# DOES PUBLIC DIPLOMACY MATTER? THE DEBATE ON ISSUES AND ACTORS OF PUBLIC DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT

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Depending on how we define public diplomacy (PD), its roots can be traced back to the interwar period, to the 1940s, or more recently, to the 1960s and the post-Cold War era. At present, politicians, diplomats and scholars are increasingly attracted, concerned by and involved in the practice and theory of this challenging and extremely fast developing field. Academia as well as the world of politics and diplomacy, are striving to understand on the one hand, shape and influence on the other, the flow of public diplomatic engagement that can launch and sustain multiple dialogues with foreign publics in an unprecedented two way street, but also, inevitably, allows the dark side of misinformation and propaganda to take advantage of such an increasingly digitalized diplomatic environment.

The essay is divided in three parts:

1) The first part is focused on the relevance of PD and traces the path of classic diplomacy towards its 'public' dimension, linking views of the debate on secrecy-transparency in diplomatic practices with the present discussion on post-truth.

2) Actors of PD with a focus on the American case and its influence in shaping contents and tools of public engagement, are debated in the second part.

3) The third section highlights the experience of PD in the EU and focuses on both success stories of international public engagement and on the dark side of misleading and conflictual narratives, contributing to the distortion of the truth.

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The conclusions of this essay are focused on the new frontiers of PD within the framework of the recent challenges we are presently confronting.

## 1. *Does Public Diplomacy matter?*

In the 2000s a new interest for diplomacy was prompted by the significant expansion in diplomatic practices coinciding with the transformation of the tools and style of communication employed by states and international organizations (IO) on one hand, and the emergence of new users on the other. Since the collapse of the bipolar world, we have witnessed not simply as previously, in the 1940s and '60s, a redistribution of power, with new state actors entering the international system, but rather a 'jump' towards the participation in diplomacy of "very different entities with political influence and at times authority, entities lacking territoriality and thus sovereignty". In other words, the post-Cold War system has been characterized by a parallel expansion and transformation in the diplomacy of states that allowed, and at times encouraged, the emergence of new actors[1].

The theoretical discussion on this subject is underdeveloped with a few notable exceptions, one being the 'English School' (ES) that looks at diplomacy as an institution of international societies, meaning a flow of institutional responses to the need of connecting separate state entities and their societal components. Diplomacy allows "living separately and wanting to do so, while having to conduct relations with others"[2]. During the Cold War scholarly attention was focused on the threat of force, rather than on diplomatic mediation and it has taken quite a long time, since the 1990s, to witness a visible reversal of this focus. No doubt, "there is a voluminous but treacherous literature on diplomacy. It is this goldmine or minefield – depending on which aspect you want to emphasize"[3], that will somehow support our understanding of the transformation in diplomatic practices since the end of the Cold War.

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[1] R. LANGHORNE, *On Diplomacy*, in "Political Studies Review", n. 1, 2008, pp. 54-62.
[2] P. SHARO, *Herbert Butterfield, the English School and the civilizing virtue of diplomacy*, in "International Affairs", n. 4, 2003, pp. 855-878.
[3] C. JONSSON, M. HALL, *Essence of Diplomacy*, London, Palgrave, 2005, pp. 12-30.

George Kennan, the initiator of the debate on containment of the USSR, showed a remarkable resilience in arguing that even in a bipolar world the 'classic function of diplomacy" is "to effect the communications between one's own government and other governments or individuals abroad and to do this with maximum accuracy, imagination, tact and good sense"[4].

Indeed, the focus of diplomacy has always been on facilitating communications among political entities and their accredited agents. A scholar of this field, Paul Sharp, argues that "Diplomacy is one of those terms that is best approached through a consideration of its usages, rather than by an attempt to assert or capture a precise, fixed, or authoritative meaning"[5]. This is a very good piece of advice together with another basic consideration to keep in mind: "The world perceived by a diplomat at the end of his career is bound to seem a very different place from that which he knew, when as or junior clerk he transcribed and translated the correspondence of his elders"[6]. Scholars of diplomacy should certainly be aware that nostalgia can affect the recollections of protagonists and practitioners. As for the general approach to the study of this field, the narrative of decline in relation to diplomatic practices is in recent times quite overwhelming. Can we actually argue that diplomacy is an endangered species or quite the opposite: an example of resilience, adaptation to changes, and capacity to re-invent the rules of the game? The case of secrecy versus openness in diplomacy is an example of how continuity and change have been at the core of a debate as old as diplomacy itself, with an acceleration since WWI. Both Cold War superpowers have a history of condemning power politics and secret diplomacy. The Bolsheviks immediately after coming to power in 1917, proclaimed the end of secrete diplomacy, disregarded traditional rules and practices and saw openness as aimed at igniting revolution abroad. However, "the Bolsheviks experiment with

