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Explaining NATO's public diplomacy

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Video interview with Stefanie Babst, Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy

Q: We're speaking today to Stefanie Babst, who is the new Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy. Ms Babst, welcome. Thank you for taking time to speak to us. First question, can you tell us something about yourself?

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- [Audio file](#)
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- [Video file](#)

Babst: Well, I'm German and I joined NATO's International Staff some seven years ago. I started first to work as the German information officer and was then appointed to head of the section, which is responsible for running communication programs for all of NATO's 26 member countries. So that was quite a challenge already.

And then in May this year, the Secretary General appointed me to my current post as Deputy Assistant Secretary General, so I think it will be even more of a challenge.

Q: Indeed. So what is the role, as you see it, of the Deputy Assistant Secretary General, or DASG, for Public Diplomacy?

Babst: Well, the DASG, as you say, I think has four principle roles. First, it's very much about supporting our Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy, the Secretary General of NATO and nations to design public diplomacy strategies, to design communication policies. Both vis-à-vis member countries, but also vis-à-vis our partner countries.

As you well know, NATO has a range of partner countries that geographically go all the way from the Balkan countries to Russia, Ukraine, to Central Asia and the Caucasus, and addressing the publics in these countries is not very easy. Some of them have only limited knowledge of what NATO actually is and what the Alliance is doing, what it has on its agenda. Some of them have stereotypical thinking still in their minds, so we need to address these publics with specific programs, and I am responsible for designing these communication policies.

The same applies for our very important program that we run for participating countries in the Mediterranean Dialogue and in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative countries like Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, countries in the Arab world who have hardly had any contact with NATO in recent years, and they only have very limited knowledge, and sometimes also misperceptions of NATO. So we need to counter that and tackle that, which is very much part of the strategy job as well.

Secondly, my job is also very much about verbal communication. I go a lot out and speak at conferences, at seminars. I speak to groups. So my job is not only about designing communication programs on a piece of paper, but actually dialoguing with our various interlocutors.

Third, I do a lot of support work when it comes to coordinating our messages and our policies between capitals and NATO HQ, because we need to ensure that we all sing from the same song sheet here, and that our messages are coherent and that we complement each other.

And finally, I also have a part of a bureaucratic task in order to liaise what our division, the Public Diplomacy Division does, with the Secretary General's Office, with other International Staff divisions and clearly also with national delegations.

Q: You've spoken of a very broad range of subjects for which you're responsible. Could you tell me what your main priorities are?

Babst: Well, indeed, I do have a long list of priorities right now, but clearly NATO's operation in Afghanistan is very much on top of my list. As everybody knows NATO runs a very challenging and a very difficult, a very complex operation in a faraway place like Afghanistan and although we have succeeded in order to support the Afghan government and providing stability and security in Kabul and in large parts of the country, we are still not there yet.

In fact, we have started to expand to the south and to the eastern part of the country and we have started to also meet resistance, sometimes very violent and very brutal resistance.

So communicating why NATO's operation in Afghanistan is still very, very important, why we remain... need to remain committed, why we need to remain on the course of action, to communicate this to our national publics and particularly to our parliamentarians and national decision-makers, is really, really an important communication job.

That's why we have started to reinforce our efforts on the communication front in recent months. We have done a lot in order to ensure that our work with the media, both in Kabul and in capitals, is running smoothly. We have set up an entire action plan that entails a number of communication programs, all aimed at reinforcing our message to the publics at home, in particular in those troop-contributing nations that take part in our operation in Afghanistan in order to get the message out what we are doing in Afghanistan is important and we remain committed.

Just to give you a, probably, small example of what this actually entails, in fact at the end of this week we are organizing for the first time ever an Afghan-NATO Student Forum and you eventually might be surprised to learn that Afghan young political leaders will come to NATO Headquarters for a two-day program.

Well, the idea behind this, to give them the opportunity to learn also from their western European and Northern American colleagues what they think about Afghanistan and vice versa, to give young students and political leaders from various European countries the opportunity to learn firsthand from their colleagues in Afghanistan what a difference ISAF has, in fact, made, what a difference it also has made for the lives of young Afghans who were born up... or brought up in a country that only experienced civil war and Taliban regime, now for the first time have an opportunity to go to university, to go to school.

