Hard facts about Europe's soft power

Is "soft power" a meaningless term that Europe's battered policymakers have embraced to cheer themselves up? Eneko Landaburu, the European Commission's Director General for External Relations, says that it amounts to a set of very solid EU policies

Ever since the bi-polar world of the cold war gave way to the uncertainties of today, discussion about how to order the world seems to come down to hard versus soft power. And in the minds of a general public unsettled by a fast-changing world, this comes down to two key questions: has Iraq proved the futility of hard power, and if so, what else can provide stability in today's world?

This is what makes the debate on the EU's soft power much more than an academic one – can we reassure our citizens that the European Union has the answers to one of their most pressing concerns? We in the EU have grown used to citing its enlargement process as the clearest illustration of our new-found soft power. If one looks back to the early 1990s, many disaster scenarios were indeed avoided: with the tragic exception of much of former Yugoslavia, national leaders' eyes were fixed on the prize of EU accession.

The undoubted success of the most recent enlargement was due, like the ones before it, to the fact that the states involved were all more or less well run and functioning democracies. In the central European countries, public opinion there saw EU membership as a chance to fulfil their yearning to "return to Europe". Enlargement therefore built upon and channelled Europe's soft power, and it was able to take root alongside the tender shoots of reform that had been tentatively growing in some parts of the region ever since the Helsinki Accords of 1975. As well as the gravitational pull of the Union's soft power, enlargement was also able to rely, when properly handled, on a reaction in the candidate countries to years of Soviet misapplication of hard power.

The process that led in May 2004 to the largest ever influx of new members showed us the value of what we in the EU now enjoy. It held up a mirror to the European models and

to the community method that we have adopted for safeguarding them. Enlargement made us appreciate the attraction that this holds to others, and the potential for our soft power to promote reform and help shape the global forces, rather than simply react to them. To that extent, enlargement as the centrepiece of Europe's reactions to the changes prompted by the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, has been the spur for the development of the EU's soft power.

The changes now under way in Turkey show this clearly. Turkey's accession process is still in its infancy, but those who hold that Kemalism will prove incompatible with democracy, and who therefore rule Turkey out of Europe, are going to find their thesis looking weaker and weaker as time goes by. We are going to see the concrete results of the EU's commitment to the principles in the Helsinki Accords that were also signed by Turkey, and were subsequently developed in the Copenhagen criteria for the peaceful promotion of freedom and justice.

Turkey's reform programme and our commitment to its accession are key drivers of the EU's soft power in the eastern Mediterranean

Turkey's own reform programme and our continuing commitment to its accession are thus key drivers of the EU's soft power in the eastern Mediterranean, where the ideal scenario sees the steady conversion of Hamas into a Palestinian version of Turkey's AKP Justice and Development Party.

For a more rigorous test of the EU's soft power, we should look at the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), where the magical carrot of EU membership does not lie behind every difficult technical negotiation. If soft power is, as defined by Joseph Nye, the leading American political scientist who coined the term, "the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals", then the willingness of our ENP partners to commit to targets which are gradually becoming the reform agenda for each country reflects a real deployment of soft power – a combination of attraction and persuasion.

The ENP is still a relatively young policy, with implementation of its first Action Plans having begun only last year. But look at the remarkable changes in governance, in Ukraine and Georgia for example, to see that already there are some concrete achievements. The foundations on which the ENP's success will be built are the credibility of the EU's own integration process; in other words, the normative power of the *acquis communautaire*. The lure of access to the EU internal market seems certain to focus reforms on those areas that will help our partners' own economies. Other pressures driving the ENP forward are the increasing focus on third pillar activity and recognition of the Commission's role at the centre of the process of combating threats in the areas of justice, liberty and security.

The ENP therefore nicely defines the nature of the EU's soft power; it is the credibility of the Community method within

the EU itself that gives us our ability to persuade others outside our borders. The corollary of this is that the further away from the magnetic attraction of the EU itself we intend to deploy our soft power, the clearer must be our member states' commitment to the unique formal and informal processes that make up the Community method. If we are to preserve an international order based on the rule of law and respect for human rights, democracy and good governance, the EU needs to persuade others of its own unwavering commitment.

There are also clear examples of our soft power on a global scale

There are also clear examples of our soft power on a global scale. Aside from the obvious example of the euro as the world's second reserve currency, there is the Kyoto Protocol, whose impact on environmental policy is increasing. Although the present US Administration has obstinately refused to look beyond the coercive aspects of the protocol to the market mechanisms that will underpin it, the support manifested by many of America's state governors and city mayors, as well as the wide-ranging plan aiming to cut carbon emissions in California by the use of carbon-credit trading, shows that the EU was right to support Kyoto.

There is also the establishment of the UN Human Rights Council, where the steady building up of an overwhelming majority of members on the basis of a coherent EU position secured a practical and workable solution in March of this year. Strengthening multilateral machinery on vital policies like this is one of our priorities, and it's now generally recognised that the EU's decision to support the final compromise text was decisive in ensuring its adoption.

On trade issues, one of the bugbears in our relations with China has been our insistence on respecting intellectual property. The higher that European economies move up the value chain, the more effort we must devote to protecting our ideas. This leads inevitably to friction when we respond resolutely, but the core of our approach is a classic of soft power – structured dialogues and working groups, combined with technical assistance. The success of this approach is that it goes with and not against the grain of the Chinese economy – as the Chinese economy develops we expect to see increasing demand from Chinese companies for tougher enforcement.

State-sponsored terrorism is being replaced by terrorist-sponsored states as the strategic planner's nightmare, and strengthening the sinews of fragile and failing states – "security sector reform" – is a key element of the "consensus on development" that EU member states adopted last year. This new consensus reflects years of experience, some of it a source of pride, some of it a source of valuable lessons, that the European Commission has had in administering its aid budget. While the jargon is relatively new, the EU's long experience is not. The EU had embarked on the long and difficult process of state-building before it became fashionable; reform of the judiciary, the establishment of

new democratic institutions, training for parliamentarians, assistance to police forces, human rights education, promotion of public involvement in decision-making and management of borders are all areas where the EU has a good deal of experience, not least on its own continent.

If we turn to the centrepiece of democratic life, the elections that have mushroomed across Europe since 1989, the EU is a visible and credible actor. Outside Europe, it sends on average 12 missions a year to places as diverse as Ethiopia, the Palestinian Authority and Afghanistan. These missions have made a real difference and are practical demonstrations of the EU's commitment to human rights and democracy. Needless to say, this effort is very much in our enlightened self-interest because democracies make better and more stable partners.

The EU is therefore a real player on the world stage because of its wide-ranging and comprehensive set of "soft-power" tools. Nevertheless, the EU's citizens should be aware that they will never get the ability to shape world events that most of them say they want unless they are prepared to pay the extra cost, either in financial terms, or in terms of institutional and political reforms that will give them the kind of hard power enabling the EU to act entirely independent of the US security umbrella. □

Eneko.landaburu@cec.eu.int