  4 In 1961 George F. Kennan talked about the diplomatic profession at AFSA. Available at: https://www.afsa.org/george-kennan-diplomacy-profession; see also G. F. KENNAN, *History and Diplomacy as Viewed by a Diplomatist,* in "The Review of Politics", n. 2, 1956, pp. 170-177.

  5 P. SHARP, *For Diplomacy: Representation and the Study of International Relations*, in "International Studies Review", n. 1, 1999, p. 37.

  6 K. HAMILTON, R. LANGHORNE, *The Practice of Diplomacy*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 93.

open diplomacy in the autumn of 1917, failed to either provoke an early revolution in the West, or to promote negotiations for a general peace"[7].

In the US references to 'open, public diplomacy', as opposed to secret diplomatic dealings, appeared on the pages of the "New York Times" in the second half of the 1800s. The idea of public diplomacy developed significantly with President Woodrow Wilson's visionary ideas of a new international system shaped around the system of 'open covenants of peace' and openness in diplomacy. Within the American and British worlds of diplomacy the debate on 'public' and 'private' practices was closely linked with the discussion on what distinguishes public diplomatic engagement from sheer propaganda. In 1939, E.H. Carr described propaganda within the context of greater mass participation in politics and economic and technological changes[8]. After the end of World War II and the era of totalitarian propaganda, the Cold War and anticommunism appeared to justify a 'new' American propaganda campaign, reaching out to 'hearts and minds' of foreign public opinions in Europe to achieve both economic reconstruction and the consolidation of the western block. It was exactly in order to take distance from this Cold War association between propaganda and public diplomacy that in the mid 1960s an American former diplomat and Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, at Tufts University, Edmund Gullion, reinterpreted the concept of public diplomacy[9].

Within this approach based on the idea of freeing contemporary public diplomacy from the heavy baggage of totalitarian propaganda, Nicholas Cull, who has published widely on this subject, argues that traditional diplomacy is based on the engagement between international actors, while public diplomacy is "an international actor's attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public". More recently, the debate has focused on the New Public Diplomacy, underlining distinct elements in the practice of PD, in par-

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7   K. HAMILTON, R. LANGHORNE, *The Practice of Diplomacy,* cit., p.157.
8   See E.H. CARR, *Propaganda in International Politics*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1939.
9   N. J. CULL (ed.), *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past*, The Annenberg School University of Southern California, Los Angeles, Figueroa Press, 2009 pp. 12-15; on the origins of Public Diplomacy, see N. J. CULL, *Public Diplomacy before Gullion: the evolution of a phrase*, USC Center for Public Diplomacy, CDP Blog, April 18, 2006. Available at: https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/public-diplomacy-gullion-evolution-phrase.

ticular, the role of non-traditional actors, including NGOS, the ability to communicate in real time via web channels, including social media and the adoption of strategies derived from marketing and network communication theories. All this leads to a departure from the previous actor-to-people of the interwar and Cold War eras and to the adoption of the present people-to-people strategy. The New Public Diplomacy is a two-way street communicating and sharing ideas as well as persuasion contents[10]. Moreover, PD has acquired an essential role as the main channel for the implementation of soft power with the aim of building and maintaining credibility in international relations. Joseph Nye's definition of soft power is well known: "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced". However, PD is not the equivalent of soft power though it is the most effective tool implementing it[11].

In the early 2000s, Nye himself developed further the idea of soft power and elaborated together with other scholars, a more updated vision of how effective foreign policy strategies can be when hard and soft power merge strategically in a format that he defines: 'Smart Power': "power is one's ability to affect the behaviour of others to get what one wants. There are three basic ways to do this: coercion, payment and attraction. Hard power is the use of coercion and payment. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction (…) thus the need for smart strategies that combine the tools of both hard and soft power". This is particularly true as the boundaries between hard and soft are not rigid: military and economic resources can imply coercion but also attract as in the cases of humanitarian relief[12].

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[10] J. MELISSEN (ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy,* London and New York, Palgrave, 2005. To view various definitions used by practitioners, academics, research institutes, or governments, along with the latest scholarship on the topic visit CPD's public diplomacy page at: https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/page/what-is-pd.

