
**European Union's Geopolitical Turn to Soft Power: Exploring EU's Recent Public
Diplomacy Efforts In Eastern Partnership Context**

The Case of the Young European Ambassadors Initiative

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, Miranda Betchvaia, candidate for the MA degree in Master of Arts in Public Policy (Mundus MAPP), declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 15 July 2021

Miranda Betchvaia

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Miranda Betchvaia', written in a cursive style.

Abstract

The thesis examines how the European Union attempts to fulfil its public diplomacy goals in the Eastern Partnership Region. Applying Nye's soft power framework and public diplomacy key concepts, the contribution analyses the case of the Young European Ambassadors initiative, the key pillar of the EU's most extensive communication campaign ever developed for the Eastern Partnership countries. Based on the YEAs case, the given thesis argues that, since 2015, as a result of the EU's 'geopolitical turn', it strives to deliver more sophisticated public diplomacy efforts using local intermediaries and youth networks in the EU and the EaP. Public diplomacy results in more soft power (a state's ability to co-opt or attract). Therefore, in the absence of tangible sticks and carrots in the EaP states, where the membership perspective has never been offered, the EU attempts to seduce the public with its foreign policy goals in the current geopolitical order. Broadly, this contribution supports the idea that perceptions of foreign publics are crucial in determining state behaviour and outcomes in international relations. The argument is supported by the data gathered from the interviews and content analysis of the relevant literature, EU communications, policies, and social media platforms.

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It is time to move forward.

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Abbreviations

EU - European Union

EEAS - European External Action Service

DG NEAR- Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations

ENP - European Neighborhood Policy

EaP - Eastern Partnership

YEAs - Young European Ambassadors

PD - Public Diplomacy

CFSP- Common Foreign and Security Policy

PI - Partnership Instrument

ENPI- European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument

AA- Association Agreement

DCFTA - Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas

1 Introduction

The European Union has grown into a significant global player. Yet, it continues to struggle to project a solid and consistent image of itself in international affairs. The EU is a solid normative and civilian power; it plays a crucial role in humanitarian aid, peace and security, democracy, environmental sustainability, multilateralism, human rights, fundamental freedoms, and development (European Union, 2016). Despite the EU's political influence and what has been accomplished so far, the awareness about the EU and what it does is still limited (Cross, 2013). Since being founded, European Union has been facing various crises, questioning the EU's unparalleled success story. Undoubtedly, the EU has brought peace and prosperity to its citizens after the wars and conflicts. However, the EU does not only operate within its territory, but its interests are broader. European Union has increasing ambitions as an international actor, requiring close cooperation with its direct and indirect neighbours.

The European Union has already established itself as a worldwide player with increasing importance and influence on the international arena. The EU's challenge is different: people outside Europe are unsure what the Union stands for, what it does or whether it matters (Lynch, 2005). Only the political actorness does not determine the success of the European Union as an international actor. The EU has to ensure that the cooperation and partnership benefits and awareness about them reach the broader public. So that not only the governments but citizens of target countries opt for a closer and deeper partnership. Adequate communication from the European Union is required to increase the effectiveness of EU external policies and reach goals set, especially in neighbourhood policies. Winning the hearts and minds of the recipients is a precondition for success; therefore, emphasising the approach and emphasising the message are

typically two sides of the same coin. That statement is undoubtedly relevant in dealing with the new “neighbours,” specifically in the enlargement and negotiations process — perhaps the most successful and effective foreign policy the European Union has ever undertaken (Lynch, 2005).

Broadly, the knowledge in third nations about the EU institutions and policies directed to third countries has been low, fragmented and incomplete (Baltag, 2019). The EU’s latest public diplomacy efforts in third nations as an outcome of “geopolitical turn” have resulted in more coherent public diplomacy efforts. Moreover, the EU’s geopolitical scope is not limited to “hard” spheres, interests and threats. The conceptualisation of global politics as a contested arena stresses the role of “soft tools” in international power struggles (Valenza, 2021). Russia’s and China’s sophisticated communication operations to earn public support among domestic constituencies and global audiences might be considered the continuation of “politics” through other methods from this perspective. The EU is attempting to become a stronger player on the novel playing field and reach out to the public inside the EU and its neighbourhood by emphasising strategic communication and public diplomacy (Valenza, 2021). The EU’s “geopolitical turn” implications are evident in the ENP countries; however, they have not been discussed from the academic perspective yet.

The EU closely cooperated with the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) member states. ENP is one of the main priority areas of the European Union that is promised to ensure security and stability in its contested neighbourhood. The government-to-government cooperation have led to partnership milestones, such as the Association Agreements, Free and Comprehensive Trade Agreements, Visa-Free regime and other country-specific agreements. However, to ensure the coherence and stable continuation of cooperation in line with the EU’s Global Strategy, with ENP countries without a membership perspective, the EU should communicate more with the broader

public to determine the state's behaviour. Locals within the ENP countries and the EU should be aware of the cooperation benefits to advocate for the partnership. In this respect, the Eastern Partnership initiative represents an intriguing case to investigate. Mainly because of the political ambitions EaP countries have demonstrated, resulting in partnership milestones. Besides, considering EU's "geopolitical turn" and new geopolitical approach in strategic communication and public diplomacy as a response to external threats from Russia and recently China. Besides, the EaP countries experience political unrest and instability, including the Belarus crisis, a war between Armenia-Azerbaijan and frozen conflicts in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Such crises are mainly due to Russia's aggressive interventions or value-driven opposition (Pro-Russian and Pro-European). As a response to such challenges, the EU's most extensive communication programme, "EU neighbours east", with the most significant pillar of Young European Ambassadors, was developed in 2015 towards the Eastern Neighbourhood countries. Which broadly aims at raising awareness about the EU and its benefits for the EaP citizens.

According to Melissen, "a state's image forms and transforms with or without PD. The identities of citizens within a state are shaped and reshaped with or without PD. This means that it is tough, if not impossible, to isolate the impact of PD on its own. However, it is possible to trace over time the changing nature of narratives and norms shared between two countries, which makes the constructivist approach to understanding PD quite promising" (Cross, 2013).

As it is almost impossible to measure the impact of public diplomacy, especially for the young initiatives, the project contributes to literature via tracing the EU's changed PD approach towards the EaP countries. Considering the relevance of the topic and an existing research gap, through the utilization of Joseph Nye's Soft Power theoretical framework and related key concepts of public

diplomacy, the thesis seeks to answer the research question: *how does the EU attempt to fulfil its public diplomacy goals in the Eastern Partnership Countries?*

The key argument of the thesis is that since 2015, the EU has been investing in coherent public diplomacy efforts, developing more sophisticated and less fragmented public diplomacy towards the Eastern Partnership Region, where the role of well-informed intermediaries have significantly increased. More soft power (a state's ability to co-opt or attract) results from public diplomacy. In the existing geopolitical order, the EU strives to seduce the public with its foreign policy ambitions in the lack of clear sticks and carrots in the EaP states, where the membership perspective has never been proposed. To support the argument, the case of Young European Ambassadors, the biggest pillar of the EU's most extensive communication campaign towards the EaP will be discussed. Even though the visibility of Young European Ambassadors has been increasingly rising in the EU-EaP partnership arena, there is no academic literature that addresses the initiative, the way it works and the key drivers behind its development.

The project uses qualitative research methods, notably interviews and content analysis, to obtain valuable material for analysis. Interviews with European Commission DG NEAR, European External Action Service EEAS, EU Neighbors East former and current team, and strategic communication professionals provided a great source of primary data. The EU communication papers, declarations, working papers, EU neighbour's east webpage, and social media platforms were indeed examined for content analysis.

The first section discusses the literature related to EU's Public diplomacy, its neighborhood policy in the Eastern Partnership region, key achievements, instruments, characteristics. The second section introduces the theoretical framework and key concepts. Followed by the methodology and

methods section. Analysis section discussed the data gathered and attempts to answer the research question via breaking it down in three sub-section, understanding the political climate as an underlying factor of the new communication agenda, discussing the main characteristics of Young European Ambassadors as PD actors and finally, introducing key challenges and opportunities of the initiative.

2 Literature review

2.1 European Union and Public Diplomacy

In order to gain international credibility and implement its ambitious goal, the EU has to prove that even though it is an ongoing project lacking *finalité*, it still manages to be a considerable power (Duke, 2013). Historically, the EU's public diplomacy has been identified with its international component, which addresses foreign publics (Duke, 2013). The EU aims to better inform public audiences externally about its policies and the global actorness, which incorporates the consequences of internal policies externally. Based on the evaluation and public demand for transparency and accountability from EU citizens, the European Institutions turn to domestic audiences and external interlocutors to explain Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and receive broader support for European External Policy (Michalski, 2005).

According to the Treaty of Lisbon, the External Action Service (EEAS) is in charge of running EU Delegations worldwide. Delegations serve an essential role in representing the EU and its citizens around the world, as well as establishing networks and collaborations. The primary responsibility is to represent the EU in the country where they are located and to promote EU principles and interests. One of the fundamental aspects of EU delegations is conducting public diplomacy and increasing the visibility, awareness, and understanding of the EU (EEAS, 2019).

However, the delegations and almost all of the European Union's institutions and services engage in internal and external public diplomacy. For example, the Commission's external relations responsibilities have grown during the previous ten years as a result of the CFSP's inception, but possibly even more so as a result of the internationalisation of several Community policy areas, such as the environment or consumer protection, as well as EU enlargement and negotiations. The

Commission has built several policy networks to assist it in developing policy proposals and implementing policies, ranging from technical expert committees to administrative and diplomatic networks, NGOs, and socioeconomic interest groups (Michalski, 2005). For instance, the Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) plays a crucial role in delivering PD in foreign countries. DG NEAR is responsible for advancing the EU's neighborhood and enlargement policies and coordinating ties with EEA-EFTA countries in terms of Commission policy. The European External Action Service and the related DGs in charge of thematic priorities work closely with DG NEAR. DG NEAR encourages reform and democratic consolidation in Europe's eastern and southern neighborhoods while bolstering prosperity, stability, and security. DG NEAR supports the promotion of EU principles, policies, and interests in this region and the development of the EU's special relationship with its neighbors (Commission, 2021).

European Commission understands Public Diplomacy as follows:

“Public Diplomacy deals with the influence of public attitudes. It seeks to promote EU interests by understanding, informing and influencing. It means clearly explaining the EU's goals, policies and activities and fostering understanding of these goals through dialogue with individual citizens, groups, institutions and the media.” (Commission, 2007)

The Public Diplomacy of the EU is complex, considering the imprecise nature of the EU's overall actorness or, putting it another way, the kind of actor the EU wants to become on the international stage (Vogler, 2011).

European Union's foreign policy is determined by and reflects the key constitutional settlements that the EU is based on. The EU's constitutional settlement is defined in *fundamental principles*,

conceptualised ideas, procedural and rule-based norms. Basic principles include peace, democracy, the rule of law, respect of human rights and the equal representation and diversity in institutions; *conceptualized ideas* underpin European policy frameworks such as sustainable development, the social market economy, the single market, the domain of freedom, security, and justice, and, most recently, neighborhood policy; *procedural and rule-based norms* include good governance and institutional building (Michalski, 2005). Therefore, through strategic communication, the public diplomacy of the European Union delivers the information about the EU policies and opportunities directed to the citizens of specific countries, where the policies reflect and embrace the fundamental principles and norms of the EU.

European Union conducts public diplomacy mainly through the Partnership Instrument, as one of the leading foreign policy instruments. The European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument – known as the ENPI – is the foremost financial mechanism through which assistance is given to the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) Partner Countries (Commission, 2014). Enhanced cooperation and alliances are intended to boost the EU’s worldwide responsible leadership and raise its profile, mainly through public diplomacy. Partnership Instrument has dedicated €954.8 million between 2014-2020 years for conducting public diplomacy in partner countries. Such investments aim to increase understanding of EU views, policies and priorities, promote the EU’s values, interests and improve perceptions of the EU. The key actors in fulfilling goals set are academics and students, policymakers, policy influencers and multipliers, civil society organisations and cultural operators. Given actors engage in people-to-people activities, networking events, outreach activities, cultural and collaborative activities. ENPI intends to engage in a stratified dialogue with different audiences, addressing perceptions of the EU having a “hearing problem “. Besides, ENPI develops a centralised EU public diplomacy strategy

compromising a *finalite* set of core messages, encourages the development of personal links with the EU and most importantly, targets youth, with a particular focus on future decision-makers (Commission, 2014).

2.2 EU in its Eastern Neighborhood

The Lisbon Treaty bestowed legal identity on the European Union, allowing it to take a more active role in various foreign policy areas. Article 8 TEU sets up a new and distinct legal basis for the Union to establish neighborhood agreements (Hanf, 2011).

The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) of the European Union was introduced in 2004 to support and foster stability, security, and prosperity in the EU's neighborhood. ENP was revised in 2015 and deepened the cooperation framework for a more effective partnership (EEAS, 2021).

