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## Narratives of Public Diplomacy in the post-Truth Era: The decline of Soft Power

**Abstract**

**This article aims to build a better understanding of today's communicative changes of public diplomacy in the post-truth era. Today, our communication environment has changed compared to decades ago: about 5 billion people communicate online and compete among themselves through their social media narratives, which are the main platform for the distribution of fake news in the post-truth era. The question posed here is: what are the winning narratives in the complex global environment of public diplomacy? Through problematizing review, this article analyses the sources of soft power which were described at the end of the Cold War, and which remain effective even in today's communication environment. Also, the purpose and influence of public diplomacy has been problematized, analysing how to influence foreign government by influencing its citizens. The paper concludes that the values of soft power described three decades ago only have limited and specific effects on non-European publics, but not on European ones. Additionally, it is impossible to influence European governments by influencing their publics through public diplomacy because the context has changed and the values of soft power in these countries no longer have the former distinctive gap between them.**

**Keywords****Narrative, soft power, public diplomacy, fake news, post-truth.****1. Introduction**

People are storytelling animals. After greeting each other (“Hi;” “Hi, how are you?”), their communication then continues by telling stories. When children return from school and greet their parents, their conversation continues about what happened during the day. This is what Walter Fisher (1984) wrote describing the narrative paradigm (Griffin, Ledbetter & Sparks, 2019). Fisher emphasized that all forms of communication that appeal to human reason are best seen as stories shaped by history, culture, and character (Griffin, Ledbetter & Sparks, 2019). Humans are not only rational, sociological, economic, political, instinctive, and symbolic beings, but also narrative beings.

Walter Fisher (1984), the founder of the narrative paradigm for human communication, viewed *narration* not as a fictional composition that could be true or false, but for ‘stories of living and story of the imagination’. “I refer to a theory of symbolic actions –words and/or deeds– that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them” (Fisher, 1984, p. 2). According to Fisher, the narrative paradigm considers human communication as

rhetoric which can be argumentative, rational, but also dramatic. He accepts the different natures of human beings but wants to add a new one: *homo narrans*. This is because humans constantly tell stories in their daily life, and social knowledge is attributed to narratives. “The narrative paradigm insists that human communication should be viewed as historical as well as situational, as stories competing with other stories constituted by good reasons” (Fisher, 1984, p. 2). These stories are persuasive, people are even influenced by mythical stories.

Based on storytelling, narratives are dominant in everyday human communication as well as in political communication, business communication, public relations, etc. The media product is also a narrative; in international communication too, there is an infinite number of messages and narratives. “Now, states, non-state actors, international institutions, social movements, and the 4.5 billion people who today have access to the internet are all narrators of global politics” (Crilley, Manor & Bjola 2020, p. 632). Thanks to the widespread use of technologies and the Internet, “the world is smaller and more connected than ever before” (Ki, Pasadeos & Ertem-Eray, 2021, p. 1). Most citizens of a country nowadays learn more about foreign policy or foreign countries and values via the media rather than through public diplomacy activities (Golan, Manor & Arceneaux, 2019; Saliu, 2022a).

In this communicative environment, politics and international communications have become a contest of competitive credibility, and the issue that arises is “whose story wins” instead of “whose army wins” (Nye, 2004, p. 106). To answer this question is quite complex, since in the digital era the communication environment has changed; the communication actors in the role of narrators have also multiplied, while the confidence of messages and narratives has declined due to the new phenomena of fake news and post-truth. Meanwhile, the traditional concepts and values that bind them such as soft power or public diplomacy have remained constant in the new environment.

This is precisely the purpose of this paper: to analyse the environment and today’s communicative changes of public diplomacy in the post-truth era. Two essential research questions of this review emerge from this goal:

RQ1. Which are the winning narratives of soft power in the post-truth era?

RQ2. What has changed in the communication environment of public diplomacy today?

To answer these two questions, this study examines the transformations of the communication environment which have taken place in the modern world today, compared to the era before social media. In addition, the actors who communicate today in the new environment, the credibility of their narratives, and the functioning of soft power as a narrative of the exposure of the country’s values through public diplomacy will also be analysed.