[11] See J. S. NYE, *Soft Power,* New York, Public Affairs Press, 2004.

[12] J. S. NYE, *Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power,* in "Foreign Affairs", n. 4, 2009, pp. 160-163; see also J. NYE, *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power*, in "The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science", Vol 616, 2008; J. NYE, *On the Future of Soft Power and Public Diplomacy*, 2019. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q75uTqz5XS4.

## 2. *Is the US a special actor of Public Diplomacy?*

The second part of this essay is focused on the actors of PD and on their strategies. Governments are still dominant actors in the use of public diplomacy, though non-state actors have also entered the scene in support or competition with state actors. The latter mainly aim at promoting national political, cultural and economic interests. They do so by 'listening' to foreign public opinions and following traditionally or digitally, the main shifts in the perceptions of their own country by those publics. However, responding politically to these shifts is not straightforward and rarely the main motive for adjusting top-down public diplomacy strategies. Public diplomacy can also be a channel allowing one state to promote outside his borders various degrees of advocacy related to national/international goals, ideas or choices in international relations[13].

Today, the relationship between public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy is quite complex, as countries successful in promoting their culture and language worldwide, such as for example France and Britain, tend to keep the two channels of public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy quite separate and in the hands of different organisations. This is to avoid, at least to a certain degree, the clash between advocacy and promotion of culture. However, engaging with foreign publics by making available significant scholarships, exchanges, training, seminars, conferences, and access to media channels, may produce shifts in public opinion perceptions abroad and therefore impact on the overall public diplomacy strategy of the country capable of creating such a network of lasting relationships[14].

Creating or regaining national reputation abroad is the main motivation activating the engine of public diplomacy and the US case is paramount within this framework. American public diplomacy's legacy goes back to the early to mid-twentieth century[15]. Since the beginning

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[13] N. J. CULL, *Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories*, in "The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science", vol. 616, 2008, pp. 31-54.

[14] M. LEONARD, *Public Diplomacy*, London, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2002, pp. 8-20.

[15] N. SNOW, *US Public Diplomacy Its History, Problems, and Promises*, in G. JOWETT, V. O'DONNELL (eds.), "Readings in Propaganda and Persuasion: New and Classic Essays", London, Sage, 2006, p. 231.

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what motivated American PD is the ambition to project a grand vision around the world. This need of making foreign publics see and understand the American way has developed in parallel with American global power. The latter became operational when the US abandoned neutrality in World War II. Since this major turning point in transatlantic history, the "efforts to define the United States for the world" blended in and became part of the war effort against totalitarianism and later, in the post Cold War scenario, of containment in the name of anti-communism[16]. From the point of view of PD, elements of strong continuity link these two phases.

In 1948 the Smith-Mundt Act created the United States Information Agency (USIA), merging further down the line with the Fulbright Hays Act of 1961 that launched an unprecedented education and cultural new exchange policy. These tools contributed to define American public diplomacy within the framework of a global diplomatic effort to promote the American/Western view of the world by targeting and reaching the 'hearts and minds' of foreign publics. President Jimmy Carter made an effort to revise the Cold War model of external engagement by giving American public diplomacy a domestic twist and making it into a dual tool for informing and being informed about the views of public opinions abroad. The idea had little success within USIA. In the following decade, the Agency lost its independence and was incorporated by the State Department thus bringing PD at the very heart of American foreign policy making[17].

The events of 9/11 provided American public diplomacy with yet another 'war strategy', this time against Islamic terrorist extremism within a scenario of diffuse rejection of American policies and values around the world. Charlotte Beers, a very successful advertising executive, was appointed by the Bush administration as Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in October 2001. She confronted the very challenging task of reaching out towards moderate Arab and Muslin communities. Her brainchild was the $15 million media ad campaign, Shared

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[16] J. HART, *Empire of Ideas*, Oxford, OUP, 2013, p. 4.

[17] WASHINGTON, D.C. UNITED STATES ADVISORY COMMISSION ON PUBLIC DIPLOMACY. *Report of the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy*, 1990. Available at: https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/united-states-advisory-commission-on-public-diplomacy/.

