



Josep Borrell Fontelles being interviewed by journalists.
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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION, A KEY TO THE SUCCESS OF THE EU'S GLOBAL GATEWAY

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Introduction

In 2021, the European Union (EU) unveiled and commenced its flagship programme to partner with countries in its neighbourhood and around the world. The European Commission has "set out the Global Gateway, a new European strategy to boost smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport sectors and to strengthen health, education and research systems across the world". European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated: "We will support smart investments in quality infrastructure, respecting the highest social and environmental standards, in line with the EU's values and standards. The Global Gateway strategy is a template for how Europe can build more resilient connections with the world".

Between 2021 and 2027, *Team Europe* has been allocated a budget of up to 300 billion euros of investment to mobilise for sustainable and high-quality projects. These investments should, according to the policy statements of the EU, take into account the needs of partner countries. In addition, they should also ensure lasting benefits for the local communities (European Commission, n.d.).

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The aim is three-fold:

1. The Global Gateway will enable EU partner countries to develop their societies and economies.
2. It will create opportunities for the private sectors of the EU Member States to simultaneously invest but also remain competitive (given the higher risk profile in many cases of the partner countries).
3. Such investments are to be made whilst ensuring the highest environmental and labour standards, as well as sound financial management.

The Global Gateway is therefore the EU's contribution to narrowing the global investment gap that is not only the cause of many domestic and competitiveness stresses for countries around the world but is also one of the causes of geopolitical instability, as well as a source of nurturing security threats, both for them as well as for the EU and its Member States.

From a practical perspective, the EU commenced its Global Gateway activities with the Africa-Europe Investment Package, allocating roughly 150 billion euros in investments with African partners. In 2023, 90 projects were launched globally in the digital, energy and transport sectors to bolster health, education, and research systems.

A key player in this scheme is the European Investment Bank (EIB). The EIB's involvement endows the Global Gateway projects with the necessary financial rigour and discipline. Moreover, it also affords the various partners in the Global Gateway designated projects with the expertise, network, and professional excellence that the EIB possesses. These advantages accrue in addition to the EIB's financial resources as a financial institution. Some of the ongoing Global Gateway projects are already well advanced, particularly in the connectivity area, such as undersea cables and pipelines. Examples include the planned pipeline between Egypt and Greece, and the undersea data cables between North Africa and Italy, in which private sector companies play a key and leading role. The EU's enabling and supporting role is crucial in projects in which the private sector is a key provider, but the lack of overall risk-taking capability may hamper its ability to bear the financial burden, despite its much-needed expertise and discipline.

The Global Gateway, therefore, is a practical and effective way with which the expansion of the provision of products and services in the critical designated development sectors of the partner economies around the world can be expanded. This enhances the environment in which stability, security and prosperity can develop, improve, and take hold (Shirley, 2023).

Strategic Communication will turbo charge the Global Gateway

Narratives matter. They matter more when development partnerships are established in non-high visibility projects. High visibility projects include bridges, large monuments and buildings, and railway schemes, whereas non-high visibility projects include training, capacity building and similar activities.

This is not to degrade the importance of such projects, such as those undertaken by China, for example. It is rather to state the obvious in so far as the projects that are not highly visible are concerned: capacity building in the medical sector, for example, is

crucial for the functioning of society, employment, social stability, and prosperity. It is, however, largely invisible to the public, despite its obvious socio-economic importance. An example is training medical staff to conduct quick and effective cataract operations, as blindness caused by cataract results in unemployment, family instability and social problems. It costs less than \$27 per cataract operation, restoring a person's vision. Whilst saving the eyesight of a person is a humanitarian act, it simultaneously enables the person to go back to work, thus avoiding poverty and dependency of themselves and of younger dependants of theirs.

It has, therefore, a dual socio-economic and humanitarian function as with other similar avoidable medical situations. Building capacity in this sense is a fundamentally different approach to providing the latest high tech medical equipment to conduct the operations. The former is not visible to the public. The latter is. This practical and real-life analogy can be extended to undersea cables transporting invisible data, and to other similar nonvisible development partnerships.

From a strategic perspective, and in order for the Global Gateway to deliver on its full potential, the gap between visibility and non-visibility will need to close. Doing so will allow the Global Gateway to be seen as the values-inspired European arm reaching out to its partners around the world in friendship, and in the mutual interest of both in the quest for peace, stability security and prosperity for all. Strategic communication closes this vital and dangerous gap.