The ENP operates and develops ties considering the common interests and commitments to collaborate on significant priority areas with the partner countries in the EU's East and South. According to the EEAS, ENP promotes democracy, the rule of law, respect of human rights and social cohesion. In addition to that, considering the current challenges, based on the revised ENP policy, the EU works with its neighbors on economic development and stabilisation, security, migration, and mobility areas (EEAS, 2021).

The European Neighborhood Policy encompasses bilateral, regional and multilateral dimensions and provides a framework of relationships between the EU and each neighborhood country. The Eastern Partnership contributes to the broader objective of enhancing the EU's neighbors' stability, prosperity, and resilience, as outlined in the EU's Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy

and the 2015 European Neighborhood Policy Review. In addition, it contributes to achieving various global policy objectives, such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the UN 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development goals (EEAS, 2021).

The EU actively cooperates with its neighbours in the East, in the framework of the Eastern Partnership Initiative, which deals with the six EaP states Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Cooperation is promised to foster stabilisation, security and prosperity, harmonious with the Global Strategy of the European Union (Parliament, 2021). The partnership between the EU and six EaP countries is based on the conditionality mechanism, incorporating the stick and carrot principle. EaP employs incentive-based approaches, named as “more for more”, where the partner countries are expected to deepen their relations with the EU the more they comply with its demands, the more carrots they receive. Standing on such an approach, EaP has three frontrunner states (Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova) that have already signed the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade agreement with the EU. Besides, they enjoy visa-free movement within the Schengen area (Commission, 2019). The other three states (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus) are still striving for fulfilling the requirements set, while developing closer sectoral ties with the EU. European Commission and European External Action Service have identified 20 key deliverables for 2020, covering the key priority areas in EaP (EEAS, 2021): Stronger Economy (economic development and market opportunities); Stronger Governance (strengthening institutions and good governance); Stronger Connectivity (connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change); Stronger Society (mobility and people-to-people contacts). Eastern Partnership initiative also focuses on engaging with a broader spectrum of civil society organisations, gender equality and non-discrimination, and “clearer and tailor-made strategic communications” (Commission, 2021).

The membership perspective has never been put on the table for the EaP countries; according to the former President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, the European Neighbourhood Policy would be dedicated to turning “arc of instability” into a “well-governed ring of friends’ (a ‘ring of friends surrounding the Union and its closest European neighbours, from Morocco to Russia and the Black Sea’) (O’Rourke, 2003). However, given current political developments in the Eastern Partnership region, such as the political crisis in Belarus, a recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and unresolved “frozen conflicts” in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia raised concerns about whether the “ring of a friend” could evolve into a “ring of fire” (Taylor, 2015). Besides, the increasing presence of sophisticated public diplomacy efforts from Russia and China have significantly increased. As a new rising power player, China is happy to provide aid with no conditionality (Cross 2013). Such events send a clear message to the EU that political conditionality and government-to-government contact are solely insufficient. Therefore, the EU must find new means to influence EaP countries without a membership prospect to ensure stability, prosperity, and the fulfilment of other ENP goals. Despite the EU’s massive political influence in the Eastern Partnership region, European Union lacks the successful delivery of public diplomacy, which has been broadly acknowledged (Anneli Kimber, Ehtel Halliste, 2015). In the absence of clear “carrots,” the EU must ensure that citizens in the EaP nations continue to regard the EU as a vital partner and support the development of closer ties.

Communicating Europe to the rest of the world has always been a great challenge for the European project. Although the European Union and Eastern Partnership countries have collaborated in the scope of the European Neighbourhood Policy and delivered substantial advantages to citizens in the region, the EU’s visibility has not matched the massive assistance provided. In recent years, critical evaluations have stated that the EU’s soft power is eroding because it is losing ground in

engagement with its Eastern neighbours, particularly compared to Russia. The EU's signals to its neighbours have been characterised as unclear and incapable of competing with a more focused Russian approach (Alexander Bogomolov, 2012). Russian soft power is mainly based on evoking Soviet past nostalgia and religion, which strongly influences the EaP citizens and easily earns the public's faith.

Even though the EU is the largest donor and contributes significantly to securing benefits in EaP states, Kimber and Halliste conclude in their depth investigation that the EU's efforts are still largely unknown in the region. They assess communication activities and public opinion trends in Eastern Partnership countries and EU efforts in those countries that may be conveyed more effectively. According to the research, the EU has difficulty adapting to new communication realities and developing differentiated and focused communication approaches instead of depending on individuals to get information independently. Long-term communication strategies are frequently overlooked, and even when they are designed, they tend to remain on paper. Authors state that” *communicators need to move away from the standard approach using official meetings and events as the primary source for EU-related news and replace it with essential topics explaining how the changes and reforms will affect people in their daily lives*” (Anneli Kimber, Ehtel Halliste, 2015).

Jan Mellisen, as one of the key researchers of public diplomacy in the EU context, in his book: “the New Public Diplomacy Soft Power in International Relations” discusses the significance of communications in EU's foreign policy as an evolving dimension, saying that the EU already poses many of the required ingredients to mount a valuable public diplomacy strategy and if the member states and institutions need to present greater efforts (Mellisen, 2016). Besides, Mellisen also argues that the Commission is increasingly turning to internal EU audiences, in addition to its

regular external interlocutors, to explain and advocate in favour of EU external action and gain broader support in the area of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Therefore, the Commission attempts to cover two dimensions of public diplomacy, domestic European audiences and audiences outside the EU (Mellissen, 2016).

The EU's public diplomacy is still fragmented and not very sophisticated; nevertheless, some movements toward a more systemic approach are emerging. In 2015, the European Union, specifically European Commission DG NEAR, launched the most extensive communication campaign of "EU neighbours east". The Young European Ambassadors Initiative is a vital cornerstone of the EU's communication strategy with its Eastern Neighbours. The network aims to create awareness of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) cooperation, share EU related information, values, opportunities among youth and the rest of society, establish and develop youth policies, and work together for a better future in general. The network was built in 2016 as part of the EU's open neighbourhood program's EU neighbours east project. The initiative is currently in its second phase and is funded by the EU Regional Communication Program for the Eastern Neighborhood 2020-2024. The YEAs network now includes around 500 young people aged 16 to 26 from six Eastern Partnership countries, 27 EU member states, and the United Kingdom. YEAs are students, young professionals, and leaders whose actions and engagement initiatives are voluntary and carried out online and offline across EU and EaP countries (east, 2016). YEAs presence is expected to influence public opinion in favour of the ongoing Europeanization process and the Eastern Partnership countries via raising awareness about the tangible assistance and benefits resulting from the EU- EaP cooperation. The Young European Ambassadors network is an emerging initiative, receiving increasing interest and support from the EU and the public. Besides the active implementation of online and offline activities. YEAs participate in official

events and policy talks dedicated to the future of the EaP region. Their cooperation with the EU regularly, and their opinions and considerations are taken into account (Commission, 2020).

Even though the European Union invests a significant amount of money in youth programs, it has always struggled to build a strong network of beneficiaries who could help bring the EU and the EaP closer together under one umbrella initiative. Still, the YEAs initiative tries to prove different (intvw #1 #2 #3 #9). The Young European Ambassadors network has been a new cup of tea for the EU and its external partners, with the Eastern Partnership countries being the first location where the initiative was implemented. The network has been acknowledged as a success story and was transferred to the Balkan states in 2019 (WeBalkans, 2019).

Given the lack of consistency of the EU's public diplomacy and current geopolitical turns of giving more emphasis on soft power, the EU's new attempts to provide strategic public diplomacy is an intriguing topic to investigate. It is curious to explore the key drivers behind developing an innovative regional communication network of young people and how the initiative works. Besides, the challenges that affect the delivery of PD by the YEAs is worth looking at.

3 Key Concepts and Theoretical Framework

The following section explains the relevant theoretical framework and essential concepts expected to help readers see the YEAs initiative and its operations from a broader perspective of the EU's neighbourhood policy.

After carefully reading the literature on public diplomacy in general and EU public diplomacy in particular, it has been determined that Joseph Nye's theoretical framework of soft power represents the most reliable source to be discussed alongside the concept of public diplomacy in the given section. Soft power theory allows a reader to view the "broader context" of the EU's public diplomacy activities in the Eastern Partnership Region through young people.

Soft power represents an increasingly popular concept in foreign policy discourses. Those who claim to be realists yet dismiss the value of soft power are akin to persons who don't comprehend seduction (Nye, 1990). The term "soft power" itself is stretched beyond Joseph Nye's definition of the "ability to do things and control others, to get others to do what they otherwise would not" and "getting other states to want what you want". Nye suggests that soft power actors exercise influence through "intangible factors such as ideology, culture and institutions". He states that others are more willing to follow it once an actor has an attractive culture or ideology (Nye, 1990). According to Nye, a country may obtain desired outcomes in world politics not necessarily by forcing other countries through the threat, use of military and economic weapons, but by using soft power in a way to make other countries want to follow, admire its values, emulate its example and aspire to its level of prosperity and openness e.g. "*co-opt people rather than coerce them*" (Nye, 1990). Soft power is more than just influence; but it is one form of it. The impact can be made by hard power as well. However, Soft power encompasses more than persuasion or the capacity to persuade others via argument. Soft power is an attractive power in behavioural terms (Nye, 1990

). Nye defines essential resources of soft power as follows: *The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)* (Nye, 1990).

Traditional diplomacy, according to Nye, strives to persuade foreign governments and their representatives to advocate for their strategic interests and concerns on specific subjects, using the stick-and-carrot method and the usual array of instruments employed by foreign ministries around the world. On the other hand, public diplomacy has its own set of goals, techniques, and aims. Nye discusses how PD promotes “ideals” and “wants” in another country by collaborating with society and non-governmental organisations. Its goal is to study how the advocate country is perceived in those countries and, as a result, how to influence locals' opinions of what they see and hear in those countries.

In his later work regarding soft power and public diplomacy Nye perfectly describes the advantages of soft power: “When you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend so much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction. Seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights and individual opportunities are deeply seductive”(Joseph S. Nye, 2008).

Public diplomacy is a primary soft power tool acknowledged in diplomatic practice long before the current discussion on public diplomacy. During the Cold War, the United States, the former Soviet Union, and Europe's three major powers spent a lot of money on their communications with the world (Melissen, 2005). After all, official communication directed at foreign audiences is not a new occurrence in international relations. Even in ancient times, prestige-conscious rulers and their representatives never totally ignored the promise and perils of foreign public opinion. The

Bible contains references to the nation and its image. In ancient Greece and Rome, Byzantium and the Italian Renaissance were all familiar with diplomatic action directed at foreign audiences (Melissen, 2005).

Governments utilise public diplomacy to engage with and attract other countries' public, rather than just their governments, by using resources such as values, cultures, and policies. To draw attention to these potential resources, broadcasting, cultural exports, organising exchanges, and other types of public diplomacy activities are used. On the other hand, public diplomacy cannot generate soft power if the resources, values, cultures, and policies are not appealing to a foreign audience (Nye, 1990).

Mark Leonard and Nicholas Cull have taken this a step further, stating that it must be a two-way street for PD to effectively speak and listen (Mark Leonard, 2002) (Cull, 2010). Cull's later publication also outlines key lessons for public diplomacy; First and foremost, effective public diplomacy starts with listening. That involves paying attention to what citizens think and say, not just what officials want to hear, e.g putting ears on the EU. Besides, PD should be linked to policies. Effective public diplomacy is necessary for publicising and explaining policy, but it cannot preserve failed ones; foreign policy and public diplomacy are in sync. Citizens' democratic legitimacy grows when they see their governments addressing the "real" issues and "their" issues. It is also critical to recognise that, like other communication operations, public diplomacy must be carefully tailored to the environment in which it is conducted, both in tone, targeting and 'going local'. In addition, Cull stresses the vitality of public diplomacy credibility to distinguish it from sophisticated propaganda. Notably, according to Cull, credible PD heavily depends on well-informed intermediaries, academics, civil society organisations, and other groups of people who

conduct the PD more effectively and engage with the broader public than diplomats can (Cull, 2010).

Given the broad scope of the concept and operations of public diplomacy, it is critical to define what is and is not considered public diplomacy. In this regard, Lynch suggests that PD is not public affairs intended at a domestic audience; instead, PD is aimed at a foreign audience; while it has a domestic impact, its primary direction is foreign. Second, Public Diplomacy is not a politically proper means of engaging in propaganda or psychological operations, which both rely on incorrect information and engage in mis/disinformation. Finally, public Diplomacy comprises far more than information; it is not merely a method for disseminating information to a foreign audience (Lynch, 2005).

Therefore, taking into account the discussion about what is public Diplomacy and what it is not, the given thesis employs the following definition of the concept:

" Public Diplomacy is the strategic planning and execution of information, cultural and educational, programming by an advocate country to create a public opinion environment in a target country or countries that will enable target country, political leaders, to make decisions that are supportive of the advocate country's foreign policy objectives" (McClellan, 2004)

The capacity of the government to accomplish its foreign policy objectives is primarily determined by public opinion in other countries. Foreign perceptions can be a source of constraint for a country's foreign policy, but they may also be a source of support. The fundamental challenge of public Diplomacy is to change unfavourable foreign impressions and strengthen positive ones.