Values[18]. She resigned in March 2003 just before the outbreak of the war in Iraq and her legacy is controversial and for some to be ridiculed. On Madison Avenue she had been very successful in rebranding the *Uncle Ben* rice company and was accused of having taken for granted that a similar process of rebranding via marketing methods, could apply to the image of *Uncle Sam*. As observed by Nancy Snow, a scholar of public diplomacy, this approach seemed completely disjointed from American citizen diplomacy, in other words from those activities that teachers, students and cultural mediators had carried on for decades implementing the Fulbright model: the largest post-World War II government-sponsored educational exchange program ever[19].

In January 2002, the White House of President Bush announced the formation of the Office of Global Communications (OGC) in order to coordinate strategic communications overseas with the purpose of "depicting America and Administration policies"[20]. Before the end of the Bush administration American public diplomacy took a turn towards militarization. At a meeting for State Department employees, the new Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, Karen Hughes, framed her plans to improve the American image abroad in militaristic terms. She talked of "rapid-response unit", "forward-deploy regional SWAT teams" and formulating "a more strategic and focused approach to all our public diplomacy assets"[21].

Obama's victory in the Presidential elections of 2008, allowed for a 'new beginning' as promised by the newly elected President to the Muslin world in his Cairo speech of June 2009. Obama's speech has been praised as much as criticised. His personal appeal and his Arab middle name, Hussein, won the hearts of many in the Arab world though, as the

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[18] C. BEERS (Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs), *Public Diplomacy after September 11, Remarks to the National Press Club*, Washington DC, UD Department of State Archive, December 18, 2002, https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/us/16269.htm.

[19] N. SNOW, US *Public Diplomacy: A Tale of Two Who Jumped Ship at State*. Foreign Policy in Focus (fpif) March 7, 2004; https://fpif.org/us_public_diplomacy_a_tale_of_two_who_jumped_ship_at_state/.

[20] White House Office of Global Communication, the White House, President George W. Bush. Available at: https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/ogc/.

[21] See N. SNOW, *The Resurgence of US Public Diplomacy after 9/11,* in M. J. MORGAN (ed.), "The Impact of 9/11 on the Media, Arts, and Entertainment. The Day that Changed Everything?"*,* New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 78-88.

President stated himself, "no single speech can overcome years of distrust". In public diplomacy terms, Obama received high marks for his speech but could only hope to contribute inspirationally to the re-branding of the American image in the Arab world and elsewhere[22].

Indeed, as argued by Nicholas Cull, sometimes the most credible voice in public diplomacy is not one's own[23]. On the ground, Obama engaged in a duel with Osama bin Laden and finally won, destroying America's enemy n.1. Osama had represented a fundamental challenge for the American administration, both in security terms and in public diplomacy terms, as "a man in a cave" seemed able, for quite an extensive period of time, to "out-communicate the world's leading communications society"[24].

Regarding the expansion of American PD, during the Obama administration, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton committed herself fully to deliver on the President's pledge to review and expand American diplomatic outreach. Clinton's public diplomacy built on the collaboration with her Under Secretaries of State for Public Diplomacy: first the TV executive and campaign contributor, Judith McHale, and then the former journalist and member of the Bill Clinton National Security Council staff, Tara Sonenshine. Hillary Clinton promoted public diplomacy very forcefully, including the integration of social media in diplomatic practice, though she remained herself a believer in direct diplomacy and in the rationale of merging public and traditional diplomacy[25].

Today after the end of the Trump presidency, showing total disregard for soft power, the Biden administration is facing a trail of controversies possibly impacting on the medium-long-term perception of America abroad[26]. Indeed, American soft power and its main imple-

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[22] President Obama's Speech in Cairo, *A New Beginning*, The White House President Barack Obama, available at: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/NewBeginning/transcripts; N. B. DeaAtkine, President Obama's Pitch to the Muslim World: Public Diplomacy Or Policy? Critical Essay.

[23] N. CULL, *Public diplomacy: Seven lessons for its future from its past*, in "Place Brand Public Diplomacy" n. 6, 2010, pp. 11-17. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2010.4.

[24] D. HOFFMAN, *Beyond Public Diplomacy*, "Foreign Affairs", March/April 2002

[25] On American public diplomacy see N. J. CULL, *The Decline and Fall of the USIA: American Public Diplomacy, 1989-2001*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

[26] I. POGGIOLINI, *Hashtag Diplomacy*, in "Aspenia. La pace fredda", Aspen Institute Italia, N. 92, marzo 2021, pp. 293-302. Available at: www.aspeninstitute.it.

mentation tool, PD, have steadily declined under Trump. In Joseph Nye's word, tweets do not create soft power, as soft power cannot be instantaneously invented and re-invented. It requires credibility and legitimacy constructed over time and this is one of the great challenges confronting the Biden administration[27]. However, the American case remains central in understanding how PD acquired a status of its own and how ideas and new trends have contributed to the development of the 'public' face of diplomacy in the US and elsewhere.