This is one of the main reasons underlying the urgent and critical need to incorporate Strategic Communication into every aspect of the Global Gateway. For example, in Albania, there is a widespread perception in society that China is the largest investor in their country. It isn't. The EU is. But that is the cost the European Union is paying for not utilising the key instrument, in soft power terms, of Strategic Communication in investment and funding activities. It was a similar story in Wales and Cornwall in the United Kingdom during the Brexit referendum. Both of these regions in Great Britain were recipients and beneficiaries of major EU funding but voted to exit the EU. These were, of course, not Global Gateway investments (given that the EU invested there years before the Global Gateways was launched) but the importance of incorporating Strategic Communication in the EU's investment activities, is identical. The lack of Strategic Communication as an integral part of the investment strategy can, therefore, have profound geopolitical consequences for the European Union itself.

Beyond the global partnerships that the EU is aiming to forge through the Global Gateway and closer to home, particularly as the consensus towards enlargement is gaining momentum, it is crucial to commence the urgent and long overdue task of incorporating Strategic Communications into the massive financial commitments, undertakings and processes that will accompany any enlargement plans (Lindner et al., 2023).

There are, therefore, three key tasks for Strategic Communication as an integral part to the financial commitments of the European Union both globally but also in the framework of enlargement:

1. For outside the EU, the Global Gateway will have to close the visibility gap between its projects on the one hand and what they deliver on the ground, on the other.
2. Within the European Union, to do the same as in (1) above but also to preventatively inform the member and candidate states with the facts of what the Union has committed in financial resources, and their outputs.

3. To articulate a positive and emotive narrative based, of course, on facts that frame the values of the EU in the practical daily lives of the recipient populations. Simultaneously articulating the strategic vision of common peace and prosperity, as a direct reflection of European values, is becoming increasingly important.

It is clear now that the activities of the EU's Strategic Communication are, and will be for decades, key to countering FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) (EEAS, 2023).

Inevitably, the Global Gateway will attract disinformation and misinformation, initiated by adversary and competitor states, that aim to sow doubt about its viability and effectiveness, and to potentially present it as a return of European influence in the partner countries. The aim will be to negatively influence the populations and political and economic leaderships of the partner countries, thus creating potentially hostile perceptions of the aims of the Global Gateway and its efficacy. The EU should expect and plan for campaigns that try to discredit the Global Gateway thus undermining the EU's message of partnership, common peace, prosperity and security. This area will be a key Achilles heel not just for the Global Gateway, but for the EU's core mission of achieving peace through positive cooperative and multilateral action, rather than strife. Integrating a Strategic Communications component in the Global Gateway and adopting a 'Comprehensive Approach' to the Global Gateway (EEAS, 2023), as well as in other financially-based investment and funding schemes, will act preventatively against such campaigns. It will also act as a mitigating instrument against malign activities targeting the broader EU aims, philosophy and intentions.

Strategic Communications is not a Press Release: it is a Comprehensive Approach

The EU's Comprehensive Approach, combining the various instruments of power at its disposal, must view its Strategic Communications' capability in contrast to the dark side of the hybrid threats spectrum.

Whereas hybrid activities aim to destabilise countries and societies, the comprehensive approach aims to stabilise countries. The Global Gateway, to deliver in full on its promise for both the EU and partner countries, must be situated in the broader strategic framework of the Comprehensive Approach. Otherwise, a great opportunity will be missed for no other reason than misunderstanding how the Comprehensive Approach is key to delivering the full effect of soft power, how the Global Gateway fits into this framework, and institutional inertia.

These updates are needed simply because the world has changed, and the EU is being targeted by various kinds of actors, state and non-state, for different, and sometimes opportunistically overlapping reasons. In the Mediterranean Basin, the risk arises that the Global Gateway narrative is hijacked by adversaries to present it as a neo-colonial scheme. This is where the EU must act preventatively to emphasise the narrative of a mutually-beneficial partnership. It is in this area in particular that specialist and expert EU units, such as the EEAS's Task Force South and the Data Analysis Team, can play a crucial role, provided that their contribution is not considered an addendum to the overall Global Gateway effort, but integral to it. These units should, therefore, be beefed up and adequately resourced given the fact that their operations will be vital to the success or otherwise of how Global Gateway partnerships are perceived by the host

societies. There is no second place in the battle of narratives, and it is a battle the Global Gateway partnerships cannot afford to lose.