PD actors are people who communicate with foreign audiences on behalf of their native countries (Cross, 2013). The definition of PD is ambiguous, especially when one considers all of the many people-to-people, horizontal, networked, and informal types of involvement. However, Cross and Daviss suggest that it's essential to keep a broad perspective of public Diplomacy. While it might be easy to distinguish between official and non-official, purposeful and non-purposeful, in real terms, this can be a challenging, almost impossible task (Cross, 2013). Cross and Daviss conceptualise the PD process as *the communication of narratives that embody key norms about a society*. Based on their explanation, PD narratives gain validity when they are based on the true identities of the persons involved. Narratives are characterised as stories about "the temporal character of human experience" (Cross, 2013).

Cowan and Arsenault address three layers of public diplomacy in their article, arguing that both monologue and dialogue are essential methods of public diplomacy. Yet, collaboration, as the third layer, deserves more investigation. Although they describe collaboration in this context as cross-national engagement in a joint endeavour or project with a clearly defined aim, collaboration may be a more effective public diplomacy strategy than the other two layers, monologue and dialogue. (Geoffrey Cowan, 2008). Collaborative PD refers to programs and outreach activities that bring together citizens from various countries to fulfil a task or achieve a common goal. It is considered that associations and partnerships that strive to transcend social and political divides can produce truth and understanding. This method is commonly employed in the development of democracies and international cooperation during the last few decades. As John Stuart Mill phrases it, "A neighbour, not being an ally or an associate, since he is never engaged in any common undertaking for joint benefit, is therefore only a rival" (quoted in Cowan 2008, 12)

The notion of collaborative public diplomacy is closely linked to the perspective of networks. Networks are defined as 'a set of relatively stable relationships which are of a non-hierarchical and interdependent nature linking a variety of actors, who share common interests concerning a policy and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests acknowledging that cooperation is the best way to achieve common goals' (Diane Stone, 1999). Decentralised networks have fewer transactional obstacles and can quickly direct information to where it will have the most impact (Reinicke, 2000).

4 Methodology and data collection

The thesis' primary purpose is to investigate how the EU attempts to achieve its public diplomacy goals in Eastern Partnership states using qualitative research methodologies. To collect data, the thesis uses both interviews and content analysis as qualitative research methods.

Case Selection

The Case of Young European Ambassadors was selected to answer the research question. Determinants of YEAs case selection are presented below.

YEAs represent a curious case to examine as it is the biggest youth network put under the umbrella of the EU's communication campaign. Whereas relatively small size of the thesis does not allow to discuss the EU neighbours east initiative as a whole, it enables to explore its main dimension. Besides, it offers a possibility to discuss the PD efforts towards the EaP countries from the collaborative PD and network perspective. There is no other such communication practice from the EU detected. Furthermore, given initiative was developed right after the so-called "EU's geopolitical turn", it is expected that YEAs case reflects the EU's current PD approaches, which is well-discussed in the analysis section. Finally, the initiative has snowballed since its development (from around 30 to 500 YEAs). YEAs visibility has increased in their local communities, EU institutions and policy discussions. The EU has done a policy transfer of the initiative in the Western Balkans too. While there is no academic literature addressing the selected case, presented reasons hold validity for the thesis author's curiosity towards examining the initiative.

Research Methods

Interviews are the most valuable and rich source for acquiring primary data, mainly when the chosen case has never been observed and investigated from an academic perspective previously. Semi-structured interviews offer the most flexibility in following up on responses given, taking into consideration interviewee expertise. The goal of the interviews was to determine the importance of public diplomacy for the EU as a whole. Narrow it down to the Eastern Partnership region, identify critical responsible institutions or services for delivering PD externally. In this scenario, it is also essential to see if public diplomacy aims and approaches have evolved due to the change of EU high officials, such as the European Commission President. Following that, the fundamental variables driving the development of a new strategic communication and public diplomacy strategy to the EaP region in 2015 were investigated. The following questions were explicitly aimed at the YEAs project and intended to elucidate the significant reasons why the EU increasingly works with young people to achieve its public diplomacy objectives. It is vital to introduce the core tools, channels, and target audiences that YEAs operate with to analyse; therefore, such questions were asked. The interviews were concluded with a discussion of the problems that currently impact or may affect the initiative's operation, particularly those linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews met the thesis author's expectations and provided her with significant insights for the study.

Content analysis is the second qualitative research approach used. The analysis relies heavily on key documents from the EU institutions, such as the Joint Declaration, resolutions, and communication papers. Furthermore, the EU Neighbors East webpage contains a wealth of information on the YEAs program, activities carried out, and areas covered. Finally, social media networks like Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and Flickr allowed the thesis author to observe the content and target audience of the YEAs' actions.

Data Collection

Selecting participants for the interviews posed a significant challenge mainly due to the time constraints. Because the project aimed at interviewing the high officials and valuable experts from the EU institutions and the YEAs initiative. Reaching out and scheduling interviews demanded a significant time; consequently, interviews were conducted during April, May and June. Fortunately, the so-called "snowballing effect" worked, making it faster and more efficient to contact the related stakeholders. As a result, eleven interviews were conducted with former and present European Commission DG NEAR, European External Action Service EEAS, EU Neighbors East, and YEAs initiative team members. The expertise of semi-structured interview participants in the strategic communication and public diplomacy of the European Union has been outstanding, involving participants with three or fewer decades of experience in given areas.

After introducing the goal of the research, the content form for interviews was verbally communicated. Participants could choose when to start recording, or stop recording at any moment based on their request. The challenges posed by Covid-19 were exploited to conduct interviews using platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. On average, interviews lasted for one hour, with the longest-lasting over two hours and the shortest lasting only 30 minutes.

Keywords like European Union, Eastern Partnership, DG NEAR, EEAS, public diplomacy, strategic communication, youth, and local people were constantly focused on content analysis. In addition, the search engine on the EU neighbors east web page and social media highlights contributed to the exploration of the initiative's nature, tools, channels, target audiences, activities, etc.

The data collection approach revealed that the methods chosen were an appropriate starting point for acquiring valuable data to answer the research question.

5 Results and Analysis

The results and analysis section is divided into three subsections; it follows the same order as the interview questions. Therefore, it introduces a broader perspective on the importance of public diplomacy for the EU and attempts to explore the key drivers behind the European Union's changed approach to the EaP countries. The second section focuses on identifying the crucial variables that have influenced young people's increased involvement in public diplomacy in EaP countries. And after that, the following section explores the structure of the YEAs effort, its core tools, channels, and activities, based on data acquired from interviews and content analysis.

5.1 Shifts in European Union's Public Diplomacy in the Eastern Partnership context

For the European Union, strategic communication and public diplomacy is a question of survival. Considering the global ambitions of the European Union, it is crucial to communicate with the public and explain policies. Nowadays, society demands transparency; without transparency, it is impossible to attain long or short or long-term goals. People must comprehend the policies that the European Union executes, why they are essential to them, and the core values and ideals that it upholds (intvw #2). In terms of public diplomacy and communications, the need of breaching a bubble was also stressed in interviews. Those who work with, research, or are somehow associated with the EU are aware of its policies and aims. However, becoming more strategic and aiming to engage with those who are more vulnerable and do not have adequate resources, experience, and knowledge regarding the EU's cooperation in their countries is critical (intvw #1 #4 #9). When more local people understand what the EU is and why governments or young people want to build

more European societies; it is expected that the demand for further integration is recognized and requested by local communities (intvw #1 #2 #3 #4 #9). As the literature addresses the issue of propaganda that public diplomacy can quickly become, the questions were stressed in this regard too, and the respondents highlighted that Public diplomacy is about becoming more flexible in adapting new perspectives, not about developing an ideology; it is about providing people with adequate information to make their own decisions (intvw #1 #2). The European Union can refer to the general public, as it has in the past; nevertheless, the general public is made up of individuals. It is critical to understand who these people are, what interests them, and then engage and develop a meaningful conversation with them when reaching out to them. Rather than dumping information from the top-down, becoming a meaningful communicator and collaborator creates more transparent, long-term relationships (intvw #2).

In the Eastern Partnership countries, the key service representing the EU is EEAS through EU Delegations in all six EaP countries. The EU Delegations have two sections of operations: political and cooperation. *The political section* is policy-related, including high-level discussions; political statements fall under the EEAS and are strongly linked. *The cooperation section* deals with implementing all the assistance, defining, programming, developing, contracting, implementing aid for the economy, education and most importantly, conducting public diplomacy. The cooperation section is under the management of the European Commission, DG NEAR (intvw #1).

Despite the European Neighborhood Policy's relevance, its flaws became apparent once it was revised in 2015. Federica Mogherini, the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission, and Johannes Hahn, the Commissioner for ENP and Enlargement, agreed that the various aspirations of the EU's neighbours should be recognised,

based on that, differentiated policies developed. Furthermore, increasing soft power investment was emphasised as a critical step. In 2013, the situation in Ukraine, when former President Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement, however, as a demand from the public he signed it later, demonstrated that the EU's strategy and "soft power" were sufficient to bring about change on the ground. (Darius Žeruolis, 2014) (intvw #1 #2 #3).

Despite the EU's significant investment in public diplomacy, the reality revealed that it was fragmented, unfocused, and the European Union's and its contributions in the EaP region had a low level of visibility and awareness (intvw #2 #3 #4 #8). According to Team Leader at EU Regional Communication Programme for the Eastern Neighbourhood, when opinion polls were conducted in 2015, only two per cent of the population in EaP nations had benefited or knew someone who had profited from EU funded projects (intvw #1). However, in reality, they were unaware of who had provided the asset due to fragmented communication and a lack of visibility, which was an urgent call for the European Union to revise its communication approach, public diplomacy strategies, and find ways to deliver information where it was needed the most.

However, recognising public diplomacy flaws was not the sole factor driving reforms in the EU's communication strategy (intvw #1 #2 #3 #9). Russia has been actively utilising information as a weapon to portray the Europeanization process in the EaP countries as a zero-sum game. Pro-Kremlin disinformation has been spreading swiftly in EaP nations, strategically addressing target audiences, spending considerable resources, and posing a threat to the pro-European course. Daily, citizens are exposed to pro-Kremlin mis/disinformation both online and offline. Mis/disinformation campaigns are sophisticated in that they target specific categories of people and appeal to their emotions, traditions, and nerves (intvw #2). The takeover of Crimea in 2014 highlighted Russia's skilled, aggressive strategy, besides, its expanded propaganda operations. The

political climate in 2015 demonstrated to EU institutions and member states the importance of focusing on information production and distribution to communicate the EU's perspective of events (intvw #1 #2 #3). Given underscored the EU's need to go beyond the notion that it can only communicate with the bubble. It became obvious that engaging exclusively with governments and EU-affiliated individuals would not result in bottom-up Europeanization. The EU had to become more transparent and comprehend the demands and interests of its citizens (intvw #1 #2 #3 #4 #11).

Besides the EU's geopolitical turn, As the interviews revealed, a fertile ground for advocating strategic communication and public diplomacy efforts in the Eastern Partnership countries was created by both major factors: recognition of the EU's shortcomings in reaching out to the broader public and relatively weak EU soft power in the EaP countries. In addition, increasing tensions in the region and Russia's disinformation efforts was another determinant. However, a political climate without a political will can not lead to changes (intvw #2).

5.2 Advocates of modified Public Diplomacy approach

The following part shows the results of the interviews about the major institutions, events, and individuals who called for a new approach to communication with EaP countries.

The Eastern Partnership Riga Summit held on May 21-22, 2015, was a watershed moment in rethinking strategic communication and public diplomacy towards the EaP states (intvw #1). The summit confirmed that the EU needed to engage with civil society, the media, business, and other stakeholders beyond intergovernmental relations in a more strategic way (Council of the European

Union, 2015) (intvw #1 #2 #3). Baltic state's governments and organisations, such as the Estonian Centre for Eastern Partnership, have long supported such a choice, having recognised the fragmentation of EU public diplomacy and the growing threat from Russia. Furthermore, the European Commission's DG NEAR and Lawrence Meredith, Director for Neighbourhood East & Institution Building, have been strongly advocating for the new strategy and involvement of young intermediaries. Not all EU member states have the same perspective on foreign affairs. It's not easy to come up with a decision that considers all member nations' views, especially when knowing that the PD challenges for the EU are broader than only in EaP (intvw #2 #3). However, unfortunate events and a tense situation in the EaP region, such as the conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia due to Russia's hostility, forced the matter to the fore during the Riga Summit. The Summit declaration recognised the need for further investment in structured strategic communication and public diplomacy activities (intvw #1 #2 #3 #9).

In June 2015, EU High Representative Mogherini presented a strategic communication action plan in response to Russia's deception efforts (intvw #2 #3). The three key goals of the action plan are as follows: *"Effective communication and promotion of EU policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood; Strengthening the overall media environment in the Eastern Neighbourhood and EU Member States, including support for media freedom and strengthening independent media; Improved EU capacity to forecast, address and respond to disinformation activities by external actors"* (European External Action Service, 2015).