Scholars of this expanding field are investigating new areas, conceptually and geographically, broadening the understanding of public diplomacy. The titles of books published by the Palgrave Macmillan Series in Global Public Diplomacy (GDP)[28], reflect this tendency providing a kaleidoscope of patterns in public diplomacy from Europe to Asia, Africa, Russia, Indonesia, China, the Middle East, Central and South America and of course North America - including Canada. Moreover, since 2003, the USC Center on Public Diplomacy (CDP), created by the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and the School of International Relations at the University of Southern California, has built a scholarly reputation in hosting and promoting the study and practice of diplomatic, global, public engagement[29].

## 3. *Confronting global crisis as a 'diplomatic persona': the EU*

The third part of this essay is focused on new challenges confronting PD. To the purpose of discussing these challenges, I have chosen the prism of EU public diplomacy. The EU is an actor in public diplomacy, requiring both a new meta narrative and pragmatic action to confront times of global crises, including the pandemic, as well as misleading and/or conflictual narratives aimed at the distortion of the truth. Among transnational actors (TNAs), the EU has acquired after the

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[27] J. S. NYE, *American Soft Power in the age of Trump*, May 20, 2019, CPD Blog. Available at: https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/american-soft-power-age-trump.

[28] Palgrave Macmillan Series in Global Public diplomacy. Available at: https://link.springer.com/bookseries/14680.

[29] University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy. Available at: https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org.

Lisbon Treaty (December 2009), an international status as diplomatic entity: it is a diplomatic persona, represented by the "High Representative" and the European External Action Service[30]. Though transnational diplomacy can be completely independent from government-to-government diplomacy, the road of the EU towards the recognition of an independent status in international relations remains, to a certain extent, contested. The relevant question here is whether the EU as a transnational actor can be successful in promoting public diplomacy and in responding to contemporary digital challenges. First of all, we need to ask a question related to the international projection of the EU: is there a public European identity or model, coupled with declared goals, that can be projected in non-EU countries? Since 2016 the EU has launched a new coherent public diplomacy with dedicated teams supporting EU delegations (EUD) in their outreach efforts towards China, India, Russia, South Korea, the US and South America. The 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS) represented a remarkable effort in defining EU public diplomacy, conceptually and in relation to those ten "strategic partners" already listed. It has also shown that the EU's image improves when addressing topics of global concern such as: climate change, human rights, and a strong regulatory position in global trade[31]. The EUGS was published a few days after Brexit and provided a conceptual approach to public diplomacy taking stock of a very difficult path ahead when "the purpose, even existence" of the Union was in question. On the contrary, back in 2003, the message of the European Security Strategy had been mainly self-congratulatory, projecting the image of a continent that had never felt "so prosperous, so secure nor so free". The EUGS narrative is sobering if compared to the previous European strategy, but it contains a long-term vision of global engagement based on the idealism of the origins to be conveyed via new PD tools: "idealism is the EU's added value and that this should be nurtured" because it can

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[30] J. KOOPS, G. MACAJ, (eds.), *The European Union as a Diplomatic Actor*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; P. PETROV, K. POMORSKA, S. VANHOONACKER, *Special Issue: The Emerging EU Diplomatic System*, "Hague Journal of Diplomacy", n. 1, 2012, pp. 1-134.

[31] B. BAUMLER, *EU Public Diplomacy: Adapting to an Ever-Changing World,* Los Angeles, USC Center on public Diplomacy, 2019. Available at: https://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org/story/new-cpd-perspectives-eus-public-diplomacy; N. Chaban, M. Holland, (ed.), *Shaping the EU Global Strategy: Partners and Perceptions The European Union in International Affairs,* London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

be "made into a meta narrative"[32]. This is indeed a public diplomacy approach framed around the concept of 'smart' power, merging ideals and actual power. The end goal is overcoming the 'civilian power' dimension, previously associated with the EU. Is this goal in sight? In other words, did the EUGS contribute to change hearts and minds of partner countries and dispel the perception that the EU is 'a power of the past'? Certainly, this document is momentous in listing EU foreign policy priorities such as: stepping up security and defense, tackling terrorism, addressing cyber-security protection, granting energy security and engaging in strategic communications. The scope and scale of the EU external action is also unprecedented, not only in strategic partnerships but also in promoting the stabilization of the Middle East, Africa and the Mediterranean and in committing to an ongoing reassessment of relations across the Atlantic and in Asia[33]. Can we argue that this broad project was adequately framed in terms of EU public diplomacy? Was it contributing to attract foreign publics towards European ideas and projects? Public diplomacy is mainly based on credibility and the 2016 EU Global Strategy was born out of a vision with roots in the past but ambitions in the present. It was meant to be an updated narrative responding to present global challenges.

