

Empowering the Southern Neighbourhood through research-intense projects: the untapped EU's public diplomacy potential

Zane Šime, *Norwegian University of Science and Technology*
(Trondheim, Norway)

E-mail: zane.sime@ntnu.no

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4690-3243>

Abstract

A comprehensive analysis of the EU's public diplomacy requires a more thorough look into the vast repository of EU instrumentary. EU Framework Programmes-funded projects are among these resourceful tools. The EU's approach is to purposefully, sustainably, and in a result-oriented manner co-operate directly with research-oriented entities internationally. The versatility of these projects in informing about and advancing EU foreign policy goals, such as resilience-building in the European Southern Neighbourhood (ESN), remains under-researched. This article's aim is to translate into terminology of public diplomacy the achievements of almost twenty projects funded by *Framework Programme 7* and *Horizon 2020* with the involvement of entities located in Morocco and/or Tunisia. This article addresses one dimension of the technoscientific gift's meaning by analysing the aspirations of the European side to assist the Southern Neighbourhood in its resilience-building efforts. In this study, inspiration is taken from analytical narrative to identify sequential developments that have resulted in the observed collaborative accomplishments. European technoscientific gifts for the Southern neighbours helped the beneficiaries launch new teaching and training opportunities in several higher education and advanced research centres. Looking well beyond the empirical findings, research publications and scholarly co-operation with diverse audiences prove indispensable in analytical understanding the resiliency and versatility of contemporary EU's public diplomacy practice.

Keywords: European Union (EU), public diplomacy, resilience, practice theory, technoscientific gift, European Southern Neighbourhood

Wzmocnienie Sąsiedztwa Południowego poprzez projekty wymagające intensywnych badań: niewykorzystany potencjał dyplomacji publicznej UE

Streszczenie

Kompleksowa analiza dyplomacji publicznej UE wymaga dokładniejszego przyjrzenia się ogromnemu repozytorium instrumentów UE. Projekty finansowane w ramach programów ramowych UE należą do tych skutecznych narzędzi. Podejście UE polega na celowym, zrównoważonym i zorientowanym na wyniki bezpośrednim angażowaniu się w działalność podmiotów zorientowanych na badania na arenie międzynarodowej. Wszeczhronność tych projektów w promowaniu celów polityki zagranicznej UE (takich jak budowanie odporności w europejskim sąsiedztwie południowym) pozostaje niedostatecznie zbadana. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu przełożenie na terminologię dyplomacji publicznej osiągnięć prawie dwudziestu projektów finansowanych przez Program Ramowy 7 oraz program Horyzont 2020 z udziałem podmiotów zlokalizowanych w Maroku i/Lub Tunezji. Niniejszy artykuł skoncentrowany jest na jednym wymiarze znaczenia daru technonaukowego, analizując aspiracje strony europejskiej do wspierania Sąsiedztwa Południowego w jego wysiłkach na rzecz budowania odporności. W niniejszym badaniu inspirację zaczerpnięto z narracji analitycznej, aby zidentyfikować wydarzenia, które doprowadziły do zaobserwowanych osiągnięć współpracy. Europejskie dary technonaukowe dla południowych sąsiadów pomogły beneficjentom uruchomić nowe możliwości nauczania i zaawansowanych badań w kilku ośrodkach szkolnictwa wyższego. Spojrzenie daleko poza ustalenia empiryczne, publikacje badawcze i współpracę naukową z różnymi odbiorcami okazuje się niezbędne w analitycznym zrozumieniu odporności i wszechstronności współczesnej praktyki dyplomacji publicznej UE.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska (UE), dyplomacja publiczna, odporność, teoria praktyki, dary technonaukowe, europejskie sąsiedztwo południowe

1. Introduction

The European Union's public diplomacy is the epitome of resilient diplomacy. However, not all of its valuable facets have been fully explored. This article addresses this gap in the existing literature by turning the scholarly gaze towards the projects funded by the EU Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation (FPs). These programmes are instrumental in translating the overarching goals of the EU's external involvement into specific actions and engagements with various entities outside of the EU, primarily third countries and international organisations (Torres Jarrín, Riordan 2023: p. 117). These EU-supported research-intensive encounters make the intellectual and practical resonance of the EU's aspirations and values felt among a broad spectrum of beneficiaries and addressed individuals.

Out of the broad repository of definitions, this article adheres to the following understanding: public diplomacy seeks to shape the perceptions and understandings of foreign publics. These efforts are aimed at ensuring favourable conditions for successful and efficacious foreign policy implementation (Proedrou, Frangonikolopoulos 2012: p. 729).