The paper will first explain the meaning of narratives and their importance in public diplomacy activities and the connection of the latter with soft power. The meaning and importance of a country’s image is also explained due to the connection it has with narratives and the new online communication environment. Given the fact that nowadays there are networked societies, social media, and multiple communication actors, the public diplomacy environment has also changed. In addition to this, trust in information and narratives that are spread online has also declined. This requires the concept of post-truth to be explained, which is related to fake news while playing a role in contemporary narratives.

Afterwards, this paper will describe sources of soft power (attractive power) in relation to the current context and compare them to the value of these resources in the 1990s. In addition, this study will explore whether the public diplomacy’s goal of “influenc[ing] governments by influencing audiences” is in harmony with today’s communication environment and soft power narratives. This review concludes with proposals to revise the sources of soft power, and the corresponding reassessment of one of the main goals of public diplomacy.

## 2. The meaning of narratives

Narratives are formed and projected in a communication environment (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013). During everyday communication, people exchange short stories, sometimes true or untrue, happy, or painful. It is important that these stories are attractive to get the interlocutor's attention; sometimes it happens that people laugh at some unfortunate or painful story just because of the way the event is narrated. Indeed, almost all creativity has narrative at its core. Today, we can find narratives in literature, social sciences, media, and online games, and these connect humans with the world in a practical way (Hatavara *et al.*, 2016). Previously, narrative concepts were found more in literary theory and other disciplines. Yet recently, political actors have been employing narratives for communications purposes, using the power of storytelling also regarding politics for foreign and international audiences (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019).

To explain the importance of narratives to human beings, three arguments must be distinguished: "First, narratives are central to human relations; they shape our world and constrain behaviour. Second, political actors attempt to use narratives strategically. Third, our communication environment fundamentally affects how narratives are communicated and flow, and with what effects" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013, p. 1). Two very important specifics should be considered: first, storytelling is the most natural and persuasive form of communication, and second, that it is through narratives that individuals and collectives construct their identities (van Noort, 2020; Roberts, 2006). Storytelling is the activity aspect of the narrative that shapes our cognitive understanding of the world, our affective orientations, and our sense of the possible (Meretoja, 2018). It has considerable power in international communications and public diplomacy (Hansel, 2023; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019) and can potentially become an ethical medium to mobilize people across cultures in a relationship (Garlock, 2012). Storytelling is a communication tool that transforms an informational message into a story, with an attractive narrative structure, easily understandable, in the fight for the attention of a potential audience (Markova & Sukhoviya (2020). This concept can also be defined as creating a narrative universe from various independent stories in different supports and formats and can separately be consumed because they make sense autonomously, but whose convergence generates a unique story that is used in different media and disciplines (Scolari, 2009).

Narratives mainly have a storytelling structure (Elliott, 2009; White, 1973). Their purpose is to be attractive, to convince, and not necessarily to present an analytical argument (Escalas, 2007). Their structure differs from argumentation and usually contains a beginning, middle, and an end; this is in contrast with argumentation, which has conclusions at the end (Roe, 1992). But sometimes, narratives can be relatively short comparative phrases and have a powerful persuasive message. An example is taken from the 2020 presidential election in the United States, where Donald Trump tweeted "If Biden wins, China wins" (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2021).

Narratives have a very important role in foreign communications and foreign policy (Krebs, 2015). For certain countries, they can be positive and romantic; for others, they can also be extremely negative, and political elites, media, and culture play an important role (Spencer, 2016). Narratives can construct positive and negative identities, create heroes, or send threatening messages (Yuan & Fu, 2020; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019). Thanks to narratives as a certain understanding of the world, as well as of countries, peoples, phenomena and values, on the one hand it becomes possible for others to get to know a certain country. On other hand, it might not be possible to get to know another country because of a lack of narratives or where existing ones did not have a significant impact. Here, narrative "has happened on a very superficial level, by using the term as synonym for discourse, rhetoric or simply for everything said, written, viewed or heard" (Spencer, 2016, p. 2).

Narrative may also be a metaphor for the economic development of any country, regional stability, and political ideology (Jiang, 2022).