Brexit and the rise of Trumpism have unpredictably transformed the EUGS from a grand strategy into "a defiantly distinctive vision in the face of the trends of anti-globalism, Euroscepticism and nationalist hubris. In other words, it has become a blueprint for a continued collective effort by the EU to defend a liberal world order defined by rules-based global governance"[34]. One could argue that the EUGS was caught in the line of fire of contrasting narratives soon after being announced, as a result of Britain leaving the Union and of the attitude against in-

[32] *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy*, Brussels, 12 December 2003. Available at:http://www.internationaldemocracywatch.org/attachments/307_European%20Security%20Strategy.pdf.

[33] M. K. DAVIS CROSS, *The EU Global Strategy and diplomacy*, in "Contemporary Security Policy", n. 3, 2016, pp. 402-413. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1237820.

[34] L. JORIS, *The EU's Global Strategy, Brexit and 'America First,* in "European Foreign Affairs Review", n. 3, 2018, p 344, this confrontational approach is currently under review by the Biden administration; see also N. TOCCI, *The Making of the EU Global Strategy*, in "Contemporary Security Policy" n. 3, 2016, pp. 461-472.

stitutional internationalism manifested by the Trump administration. Interestingly, here is where the link between the EUGS and misinformation comes into being. Not only in Europe but globally, the information age has dramatically altered the public face of public diplomacy. Since 2014, controversial electoral processes including the elections in the US and the Brexit referendum in the UK, but also military operations such as ISIS recruiting to fight in Iraq and Syria, via social media, online thousands of combatants around the world[35], or the Russian annexation of Crimea supported by a very aggressive propaganda campaign, are high profile international cases of both disinformation and cybernetic conflicts meant to interfere and shape narratives of events[36]. In 2015 the European Council called for investigation of Russian disinformation campaigns and the European External Action Service (EEAS) created the East Stratcom Task Force. Since 2020 misinformation regarding Covid has also scaled up within the EU. According to the present EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Borrell, a 'battle of narratives' is ongoing between China and the EU. In the spring of 2020, the EEAS published three special reports dedicated to combating foreign narratives and misinformation regarding the pandemic. However, the wording of the final drafts of these documents watered down significantly the expected denunciation of 'global disinformation'[37].

Disinformation has been defined as "intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals". Indeed, fake news can be isolated episodes, but disinformation campaigns are systematic and aim at specific political, military, ideological goals that can be pursued over time[38]. The loss of trust in institutions and politics in general is at the core of this phenomenon and

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[35] E. BENMELECH, E F. KLOR, *What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?*, Working Paper 22190, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge MA, April 2016, pp.1-25, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w22190/w22190.pdf.

[36] T. ZEITZOFF, *How Social Media is changing conflicts* in "Journal of Conflict Resolution", n. 9, 2017, pp. 1970-1991.

[37] On disisinformation and the eu see: https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/countering-disinformation_en.

[38] W. LANCE BENNETT, *The Disinformation order: disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions*, in "European Journal of Communication", n. 2, 2018, p. 122-139.

involves diplomacy as well. No democratic nation today seems able to prevent different levels of disruption of authoritative information in interactions with international partners and foreign publics. The first international centre for countering 'hybrid threats' - meaning threats from state and non-state actors involving disinformation campaigns - has been created in Finland in cooperation with NATO and eight other nations with the encouragement of the European Commission. New challenges are facing PD since 2020, in view of potentially higher levels of disinformation connected to political, strategic and health issues[39]. As a result, the EU's declared ambition since the early 2000s, of asserting itself as a geopolitical actor globally, is now put to test politically and diplomatically by both institutional contestation and rampant misinformation campaigns.