The empirical focus of this article is on the European Southern Neighbourhood (ESN) and one EU funding programme. These elements are part of a broader spectrum of the EU's outward advancement towards its adjacent areas, exercised through "blanketing" these geographic areas "with deep regulatory mechanisms, while pushing for greater regional cooperation" (Ohanyan 2015: p. 27). This supranationally organised "blanketing" reflects the EU's tendency towards projectification, in other words, the preference for project-based consultations and activities (Lundin et al. 2015: p. 178–179, 192; Nicklich et al. 2020: p. 386–387). The wide spectrum of EU-supported projects remains to be fully explored. This article attempts to fill this gap in the existing literature through a public diplomacy lens.

Moreover, there is a need to go beyond the mere references to the relatively asymmetric power relations characterising the encounters between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea (Ben-Yehoyada 2015: p. 194; Cosquer 2021: p. 302; Pavón-Guinea 2023: p. 294). Though on a smaller scale, the EU's diverse assistance to build resilience through multiple partnerships and on a variety of topics to promote green transition and sustainability predates the *European Green Deal* (Tocci 2023: p. 71–91, 167). The EU routine support to address various risks and challenges faced by the regular volatilities in the ESN remains to be fully understood.

This article addresses the following **research question**: which types of EU-funded public diplomacy activities remain understudied in contemporary EU diplomacy studies?

The author develops the following argument: to comprehend the full spectrum of contemporary EU diplomacy activities, it is essential to analyse more closely various EU-funded activities and how they have contributed to advancing the EU's goals towards the ESN, such as comprehensive resilience-building.

The first part of the article combines practice theory thinking, especially its relationality stream, with anthropological enquiry into meetings to set some minimal theoretical and conceptual grounds for this public diplomacy enquiry. The second part explains the methodological considerations regarding how this article builds upon recent science diplomacy findings to argue that the full public diplomacy potential of EU FPs remains insufficiently acknowledged. The third part presents the main research findings concerning the most stellar public diplomacy episodes achieved by some projects. The concluding part discusses how the identified public diplomacy achievements could be contextualised and studied further, with some remarks on the need to elaborate in greater detail on the methodological considerations guiding and shaping findings across the wide spectrum of research on public diplomacy.

2. Practice theory

This article is based on the pronounced relationality thinking inherited by many contemporary practice scholars from Bourdieu (Hofmann, Schmitt 2020: p. 161; Widerberg 2021: p. 191). "IP[ra]ctice theory concerns routinised behaviours, competence, making do, bodily movements, mind, and even the proper level of devotion and attention to doing.

Additionally, tools, objects, things, and materiality are also important to construct a practice." (Cheng 2020: p. 415) The way these means and modes of relationality serve as trust-building or maintaining reservoirs remains an understudied aspect that deserves more attention (Schilke et al. 2021: p. 244), including from the public diplomacy perspective.

In the EU setting, the practices are to a considerably large degree reliant on meetings and online communication via a variety of digital communication services. This wide spectrum of encounters captures communicative, deliberative, and productive rituals and events that maintain and shape the social order and define framework governance across an expansive range of domains (Sandler, Thedvall 2017: p. 8; Schwartzman 2017: p. 163). In the context of foreign policy and external action, these routines are studied with a reference to hybrid or blended diplomacy. Both terms refer to a combination of in-person and digital modes of interaction (Bjola, Manor 2022: p. 491; Bicchi, Lovato 2024: p. 187). However, there are a myriad of routines among other professional circles that deserve more attention to grasp the full scope of EU relationality, especially when it comes to the dense links with its neighbouring areas. Contemporary reflections attest to the enduring importance of relationality and collegial recognition for academic career progression (Lacerda et al. 2023: p. 851; Song 2023: p. 274). However, the preoccupation with the major and large-scale research centres, such as one of the recent Egyptian accounts (Soror et al. 2023), leaves out smaller-scale activities that entail a strong relationality component and regularly provides targeted support to address various challenges faced across the ESN.