Narratives can appear both through traditional media in text, sound, and visual format, and overwhelmingly through digital and social media. Visual narratives are also very important in the digital age, especially when it comes to a country's image and foreign policy where social media is used as a visual platform (Crilley, Manor & Bjola, 2020). These visual narratives can be photographs, maps, public relations material, images from popular culture, and films. "Visual communication is at the heart of international relations in the digital age" (van Noort 2020, p. 1). In social media, visual narratives have a large scope, as these forms of media have influenced radical changes in diplomatic communication and public diplomacy (Bjola, Cassidy & Manor 2019). In important international meetings and forums, the use of social media as a visual platform strengthens the importance of the event; it is also an opportunity, however, for propaganda and disinformation (Crilley, Manor & Bjola, 2020). In these forums, state actors often use different narratives about events from the past with the intention of benefiting the minds and hearts of other political actors, and aware that their words will also receive media attention. Often, they contain a message for the future.

Narrators in public discussions, in addition to political actors, state representatives, government officials and political leaders, are also social activists, academics, experts, media actors, and artists, etc. But narrators can also be multinational corporations, and terrorist organizations are probably most often cited as important new actors in the world, including diaspora-linked groups and anonymous (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013).

These narrators make deliberate choices about which narratives to use to shape and influence broader discursive environments, impacting the behaviour of others in domestic and global politics for their own political gain (Barthwal-Datta, Krystalli & Shepherd, 2023). The use of the words "controlling the narrative" and "changing the narrative" have become commonplace today and are usually associated with "strategic communicative efforts to influence public perception of social issues and current events" (Dawson, 2023, p. 72).

Political actors do not use narratives unintentionally. They seek to use them strategically to achieve desired results; to get others to do what they would not otherwise have done (Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019, 2021). These strategic narratives contain information that attracts the attention of the audience: they are clear and convincing, aiming to influence the public's behaviour and strengthen the identity of the political actor and the system or values that is being promoted (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013). They are of special importance both in internal political communication and at the international level: "In the twenty-first century, the communication of persuasive 'strategic narratives' has received growing attention as a way to elicit domestic and international support for foreign policy" (van Noort, 2020, p. 1).

Strategic narratives are a "means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013, p. 146). State actors, organizations, and individuals all tell different stories about their country which promote the values, services, or politics of a country. Strategic narratives can be defined as "a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors" (Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 2). The research on strategic narratives examines the communication processes by which political elites try to influence domestic and foreign audiences (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013). Also, scientific research on strategic narratives usually focuses on analysing the content of the speeches of political actors and their interviews and political communications in campaigns, international meetings, etc. (Roselle, 2017; Dimitriu & de Graaf, 2016). This is due to the fact that "strategic narratives are the soft power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 71) and they represent the rhetoric of public diplomacy (Hayden, 2012).

### **3. Methodology**

This review article is a problematizing review, which main purpose has a “re-conceptualizations of existing thinking, to re-evaluate existing understandings of phenomena, with a particular view to challenging and reimagining our current ways of thinking about them” (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020, p. 1297). A main principle of the problematizing review is reflexivity, which implies that the researcher has carefully read several selected texts and challenges and interprets these in a certain context, taking into consideration different perspectives and alternative sources (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020). Reflexivity enables scientific researchers to become more aware of the complexity of communication or public relations contexts (Willis, 2019) by exposing contradictions, doubts, dilemmas, and possibilities (Cunliffe, 2002). Also, problematizing requires *reading broadly but selectively; problematizing instead of accumulating* –questioning rather than trying to identify missing pieces in an ever-growing puzzle.

The problematizing review allows researchers “to imagine how to rethink existing literature in ways that generate new and ‘better’ ways of thinking about specific phenomena” (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020, p. 1290). It is a novel approach, but in management and organization studies, problematization is becoming increasingly common; it has been successfully applied in marketing, applied management, communication studies, strategic communication, public relations, and entrepreneurial communication etc. (Goyanes, 2020; Gossel, 2022; Willis, 2019; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020).

### **4. The interconnection between public diplomacy and soft power**

Soft power and public diplomacy are two interrelated concepts. Soft power represents a country’s attractive values, while public diplomacy represents those activities that are carried out to demonstrate the soft power of a country in other countries. In other words, soft power is what the country *has*; public diplomacy is what the country does to showcase *what it has*.

