

## **Research Project Summary**

### **Tattered global reputation? The EU, the ‘refugee crisis’ and social media**

#### **Background**

As a hybrid and ever evolving political entity in a world still dominated by states, the European Union (EU) is constantly striving to gain greater recognition as an independent and effective actor in global affairs. These efforts at strengthening its presence on the world stage have been at the centre of the organization’s activities since foreign policy officially became an area of EU competence in the 1990s. Since then, the EU has substantially expanded the scope and size of its diplomatic capabilities and activities. The EU currently boast a dedicated foreign service (External Action s Service), with a capillary presence across the globe (Carta 2015) and it is active in numerous military and civilian missions around the world.

The EU has also become more active in the realm of ‘public diplomacy’ (Cross 2013). This effort stems from the recognition that in order to project a more appealing image to the rest of the world the EU has to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of foreign populations, and it can accomplish this goal by building on one of the EU self-proclaimed major assets, namely its image as ‘force for good’ promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The EU has deployed more resources for these efforts, supporting cultural and outreach events and ‘people to people’ activities that showcase Europe and its member states beyond Europe. The EU has also embraced more eagerly public communication (see European Commission’s ‘Plan D’; Badouard & Monnoyer-Smith, 2013) using both traditional and ‘new’ media.

These efforts’ stated goal is to ‘improve perceptions of the EU’ (EU 2016) and thus increase the organization’s international reputation. Yet there are challenges to build a coherent and inspiring narrative about what the EU is and stands for that resonate with foreign publics. Some of these challenges are structural, and have to do with the peculiar ‘postmodern’ (i.e. complex, unfinished, ever evolving, contested) nature of the EU project which affects the type of content to be diffused and the ability of non-European publics to ‘get’ what the EU represents. These challenges are compounded by the still underdeveloped and chaotic features of EU structures that should manage the narrative (competing actors and interests in EU public diplomacy, lack of coordination; lack of resources, etc. References). Besides these long terms challenges, there are also short-term ones, which are more contingent, less predictable, but with the same potential to destabilize the EU’s reputation. These situations originate from events beyond the EU control and whose implications undermine the EU official narrative about itself. One of these events is the ‘refugee crisis’./ In recent times, these events have taken the form of a series ‘crises’ (e.g. the ‘Euro crisis’, the ‘Refugee crisis’), which have seriously put to the test the EU’s reputation as a competent, coherent and progressive political entity.

There seems to be a consensus among commentators and EU officials that these crises, and the way in which the EU has handled them, negatively affect the way EU is perceived around the world. At the height of the refugee crisis, for instance, European Commission President Juncker was quite blunt in his assessment of the crisis's impact on the EU: "EU's reputation is being damaged worldwide by the failure of member countries to manage the refugee crisis."<sup>1</sup> The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security policy of the EU Federica Mogherini, stating that EU action on the issue of the refugee crisis "(..) greatly weakens our (i.e. the EU's) credibility abroad"<sup>2</sup>. These claims, however, are based on anecdotal evidence, and they lack clarity on what 'EU reputation' consists of, who is influencing it, and on the mechanism linking crises and EU's reputation. As a result, the assessments provided are superficial, incomplete and possibly skewed.

### **Research project's objectives**

This research project seeks to provide a systematic and empirically grounded answer to the question of the impact of external crises on EU reputation, using the 'refugee crisis' as main case study. Theoretically this paper builds on the literature that has focused on EU's 'international identity' and external perceptions (Cederman, 2001; Lucarelli, 2006; Lucarelli and Manners, 2006; Sjørnsen, 2006) and expands on this body of work to include insights drawn from organizational theory, crisis management and consumer research.