EU-funded projects are theoretically and conceptually positioned as temporary intellectual institutions for regular encounters among consortium members for internal coordination, representation, and decision-making purposes, as well as outreach to specific audiences. Consequently, EU projects are valued in this article as sites of prestige and attraction among wider audiences and cooperation partners that are not part of the consortium composition. Thus, following Carnevali's (2020: p. 168, 199) reasoning on social appearances, an EU-funded project embodies a social magnet. The EU-funded project serves as a temporary intellectual site that often expands (even beyond the consortium composition) its capacity to engage individuals on an ad hoc basis in a supranationally supported research-intensive expertise exchange and co-creation environment (Šime 2023c: p. 58). This characteristic concisely introduces the intersections between the public diplomacy logic and those of educational and science diplomacies (Šime 2023a: p. 8). Educational and science diplomacies are nested with the public diplomacy next to other niche diplomacies. Along the lines of Villumsen Berling (2011: p. 391), the EU-funded project is an excellent site for social reproduction and for achieving a broader societal echo of the consortium's research results and accomplishments.

This intellectual attractiveness of EU-funded projects is instrumental in the continuous pursuit of the EU to comprehensively strengthen the resilience capacities in the neighbourhood. The EU's overarching approach to resilience allows for the embrace of a notable variety of resilience understandings (among others, noted by Krüger, Albris 2021: p. 353). The supranational steering of this neighbourhood visibilisation is most obviously performed through criteria enshrined in the open calls for project applications (Šime

2023b). Krüger understands visibilisation in his resilience study as “the process of making capacities and the lack thereof visible in the public debate and thus to power structures” (Krüger 2023: p. 223). The EU outlines challenges to seeking the best mix of expertise to masterfully address this identified gap in the form of a project. A neighbourhood better capable of withstanding various challenges and shocks is essential to consolidating EU internal resilience (Šime 2023d). Projects are one element in the EU’s toolbox to achieve resilience-building.

The author draws inspiration from the network paradigm in public diplomacy studies (Proedrou, Frangonikolopoulos 2012: p. 729). It views beneficiaries of EU FPs, especially the Europe-based ones, as an enabling circle of experts, to whom to devolve a certain proportion of the structural diplomacy work linked to the external action goals and aspirations. While Proedrou and Frangonikolopoulos (2012: p. 731) argue that the past EU practice of structural diplomacy did not engage with the broader public, the author argues that findings on the impact of EU FPs demonstrate a different picture. Therefore, the empirical insights brought by this article further the scholarly understanding of structural diplomacy as a European practice that can persuasively reach diverse parts of societies abroad. Looking beyond the hierarchical positionality of certain research establishments or academics (Lindner 2021: p. 367), the public diplomacy value of research cooperation lies in its potential to reach a much broader resonance and promote the societal value of EU-funded research.

In such a manner, this article delivers a less orthodox approach to and broader interpretation of what can be considered as a diplomatic gift. Historically, the majority of diplomatic gifts were objects or living beings that were delivered via official channels by the royal, national, or federal emissaries or representatives of the diplomatic corps (e.g. Auwers 2013: p. 428; Bowry 2020: p. 131; Eberhard 2022). In the contemporary EU setting, the author looks for the implicit diplomatic gifts, meaning the know-how tied to a skilful use of the advanced research instrumentation shared by the European counterparts with entities located in the ESN during EU-funded projects. This type of gift is not delivered to the ESN by the respective locally operating EU delegation. It does not come from the European External Action Service, either. Nevertheless, the EU-funded expert involvement in assisting the neighbourhood colleagues in their pursuit to improve their research expertise and technical equipment has some gift-giving traits that resemble the historical tradition practiced throughout centuries. To attune this thinking on the new generation of gifts with the creative and experimental enthusiasm described in recent studies (e.g. Bueno 2023: p. 335; Callahan 2017: p. 368), this article follows the logic of technoscientific gift. Rentetzi (2021: p. 3) develops the analytic category of technoscientific gift to address the interactive character embodied by an object with certain characteristics corresponding to technoscientific knowledge and international relations.

Technoscientific gifts have the same strong relationality component between the gift giver and the gift receiver described in the literature addressing historical diplomatic gifts (Šime 2024). Bringing into the picture methodological fetishism and the complex ways, by which individuals attach diverse qualities to objects and position those in a broader

context (Allen 2020: p. 172; Eberhard 2022; Schäfer 2020: p. 320; Widmer 2020: p. 247), the given gift is valued from the standpoint of the giver. This article delves into the value the European side associates and estimates to deliver along its shared expertise and equipment. However, this lens leaves out the dynamism of the shared expertise and instruments in terms of the full spectrum of meanings that recipients and other individuals attribute to them and that change over time (Hammel 2020: p. 236; Yagou 2020: p. 209). Therefore, this article unpacks one dimension of the technoscientific gift's meaning by primarily addressing the aspirations of the contemporary European side to assist the neighbourhood in its resilience-building attempts (Fridlund 2020: p. 438). It is essential to thoroughly examine this side of the gift-giving process before proceeding with further enquiry into the meaning-making on the receiving side.