In March 2015, the European Council approved the formation of the East StratCom task force at EEAS. The High Representative would direct Foreign and Security Policy Federica Mogherini to recognise concerns for the EU in the EaP region. (intvw #2 #3). The newly formed

communications team's declared purpose was to increase the EU's strategic communication with its six Eastern neighbours.

The increased importance of strategic communication and public diplomacy was not only a signal for the EEAS to reconsider its approach, but it also provided conducive environment for the European Commission, particularly DG NEAR, which oversees the EU's neighborhood and enlargement policies, to develop new approaches to better communicate the EU to the EaP states. Even though the formation of the East StratCom task force has attracted the attention of researchers, DG NEAR and its modified outreach tactics have received less attention (Hedling, 2021). According to interviews, the public diplomacy efforts of the EEAS East Stratcom and DG NEAR were a "great marriage that happens rarely" for both, the EEAS and the Commission, to spend reciprocal efforts in establishing a more cohesive, less fragmented public diplomacy approach to the Eastern Partnership Region (intvw #2). Although the DG NEAR has previously implemented public diplomacy initiatives in the EaP region as part of the open neighbourhood concept, they mainly consisted of fragmented communication and dry material supplied via official EU delegation webpages or booklets (intvw #1 #3). On the other hand, the new method aimed to incorporate person-to-person contacts based on story-telling and real-life experiences to convey information where it was most needed. In building the EU's most significant regional communication endeavour, the EU Neighbors East communication campaign, new public diplomacy tactics were extensively utilised to engage more online and proactively (intvw #1 #3 #4 #8).

It was highlighted that the willingness and agenda of high officials are crucial in determining the priorities. During interviews, questions were raised about whether the focus on public diplomacy towards the EaP region has shifted since the change of the European Commission president,

specifically Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula von der Leyen Commission. It seems there was no notable change in provided dimensions, but some claimed that it is difficult to compare due to the Covid 19 crisis, which shifted all the cards on the table (intvw #6). However, it is obvious that the impact of public statements from EU officials, such as Josep Borrell's visit in Russia, high representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, might influence the way how the EU, as an international, credible actor, is perceived (intvw #2 #3 #5 #9 #10).

5.3 Young People as Public Diplomacy Actors

The European Union can, and has, put significant resources into public diplomacy, but this does not always translate into solid soft power. The EU's communication shortcomings with the EaP states necessitated the development of a new approach, but how it could be done and whether it could succeed was a question of expectations. The EU has consistently committed significant resources to youth. The majority of its programs include a youth-supporting component but struggled to get its beneficiaries under one umbrella striving to achieve a common goal(intvw #9).

Eastern Partnership Riga Summit in 2015 indicated that "*better communicating and promoting EU policies will be at the heart of the new ENP. Improved public Diplomacy will contribute to better explaining the rationale of EU policies and the positive impact of concrete EU actions*" (Commission, 2015). Furthermore, the communication emphasised increasing involvement with young people around the neighbourhood and forming a youth partnership. By increasing people-to-people contacts and networks for young people of all ages in the EU and neighboring countries, the collaboration was intended to promote mutual respect, understanding, and open societies: '*The development of 'Friends of Europe' clubs and alumni networks for those who have participated in EU activities, and where possible develop networks of "youth ambassadors" could be tools for such outreach, together with the creation of fora to enable exchanges between young leaders and*

future opinion formers from across the EU and its neighbourhood. The declaration highlighted that opening prospects to youth is a key to stabilising societies in the neighbourhood (Commission, 2015).

“Our most important challenge today is to find ways for the young men and women in our region to see a meaningful future; a sense of belonging to a local and global community where they can offer and get rewards for their individual skills. We need to send them the message that we see the future of this region as one of cooperation and exchange” – Johannes Hahn, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (east, 2016).

The EU regional communication program for the Eastern Partnership from the DG NEAR at the European Commission has set a goal to enhance strategic communication, improve public understanding of the EU policies, and build societal resilience to disinformation in the EU and its Neighbourhood (east, 2016). The initiative's main goals are to improve citizens' perceptions of the EU, raise awareness and understanding of the benefits citizens can obtain through real-life stories and facts, and stimulate a positive public debate about the EU and the Eastern Partnership. In particular by establishing a strong network of young multipliers and by collaborating with the local media, as well as gauging and monitoring public attitudes. In terms of building multipliers, the key focus was given to developing the network of Young European Ambassadors to engage in people-to-people outreach (east, 2016). According to interviews, one of the important motivations in selecting local youth between the ages of 16 and 26 for the YEAs program was that, according to opinion polls from 2015, young people were more in favour of and aware of the EU's commitment to the EaP region than other age groups(intvw #1 #4 #8 #9). In this regard, that approach can be linked to the concept of public diplomacy. PD concept argues that an actor cooperates with the audience that already holds a positive attitude towards it. Through such

cooperation, it tries to influence and change the negative or neutral attitudes in the rest of society. Another critical influence in this regard, as interviews have revealed, was young people's understanding and experience of the EU, since an increasing number of young people participate in EU-sponsored cultural and educational exchange programs. Young people are also considered more open to gaining new knowledge, experience and can implement or develop skills for conducting public diplomacy online or offline. Members of network of people are most likely to engage in the future political developments in their countries too. Therefore, already existing ties among the EaP and EU leaders might positively shape the further approximation process with the EU and within the EaP region (intvw #1 #2 #3 #5 #8#9 #10). This technique is strongly linked to the concept of collaborative public diplomacy efforts and stands out in the EU's new public diplomacy approach. Unlike the past, the EU has now continuously invested in developing an umbrella initiative that includes local beneficiaries, intermediaries willing to share their experience and knowledge voluntarily. Such public diplomacy actors are expected to gain more trust and acceptance from the general public. 'Instead of inviting foreigners from the EU and having them explain why locals should favour tighter connections with the EU, locals are more likely to trust what their relative or neighbour who has benefited from EU support says '(intvw #1).

In fact, it was a realisation that the public diplomacy process needed to include more local actors and foster story-based, dialogue-driven and collaborative public diplomacy. Furthermore, the YEAs effort would aim to break through a bubble of people who are already aware of EU-EaP cooperation and reach out to more vulnerable members of society. As a result, the selection committee took into account the location of YEAs throughout the selection process, encouraging adolescents in rural regions to participate in the project (intvw #1 #8 #9). The latter technique was thought to promote civic activism and implement a more bottom-up approach, in which YEAs,

who are aware of what people in their community require, organise and deliver informative projects and events for the target audiences, as well as engage with local government, institutions, and NGOs. The platform would allow YEAs to become multipliers, construct a platform, engage with associated parties, and improve themselves and their communities and thereby halt the brain-drain process in the long run. (intvw #1 #2 #3 #4 #8 #9).

The neighbouring countries and the EU citizens are unaware of the EU's foreign policy effort and its EaP dimension. YEAs initiative in this regard offers a promising start, as YEAs from the EU and the UK represent a small group of people who try to raise awareness about the EaP policy and its member states' culture, history and key characteristics. Considering they all belong to the same network, YEAs in EaP, EU and the UK, closely cooperate and plan collaborative events(intvw#6).

It was noted in the theoretical framework part that public diplomacy could not ensure success unless the recipient state and its people are willing to accept it. During the interviews, one of the crucial discoveries was that the YEAs effort was based on "learning by doing." The growing enthusiasm among YEAs came as a pleasant surprise to Brussels officials. YEAs and EaP countries' willingness to engage with local people voluntarily was a significant determinant of the initiative's growth and further development and widespread acceptance, and a high level of interest among locals in EU-related information. The EU was surprised by the unexpected enthusiasm and decided to invest more resources in furthering the YEAs initiative. However, to ensure the continuation of YEAs active engagement and commitment, the EU should ensure active policy developments towards the EaP countries, as public diplomacy solely can not succeed if it is not accompanied by relevant development on a political level and willingness of the target audience to engage (intvw #3 #4 #10).

5.4 Young European Ambassadors on the ground

The YEAs network in the Eastern Partnership region and the EU works under one umbrella initiative, with a horizontal hierarchy, that includes a project team in Brussels and national coordinators in six Eastern Partnership countries and the EU. The national coordinators from the EaP and the EU work closely with the Brussels team to plan and implement activities (intvw #1 #4 #5 #6 #7 #8). According to interviews, YEAs are offered professional and career-building opportunities from experts in their interest areas. Such training aims to share more knowledge and skills from the EU officials, diplomats, strategic communication experts, journalists, and civil society actors (intvw #1 #4 #5 #6 #7 #8). When delivering voluntary work on the EU-EaP cooperation and partnership, YEAs put their newly acquired skills and knowledge into practice. Furthermore, the YEAs are allowed to specialise in areas of their interests, and after completing the expert training, they can become trainers, mentors, or advisors within the project. Such approach has been believed to promote the exchange of knowledge and experience within the initiative. Based on members' interest, they plan and implement reach out activities to target audiences (intvw #1 #4 #5 #6 #7 #8). Since the establishment of the initiative, YEAs have been carrying out community events and actively engaging online. Online engagements have risen since the covid 19 breakouts (intvw #1 #4 #5 #6 #7 #8). With the same aim, which is to raise awareness about the EU-EaP partnership and benefits for the public due to the collaboration, YEAs activities include talks, pub quizzes, school visits, fairs, workshops, social media campaigns and challenges, vlogs etc (east, 2016).

The target audiences of YEAs vary depending on the goals of their activities; they attempt to reach out to as many target groups as possible. Nonetheless, young people in local communities typically receive training and informational seminars on engaging in EU-funded projects, making a resume,

applying for a job, and accessing free online and offline education. (intvw #1 #2 #3 #4 #6 #7 #4 #11).

5.5 Messages Conveyed

Key messages conveyed in the framework on YEAs activities mainly aim to inform the EU, promoting a friendly image between EU and EaP and stressing the importance of closer partnership.

Informing about the EU

The operations of the YEAs actively engage local people to provide more important information about the European Union. It is not uncommon for people to mix up the European Union with other international organisations or benefit from initiatives and programs that the European Union-backed without knowing it (intvw #1). Furthermore, it has been stated that member states, in collaboration with the EU representative in EaP states, are now more ready to unite and place their sponsored projects under the EU's name, reducing fragmentation while increasing visibility (intvw #1 #2 #4 #7 #8).

In respect of informing the broader public about the EU, the history, key facts and figures are shared with the public. However, it is essential to mention that the initial attempts to approximate EU and EaP societies focus on the narrative that the EaP countries have been historically part of Europe. YEAs intensely concentrate on demonstrating cooperation with the EU in the respective countries (intvw #1 #4 #6 #7 #8). For instance, in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, YEAs press the importance, achievements, and opportunities from the Association Agreements, communication on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) benefits or the visa-free

regime. As the Eastern Partnership countries and their economy have been hugely dependent on the Russian market, since signing the DCFTA, two key challenges have developed; the first challenge is related to the increasing disinformation from Kremlin regarding the harms DCFTA might have on local farmers; another challenge was related to the lack of information about the DCFTA and its practical implications among farmers. Almost the same circumstances have taken place in AA and Visa Free. The broader public little knew about the tangible benefits they could achieve. In this respect, YEAs try to go more local and engage with farmers and entrepreneurs too (Intvw #1 #2 #6 #7 #8).

YEAs operating within the European Union are more focused on informing the broader public about the Neighbourhood Policy in the Eastern Partnership countries and explaining the key characteristics and facts about the EaP countries (intvw #1 #5).

Promoting a friendly image

Another significant message delivered by YEAs is that of demonstrating the European Union's friendly image; this strategy is closely linked to soft power theory. Promotion of a friendly image can have a variety of consequences, including positioning the EU as the most friendly and stable, advantageous partner, and positioning the EU as an international player with growing power and leadership (Intvw #1 #4 #6 #7 #8). The cultural narrative is also being extensively employed, highlighting the similar culture, values, and interests of the EU and EaP countries. The primary focus is on the idea that the EU and EaP states have more common things, attempting to establish linkages and a sense of belongingness. Once again, such an approach highlights the soft power implications of the EU projecting a positive image and shaping the environment for its foreign policy. The messages conveyed in this regard are highly dependent on the local context. For example, in the Eastern Partnership countries, given the tension between Russia and the region,

which has impacted almost all of the six countries directly or indirectly, the EU attempts to demonstrate itself as a peaceful partner and counter a robust Kremlin disinformation campaign.. Covid 19 has exposed the general public to disinformation, and social media has become the primary source of news, making it difficult to distinguish between fake and authentic information (east, 2016). The EU's involvement and support in EaP nations to combat the pandemic has been undercut by Kremlin propaganda, either directly or indirectly. YEAs are among the local players in those nations that, after learning the true facts and numbers concerning the EU's contribution, spread the word in their communities and teach others how to apply fact-checking procedures in practice. Recently, due to the Covid-19 crisis and the EU's declared leadership in the vaccination process, which was accompanied by unexpected drawbacks, the disinformation campaigns mainly attempted to demonstrate that the EU was unable to support EaP countries with vaccines and therefore it is not a trustful partner in the times of crisis.