*Conclusions*

Providing a tentative answer to the question we posed at the beginning of this essay, we could argue that the relevance of PD in the post-Cold War era continues to grow, both as an extraordinary versatile diplomatic tool and in its exploitation by the dark side of communication, activated by state and non-state actors. The most recent and highly visible exercise worldwide, that of what has become known as 'vaccine' diplomacy, is bringing into the public domain both strengths and weakness of PD. 2021 has opened with the EU struggling to project an image of cohesion and apparently unable to secure vaccine supplies and a common strategy of fast and pervasive inoculation. State disinformation via social media has also being rampant from the Chinese side against the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and promoting the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine.[40] Eurosceptic leaders such as Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic

[39] J. WANG, *How 2020 Changed Public Diplomacy*, Dec 8, 2020. Available at: https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/how-2020-changed-public-diplomacy); regarding the impact on the approach and practice of the digital component of PD see C. BJOLA, I. MANOR, *Digital Diplomacy in the time of Coronavirus*, 31, 2020. Available at: https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/digital-diplomacy-time-coronavirus-pandemic.
[40] Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-vaccine-china/chinese-media-criticise-pfizer-covid-19-vaccine-tout-local-shots-idUKL4N2JV0L3.

and Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto, have welcomed Sinopharm and criticized the EU's vaccine procurement. In the case of Hungary, this critique comes from a member of the Union[41]. The EU struggles amid shortages of the Pfizer-BionNTech, Moderna and Oxford AstraZeneca vaccines but - like all other rich parts of the world - has been buying vaccines massively from western companies and now the contractual relationship with some of them, such as AstraZeneca in particular, is at the core of a clash between the EU and the UK regarding vaccine exports and bans, as the EU is divided in taking measure requiring exports of covid-19 vaccines to be subject to authorisation by member states[42]. Indeed, "Vaccines have had a place in diplomacy since the Cold War era. The country that can manufacture and distribute lifesaving injections to others less fortunate sees a return on its investment in the form of soft power: prestige, goodwill, perhaps a degree of indebtedness, even awe"[43]. Today, China as well as Russia are offering their vaccines to low and middle-income countries around the world. Their influence is behind misinformation campaigns regarding the western vaccines contributing, together with many other cultural, social and political factors, to undermine public confidence. For China, attracting attention towards its international vaccination power has also meant counterbalancing allegations regarding the spreading of the disease in early 2020, and introducing the vaccine discourse in a prominent position within the subtopics of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). On the Russian side, the national vaccine, Sputnik V, received approval for use in Argentina, Mexico and Belarus and may now be considered for licensing officially in the EU, as the European Medicine Agency (EMA) is reviewing it. As for Iran, Sputnik V was injected in the arm of the son of the health minister, as a sort of testimonial of the Chinese vaccination PD[44]. Moscow and Beijing, via their vaccine diplomacy ex-

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[41] Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-hungary-vaccines/first-550000-doses-of-chinese-sinopharms-vaccine-arrive-in-hungary-idUSKBN2AG17M; see also the Chinese media in English on how Serbia has welcome their vaccine diplomacy. Available at: https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1212985.shtml.

[42] Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_307.

[43] Y. HUANG, *Vaccine Diplomacy Is Paying Off for China, Beijing Hasn't Won the Soft-Power Stakes, but It Has an Early Lead*, in "Foreign Affairs", March 11, 2021.

[44] A.S. CHASSANY, in "Financial Times", February 10, 2021.

ercise "sharp power"[45] and keep pressure on Europe as a transnational actor, and on the World Health Organization's vaccine procurement policy, COVAX. Delivering free jabs via COVAX and promoting a credible public diplomacy message that could counteract disinformation about western vaccine and western motives was supposed to be a unifying factor in the West. This is struggling to emerge in the present highly tense, polarised and fragmented pandemic atmosphere, while the Chinese and Russian vaccine agendas contribute to divide further the former western block[46].

In today's scenario one may doubt that PD could be effective in deescalating tension and its impact controlled, once launched, or even contained, when employed by disruptive forces. Concerns are also raised regarding the unprecedented closeness of PD with marketing and media strategies and the potential competition - rather than collaboration - with politics via social media. However, the study of PD shows that the deliberate, structured pursuit of political goals and the involvement of key figures in this pursue are central to the purpose of sending the 'official' PD message to the expected target audience. In our digital age, a 'trusted digital environment', represent a priority and pre-condition that allows for a safe channel of official diplomatic contents to reach foreign publics via tweets, posts and visual narratives. Scholars have investigated the capacity of social media in the hands of diplomats, to advance foreign policy goals and identified three paths of diplomatic engagement: agenda-setting, presence-expansion and conversation-generating. The study of Bjola and Jiang, discussing PD strategies by the EU, US and Japan representations in Beijing and their success in creating confidence in their social media messages via Weibo, is a very interesting example – even at our present difficult times - of how "the future of public diplomacy in the digital age remains bright, as long as MFAS, embassies and TBNSAS continue to engage creatively and positively with digital tech-