3. Methods

The overall methodological propensity towards an analytical narrative stance explains the importance of broadening the EU public diplomacy study to fully grasp the resonance of the EU across the ESN. "Analytic narratives involve choosing a problem or puzzle, then building a model to explicate the logic of the explanation and to elucidate the key decision points and possibilities, and finally evaluating the model through comparative statics and the testable implications the model generates" (Levi 2002: p. 113; 2004: p. 208). Although the inceptions of analytical narrative are tied to rational choice and game theory, this article's author takes a less orthodox choice of using practice theory as the main reference point. The contemporary search for, as Levi (2004: p. 217) puts it, "novel facts" should be developed without staying immune to the theoretical advances in social sciences, such as those developed by practice scholars.

The practice theory enables translating the empirical insights not only into confirmations of the already established findings on contemporary EU public diplomacy. Following the reflections on analytical narrative (Nalepa 2010: p. 372), practice theory proves its worth in extending the empirical horizons in an understudied area to build a more comprehensive understanding concerning various facets forming EU external action. Noting the enduring scientific relevance of analytic narrative as attested by the Johan Skytte Prize award in 2019 to Margaret Levi (Levi 2019), this article captures an interest in bringing an experimental manoeuvre. Consequently, in this article, inspiration from analytical narrative is taken to identify orderly processes that have led to the chosen state of affairs. It is an attempt to strengthen order amidst diverse disorderly elements with potentially intrusive features in the studied model. To specify, the studied model is the public diplomacy dimension of the European Research Area's extension across the ESN through participation in consortiums funded by the EU FPs.

Obtained project insights offer first steps towards generalisation concerning the EU-offered research support in the ESN context. Following the established analytical narrative approach (Bates et al. 2000: p. 694; Levi 2002: p. 119), this article is based on considerably extensive prior research stages performed by the author concerning the

EU science diplomacy towards the ESN. Respecting the widespread propensity towards analytical narratives as studies of short sequences of events (Carpenter 2000: p. 655), this article is focused on project-based activities that took place primarily within the post-Arab Spring years of 2014–2017. The earlier use of interviews by Nalepa (2010: p. 355) to develop an analytical narrative strengthens the author's certainty regarding the methodological choices, including the geographic restriction of analysis to Morocco and Tunisia, namely consortium members from these two ESN countries.

Furthermore, this article is grounded in the strong influences of meeting ethnography and the self-reflexivity of the author as an influential creator of evidence-informed insights, findings, and conclusions (Kendall, Silver 2017: p. 42; Sandler 2017: p. 124). Nineteen semi-structured interviews were the main sources of empirical material concerning the routine active learning undergone by practitioners throughout the years of project implementation and, on certain instances, beyond the project time frame (Abram 2017: p. 66). Following systematic project mapping, invitations were sent to interviewees to leverage insights from those countries that were most prominent in the resulting pool of selected projects. Fully considering the limits acknowledged by meeting ethnographers, these semi-structured interviews are treated as sources that offer some insight into the understudied EU's public diplomacy (Brown-Saracino, Stiman 2017: p. 98). Recognising the tall order elaborated by Levi (2002: p. 111) that is far from easy to squeeze into a standard-length manuscript, the practice theory choice displays receptiveness to some of the criticism formulated by Skocpol (2000) concerning the research published by the main proponents of analytical narratives.

The interviews were combined with participation in ongoing project meeting and conference. Respecting the routine planning of the EU FP-funded project cycle, these two complementary encounters with one project represent punctuated entries into the project implementation practices (Thedvall 2013: p. 107; 2017: p. 145). This article is far from the definite and ultimate sole explanatory perspective on the EU public diplomacy angle, thus far neglected in the existing literature. Parikh (2000: p. 683) rightly outlines the analytical narrative line of thinking on the importance of acknowledging biases captured by the examined empirical source. Nevertheless, following the ethnographic thinking on participatory reflections (Garsten, Sörbom 2017: p. 136), the aspirations, achievements, and challenges shared by project managers are highly informative about the routines that deliver success and address hurdles standing in the way of stellar external action and structural diplomacy projection.