The overarching message is that the EU and the EaP countries are stronger together. Almost all YEA activities are searchable on social media platforms with the hashtag #strongertogether. (Intvw #1 #4 #5 #6 #7 #8). YEAs around the EU also organise cultural and informative events to introduce EaP nations and cultures to more EU residents. (intvw #1 #4 #5)

Calling for further partnership

YEAs communicate nation and region-specific policies and represent essential European Union principles and values in their operations, which are primarily tied to and later mirrored EU policies in human rights, gender equality, and the rule of law. The spotlight might also be placed on the EU's current focus on specific fields, such as the fight against climate change via the Green Deal and the successful implementation of the Paris Agreement (intw #1 #4 #8). Security issues are

fundamental in the EaP countries; as a result, YEAs strive to portray the EU as an organisation formed to ensure security and peace and then assist its partners in developing peaceful and safe countries. Values communication goes beyond standard tactics and allows for more collaborative public diplomacy among various stakeholders, such as the local organisation, media, business, and education sector representatives are involved in designing or delivering activities, attempting to build multilevel cooperates around the EU principles. In this regard, interviews revealed that the goal of such multilevel, collaborative coordination is to promote the European Union's positive image to deliver and explain the benefits that coordinated activities by various stakeholders can have on local development processes. (Intvw #1 #6 #7).

In the Eastern Partnership countries, European Neighborhood Policy has been attempting to build a differentiated strategy for the six EaP countries. Even though this has not always been the case, the Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020 aims to provide assistance where it is most needed. For example, environmental issues are prioritised in Moldova, whereas good governance is prioritised in Georgia (intvw #1). However, the general areas of cooperation and long-term objectives include building resilient, sustainable and integrated economics, accountable institutions, the rule of law and security, environmental and climate resilience, digital transformation and fair and inclusive societies (Union, 2020). The fundamental approach of YEAs projects and activities is to translate such broad policy objectives into concrete projected beneficial consequences for the local population. Particular emphasis is placed on informing target audiences about projects being executed with EU funding that positively influence residents' daily lives. In the Eastern Partnership countries, European Neighborhood Policy has attempted to build a differentiated strategy for the six EaP countries. Although this has not always been the case, the Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020 aims to provide assistance where it is most needed. For

example, environmental issues are prioritised in Moldova, whereas good governance is prioritised in Georgia (intvw #1). The fundamental approach of YEAs projects and activities is to translate such broad and country-specific policy objectives into concrete projected beneficial consequences for the local population. As a result, strategic communication tries to ensure that people who deliver speak the same language as the target audience, which has always been difficult for the European Union (Intvw #1 #2 #3 #4 #7 #8).

Te emphasizes on the importance of further partnership and tries to demonstrate that the EaP countries can have more stable, peaceful, developed states if they continue closer cooperation and compliance with the EaP objectives. In three frontrunner EaP countries (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine), that have already achieved the most tangible benefits from the EU (AA, DCFTA and Visa Free regime), the concerns whether there is nothing else to be offered from the EU take place. Public Diplomacy efforts attempt to explain and convince the audience that the partnership still remains profitable. However, in the absence of a membership perspective, such concerns may rise even more.

6 Challenges of the Initiative

Because effective public diplomacy necessitates systematic interaction with target states, the key difficulties that may jeopardise the consistency of PD delivery by YEAs have also been investigated. According to interviews, the main worries that could pose problems were related to the continued heated situation and political unrest in Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, which could obstruct the formation of a regional network in EaP policy and, as a result, public diplomacy aims. The case of Belarus is especially alarming, as President Lukashenko has announced that they have requested to leave the EaP initiative as a response to sanctions imposed by the EU (Brzozowski, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic reduces face-to-face interactions but increases social media coverage, which isn't all bad if it weren't for the expanding disinformation that exposes the populace and makes it nearly hard to tell the difference between fake and real news. Besides, the EU has to ensure that public diplomacy does not turn into propaganda. Another critical issue is that the EaP countries, especially in this case, young people, should remain engaged, active, and motivated to support the region's Europeanization process. Given necessitates a proactive political partnership and cooperation between the EU and the neighbourhood. Another significant concern for the EaP and the EU is the brain drain process within the EU and EaP.

The initiative is still in its early stages; the YEAs' enthusiasm and the EU's political willingness should remain active. Rising powers in the global governance process, particularly Russia's and China's ambitions in the EaP region, offer a substantial soft power threat for the EU. Furthermore, Euroscepticism is another huge issue for the EU, which might pose a great challenge for its soft power practices (intvw #1 #2 #3 #4 #5 #6 #7 #8 #9 #10).

7 Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to find out how the EU, as a soft power, attempts to fulfil its public diplomacy goals in the context of the EaP region. Current geopolitical challenges have resulted in the EU's geopolitical turn, with an attempt to develop more sophisticated soft power practices. The contribution has applied Nye's soft power framework and public diplomacy key concepts. Research has examined the case of the Young European Ambassadors program, a vital feature of the EU's most extensive communication campaign ever designed for the Eastern Partnership countries. Based on the YEAs case, the thesis argues that since 2015, the EU seeks to deliver more sophisticated public diplomacy operations in the EU and the EaP by utilizing local intermediaries and youth networks. Soft power (a state's ability to entice or co-opt others) is increased by public diplomacy. PD is a primary soft power tool. According to Nye, a country can attain desired outcomes in world politics by using soft power to persuade other countries to want to follow, admire, and emulate its principles, as well as aspire to its level of prosperity and openness, e.g. *"co-opt people rather than coerce them"* (Nye, 1990). The utilisation of soft power through PD represents a strategic move from the EU towards the EaP region. The EaP states were never offered a membership perspective. The partnership is based on the stick and carrot approach; less tangible carrots for EaP countries are left on the table as they accomplish them. Whereas stick and carrot approaches can be temporary, soft power efforts are a long-term investment. Besides, other big powers, such as Russia and currently China in the region, represent a threat to the EU's supremacy in the region. The "geopolitical turn" of the EU has resulted in massive investments in strategic communications and public diplomacy, e.g. soft power. As the literature argues, the impact of PD is impossible to be measured separately; however, observing and tracing the

changing characteristics and its nature contributes to the constructivist approach to understanding public diplomacy.

The qualitative research methodology, namely interviews and content analysis, was used to analyse the case study. The information gathered has been divided into three sub-sections.

The first section looked at the reasons behind the shifted PD policies by the EU in the EaP context. findings suggested that the key drivers behind developing more sophisticated and strategic PD efforts were mainly influenced by the recognition of EU's public diplomacy drawbacks, the increasing soft power utilization via mis/disinformation by pro-Kremlin actors in the EaP region, as well as the tense political situation and Russia's initiated wars and occupation in both, Georgia and Ukraine.

However, the political will on the EU level does not always translate into concrete actions, which is mainly due to the EU's institutional and decision-making process complexity and the contrasting interests of the member countries. Therefore, the second section tried to look at the key institutions, individuals or units that have advocated for translating the political willingness into tangible actions. In this regard, the research demonstrated that the key turning point was the Eastern Partnership Riga Summit in 2015, where the Baltic states and organisations, especially the Estonian Center for Eastern Partnership, DG NEAR and Lawrence Meredith, Director for Neighbourhood East & Institution Building, have pushed the vitality of strategic communication and public diplomacy in the context of the EaP.

The third section closely analyses the Young European Ambassadors network, a vital pillar of the EU neighbour's east communication campaign. YEA's initiative represents a network of nearly 500 young students and professionals in the EaP, EU and EaP. They put dialogue-driven and

collaborative public diplomacy principles into practice to raise awareness about the EU's cooperation benefits in their local communities. Research has demonstrated that the key messages YEA's network conveys are related to informing about the EU and its key values, principles and policies, establishing a friendly image and emphasising the need for further partnership between the EU and EaP. When developing policies for the EaP countries, their opinions and suggestions are also taken into account. YEAs initiative within the EU also demonstrates that the EU also turns to internal audiences and attempts to inform about its foreign policy efforts. Critical variables of choosing local young people as public diplomacy actors are that the young people are more pro-European since they have studied or worked in the EU or have friends. The program believes that such a group of people can have a multiplier effect and help achieve public diplomacy aims more effectively. Aside from that, given the EU's fragmented public diplomacy, bringing its beneficiaries under one umbrella was a move toward a more united PD. The European Union has recognised that government-to-government and people-to-people cooperation are the most crucial determinants of a future partnership between the EU and EaP countries. Thus, it strives to increase soft power efforts with the help of intermediaries, in this context, the local youth, as they are pro-European and willing to interact with their communities to approximate the EU-EaP partnership voluntarily. Besides, it is crucial to keep in mind that the delivery of PD depends on the openness, willingness and acceptability of local intermediaries and the broader public. Broadly, this contribution supports the notion that foreign public perceptions play an important role in affecting state behaviour and outcomes in international relations. Therefore, the EU attempts to communicate with the foreign public closely.

The research's key challenge was gathering the data as there was no secondary academic data available for the selected case study. Besides, the relatively small size of the thesis has limited the research scale. The contribution tried to explore how the EU attempts to fulfil its public diplomacy goals in EaP states; however, another necessary research could be conducted in exploring how the EU's latest PD efforts have emerged in other European Neighbourhood Policy dimensions. Given could enable interested parties to draw conclusions and trends, whether the significance of the EU's geopolitical turn is equally visible in other regions or not. In this respect, a comparative study can be conducted of the EU neighbours East and South dimensions. Besides, considering the challenges discussed above, it would be interesting for future researchers to observe their possible impact on the initiative. As the YEAs project has been transferred to the Western Balkan states, which, unlike EaP countries, are already accession states, conducting the relevant research would also contribute to the literature.

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Appendix 1 - Semi-structured interview question

semi-structured interview question
What is the importance of soft power and public diplomacy in the EU context?
What are the key messages and principles the EU delivers externally?
Which Institutions are responsible for delivering public diplomacy in Eastern Partnership Region?
How has the goals and approach towards PD shifted considering the change of the European Commission president and other high officials, EU's foreign policy priorities?
What were the key drivers behind designing EU neighbours east strategic communication campaign? Was it a response to a specific problem?
Who pushed and advocated for the updated approach? (institution, state, individual)
Why does the EU increasingly engage with young people to conduct public diplomacy in EaP countries?
Who are Young European Ambassadors? What are their tools, channels, target audiences?
What is the network and collaborative perspective of the initiative, and how does it operate? (structure and hierarchy)
What is the advantage of selecting local people as PD actors?
What are the short- and long-term expected developments of the YEAs initiative?
How has Covid affected the delivery of PD? What are the other challenges?

Appendix 2 – Thesis report



UNIVERSITY
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Thesis Report

Stronger Together- Young European Ambassadors as norm diffusion actors

The case of Georgia

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Abbreviations

ENP - European Neighbourhood Policy;

EaP - Eastern Partnership Initiative

YEA – Young European Ambassador;

NPE- Normative Power Europe.

1. Introduction

The partnership between the European Union and its neighbouring states has been rapidly developing during the last few years. In the framework of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the European Union seeks to establish a strong partnership and cooperate with its neighbours aiming at ensuring the stability, prosperity and security in the regions, while promoting democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and social cohesion.¹ The Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP) has been launched in 2009 during the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit² to strengthen and deepen the relations between the European Union and six Eastern Partnership Countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). The initiative shares a joint commitment to ensure the delivery of tangible results for all citizens in the region.

The delivery of trustworthy information on the partnership achievements as well as the assurance of the EU norm diffusion process by various actors in EaP region represents an important goal of the EU. Especially considering the recent growing concerns on Russia's use of disinformation both, online and offline, to promote its outlook of developments in the region and neighbouring countries' choices as a zero-sum game.³

Kimbel and Halliste examine that even though EU is the main partner and biggest donor in the EaP region, the joint effort of the union and the member states is not recognised, there is a lack of visibility and awareness as well as an understanding by the societies due to the lack of information among citizens.⁴

The EU NEIGHBOURS east project is a part of Open Neighbourhood Programme of the European Union and was launched in 2015. The goal of the programme is to promote and diffuse EU norms, raise awareness, increase the understanding and knowledge about ENP and region-specific projects, achievements and developments in the Eastern Partnership region. The Young European Ambassadors initiative is the most significant pillar of EU NEIGHBOURS east information campaign and was implemented in 2016.⁵ The network aims at connecting the young people from the EaP region and the EU member states. The members of the initiative are EU enthusiastic, active people who voluntarily organise online and offline activities and events in order to share EU related information, norms, values, opportunities

¹ 'The European Neighbourhood Policy | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament', accessed 11 August 2020, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/170/the-european-neighbourhood-policy>.

² 'Eastern Partnership', EEAS - European External Action Service - European Commission, accessed 24 August 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/419/eastern-partnership_en.

³ Antoaneta Dimitrova et al., 'Soft, Normative or Transformative Power: What Do the EU's Communications with Eastern Partners Reveal About Its Influence?', 2016, <https://doi.org/10.17169/refubium-25132>.