A key factor here is to distinguish between the linguistic abilities of the EU to communicate with the partnership societies in their languages through spokespersons (Arabic for example), which is largely an information function, and Strategic Communications which is essentially a cognitive operation, the latter being the most important component of the information domain. Having an Arabic speaking spokesperson is of course an excellent and necessary factor, but there is a need to design and deliver an integrated Strategic Communication Plan that has both preventive measures and narratives as well to take the initiative to fill the narrative's space and vacuum with the EU's own narrative. North Africa and Egypt, given that the first partnerships are being developed in these countries, offer an excellent opportunity for the EU to integrate a Strategic Communication Plan, both preventative and forward looking, into its Global Gateway projects.

As such, integrating Strategic Communication into the Global Gateway enhances the security of the EU. There are, therefore, two key functions for Strategic Communication as an integrated operation within the Global Gateway:

1. **Reputational narratives:** The 'Battle of narratives' in this context is a key underlying driver. In other words: where does the Global Gateway fit into the battle of narratives and can the battle be won, particularly given the wide and deliberate scope of hostile FIMI operations? And how can the positive legacy of the Global Gateway projects be preserved in the future and in spite of the gyrations of geopolitics and international relations?
2. **Reputational crisis management from a Comprehensive Approach perspective.** In other words: How can adverse events be considered, as well as malign narratives attempting to discredit Global Gateway projects, and ultimately the EU's intentions?

In this context, the Global Gateway scheme needs to acquire the means to be able to defend itself, and to maximise the effects of its achievements, in the space in which the 'battle of narratives' is already taking place.

Technology, the Global Gateway, and the accelerating need to integrate Strategic Communication

The optimistic and forward-looking Global Gateway narrative cannot remain insulated from the ravishes of the negative aspects of disruptive technologies. AI-enabled deepfakes, and the so called "cheap fakes" across the Middle East and Africa are a prime threat (Cosser, 2023).

Dealing with the potential likely impact of the output of these technologies requires the integration of the Strategic Communication capability into the heart of the Global Gateway scheme. AI-enabled synthetic data deepfakes, robotic microtargeting of individuals and organisations based on the largely automated identification of their profiles, and the shift from 'social media clicking' to the AI-enabled bot interaction creating 'intimacy' as a driver of human-machine interaction, are but a few direct threats. They can only be dealt with, whether in the partner societies or even in European societies, through integrating Strategic Communication into the Global Gateway.

It will be crucially important, and mission-critical, to maintain the democratic political support of voters for the budgets and spending of the Global Gateway, particularly in an economic climate where growth is anaemic at best, and inflation has evolved into a cost-of-living challenge. To maintain the voters support for the continued spending on Global Gateway projects, without this spending being exploited by malign actors through FIMI and other operations, it is essential to move beyond confusing 'Strategic Communication' operations with 'Communications and PR' functions. There is, in fact, little in common between the two, particularly when it relates to developing a comprehensive approach to such a key strategic instrument as the Global Gateway.

A key rising threat is the combination of microtargeting and AI-enabled deepfakes, the latter sowing not only doubt over "what" is true, but "who" is real as well. To abuse such technological tools by using them to target specific individuals and organisations based on their public profiles online is a clear threat to activities such as elections. These tools can be used also to undermine the credibility of schemes and projects. They are sophisticated and require specialist, comprehensive and strategic efforts to counter their malign influence. In the case of the Global Gateway and its projects, partner societies may be susceptible, as are European societies, to believing the deepfakes and magnifying their impact through microtargeting and social media. This should be a key area in which Strategic Communication, especially in partnership with civil society organisations in the partner countries, should be at the heart of both promoting the Global Gateway and its aims, but also in defending it.

In conclusion, the Global Gateway will not deliver on its full promise without Strategic Communication being at its heart. Adversely, without Strategic Communication at its heart, the potential exists that it could be turned, in terms of perceptions and their practical on the ground consequences, into an information and cognitive weapon undermining the EU strategic interests and objectives.

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