To examine the empirical examples of public diplomacy practices outlined by the interviewed project representatives, mostly project managers, the findings revolve around the following three groups of activities: conferences, short-term training or teaching course for researchers from the ESN organised in Europe or its neighbourhood, and various types of public outreach activities.

Stressing the public diplomacy character of this study, two limitations of this study distinguish the findings from typical science and technology studies. Firstly, the chosen time frame does not tap into the longitudinal evolution of the value and meanings attrib-

uted to various scientific tools, such as social recycling (see example of Gonçalves Martin 2020: p. 507; Grote 2020: p. 464). Secondly, the full spectrum of networked organisational and administrative procedures implemented to secure accessibility to the envisaged operators, users, and beneficiaries deserves to be addressed in greater detail in a separate manuscript (e.g. Alexander 2023; von Oertzen 2020: p. 478).

Before proceeding with the elaboration of the research findings, it is important to note that the interview template was designed without explicit public diplomacy research goals in mind. The interview template was focused on the EU's strategic frameworks and science diplomacy. This is an important nuance to consider when estimating that the information extracted from the interviews might not demonstrate a complete picture of all the dimensions of public diplomacy in the analysed projects. To address this limitation, where applicable, the websites of projects were used to gather some additional information relevant for the public diplomacy study. On rare occasions, former project websites were no longer functioning, and some project subsections on institutional websites offered scarce information with outdated and no longer functioning hyperlinks. Therefore, this additional search for information faced a patchwork of open-access information.

Two aforementioned limitations of the processed empirical material are not considered an insurmountable challenge to the envisaged research design, because qualitative research almost always entails work with some degree of incompleteness of data. The deeper the study process advances into the studied topic, the more the author becomes aware of some gaps in the analysed empirical material. This remark simply attests to the advanced stage of the overall scholarly enquiry into the chosen topic. It revisits the empirical material that has already been subject to analysis from several methodological standpoints. The preceding enquiries have offered a more profound understanding of the way strengths and weaknesses can be detected in the chosen empirical material depending on the theoretical framework and methodological tool set. The author is a novice who has a very nuanced understanding built on multiple research rounds and is not a first-time user of this set of transcripts of semi-structured interviews.

4. Public diplomacy practices

Nineteen analysed projects (cases P1–P19) provide an informative cumulative insight on the prevailing project-based activities to support EU public diplomacy across the ESN. While most of the projects offered useful insights into specific results, two projects must be singled out as offering no empirical value to this article. One of those projects lacked the sought-after characteristics, because it was not a successful cooperation experience between the European manager and the entity based in the ESN (case P11). The other project did not provide any substantial examples of public diplomacy characteristics, because the semi-structured interview revolved around internal administrative considerations of the project and the project website is no longer publicly available (case P12). These two exceptional cases are helpful examples of why not all EU FPs-funded projects should be automatically considered as public diplomacy resources. Internal consortium

dynamics and project implementation experience might not always result in relevant public diplomacy resonance. This is a helpful guide cautioning against overestimating EU investments in research as capable of generating public diplomacy value. Following a recent example (Šime 2024), enquiry into each case and its strengths and shortcomings is essential. As the subsequent paragraphs prove, most projects are resourceful intellectual spaces capable of generating significant public diplomacy activities. The prevailing forms of such implicit public diplomacy performance and the type of relationality it sets in motion are explained in the subsequent three subsections, each addressing every earlier defined form of public diplomacy activity.

4.1. Conferences

Conferences and large-scale public gatherings with a considerable degree of formality aimed at introducing EU FPs-funded project activities and results are not common characteristics. Conferences as noteworthy sites of public diplomacy with relevance to the ESN setting were identified only among four out of nineteen projects. P6 concluding conference's diplomatic dimension was captured by the presence of the French diplomatic staff during the event. The participative approach and significant investment made in ESN human capital were showcased through research presentations given by early-career researchers. The conference was hosted in the ESN. The event was made accessible to wider audiences via online video streaming, thus considerably facilitating the accessibility of interested audiences irrespective of their geographic location. Whereas P7 contained a formal symposium in one of two selected ESN countries organised by the locally headquartered consortium member. This event was open to the mass media. In both project examples (P6 and P7), the project managing institution from Europe was among the participants of the event.

