

Social Media Europe and the Rise of Comedy in Global Diplomacy

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JAMES BRASSET AND CHRISTOPHER BROWNING, OCT 14 2018

Donald Tusk's use of Instagram to stage a joke at Theresa May's expense was perceived by some to cross a diplomatic line. Certainly this view was implied by May's sharp response that called for greater respect in Brexit negotiations. But the use of social media is increasingly a part of the 'new diplomacy' of states and the current agenda to re-invigorate the EU brand in the face of an unprecedented set of crises. Central to this agenda is the deployment of humour and comedy as a language of public communication that crosses boundaries and demographics in a way that embraces the mediatised public sphere of global politics. Insta-national Relations.

To recall, Donald Tusk's joke was to post a picture of himself offering May 'A piece of cake', with the refrain 'Sorry no cherries'. While not exactly cutting edge humour, the joke belies a depth of construction and staging that should give scholars of new diplomacy pause for thought. First, it brings together two of the EU's favourite metaphors for criticising the UK's Brexit position. On one hand, the nearly forgotten trope that in wanting to leave the EU while retaining many of the benefits, the UK wants to 'have its cake and eat it'—indeed, this was initially a direct riposte to a Boris Johnson quip. On the other hand, in seeking a bespoke post-Brexit deal the UK is ignoring how the Single Market only provides the technical basis for a limited choice between models (e.g. Canada or Norway): it is therefore 'cherry picking'.

Of themselves such metaphors relay a basic diplomatic line: 'don't be greedy'. But when staged in this manner – and circulated after the fact – they perform a relation of power that may, *or may not*, have been intended. Tusk has contrived a situation in which he is ostensibly being nice and polite to a state leader: normal diplomacy. Yet as an emergent exponent of the new diplomacy, Tusk has staged this moment to make fun of a state leader: *laughing at*, not *with*. At a very basic level the image belies a realist assessment; this is something the EU believes it can do, a Schmittian gag if you will. More critically, we might question the gendered nature of the image, or indeed, the way it plays with different audiences beyond the EU including, and supposedly unexpectedly, those 'Remainer' constituencies that have balked at the humiliation. In this way, Tusk's intervention was provocative precisely because it challenged – or perhaps placed ill found confidence in – Britain's own self-identity as being able to take a joke. But as replies to the post suggest, the move tweaked a certain and very British resolve: while Theresa May might 'be' a joke, she is 'our' joke.

How should we think about the use of social media in global diplomacy? What does the rise of comedy in the mediatised public sphere do to politics? These are questions that underpin our British Academy funded research project on: *Humorous States: New Diplomacy and the Rise of Comedy in IR*. While it is too soon to say anything definitive about the case of the 'cherry-less cake', we would read Tusk's move as part of a wider set of shifts in the public branding of the EU (and in practices of nation/region branding more generally). After the Eurozone crisis, the media image of the EU has been relentlessly tarnished as a neo-liberal hegemony that imposes austerity on smaller states, while letting larger states off the hook. This image has been played out and extended via representations of the migrant crisis, where smaller states have argued they bear a greater burden, while still under conditions of austerity. And it is an image that has been drawn upon in the populist rhetoric of crises over – inter alia – Brexit, Hungary, Catalonia, and Italy. In response, the EU has sought to improve its brand so as to identify more directly with young people, evidently aware of its need to shore up this constituency of support. In this sense, Tusk's turn to

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Instagram is part of a concerted effort to bypass traditional channels of communication and (re)connect with a younger demographic. Newspapers and TV are seen as a turn off for millennials, whereas Twitter and Facebook are prone to echo chambers. The visuality of Instagram and YouTube, it seems, can communicate the importance, dynamism and 'sexiness' of the EU.

But what about when such comedy fails? The literature on comedy and global politics often seeks to highlight the subversive potential of humour to build critical consciousness or ironic self-awareness. However, while such elements of humour are easily located in resistance movements, say, or the work of graffiti artists and other 'non-state' forms of political agency, our project is implicitly concerned with the problems created by the use of humour by states. For one thing, humour can also carry a conservative gesture, jokes can affirm certain 'group' values and identities, often through 'othering'. Equally, almost by definition jokes are funny for some and not others. While a professional satirist like Stewart Lee can make such ambiguities of reception a productive element in his performance, it is presumably harder for politicians. Indeed, there are numerous EU branding exercises that have not gone down very well, including Captain Euro, Science: It's a Girl Thing, and the monumental MEP Rap Battle (for the youth vote): Straight Outta Strasbourg.

In conclusion, the emerging use of comedy in public diplomacy is complex and ambiguous terrain and while we might take a certain joy in the way politicians are stumbling into this new area, we must also retain a sensitivity to the cultural basis of such branding. This move to irony in political culture follows on the back of concerted efforts after the Danish Cartoons Crisis and Charlie Hebdo to equate satire (of Islam) with the fundamental European right of free speech. As the EU seeks to rebuild its public image in terms that millennials understand, it cannot laugh away the hierarchical power relations that pushed it to this point.

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