[45] Sharp Power is based on the asymmetry between free and unfree political systems, allowing the latter to operate outside the rules of the former. See J. WALKER, J. LUDWIG, *The Meaning of Sharp Power. How Authoritarian States Project Influence,* in "Foreign Affairs", November 16, 2017. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power.

[46] Y. Huang, *Vaccine Diplomacy is Paying off for China*, "Foreign Affairs", March 11, 2021. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-03-11/vaccine-diplomacy-paying-china.

nologies and stay committed to the mission of building bridges between offline and online communities"[47]. The vaccine squabble, however, is not helping in creating this highly sought after 'trusted digital environment' and PD's dialogues struggles to reach the goal of de-escalating tension. New studies soon to be published, may help us to reflect on the moral dimension and virtues of how PD's messages are framed if we share the assumption that "public diplomacy is one of the primary vehicles through which international actors engage in moral rhetoric to meet their power goals"[48].

**Riassunto** - Le definizioni di Diplomazia Pubblica (DP) sono molteplici e non sempre condivise. Maggiore consenso riguarda invece le origini della diplomazia pubblica contemporanea da rintracciare nel periodo tra le due guerre mondiali, così come la sua espansione dopo il 1945 e la sua presa di distanza dalla categoria della 'propaganda' negli anni '60, a partire dagli Stati Uniti. Si può affermare che la 'nuova' diplomazia pubblica sia il prodotto della fine della guerra fredda e la sua espansione a partire dagli anni '90 e' un processo ancora in atto e una sfida per gli attori che ne sono protagonisti, sia sul terreno delle metodologie, sia su quello degli strumenti tecnologici, soprattutto nell'era digitale. Politici, diplomatici e studiosi sono attratti, preoccupati ma anche inevitabilmente coinvolti nella pratica, o nella teoria della DP. Si tratta, infatti, di comprendere da una parte, dare forma e influenzare dall'altra, un flusso pubblico di 'diplomatic engagement' il cui principale obiettivo resta quello di creare e sostenere dialoghi multipli con opinioni pubbliche di paesi diversi dal proprio, non in forma unidirezionale (come fa la propaganda) ma creando un flusso bidirezionale di comunicazione che però, inevitabilmente, può lasciar passare anche fenomeni di disinformazione occasionale, o programmata da parte di altri attori internazionali.

Il saggio è diviso in 3 parti: La prima discute la rilevanza della DP e ripercorre alcuni passaggi dell'evoluzione della diplomazia verso la dimensione pubblica, collegando il dibattito su segretezza e trasparenza nelle pratiche diplomatiche del passato alla discussione attuale sulla post-verità. La seconda parte ha per oggetto gli attori della DP, con particolare attenzione al caso degli Stati Uniti, sia per il ruolo centrale che hanno avuto nella definizione e sviluppo della dimensione pubblica della diplomazia nel secondo dopoguerra, sia per l'influenza che questo modello continua a esercitare su alleati e nemici. Il focus della terza parte è sulla diplomazia pubblica della EU nello scenario contemporaneo e si concentra su casi di successo della proiezione diplomatica europea, ma anche sul confronto con narrative conflittuali rispetto al messaggio EU, e con il fenomeno della disinformazione. Le conclusioni trattano delle sfide attuali, in particolare quella dei successi e fallimenti della diplomazia dei vaccini, e delle nuove frontiere digitali della DP.

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[47] C. Bjola, J. Cassidy, I. Manor, *Public Diplomacy in the digital Age*, in "The Hague Journal of Diplomacy", n. 14, 2019, pp. 83-101; C. Bjola, L. Jiang, *Social Media and Public Diplomacy: a comparative analysis of the digital diplomatic strategies of the EU, US and Japan in China*, in C. Bjola, M. Holmes, "Digital Diplomacy. Theory and Practice", New York and London, Routledge, 2015, pp. 71-89.

[48] C. R. Alexander (ed.), *The Frontiers of Public Diplomacy: Hegemony, Morality and Power in the International Sphere*, New York and London, Routledge, 2021.