The case P9 included a considerably long list of international outreach events in Latin America and China, not only the ESN. P9 organised a francophone workshop in one of the studied ESN countries. This is a good example of how many of the studied projects had a broader outreach beyond Europe and the ESN. More precisely, the ESN was only one of several prioritised areas for researcher cooperation and exchanges of expertise. This nuance is important when considering that the European Research Area offers ESN entities access not only to internationally excelling European hubs of scientific excellence. Many of the studied projects offer the ESN an immersive experience in international subject matter expert circles, thus contributing to their expertise beyond the topical issues addressed in the European setting.

The case P16 serves as a good reminder about the reoccurring internal volatilities in the ESN and their imprints on the implicit EU public diplomacy practices. Due to some disorders in one of the studied ESN countries, a large project event was decided to be hosted in Southern Europe. Public and visitor safety is among the reasons why, on certain occasions, major events of EU FPs-funded projects cannot fulfil their full public diplomacy potential. More in-person presence in the ESN is restricted by the lack of certainty about the safety of EU-funded beneficiaries.

Overall, the outlined four project examples do not show that there was no engagement in diverse public events performed during other examined projects. These research results mean that those public events not included in this analysis were either not outlined by the interviewee as noteworthy for the ESN context, or the project online publications did not demonstrate that these types of events had substantial ESN relevance.

4.2. Short-term training courses

Since many of the 19 studied projects are Research and Innovation Staff Exchanges of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, research secondments, short-term research visits, and short-term training courses are typical. The examined projects organised both internal and externally accessible capacity-building events. This distinction is important for public diplomacy purposes. The learning and training events that were open to participants beyond the project consortium translate into significant outreach and expertise dissemination potential. In such a manner, EU FPs-funded project consortiums fulfil their role as versatile learning environments as well as open and accessible socialisation spaces. Consequently, these projects fulfil an essential public diplomacy role of offering more nuanced understanding to highly skilled experts into the technicalities and methodologies that support EU goals and aspirations in tackling various challenges, such as sustainable approaches to Mediterranean forest management (Doblas-Miranda 2015: p. 228), faced by its populations and the ESN.

P1 offered short-term training visits to researchers from the ESN to perform research and measurements with equipment located in Europe. These visits translated into academic publications. P2 supported the post-doctoral research projects of several outstanding researchers for 36 months, which is a considerably longer engagement than the standard short-term mobilities characterising this cluster of relevant public diplomacy activities. P3 contained exchanges among experts from the northern and southern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. P5 included short-term training sessions organised in the ESN with participants from all over Africa. Additionally, the consortium members from the ESN conducted several webinars in French via *YouTube* to offer learning opportunities across Africa.

The case P7 contained several capacity-building activities. One form was the training course for doctoral students and early-career researchers in one of the studied ESN countries with the presence of representatives from the line ministry of the respective country. P7 also stimulated new doctoral projects, training, and capacity building in one of the studied ESN countries. Post-graduate courses were offered in Europe, Northern Africa, and Latin America. This nuance puts once again the ESN in a broader context of the international outreach of a typical EU FPs-funded project. Similarly, P10 offered European expertise not exclusively to the ESN. For example, P10 financed a visit to Belarus as well. Consequently, P14-funded secondments lasting several months to North and South Americas and touring workshops (both internal and open to external attendants) demonstrate similar openness to various geographic locations.

P8 brought to the consortium members from the ESN a better understanding concerning the European research tradition and practice. More importantly, the project put women researchers from the ESN into the academic spotlight. Therefore, the project became a platform for the recognition and acknowledgement of their expertise.

P9 brought major milestones to the ESN. This project facilitated the installation of a scientific monitoring and measurement station that offered completely new research opportunities in the nearby areas. This technoscientific gift opened a new research chapter in the ESN, most notably demonstrated by the introduction of thematically new courses in the curricula of several nearby universities. The accessibility of this technoscientific gift was not restricted to institutions that were part of the P9 consortium. The research facility promoted academic publishing. Visits to European universities were also part of P9. A field campaign accompanied the installation of the technoscientific gift, and this event was open to a broad set of interested researchers from various universities. This is a great example of how, opening a new scientific practice chapter in the ESN with European assistance, the project offered capacity-building opportunities beyond the beneficiaries of the EU FPs-funded P9. This is an example of the considerable outreach achieved by P9 to address societal challenges linked to greenhouse gases and other environmental issues in an inclusive manner and with a distinct outreach scope.

P17 offered training to doctoral students, early-career researchers, and professionals based on the data obtained from a mobile measurement tool. Going beyond pure academic purposes, the data obtained from the temporarily deployed technoscientific gift proved useful to a broader set of end-users, such as local public authorities and some segments of local professionals making a living in the ESN. This example stresses the vast scope of outreach in the implicit public diplomacy practices studied. P17 could satisfy academic and professional needs across a spectrum of ESN inhabitants, not just capacity-building in the research sector.

