

HOW THEY SEE US

By Martin Holland

European Commission Vice-President Margot Wallström has identified a communication deficit in explaining the EU to its citizens. How the EU is perceived externally has been largely ignored, yet the outside world's perspective of the EU can provide an important assessment of the integration process.

Evidence of this can be found in a recent study of perceptions of the EU in New Zealand, Thailand, Korea and Australia. Five leading newspapers and two leading TV news broadcasts in each country were examined over a 12-month period, together with national public and elite opinion surveys.

The clear pattern common to coverage of the EU in the region's media is both the limited press attention and the virtual invisibility of the EU on TV news. On average, just six EU news items a month appeared on Thai and Korean prime-time news during 2004. Coverage was even lower in New Zealand, where a total of only 29 items were broadcast on prime-time news in the entire year, and worst of all in Australia – a mere 18. Conversely, newspaper coverage in Australia was the more extensive, with an average of 171 EU stories appearing each month in 2004. New Zealand's monthly average was 54. The national language press in the two Asian countries showed the least interest in EU reporting, with monthly averages of 28 in Thailand and just 12 in Korea.

Generally, press coverage of the EU was neutral, although a third of the Australian articles presented a negative image. But, perhaps surprisingly, all four countries' media were just as likely to show the EU as a political actor as an economic power. While the image of the EU created in the region's media may be balanced, the very limited coverage means the impact is at best marginal. In the context of such a communication deficit, what then is the public perception of the EU in the region?

The survey revealed a remarkably similar

pattern in all four countries. Respondents in Australia, Korea and New Zealand ranked the EU as only the sixth most important partner for their country, with the Thais ranking it as the fifth most important. The US, China and "Asia" were all ranked higher, and this is despite the economic reality that for all four countries, the EU is a 'top three' trading partner.

More encouragingly, the vast majority in all countries felt their country's relationship with the EU was improving or stable.

The South Korean public tended to view the EU's economic power and growing political influence with mixed feelings. For some, the EU and the process of integration constituted a positive model for Asia. For others, the EU was seen as an exclusive club of powerful countries. The EU's response to North Korea and to car imports conjured up particularly negative images.

Thais largely saw the EU positively. Europe's image was typically linked to a strong economy, a powerful trading bloc with a single currency, democracy, human rights and rule of law, technological innovation – and football teams! EU restrictions on Thai exports (because of bird flu) prompted the most negative reactions.

Remarkably, Australia and New Zealand had virtually identical trade-related images of the EU. Predominantly, responses varied from concern about a closed EU market to enthusiasm about how the Union could enhance trade with the Antipodes. More than 20% in both countries commented positively on the emergence of the euro.

Overall, these findings indicate that public opinion in the Asia-Pacific region views the EU foremost in economic terms and less as a global political actor. This finding



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is in contrast with the overall media representation of the Union and somewhat puzzling given that in all four countries, the main source of EU information was TV news and the written press.

Interviews with a sample of elites in the four countries confirmed the general public's economic view. Elite attitudes towards the EU ranged from 'Europhile' to 'Eurosceptic'. However, the majority perceived the EU principally as an economic power. Where the Union was described as an international political leader, it was framed in terms of its commitment to further integration and its role as a cohesive force internationally.

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