⁴ Kimber, A. and E. Halliste (2015), "EU-related Communication in Eastern Partnership Countries", Eastern Partnership Review No.25, Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership. '22_EPR-22-Final.Pdf', accessed 18 August 2020, https://eceap.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/22_EPR-22-final.pdf.

⁵ 'Young European Ambassadors (YEAs) | EU Neighbours', accessed 26 August 2020, <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/eu-in-action/youth/yeas>.

among the young people.⁶ Their presence is promised to positively shape young peoples' perceptions towards the ongoing Europeanization process in the Eastern Partnership region.⁷ The network includes many young leaders and opinion-makers who will be tomorrow's leaders and norm-shapers in their countries.

Four years have passed since the Young European Ambassadors initiative has been developed. However, there is no academic work and research conducted to explore and analyse the initiative, examine how influential it has been to promote EU norms, raise awareness and positively shape perceptions towards the EU in EaP region. Thus, the research question can be framed as follows:

How does the Young European Ambassadors initiative diffuse EU norms among young people?

Due to the broad scope and diversity of the EaP region, to ensure the high quality of work, and minimise the other country-specific factors that may influence the answer to the research question the case of Georgia will be selected to examine the work of the YEAs initiative. The researcher believes, Georgia stands as an interesting case in the region, the country is considered as one of the frontrunners of the Eastern Partnership Initiative⁸ and an obedient normative partner for the European Union.⁹ Besides, based on the Opinion Survey 2020 carried out with ACT LLC in the cooperation with EU NEIGHBOURS east, European Union is the most trusted international institution in Georgia (69%), with the highest trust rate in the EaP region.¹⁰ Also, the knowledge of the local language will support the research process to collect valuable qualitative data from the beneficiaries of the initiative. Besides, the author is a member of the YEAs initiative, which allows her to identify and reach out to the related stakeholders promptly.

The researcher believes, the study has both academic and practical importance. First and foremost, the current strategic communication and its effectiveness of EU in the EaP region, through the Young European Ambassadors, as norm diffusion actors will be examined and assessed, which has not been done before. In practical regards, the empirical study will contribute to the development and improvement of the initiative by the related stakeholders.

⁶ 'Young European Ambassadors (YEAs) | EU Neighbours', accessed 19 August 2020, <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/eu-in-action/youth/yeas>.

⁷ 'Young European Ambassadors (YEAs) | EU Neighbours', accessed 9 August 2020, <https://www.euneighbours.eu/en/east/eu-in-action/youth/yeas>.

⁸ 'Political and Legal Perspectives of EU Eastern Partnership Policy', accessed 2 August 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316789059_Political_and_Legal_Perspectives_of_EU_Eastern_Partnership_Policy.

⁹ Anna-Sophie Maass, 'The Limits of the European Union's Normative Myth in Armenia and Georgia', in *Democracy Promotion and the Normative Power Europe Framework: The European Union in South Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*, ed. Marek Neuman (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 99–117, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92690-2_6.

¹⁰ ANNUAL SURVEY REPORT: REGIONAL OVERVIEW, EU NEIGHBOURS east 'OPEN Neighbourhood — Communicating for a stronger partnership: connecting with citizens across the Eastern Neighbourhood', accessed 21 August 2020, https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-06/EUNEIGHBOURS_east_AS2020report_EaP_OVERVIEW.pdf.

Relevant studies can be conducted in other EaP countries as the initiative represent a regional project, for what, the thesis can be a valuable asset.

To solve the puzzle and answer the research question, the given thesis proposal first introduces critical theories and concepts, which are believed to support the research process. The first sub-section of the first section leads to a narrow topic from a broader perspective. Once EU external governance and Europeanization beyond its borders from Frank Schimmelfennig is shortly discussed¹¹, the following sub-section introduces the EU as a normative power and its fundamental norms. Specific factors shape the norm diffusion process, within the same section, these key factors suggested by Manners¹² will be presented, and the position of YEAs initiative within given factors analysed. Norm "life-cycle" three-stage process closes the section of key theories and concepts. Norm "life-cycle" three-stage process is developed by Finnemore and Sikkink and enables a researcher to look closer and identify the cycle Young European Ambassadors initiative goes through in order to diffuse EU norms among young people. Norm "life-cycle" will be a guiding framework for the thesis.

The following, second section is dedicated to introducing the institutional setting of the European Union in the Neighbourhood Policy dimension. First, the ENP policy, its goals, antecedents, actors and instruments will be discussed. Afterwards, the Eastern Partnership Initiative and EU-Georgia relations are introduced. The final sub-section introduces EU communication campaigns and Young European Ambassadors initiative. The author believes, given institutional setting provides the background for future analysis.

Last but not least, the final section intends to deal with the research design and methods. The selection of theoretical frameworks, as well as the methodology, will be justified and the perspective from an author how they will support her research process introduced. The qualitative research design will comprise content analysis, interviews and focus group as a methodology.

The conclusion closes the thesis proposal. The work plan for the upcoming academic year that will ensure the high-quality research and thesis writing that indicates the detailing deadlines will be attached.

¹¹ Frank Schimmelfennig, 'Eu External Governance and Europeanization Beyond the Eu', *The Oxford Handbook of Governance*, 29 March 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199560530.013.0046>.

¹² Ian Manners, 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353>.

2. Key theory and concepts

2.1 Europeanization beyond its borders

Europeanization is considered as a domestic impact of European Governance within its borders.¹³ However, the current external policy dimension and governance of the European Union and the process of Europeanization beyond its borders has been frequently discussed by scholars in the last few decades. Frank Schimmelfennig addresses the European Union's (EU) external governance and the Europeanization process outside the EU. He defines the European models of governance the EU implements outside its borders and explains the Europeanization processes as well as the conditions under which they affect outside actors.¹⁴ He also argues that EU market strength and supranational regulation are the key factors in the adoption of EU governance models and regulations by non-member states, either as a result of overt conditionality or by indirect externalisation.¹⁵ The interest towards the EU as an external actor has indeed developed since 1990, after the significant events, such as the Single Market Agreement, Eastern enlargement and the novel institutional arrangement for states that can still benefit from EU programs, without being a member of it (e.g. Switzerland). It made evident that the external governance of the European Union is capable of projecting and implementing its regulatory models, institutions and the rules of governance beyond its member states and it is done in institutionalised manner, where the coordinated actions produce the binding agreements. If the regulatory models are implemented successfully, the Europeanization process takes place.¹⁶ Schimmelfennig defines the content of Europeanization as a set of European norms, models and rules of governance that are a regionally integrated system of liberal democracy, where the European Governance is determined by regionalism, supranational integration, multilateralism, transnational markets, the regulatory state, and democratic constitutionalism.¹⁷ However, the external European governance and the Europeanization process beyond its borders may not reflect the abovementioned determined characteristics and may develop in the recipient country-specific context.

Noteworthy, Europeanization process beyond Europe may not be as successful if the membership perspective is not offered, but only incentives (visa-free movement, deep and comprehensive free trade agreement, association agreement, financial support) quid pro quo the adaption of EU norms, values and principles. European Neighbourhood Policy never promised a membership perspective in both of its dimensions the regional and multilateral cooperation in the Southern neighbourhood so-called Union for the Mediterranean and the

¹³ Schimmelfennig, 'Eu External Governance and Europeanization Beyond the Eu'.

¹⁴ Ibid;

¹⁵ Ibid;

¹⁶ 'The External Governance of EU Internal Security: Journal of European Integration: Vol 31, No 1', accessed 14 August 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07036330802503932>.

¹⁷ Schimmelfennig, 'Eu External Governance and Europeanization Beyond the Eu'.

Eastern neighbourhood the Eastern Partnership Initiative. According to the former president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, the European Neighbourhood Policy would be dedicated to turning "arc of instability" into a "well-governed ring of friends' (a 'ring of friends surrounding the Union and its closest European neighbours, from Morocco to Russia and the Black Sea').¹⁸

Even though, low incentives and policy consistency can be severe domestic obstacles for Europeanization process in third countries, does not directly lead to the conclusion that the examples of significant impact and consistent policy cannot be found.¹⁹ The successful EU norm promotion and adaption process can be expected to take place in a country without a clear membership perspective if the fertile soil for the Europeanization process is found.

2.2 European Union as a normative power

Scholars have contractor opinions, whether the EU represents a soft, normative or transformative power.²⁰ In this respect, Manners examines that the "notion of 'normative power' when applied to the EU is not a contradiction in terms, as the ability to define what passes for 'normal' in world politics is extremely rich."²¹

The European integration process and its creative efforts significantly influenced the perception of "normal" in the world politics.²² Manners argues that the existence of the European Union as a different unit and its approach towards the world of states, as well as the mutual relations between the EU and other countries, already changes so-called 'normality of International relations'. Following this logic, one can argue that the EU represents a normative power as it changes norms, standards and perceptions of World politics. EU's normative difference is based on the historical context, hybrid policy, as well as political and legal constitution.²³ In the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the European Union acts as a canal through which the Normative Power Europe²⁴ can project its EU norms and values that are efficient and legitimate.²⁵

Enlargement of the Union is not only associated with the geographical boundaries, but it also seeks to establish or impose EU orders via diffusion and transfer of EU norms, values, rules

¹⁸ 'Moga - THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD OF THE EU GRAND CHESSBOA.Pdf', accessed 23 August 2020, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/198184/1/ceswp-v04-i3-p385-395.pdf>.

¹⁹ Schimmelfennig, 'Eu External Governance and Europeanization Beyond the Eu'.

²⁰ 'Dimitrova et al. - Soft, Normative or Transformative Power', accessed 12 August 2020, <http://eu-strat.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/EU-STRAT-Working-Paper-No.-1-1.pdf>.

²¹ Ian Manners, 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002): 235–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353>.

²² Ian Manners, 'The Normative Ethics of the European Union', *International Affairs* 84, no. 1 (January 2008): 45–60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2008.00688.x>.

²³ Manners, 'Normative Power Europe', 2002.

²⁴ Ibid;

²⁵ Ibid;

and regulations.²⁶ With NPE's emphasis in the context of Eastern Partnership region, the practice of "stick and carrot" is adopted in order to establish advanced normative influence.

European Union, as well as the third nations, are experiencing the change of conditions and evolve as time passes, that results in the challenged EU norm promotion. While, EU evolves institutionally and in-scope, the regional power, such as Russia, implements new interest-based policies in the EU's partner countries.²⁷ In the Caucasus, the transformation of institutions, as well as societies, requires an updated approach to promote EU norms successfully.²⁸

What are NPE core norms, and how are they diffused externally? The external actions of the European Union are guided by the principles and values (Reform Treaty Articles, 3-5 and 10-1) that represent the fundamentals of EU creation.²⁹

According to Manners, EU as a normative power is predominantly built on five core norms: peace, liberty, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, plus four minor norms of social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, and good governance.³⁰ He also argues that values such as peace, liberty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law do not represent only EU specific values, but these norms are integrated into world politics.³¹

After identifying the core norms of the NPE, Manners explores how they are promoted, since only the existence of norms does not make the EU a normative power, but the norm diffusion should take place. Norms are defined as "standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity"³² whereas "norm diffusion implies that norms travel: they are taken out of their original (European Union) context and applied to a new (EU neighbourhood) context."³³

²⁶ Thomas Diez and Richard Whitman, 'Analysing European Integration: Reflecting on the English School - Scenarios for an Encounter', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40 (1 March 2002): 43–67.

²⁷ Marek Neuman, ed., *Democracy Promotion and the Normative Power Europe Framework: The European Union in South Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92690-2>.

²⁸ Ibid;

²⁹ 'EU Treaties', European Union, 5 July 2016. accessed on 10 August, 2020. https://europa.eu/european-union/law/treaties_en.

³⁰ Manners, 'The Normative Ethics of the European Union'.

³¹ Ibid;

³² Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', accessed 29 August 2020, https://home.gwu.edu/~finnemore/articles/1998_norms_io.pdf.

³³ Carla Winston, 'Norm Structure, Diffusion, and Evolution: A Conceptual Approach', *European Journal of International Relations*, 31 July 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066117720794>.

In the framework of NPE, Manners suggests that EU norm diffusion process is shaped by six factors: *contagion, informational diffusion, procedural diffusion, transference, overt diffusion, and the cultural filter*.³⁴

The Young European Ambassadors Initiative falls in line with the category of informational diffusion. As Manners argues, informational diffusion is a result of strategic and declaratory communications to diffuse norms, for instance, the new policy initiatives by the EU.³⁵ The informational diffusion of EU norms is based on several mechanisms of initiation, declaration and communication, including persuasive attraction and argumentative promotion of ideas.³⁶ From the perspective of the given thesis, the Policy Initiative is a Young European Ambassadors network, where the norm diffusion takes place through argumentative promotion of ideas. The argumentative promotion of ideas is based on the previous experience of the network members, as they have already accepted EU norms, values and have benefited from EU opportunities, the share of personal experience is one of the core strengths of the initiative and tends to ensure the delivery of more truthful, proven experience.