P19 helped shed light on diverse talents ready to express themselves along the lines of marine beauty, maritime urgencies, needs, and challenges. An education initiative for school pupils, a contest and corresponding exhibition of art works connected to science, and citizen science activities allowed to gather a broad spectrum of attention. Therefore, besides its scientific purposes, P19 translated the propensity of the project managing institution to facilitate joint initiatives across the shores of the Mediterranean Sea into a set of calls for various marine aficionados to find interesting forms of expression and intellectual engagement with the P19 main theme. Consequently, the P19 implicit public diplomacy formula entails both educational and artistic expression elements.

Overall, the diversity of capacity-building, individual research mobility, and peer exchange opportunities offered by the analysed projects attest to the strong relationality component of the EU FPs-funded projects. The EU's support for diverse domains of resilience-building across the ESN offers an immersive environment strongly linked to other parts of the world. Building on the earlier acknowledgement that the EU FPs are made accessible to a notable diversity of research-oriented hubs in the ESN, it is essential to reiterate that many projects strive to offer their expertise beyond the consortium

entities. This educational and training outreach makes the EU resilience-building effort felt across a broader realm of societal groups in the ESN and beyond this geographic area.

4.3. Various public outreach activities

Many of the studied projects contained some unique elements. They are collected in one group as distinctive implicit public diplomacy expressions. P1 was presented by its ESN consortium member during the locally hosted *Researchers' Night*. P13 benefited from an active engagement with the mass media in Italy concerning EU relations with the Middle East and North Africa. Besides classic academic publishing, P15 published in popular scientific magazines, and mass media in English and Spanish.

P2's ESN consortium members significantly contributed to the dissemination of the call for applications, thus contributing to the awareness among eligible professionals about the project and its offered expertise and opportunities. The P3's managing authority praised that partnering with colleagues located in the ESN helped them enhance their international standing. P3's implementation gave the project-managing institution a fresh look at its analytic work to seek more impact than the purely academic publishing option of the P3 research findings. Similarly, P18 significantly enhanced the reputation and international standing of the project management institution. As part of the P18 commitment to the sense of togetherness developed during the project among colleagues, this project is linked to the project manager's suggestion to establish an institute or a foundation to address in greater nuance the Mediterranean and Euro-Arab matters. P18 incentivises more institution-building with the support of a joint intellectual engagement with regionally important issues. The P18's contribution to public outreach is based on the prioritisation of maintaining close ties to civil society. The extensive interviewing for research purposes echoes the active listening conceptualisation characteristic of public diplomacy studies (Šime 2020). P18 engaged in extensive and active listening across the ESN to convey the sentiment and concerns to the EU institutions in their rich entirety and full context.

P4 workshops with stakeholders organised in different places contributed to the overall awareness concerning the project-managing institution and its expertise in building research agendas and platforms that correspond to societal needs. The P4 managing entity attached great importance to the promotion of a sense of equality and joint responsibility of the present and future situation in the Mediterranean region. This is one of the reoccurring signs of the project-based propensity, such as in the P19 case, to strengthen the collective dedication to the common or shared cause. This joint effort was translated in the P5 setting as an attempt by the ESN representative to seek an opportunity to briefly introduce a high-level EU official to the project achievements during the visit to the ESN country. The actual accomplishment of this effort and outreach attempt is not known. However, it is an important episode concerning a sense of local ownership of the EU FPs-funded project and enthusiasm for bottom-up advocacy.

P8 close cooperation with the relevant managing authorities and competence centres were attested by the involvement of local authorities in project meetings and

decision-making during these meetings. The policy briefs were published on the website in open-access format for convenient access for all interested readers. The Union for the Mediterranean was part of the P8 advisory board. P8 prides itself on doing research in close collaboration with society and through participatory approaches that can accommodate some concerns voiced during the Arab Spring.

P9 meetings held in the ESN were accompanied by consultations among Europe-based project's participants with the embassy staff of the respective country concerning future research cooperation opportunities. This is not a public diplomacy example. Instead, such consultations are praised, because a project improved the embassy staff's awareness about local research outreach opportunities and potential future public diplomacy prospects.

