Not surprisingly, institutional communication channels rank among the least trusted.

This emphasizes the ever-greater need for well-planned public diplomacy efforts. Strategic communications, branding and public affairs are widely seen as essential tools to win over the hearts and minds of foreign audiences and convince them that a country's or organization's values are worth supporting. With a lot of governments hiring PR firms to improve their image abroad, the branding industry is said to have skyrocketed over the past ten years. While it is already difficult for countries to change their image for the better, it is even harder for multilateral bodies, as citizens find the policy-making processes of large international organisations like the EU or UN too complex and distant from their day-to-day concerns.

Euro support for NATO still high

The good news for NATO is that the Alliance still enjoys a highly recognisable brand name. As international and national surveys show, NATO is widely associated with security and defence and perceived as a transatlantic provider of peace and security. According to the Transatlantic Trends survey that the German Marshall Fund published on 15 September, majorities (59%) in 11 European NATO member countries and the United States (60%) still believe that NATO is essential for their security. The exception is Turkey where only 30% believe NATO is essential. Even in Russia opinions about NATO are improving. In 2009, only 24% of Russians held a positive view of NATO; currently 40% express a favourable opinion.

However, the leaders of the Alliance would be well advised not to take public support for NATO for granted, as attitudes to the NATO-led operation (ISAF) in Afghanistan demonstrate. The prevailing view in many European nations is to see the number of NATO troops reduced or totally withdrawn. As the GMF survey revealed, more than half of West Europeans want to see their troops withdrawn from or reduced in Afghanistan, with Poland highest on the scale (77%) and Turkey lowest (47%). Support for NATO's operation in Afghanistan has also started to decrease in the United States, where 41% wish to see their troops come home or be substantially reduced. Against this background NATO must do a

better and more coherent job of explaining their strategy in Afghanistan and convincing parliamentarians and the public why it is important to finish the job.

What is NATO's 21st century role?

At the same time the Alliance needs to tackle another fundamental challenge. Simply put, it must better explain what the Transatlantic Alliance is all about in the 21st century. National and international surveys demonstrate clearly that the public at large, and particularly the post-Cold-War generation, has only foggy ideas of NATO's new missions and policies. While a considerable degree of trust and confidence in the organization as such remains, many people have difficulties relating NATO to the new global security threats. Others question the need to invest in defence or view NATO primarily as a defence against Russia. All of these perceptions and assumptions are wrong. The sad fact is that our world has actually become more fragile following the end of the Cold War. Terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, threats posed to our energy security, information infrastructure and commercial shipping as well as regional conflicts all require urgent security responses. No single government can tackle this expanding number of problems on its own. The Alliance remains the best and most effective transatlantic forum to do exactly this, but NATO's efforts to play an efficient role as a security provider have clearly not always been fully understood by our publics.

New media and the military

How does NATO respond to this? The Alliance has come quite a long way in embracing a new and modern understanding of communication policy. More than ever, journalists, think tankers, decisions-makers and NGOs are populating the Headquarters corridors and meeting with NATO experts. NATO leaders have also become more accessible for average citizens: every year thousands of visitors come to Alliance Headquarters to discuss the transatlantic security agenda with national and NATO officials and with the NATO Secretary General himself. It goes without saying that the organization has also overhauled its technological capabilities, aimed at bringing the NATO website and other audiovisual tools and products up to par. Online lectures, videos and discussions have made NATO's interface to the outside world more transparent and interactive. There are no taboos: topics range from the new Strategic Concept all the way to the challenging operation in Afghanistan. When it comes to the use of new media tools, NATO's Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, can claim to be a frontrunner. He runs personal Facebook and Twitter profiles and responds directly to questions and comments from ordinary citizens at his digital "Secretary General's Corner". NATO's commanders have clearly come to understand how important a modern and responsive public diplomacy strategy is for the organisation. They have grasped that NATO's image rests in their own hands. Ultimately, however, a strong and positive brand can never be constructed through slogans and logos alone. It needs to be earned through convincing policies and political actions.

Dr. Stefanie Babst is the NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy. She is one of NATO's most senior women in the International Secretariat. The views expressed in this article are solely her personal opinions and do not represent an official NATO position.