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Comparative public diplomacy: Message strategies of countries in transition



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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study used infrastructural variables that have been used in comparative public relations research and applied them to the study of public diplomacy. It also compared message strategies using a content analysis of Ministry of Foreign Affairs websites of eight countries that are recent members or candidates to join the European Union to examine how public diplomacy message strategies correlate with economic development, level of democracy, and perceptions of the country. The most common message strategy was informational. There were no statistically significant correlations between reputation and message strategy, but descriptive statistics show countries that used advocacy strategies had higher means for reputation. There was a significant correlation between the level of democracy and the use of advocacy messages. Findings indicate that transitional countries could benefit from advocacy and promotional message strategies.

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1. Introduction

The conceptual and theoretical convergences between public relations and public diplomacy have been increasingly noted by public relations scholars over the past decade (Fitzpatrick, 2007, 2010; L'Etang, 2009; Signitzer, 2008; Szondi, 2009; Wang, 2006; Zaharna, 2010). Theoretically and paradigmatically, public diplomacy as a strategic dialogic communication and relationship-building process is closely related to global public relations. Signitzer and Wamser (2006) argued that the two fields are strategic communication functions with very little intellectual divide. They both facilitate information exchange, help build positive perceptions, and foster goodwill (Melissen, 2005). Fitzpatrick and Vanc (2012) explicated the substantial theoretical and practical links between public relations and public diplomacy, and noted both the growing interest about public diplomacy among public relation scholars as well as the potential for public relations to contribute to the intellectual and practical development of public diplomacy. Public diplomacy is, in effect, a nation-state's international public relations.

Just as the practice of public relations is altered by different infrastructural and cultural variables, the nature of public diplomacy may vary among countries based on differing political goals and national characteristics. However, studies tend to focus primarily on U.S. public diplomacy and ignore other countries (Gilboa, 2008). As more countries use public diplomacy, the definitions, functions, and practices will likely become less universal; it will be increasingly important to develop comparative theories and frameworks of public diplomacy that take into account the differing infrastructures and different communication goals of nation-states. To address the gap, this study explores how public diplomacy message strategies

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found on Ministries of Foreign Affairs websites differ among countries. Countries, for the purpose of this study, are defined as geographic entities with recognized political borders.

2. Public diplomacy in transitional countries

The nature of public diplomacy is evolving throughout the world as a result of political changes that include the increased number of democracies worldwide since the end of the Cold War, ever-changing networked communication technologies, and the profound effects of globalization. Public diplomacy is increasingly multi-directional and has moved from government-to-government propaganda to nation-to-nation communication, dialog, and relationship building. [Melissen \(2011\)](#) believes public diplomacy can only be understood if analyzed in the context of change. A major change in recent world politics has been the increased influence of the European Union and the number of transitional countries in Central and Eastern Europe that wish to join it. According to [Europa World Plus](#), in 2012 the EU had 7.3% of the world's population (more than 500 million) and represented approximately 20% of the global gross domestic product (GDP), making it the largest overall economy in the world. (Its 2012 GDP equaled \$16.6 trillion USD compared to the United States \$15.7 trillion USD.) For Europe with its long history of wars among nation-states, the EU has represented peace. To countries in Eastern and Central Europe, it represents security, democracy, and the opportunity for increased prosperity.

While all countries in Eastern and Central Europe have unique histories and cultures, they share a common process of transition as they move from centrally planned, government-controlled systems to free-market economies. The public diplomacy goals of transitioning countries are different from those of more developed nations; transitional countries are increasingly concerned with reputation management and global competitive positioning to attract tourism and investment ([Wang, 2006](#); [Szondi, 2009](#)). Countries in Europe that were previously dominated by communist regimes have “seized the opportunity to invent themselves” ([Szondi, 2009](#), p. 292) and to manage their reputations. They often seek to distance themselves from former authoritarian governments, to re-establish cultural identities that may have been lost when they existed behind the Iron Curtain, and to establish themselves as trustworthy partners in international relations as well as reliable and eligible candidates for EU membership ([Szondi, 2009](#)).

The current exploratory study looks at countries that share a political goal – to become members of the European Union – achievement of which requires the use of public diplomacy to some degree. The sample is eight countries that have recently joined or are candidates to join the European Union. These countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey) range in economic achievement and in achievement of fully democratic forms of government. (Iceland is not in the same geographic region, but as an EU candidate was included in the sample.) The purpose of the study is to examine how diverse countries may use different public diplomacy message strategies, and how those strategies correlate with political and economic development and perceptions of reputation.

3. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

3.1. Message strategy

Scholars have grappled to find theoretical frameworks for the study of public diplomacy. [Entman \(2008\)](#) noted that scholarly work about public diplomacy lacks a theoretical infrastructure; however, his attempt to develop theory was limited to mass mediated messages (from a U.S. perspective) and did little to establish a broad analytical structure. [Fitzpatrick \(2010\)](#) reviewed an array of scholarly and professional literature about public diplomacy and identified six functional categories of research about public diplomacy that represent different ways of thinking about and practicing public diplomacy. They are: public diplomacy as advocacy, public diplomacy as communication/information, as relational, as promotional, as warfare/foreign policy propaganda, and public diplomacy as a political strategy.

Advocacy/influence is the intention to influence attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of foreign publics, and to persuade foreign publics and governments that the values, policies, and actions of the country deserve their support. This approach may be likely to emphasize self-interests of a country rather than relational objectives or common concerns and shared interests. The *communication/informational* perspective is that the function of public diplomacy as a nation-state's communication is to inform and educate. The purpose of the *relational* function is to establish and sustain beneficial relationships with other countries. It is involved with relationship building, and seeks dialog and engagement with foreign publics. Therefore interactive communication (through websites and social media) plays a part in this function. The *promotional* function of public diplomacy is to promote or “sell” particular aspects of a country by promoting positive perceptions of culture and national identity. It often deals with tourism, trade, and investment. *Warfare/propaganda* is the use of public diplomacy as an instrument of national security used to support and/or complement military efforts and foreign policy. The *political* function of public diplomacy is engagement in international politics, which includes elections, foreign policies, democracy, human rights, etc., but not warfare. The categories and functions, according to Fitzpatrick, are not mutually exclusive. A country may employ a variety of functions, and even single messages can serve more than one function. The commonality is that the messages are aimed at foreign publics to cause them to view the sender nation in a more favorable light.

Functions and conceptualizations of public diplomacy may differ based on national interests. For example, a U.S. perspective of public diplomacy is that its purpose is to create a more secure nation and world (warfare/foreign policy function), but other countries have different priorities. In developing nations, public diplomacy may be more focused on communicating

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