P10 attested to the importance of engaging ESN countries in the EU FPs-funded projects to ensure a sufficient diversity of expertise and points of view. This interest in securing sufficient diversity of perspectives applies to the natural sciences. Along somewhat similar lines, P19 attached importance to addressing the ESN colleagues equitably and respecting their scientific, public, and political characteristics.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The EU shapes the perceptions and understandings of the ESN through capacity-building, instalment, or temporary deployment of research infrastructure in the form of implicit technoscientific gifts and opportunities to engage in co-decision concerning recommendations for future policy directions, possibilities for artistic expression, and citizen science that is structured in project-based activities. To answer the research question, considering the widespread use of short-term research mobilities and concise training events for early-career researchers, these are the types of EU-funded public diplomacy activities that remain understudied in contemporary EU diplomacy studies. This study of nineteen projects attests to the validity of the argument that, to fully grasp the spectrum of EU diplomacy activities offered to the ESN, it is essential to take a much more thorough analytical look at various EU-funded activities. These activities have immensely contributed to the overall goals of EU diplomacy towards the ESN in diverse forms, covering a myriad of topics related to comprehensive resilience-building.

Moreover, these project-based activities have fostered a strong relationality among project coordinators with their Southern colleagues, including the commitment to address Mediterranean issues as a common cause that deserves a jointly crafted and concerted effort. Online streaming means have significantly facilitated the outreach possibilities of projects, including well beyond the ESN. Technoscientific gifts from the European side to the Southern neighbours helped them open new learning opportunities in several advanced educational and research centres. These implicit diplomatic gifts enable the training of early-career researchers with new equipment and expanded mastery of data analysis. These opportunities contributed to environmental situational awareness among locally stationed experts. Future research should explore the meaning-making among

the receivers of these technoscientific gifts to better understand what value researchers and other interested parties across the European Southern Neighbourhood attribute to these object- or installation-enabled collaborative encounters within the European Research Area.

Overall, the examined projects are complementary elements to other funding streams operated by the EU to help the world address climate mitigation and adaptation paths (Humphreys 2022: p. 1091), as well as other comprehensive resilience-building matters. The EU FPs-funded projects are indispensable embodiments of climate and sustainable development action to counter the risks associated with public propensity towards climate change fatigue or apocalypse lassitude propagated by some entities involved in the global sustainability debates, as well as disturbances to public safety and well-being caused by the radical direct action (Maslin et al. 2023: p. 8; Saab 2023: p. 127). Through offering early career academic pathways, training, and capacity-building opportunities, these projects involve youth in a constructive manner in a sustainable transition. This is an essential component in the overall translation of the EU's evidence-informed approach to sustainability. Academic opportunities offered to young scientists through the projects are an excellent example that proves that the EU understands public concerns about climate change and offers many constructive and well-supervised opportunities to engage in early career trajectories across a broad spectrum of specialisations.

Following such understanding of practice theory, this article itself can be viewed as part of developing EU public diplomacy practice. Since public diplomacy is to a large extent dependent on the routines of meaning-making, its co-production with researchers as a notable group of the most active meaning-makers deserves to be mentioned. Therefore, the professional drive towards productivity in terms of the academic publishing record also can be an influential intellectual thread shaping the current state and perspectives, not just on certain facets of European integration but also on the nature of contemporary EU public diplomacy (Mak, Pollack 2020: p. 621; Pel et al. 2022: p. 50). This statement echoes the earlier drawn conclusions about the political instrumentation of higher education to support the European project and identity (Kushnir 2022: p. 316). Research findings and scientific achievements are essential for an analytical understanding of the resiliency and versatility of contemporary EU's public diplomacy practice.

From a methodological standpoint, this article stresses the importance that public diplomacy studies should not be mainly preoccupied with compelling story telling. Academic enquiry should be equally attentive to the gaps and limitations of the studied empirical material, the chosen research methods, and the way highly invested scholars implicitly or explicitly instil certain positionality in the research they produce. Good narration in academic terms needs to be closely anchored in these considerations and properly mirror this dimension of scientific enquiry into the research output, such as this article.

Zane Šime – affiliated researcher (doctoral candidate) at the Department of Historical and Classical Studies (Faculty of Humanities, Norwegian University of Science and Technology). Research interests: regionalism, diplomacy studies, research and innovation policies.

Zane Šime – badaczka (kandydat na doktorat) w Katedrze Studiów Historycznych i Klasycznych (Wydział Nauk Humanistycznych, Norweski Uniwersytet Nauki i Technologii). Zainteresowania badawcze: regionalizm, studia nad dyplomacją, polityka badań i innowacji.

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