The researcher believes given norm diffusion factors suggested by Manners represent a valuable asset to her research, as they allow her to identify the approach of EU via which it tends to promote NPE with the help of Young European Ambassadors outside its borders, specifically in Georgia.

2.3 Norm diffusion and norm "life-cycle."

However, to advance the theoretical framework and examine how the norms are diffused and internalised, norm "life-cycle"³⁷ three-stage process suggested by Finnemore and Sikkink will be discussed and combined with the above-discussed framework.

European Union does not only depend on the passive diffusion strategies but also develops them mutually with its norm-recipient partner states.³⁸ Whitman argues that the mutual norm diffusion strategies are taken by the EU jointly with the states where the "Union's enlargement can be seen as the main instrument of its normative power. The EU can be envisaged as a regional normative hegemon that is using its economic and normative clout to

³⁴ '(PDF) Soft, Normative or Transformative Power? What Do EU's Communications with Eastern Partners Reveal about Its Influence?', accessed 18 August 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317253256_Soft_normative_or_transformative_power_What_do_EU's_communications_with_Eastern_partners_reveal_about_its_influence.

³⁵ Manners, 'Normative Power Europe', 2002.

³⁶ Manners, 'The Normative Ethics of the European Union'.

³⁷ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', accessed 29 August 2020, https://home.gwu.edu/~finnemor/articles/1998_norms_io.pdf.f.

³⁸ Richard G. Whitman 'Normative Power Europe | SpringerLink', accessed 27 August 2020, <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9780230305601>.

build a set of highly asymmetrical bilateral relationships that help to facilitate an active transference of its norms and values."³⁹ However, in this thesis, an author argues that even though in Georgia, where the membership perspective has never been promised yet,⁴⁰ the European Union tends to develop mutual norm diffusion strategies, where the local norm diffusion actors, in our case YEAs, actively promote EU norms and values. The given initiative can be discussed within the framework of the norm "life -cycle"⁴¹ three-stage process. The process consists of the following steps, respectfully: norm emergence, norm cascade and internalisation, between the first two stages so-called "tipping point" takes place.⁴²

Norm emergence occurs through persuasion, where two elements ensure its successful creation: norm entrepreneurs and organisational platforms, the entrepreneurs act from platforms.⁴³ As "ideas do not float freely"⁴⁴, Finnemore and Sikkink argue "they are built by agents having strong notions about appropriate or desirable behaviour in their community."⁴⁵ Norm entrepreneurs instead call attention or create issues" by using language that names, interprets, and dramatises them"⁴⁶ i.e. frame them. Organisational platforms promote international actors' norms. The platforms can be explicitly constructed with this goal (e.g. NGOs, networks).⁴⁷ *Tipping Point takes place once* "norm entrepreneurs have persuaded a critical mass of states to become norm leaders and adopt new norms". During the second stage, *norm cascade*, not significant normative changes take place, before the tipping point is not overcome. However, once it has achieved, active norm adaption dynamics take place.⁴⁸ Socialisation is a principal mechanism of norm cascade stage, where the process of internal socialisation takes place, the norm breakers (refers to critical mass) become norm followers.⁴⁹ The last, third stage is internalisation, where norms may become widely accepted and reach "taken for granted" quality which leads to conformance with the norm relatively automatic.⁵⁰

Given table demonstrates the norm "life-cycle" process.

³⁹ Richard G. Whitman 'Normative Power Europe | SpringerLink'.

⁴⁰ Izabela Albrycht, David Král 'The Eastern Partnership in the context of the European Neighbourhood and V4 agenda'

⁴¹ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', accessed 29 August 2020, https://home.gwu.edu/~finnemor/articles/1998_norms_io.pdf.

⁴² Ibid;

⁴³ Ibid;

⁴⁴ 'Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War', *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (1994), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020818300028162>.

⁴⁵ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', accessed 29 August 2020, https://home.gwu.edu/~finnemor/articles/1998_norms_io.pdf.

⁴⁶ Ibid;

⁴⁷ Ibid;

⁴⁸ Ibid;

⁴⁹ Ibid;

⁵⁰ Ibid.

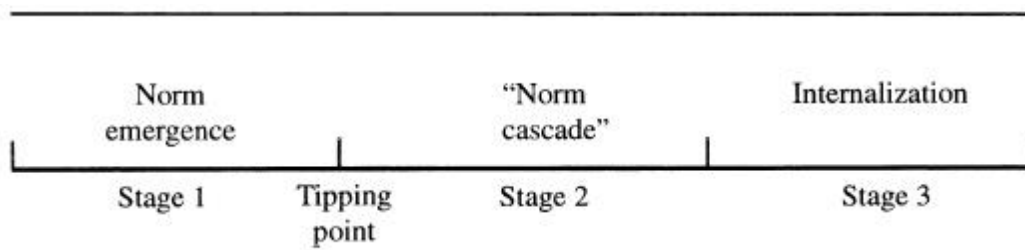


FIGURE 1. *Norm life cycle*

Source: Finnemore, Sikkink "International norm dynamics and political change."

3. EU Institutional Setting

3.1 European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership.

The largest expansion of the European Union occurred on May 1st, 2004. The new reality after the enlargement brought new neighbourhood to the European Union, which also emphasised the importance to develop the security policy and a necessity to update the approach in the region as a response to increasingly strained relations with Russia.⁵¹ EU's response resulted in the modified neighbourhood agenda and a 'proximity policy' development. The EU revised the European Neighbourhood Policy and launched active cooperation together with its Southern and Eastern neighbours aiming at fostering the stabilisation, security and prosperity, harmonious with the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy.⁵² However, the neighbourhood policy did not offer the membership perspective of the EU to ENP states but the benefits (visa-free movement, deep and comprehensive trade agreement, association agreement, financial support) quid pro quo the adaption of EU values and principles. The given approach is based on the 'stick and carrot' strategy, wherein the exchange of EU policy norm, demand or recommendation adaption brings tangible benefits to the partner countries. The concept of the political conditionality of the European Union includes cooperative and punitive measures and ensures that more the partner countries implement EU demands, more incentives, benefits they receive.⁵³

As we have already mentioned, ENP predominantly represents a respective policy between the European Union and its partner countries. However, it also has integrated the regional

⁵¹ The European Neighbourhood Policy: A Strategy for Security in Europe?', accessed 23 August 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304739182_The_European_Neighbourhood_Policy_a_Strategy_for_Security_in_Europe.

⁵² 'The European Neighbourhood Policy | Fact Sheets on the European Union | European Parliament'.

⁵³ Svea Koch, 'A Typology of Political Conditionality Beyond Aid: Conceptual Horizons Based on Lessons from the European Union', *World Development*, Political Conditionality and EU Foreign Aid, 75 (1 November 2015): 97–108, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.01.006>.

and multilateral cooperation in the southern neighbourhood so-called Union for the Mediterranean, while in the eastern neighbourhood the cooperation takes place in the framework of the Eastern Partnership Initiative. Considering my research interest, it is essential to give a brief overview (that will be expanded in the thesis) about the Eastern Partnership initiative and its influence in Georgia.

Eastern Partnership Initiative was developed back in 2009 in the framework of the ENP, aiming at building a common area of shared democracy, prosperity, stability, and increased cooperation between six EaP states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova) and the EU.⁵⁴ Built on mutual commitment and shared values, the European Union offers privileged relations to its eastern neighbours. The development of the relationship depends on the extent to which the partner countries share EU norms and values. EU represents a norm sender, while EaP countries are norm receivers.⁵⁵ The EU stresses the 'more for more'⁵⁶ principle in the process of Europeanization of the region, according to which, the EU develops stronger partnerships with those states that make more significant progress towards democratic reforms and fulfil the partnership action plans. The resolution of the European Parliament adopted on July 9th 2015, underlines the need for a more strategic, focused, flexible and coherent ENP, which was followed by the communication strategy presented by the EEAS and the Commission presented based on the mutual consultation on November 11th 2015.⁵⁷

Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova are considered as frontrunners of the EaP initiative, they already enjoy the tangible benefits in the political and economic area based on The Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (AA/DCFTAs), as well as the visa-free movement to the Schengen area up to 90 days, improved the people-to-people movement and communications. The negotiations regarding the abovementioned benefits are taking place with the rest three states, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus; however, they should first adopt the EU conditions, that were jointly set by EaP states and the EU to enjoy the carrots. Given reality shows the real-life implementation of "more for more" principle. Observations show that the incentives are considered strong enough for some of the states when for the rest, it is not while knowing that the membership perspective is not offered.⁵⁸ The EU once again proved the approach "more for more" implementation

⁵⁴ 'European Neighbourhood Policy', accessed 18 August 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/european-neighbourhood-policy_en.

⁵⁵ Natalia Chaban, Annick Masselot, and Katharine Vadura, 'Introduction. Asia-Europe Dialogue on Norms: Revisiting the Role of Norm-Receiver in the Conceptualisation of the "Normative Power Europe"', *Asia Europe Journal* 13, no. 3 (1 September 2015): 233–39, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-015-0425-y>.

⁵⁶ 'The EU and the Eastern Partnership: A Clearer Citizens-Perspective | EMI', accessed 23 August 2020, <https://europeanmovement.eu/the-eu-and-the-eastern-partnership-a-clearer-citizens-perspective/>.

⁵⁷ 'Eap_factsheet_georgia_en.Pdf', accessed 11 August 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eap_factsheet_georgia_en.pdf.

⁵⁸ 'Armenia and Belarus: Caught between the EU's and Russia's Conditionalities?: European Politics and Society: Vol 19, No 4', accessed 24 August 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23745118.2018.1455337?forwardService=showFullText&toke>

tactics during the COVID 19 pandemic. EAP countries received financial assistance in order to overcome the adverse circumstances, and the frontrunner states received more generous financial support.⁵⁹

The instrumental approach to deliver tangible results in the EaP region has been developed during the EaP Summit in 2017, where the '20 deliverables for 2020' were introduced within the following dimensions: a stronger economy, stronger governance, stronger connectivity and stronger society. The cross-cutting issues of gender, civil society and strategic communication were also taken in serious consideration.⁶⁰

The Eastern Partnership initiative celebrated its 10th birthday in 2019 , the structured consultation to develop a policy beyond 2020 has been reached with the initiative by the President of the European Commission, which was approved by the European Council, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and security policy and the Commission begun to establish a new set of long-term policy priorities after 2020. The consultation was wide-ranging and inclusive. The related stakeholders submitted more than 200 contributions: the Member States, EaP countries, EU institutions and committees, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, international financial institutions, and youth stakeholders from the EU and EaP countries through the Young European Ambassadors. The involvement of Young European Ambassadors identifies them as significant actors.

'Eastern Partnership Beyond 2020 - reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all' was adopted on March 18th 2020. More advanced long-term policy objectives that to strengthen resilience, foster sustainable development and deliver tangible results for society were adopted.⁶¹

The Joint Communication and a Joint Staff Working Document sums up the latest monitoring report of the 20 deliverables for 2020, where the Young European Ambassadors network is considered as a success story.⁶²

⁵⁹ 'COVID-19 Crisis Response in Eastern Partner Countries', accessed 24 August 2020, <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-eu-eastern-partner-countries-7759afa3/>.

⁶⁰ 'EU relations with region- Eastern Partnership', accessed 24 August 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership/419/eastern-partnership_en.

⁶¹ 'European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)', Text, EEAS - European External Action Service - European Commission, accessed 22 August 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp/330/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp_en.

⁶² Ibid;

3.2 EU-Georgia relations in the framework of EaP

The European Union and Georgia enjoy the privileged relation, and closer ties as the cooperation gets advanced. The partnership is based on the EU external governance norms. Since 2016, the Association Agreement (AA) entered into force, that includes the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) and allows both parties to develop cooperation and extend the partnership area. The following millennium of a partnership between EU and Georgia did not take a while as in 2017, as a result of successful implementation of EU recommendations and standards, Georgian citizens were granted to enjoy the visa-free regime in Schengen Area countries up to 90 days. Considering the simplified market access, the EU became a top trading destination for Georgia, according to the European Commission report in 2018, EU represents the primary trade destination for Georgia and accounts 27% of the total trade, followed by Turkey (14%) and Russia (12%). From 2017 to 2020, in the framework of European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), an estimated fund for Georgia amounts 371 to 453 million Euros.⁶³ The financial assistance mainly helps Georgia to develop the economy, promote good governance, and ease the movement of people and support education.

European Union also represents the strategic partner of Georgia to peacefully solve the territorial conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions that are currently occupied by the Russian Federation. The EU supports the conflict resolution efforts made through the work of the EUSR, the EU Monitoring Mission and the EU Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace. Since 2014, Georgia has also made outstanding contributions to many activities of the EU's shared security and defence strategy.⁶⁴

The main areas of cooperation between the EU and Georgia, as with the rest of the EaP states are based on EU norms and aim at diffusing them in the following areas, include economy, governance, environment and connectivity and society.