The premise of the proposed argument is that reputation is a dialogical process, characterized by an ongoing communicative exchange between a reputation-seeking entity and reputation-builders. The dialogical nature of reputation has been recognized in the EU literature; yet, when examining EU's reputation-making process, the focus has tended to be on the on first component of this dyadic relation, namely what the EU as organization is doing to build its reputation, and especially its communication strategies (Elgstrom 2007). To analyze the content and impact of these 'image building' exercises, scholars have therefore relied on EU official public relations practices (e.g. external communication and media relations efforts, EU institutions and individual officials' presence on mass media)<sup>3</sup>.

In order to rebalance this over-emphasis on EU official channels and incorporate other 'external' actors who play a central role in determining what the EU reputation is, this paper adopts what in organization theory is called a 'outside in' approach. In this perspective, the emphasis is on individuals who are not affiliated with the organization under consideration but that through their feedback contribute to the organization's reputation building. In other words, the primary source

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/europe/2016/01/16/refugee-crisis-has-hurt-eus-reputation-juncker-admits>

<sup>2</sup> <http://meta.mk/en/mogerini-eu-go-gubi-ugledot-poradi-begalskata-kriza/>

<sup>3</sup> Brüggemann, 2010; Kaid, 2008; Laursen & Valentini, 2013; Maier, Strömbäck, & Kaid, 2011; Nesti, 2010; Spanier, 2010; Valentini, 2003, 2008, 2010; Valentini & Laursen, 2012). News management activities and practices of the spokespersons of the European Commission (Spanier, 2010); the Council of the European Union (Laursen and Valentini 2013); national representatives at the EU (Brüggemann (2010). The focus on EU image activities is also central Martins, Lecheler and de Vreese (2012) the study of perceptions of Brussels correspondents regarding the Commission's information quality.

of reputation is “customer experience”. These experiences in turn will shape reputation depending on the actors, situation, issue, temporal framework involved, in recognition of the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon, (and thus countering some simplistic understandings of the concept available in the literature.)

Empirically, this paper will assess the impact of the refugee crisis on EU reputation by examining the online activities of private individuals expressing their opinions on the EU and its handling of the crisis on twitter during the height of the crisis (July 2015- June 2016). As the focus is on the EU ‘international’ reputation (i.e. beyond Europe), the study covers tweets from individuals who are based outside the EU. (The analysis of the collected data is based a combination of network analysis and emotional analysis.)

### **Methodological issues**

This work seeks to complement existing research that has sought to empirically assess how the EU is perceived (both within and beyond Europe). These works have included surveys (Valenti 2013; Eurobarometer data; Chaban et al 2015), interviews with experts and policy-makers (Elgström’s 2007), content analyses of traditional media (Meyer, 1999; Van Noije, 2010; De Vreese, 2004). While useful, these studies and data collection techniques have some limitations. Interviews and media analyses reflect the views of experts. Surveys that seek to capture ‘popular’ reputation raise issues of salience and sampling. Social media has not been extensively used as methodological tool to study perceptions of the EU abroad (for an exception, see Chaban et al. 2015). Social media analysis nonetheless has the potential to offer a more comprehensive, detailed picture of EU reputation.

The choice of social media as main data collection technique stems from both theoretical methodological considerations. The theoretical reasons for using twitter to study reputation stem from the discursive, dialogical, public and networked nature of social media (Humphreys 2016), all central features in reputation-building. Social media such as twitter represent platforms on which communication among individuals (and organizations they represent) takes place. Communicative practices (e.g. tweets) are prerequisites to build reputation, as evaluations of an entity have to be expressed publicly in order to contribute to an entity’s reputation. These communicative practices are dialogical, as they entail exchanges between users, and these interactions in turn create networks of individuals who share common interests (an ‘imaged community’ (Grudz et al.).

Methodologically, social media as source of data is consistent with outside in approach, for it encompasses views of a potentially large section of the population over a particular subject or organization. It is also unprompted (hence avoiding selection bias and salience of subject) and unfiltered (with the exception of totalitarian regimes). It is also free to use, public (or perhaps semi-public), multicast (i.e. many to many), interactive, and networked. Twitter as data collection technique is used extensively in consumer research, but less so in EU research, and its potential has not been fully exploited.