So I'm very much looking forward to this exercise, to this opportunity, and welcoming our young political leaders from Afghanistan by the end of this

week.

Q: We're sitting in front of the logo for Riga, looking to the upcoming summit in Riga this November. What would you say are the main Public Diplomacy activities planned in the build-up to the Summit?

Babst: Well, the build-up or the so-called run-up phase for the Summit is a very important and integral part of our Public Diplomacy strategy for the Summit, and we started already some months ago in order to prepare the ground for that.

More concretely, we have started to organize a series, a full range of different activities in many, many member countries, including gatherings, meetings with the Secretary General. We took advantage of the Secretary General's various visits to capitals in allied countries. We organized and will continue organizing conferences and seminars.

And to single out one important flagship activity, on the 19th of October, the Secretary General will be hosting his annual conference. For some time already the Secretary Generals of NATO are hosting their annual conferences, so also Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, our Secretary General, will be hosting his conference.

And we opted for London because London is a very interesting city, it's a very lively city, with a very lively business community, so we invited representatives from the London-based business community, together with students specializing in international business affairs, to meet with the Secretary General and other speakers, spend the day and discuss the Riga agenda. So this is clearly one of our flagship activities.

Q: Do you have any other activities planned?

Babst: Sure, we very much try to use the full range of our communication toolbox, I shall say. That is the website, as well as our publication program, image building programs. On the website we'll be hosting, in the weeks and months to come, all the way to Riga, web interviews and web stories. We have a full range of dedicated publications that we are preparing for the Summit. So we really try to make sure of our communication toolbox in order to raise awareness about the Summit and talk about the future of the Transatlantic Security Partnership as Alliance leaders will do that at the Summit.

Q: As a last question, can you tell me what you think are NATO's key public diplomacy challenges today?

Babst: Well, I can offer you three of my observations when it comes to NATO's major communication challenges.

The first one is clearly about NATO being in transition. It's an organization that has changed dramatically, and in many ways fundamentally over the past 10 and 15 years. And these changes are not easy to communicate. Large parts of our publics haven't come to really grips with these changes. They haven't really followed these many changes, and they continuing questioning why we are in Afghanistan, why we are in Kosovo, why we are engaging with partner country X, Y or Z.

So we need to come up with very good and convincing answers in order to explain the rationale of our transformation agenda and the rationale, the whys that are attached to our many changes that we've seen at NATO.

The second challenge is very much about engaging with the successor generation. I truly and genuinely believe that it's important to engage with those young girls and boys, I shall say, of 18, 19, 20 and more years, that haven't really followed in the past the evolution of the Transatlantic Security Partnership. Clearly those who have experienced the Cold War, those who have been part of the strategic communities in the seventies and the eighties and the nineties, they don't need to be convinced. They know NATO well and they know about the value of the Transatlantic Security Partnership.

But the young people of nowadays, they are not entirely convinced. They ask many good questions, and I think we need to come up with good answers when it comes to making the case for maintaining a very volatile and a very vivid Transatlantic Security Partnership.

And thirdly, I think there is a lot of stereotypical thinking out there and there is a lot of misperception about what is the NATO of today. Well, if you go into the briefing rooms next door and you meet with opinion formers or journalists, or school masters from many of our countries I hear very often the question, is NATO going to become the global policeman? Does NATO have any ambition to become this global policeman? Isn't it so because you're supporting an operation run by the United Nations in Darfur? Isn't it so because you're engaged in Afghanistan?

The question to that is clearly not... is clearly no. But nevertheless, we need to make the case, and we need to make a good argument in order to convince these people.

But there is more stereotypical thinking about there. There are others who foresee that NATO has all ambitions in order to replace the United Nations, only because the group of our partner countries is really becoming larger and larger, and eventually also one fine day the group of all member countries is becoming bigger. There are questions related to NATO's enlargement policies, and sometimes these questions go clearly along with very, very many misperceptions about NATO.

So there is a lot to do when communicating our policies and our agenda to these publics in order to actually inform and educate them about what NATO actually standards for, what our correct policies are, and what allies have on their common tableau.