According to the European Union External Action Service, by 2019, the partnership and support from the EU in the four priority areas is as follows, the main highlights include:

Economy – economic development and job creation, border opening for more Georgian products; funding and training, as well as export support for farmers, modernisation of Agriculture, local initiative support and income stability of farmers.⁶⁵

⁶³ Michal Jiráček, 'Three Eastern Partnership Neighbours in the South Caucasus', 2020, 5.

⁶⁴ 'Cooperation with the European Union - MOD.GOV.GE', accessed 11 August 2020, <https://mod.gov.ge/en/page/39/cooperation-with-the-european-union>.

⁶⁵ 'EU-Georgia Relations - Factsheet - European External Action Service', accessed 12 August 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/23634/eu-georgia-relations-factsheet_en.

Environment and connectivity- development of transport connections, electricity and water infrastructure, waste management, Black Sea Basin Cross-Border Cooperation Programme.⁶⁶

Governance- ensuring to establish an efficient, accessible, and fair state that protects citizens' rights, training of judges, prosecutors, policeman, lawyers and other stakeholders, the establishment of Government Community Centres.⁶⁷

Society – simplified mobility, exchange programs for students and professors, harmonization of European standards in teaching and learning process.

The financial support during the COVID 19 crisis included the package of 183 million Euros in order to tackle the crisis while ensuring the stable and sustainable development of abovementioned priority areas.

However, in order to ensure the norm and value promotion, acknowledge the broader public regarding the mutual partnership and benefits between EU and Georgia, communication strategies and campaigns should be ensured. In this regard, not only the EU, but also the government of Georgia takes responsibility, the action plan of the Ministry of Defence for 2017-2020 emphasises the importance of competent information delivery to the population of Georgia regarding EU integration. For that purpose, the Information Centre on NATO and EU has been created, which already counts eight information centres all around the country and is aiming at delivering the updates of cooperation and integration achievements with NATO and EU, while ensuring to tackle Russian disinformation.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the Parliament of Georgia, in 2019-2020 Action Plan of the Parliament of Georgia for the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement sets the goal to raise awareness on EU-Georgia in a broad audience that includes various groups of audiences, including civil society organisations, representatives of local self-government, youth and school students, business organisations and farmers, international organisations, social media opinion leaders.⁶⁹ The Delegation of the European Union to Georgia actively contributes to the strategic communication campaigns countrywide.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ 'EU-Georgia Relations - Factsheet - European External Action Service'.

⁶⁷ Ibid;

⁶⁸ The parliament of Georgia, 2019-2020 EU action plan on EU-Georgia Association Agreement accessed 12 August 2020, https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/archive/documents/strategia_geo.pdf.

⁶⁹ '2019-2020 Action Plan of the Parliament of Georgia for the Implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement | UNDP in Georgia', UNDP, accessed 12 August 2020, https://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/en/home/library/democratic_governance/2019-2020-action-plan-of-the-parliament-of-georgia-for-the-imple.html.

⁷⁰ 'Georgia', European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations - European Commission, 6 December 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/georgia_en.

3.3 EU strategic communication and Young European Ambassadors

Strategic communications of the European Union represent one of the most critical aspects of the EU's normative power and contribute to the effectiveness of its policies. Communication tools aim to raise awareness on EU policies and positively shape perceptions in its partner countries.

Kimber and Halliste (2015) in their rich, informative analysis of EU communications in Eastern Partnership argue that despite the positive trends, the broader public is still unaware about the contribution EU is making in EaP countries.⁷¹ Observing the opinion polls and communication campaigns they emphasise that EU experiences difficulties to adjust to the new realities where the differentiated and targeted methods of communication of EU activities will be delivered to the public, rather than relying on citizens to look for the information by themselves. Kimbel and Halliste back in 2015 also argued that the long-term communication campaign plans by the EU most of the times stay on the paper and lack implementation ("communicators need to move away from the standard approach using official meetings and events as the main source for EU-related news and replace it with important topics explaining how the changes and reforms will affect people in their daily lives").⁷²

Later in 2015, during the 11th Public Administration Reform Seminar in Brussels, the need to enhance EU-related communication vis-à-vis Eastern partner countries were jointly recognised by the communication directors of the EU institutions.⁷³ The previous work has been appreciated, however, the long-term communication and developed cooperation essence has also been announced. To reach the wider groups of people, impactful communication with showcases, that tell the citizens real-life examples about the EU and its support and benefits that positively influenced the lives of societies is essential. Besides, strategically planned and executed communications work should aim at tackling the misinformation campaign about the EU that are actively spread in the region.⁷⁴

Young European Ambassadors Network

It is true that Before the EU NEIGHBOURS east project campaign (2016), the EU was implementing and supporting EaP states financially and with other assistance, however, the awareness about the activities was not high, considering the weak informational campaigns.

Since 2016, EU neighbour's strategic information campaign has been launched, to increase awareness about the EU, ENP, EaP and country-specific projects, activities, initiatives EU supports in EaP states. By doing so, the wider public could take advantage of given

⁷¹Kimber and Halliste (2015) 'EU-related communication in Eastern Partnership countries'

⁷² Ibid;

⁷³ 'EU Launches Reaction to Russian Campaigns of Disinformation – European Sources Online', accessed 21 August 2020, <https://www.europeansources.info/record/eu-launches-reaction-to-russian-campaigns-of-disinformation/>.

⁷⁴ Kimber and Halliste (2015) 'EU-related communication in Eastern Partnership countries'.

opportunities and at the same time, develop the trust towards the Union, resulting in stronger cooperation and partnership. The joint communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions in the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy 2015 indicates the importance of youth engagement in order to increase the visibility, communication and outreach level.⁷⁵ Besides, the given document also underlines the essence of partnership among youth between neighbouring countries and the EU member states. This would increase people to people communication and support faster and more effective diffusion of EU norms and values, opportunities and information on the partnership outcomes and projects implemented.

The Young European Ambassadors initiative in the framework of EU NEIGHBOURS east information campaign as a part of Open Neighbourhood Policy was developed back in 2016 as a follow up of the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy 2015. The network aims at connecting the young people from the EaP region and the EU member states. The members of the initiative are EU enthusiastic, active people who voluntarily organise online and offline activities and events in order to share EU related information, values, opportunities among youth and the rest of society. Their presence is promised to shape the positive attitude towards the ongoing Europeanization process and the Eastern Partnership Initiative. Based on the EU NEIGHBOURS east, the number of Young European Ambassadors network is a growing initiative and currently accounts more than a seven hundred young professionals and students from six eastern partnership countries, European Union Member States and the UK. Besides the active implementation of online and offline activities, YEAs frequently participate in the official events and policy discussions that are dedicated to the future of the EaP region and cooperation with the EU, their thoughts and considerations are taken into account.⁷⁶

As Young European Ambassadors' focal point from Georgia underlines in the short interview, currently there are 90 active YEAs in a country, this group of people have implemented 118 online and offline activities, in the offline activities almost 8000 beneficiaries participated, online activities account 45 619 participant reach.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ 'Council Conclusions on the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy', accessed 31 August 2020, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/12/14/conclusions-european-neighbourhood/>.

⁷⁶ 'Young European Ambassadors (YEAs) | EU Neighbours'.

⁷⁷ Nino Turiashvili, National Focal Point of EU NEIGHBOURS east, Young European Ambassadors initiative. (interview)

4. Research Design and Methods

4.1 Theoretical framework and hypothesis

This section is dedicated to consolidating author's theoretical framework choice and present the hypothesis.

The author believes the theoretical frameworks she has discussed within the first section represent a valid baseline for the research process and will support the deciphering of the Young European Ambassadors as norm diffusion actors. The framework suggested by Frank Schimmelfennig "Europeanization beyond the EU"⁷⁸ is dedicated to lead the author to the general context, the incentive-based external strategy of European Union towards its neighbouring partner states in exchange to the adaption of EU norms. The following framework "Normative Power Europe"⁷⁹ from Ian Manners identifies EU key norms, and afterwards, the factors that shape the EU norm diffusion process. The given framework is considered as a great asset as the Young European Ambassadors initiative falls in line with the informational diffusion factor identified by Manners. In this context, Young European Ambassadors initiative represents a policy initiative by the EU to diffuse information about EU norms through strategic and declaratory communications. After categorising the initiative, it is essential to explore the norm diffusion process itself. For that purpose, norm "life-cycle"⁸⁰ three-stage process from Finnemore and Sikkink will be introduced; the given framework is planned to be the primary guiding framework during the research process, as it enables a researcher to respectively analyse and assess the impact of the EU norm diffusion process from Young European Ambassadors in Georgia. On the first stage of the norm "life cycle", norms emerge where the actors are norm entrepreneurs and organisational platforms, the motives of norm emergence can be Altruism, empathy, ideational or commitment, the dominant mechanism on the first stage is identified to be persuasion.⁸¹ The second, norm cascade stage identifies main actors that are states, international organisations or networks; this stage is shaped by legitimacy, reputation or esteem motives, the mechanisms are socialisation, institutionalisation or demonstration.⁸² During the final stage, norms are internalised by bureaucrats, professions or other concrete groups of people, as well as the wider public.⁸³

Overall, discussed perspectives hold great importance to examine the Young European Ambassadors impact on the EU norm diffusion in Georgia and test the hypothesis:

⁷⁸ Schimmelfennig, 'Eu External Governance and Europeanization Beyond the Eu'.

⁷⁹ Manners, 'Normative Power Europe', 2002.

⁸⁰ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink ' International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', accessed 29 August 2020, https://home.gwu.edu/~finnemor/articles/1998_norms_io.pdf.

⁸¹ Ibid;

⁸² Ibid;

⁸³ Ibid.

The presence of Young European Ambassadors ensures the successful promotion and norm diffusion of the European Union in Georgia.

The following section will introduce the methodological approach that helps the author to answer the research question.

4.2 Methodology

Research question: How does the Young European Ambassadors initiative diffuse EU norms among young people? The case of Georgia.

To reach the main goal of the thesis and answer a research question, three qualitative research methods will be adapted: content analysis, interviews, focus group.

Content analysis will ensure to examine the European Council conclusions, annual reports, EU regional and country-specific opinion polls, EU institution joint statements, EU NEIGHBOURS east portal, ENP and EaP policy papers as well as the related speeches from EU high officials.

The interviews are an essential part of the research; they will enable the researcher to hear from EU *high officials*- Interviewing EU officials in the Neighbourhood and Enlargement dimension will enable an author to analyse their approaches, interest and assessments towards the YEAs initiative. Strategic communication experts will support the assessment of the effectiveness of the initiative.

EU NEIGHBOURS east project coordinator, as well as the YEAs National focal point in Georgia, will give an author more in-depth insight how does the initiative operate, how the YEAs are selected, how the activities are planned and implemented, what are the main target groups.

The focus group with the beneficiaries of the initiative holds great importance; it will allow me to hear from the YEAs event participants how their perceptions towards the EU has changed and how the norms were internalised.

2016-2020 years' time frame has been selected. The initiative was developed in 2016, 2020 year represents the final year when the initiative operates in the given framework as presented.

Considering the travel restrictions, geographic distance and time constraint, the interviews are expected to be held online. However, if the travel restrictions are lifted, the focus group interviews will be carried out in Georgia.

5. Conclusion

This thesis report intends to establish a theoretical ground for the thesis, which will be written during the upcoming academic year and submitted in mid-July 2021. The thesis will contribute to the growing literature about the European Union and Eastern Partnership, precisely EU-Georgia relation. However, the dimension the thesis explores is underresearched, and no academic work has been done to explore how the EU norm diffusion among young people through the Young European Ambassadors initiative takes place. The given topic is extremely interesting as much as the European Union has never developed such pillar of communication campaign before. Since the initiative already operates for four years, the given period and the high activity of network will enable the author to draw conclusions.

The conceptual model of the study integrates a norm “life-cycle” three-stage theory as a prominent theory. However, the factors that lead to EU norm diffusion, such as informational campaign suggested by Manners and the external governance of the EU from Schimmelfennig will also assist the research process.

The thesis will argue that the Young European Ambassadors initiative positively influences the EU norm promotion in Georgia. To prove the hypothesis, whether *The presence of Young European Ambassadors ensures the successful promotion and norm diffusion of the European Union in Georgia*, qualitative research will be conducted. To evaluate the hypothesis, content analysis, interviews, and focus group will be employed.

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Work plan with deadlines and deliverables up to the end of the thesis writing period.

Complete literature review	December 25, 2020
Develop theoretical framework	January 31, 2021
Develop a structure and questions for interviews and case study	February 20, 2021
Receive feedback on the structure and questions for interviews and case study	February 28, 2021
Conduct interviews and case study	March, 2021
Process the materials from interviews and case study	April 30, 2021
Finalize the analytical part	May 25, 2021
First draft of the thesis	June 15, 2021
Submit the thesis	July 10, 2021
Oral defense	September, 2021

Declaration of Authorship

I, the undersigned Miranda Betchvaia hereby declare that I am the sole author of this Thesis Report. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made. This Thesis Report contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program, in English or in any other language. This is a true copy of the Thesis Report, including final revisions.

Date: 31st August 2020

Name: Miranda Betchvaia

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Miranda Betchvaia', written in a cursive style.