According to Joseph Nye (1990, 2004, 2008, 2019, 2021), who coined the concept of soft power, a country can implement foreign policy if it has attractive values for other nations. Soft power is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (Nye, 2004, p. x). These values or sources of soft power are:

- (a) the culture of a country –where it is attractive to others,
- (b) the ideals and good political practices of a country, and
- (c) a foreign policy rich in moral authority (Nye, 2004, 2008).

Speaking about American values, Nye (2004, 2008, 2021) emphasizes that universal values, such as progress, individual opportunities, human rights, democracy, good political practices, open culture, and widespread popular culture are attractive to others, especially as promoted through Hollywood, high-quality higher education, etc. “A country may often obtain preferred outcomes in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, and aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness” (Nye, 2019, pp. 7-8).

Soft power is not the same as influence or power or argumentation, but it is “attractive power” (Nye, 2004, p. 6). This attractiveness can be achieved by demonstrating the values of soft power to foreign audiences, which then becomes narrative power (Winkler, 2019). This exposure is done by public diplomacy via communication-related activities.

Since Edmund Gullion created this concept in 1965, public diplomacy has aimed to promote a given country and to realize its foreign policy by influencing the foreign publics (Melissen, 2005; Tuch, 1990; Malone, 1985). The practice of public diplomacy is focused on the cultivation of positive public opinion in foreign nations (Golan, Manor & Arceneaux, 2019). The essence of public diplomacy is the “good impression that a country seeks to make on the public of another country” (Gilboa, 2016, p. 1). This is achieved through various activities, including educational and cultural exchange programs, various scholarships, and the media

along with language programmes, sports, and the arts (Snow, 2020; Golan, 2015; Gilboa, 2008; Nye, 2004, 2008).

Public diplomacy is “a communication process states, nonstate actors, and organizations employ to influence the policies of a foreign government by influencing its citizens” (Gilboa, 2016, p. 2). I define public diplomacy as a communication of state and non-state actors of a country with the public of foreign countries to inform, engage, influence them and to realize the state interests (Saliu, 2020a; 2020b; 2022a, 2022b). This communication can be done directly by visiting a country or mediated through the media. Entman (2008) calls this a communication process realized by media or mediated public diplomacy. Nowadays, communication through the media is much more frequent than that which is carried out directly. Accordingly, the following aspects are important:

- (a) information management, which means that the greatest possible volume of information on foreign publics is shown through the media, preferably on daily basis,
- (b) strategic communication –consisting of occasional campaigns throughout the year; and
- (c) cultural diplomacy –involving various exchanges to achieve the establishment of long-term relationships with foreign audiences (Gilboa 2008; Leonard, 2002; Nye 2004, 2008, 2019; Saliu, 2022a).

The first category, *information management* refers to the government’s control of information through the mass media (Gilboa, 2008). According to Cull (2009, 2010, 2019), core public diplomacy activities are: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange, and international broadcasting. In other words, public diplomacy activities are realized through the development of communication strategies that include educational, informative, and entertaining programs (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2011). The aim of public diplomacy is to “to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public” (Cull, 2009, p. 12) and “to maintain mutually beneficial relationships with strategic foreign publics that can affect national interests” (Fitzpatrick, 2009, p. 105).

#### **4.1. *Influencing foreign governments by influencing their citizens***

To achieve this objective, researchers believe that once the influence on the foreign public is achieved, then that public will exert pressure on its own government to have the most positive attitudes towards the foreign country that has exerted the influence. The aim of public diplomacy is “to influence directly or indirectly those public attitudes and opinions which bear directly on another government’s foreign policy decisions” (Delaney, 1968, p. 3, cited by Signitzer & Coombs, 1992, p. 138). Frederick (1993) believes that the purpose of public diplomacy is “to influence a foreign government, by influencing its citizens” (p. 229). Cull (2006), one of the most cited in this field, emphasizes “the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies” (p. 1). The other most quoted scholar in international communications, Eytan Gilboa (2008) emphasizes that public diplomacy exerts “pressure by the informed public on its government to adopt friendly policies towards the country employing public diplomacy” (p. 57). Furthermore, Gilboa (2016) defines public diplomacy as “a communication process states, nonstate actors, and organizations employ to influence the policies of a foreign government by influencing its citizens” (p. 2).

This was also the approach during the Cold War period. Malone (1985), a well-known scholar of public diplomacy of that period, appreciates that “the core idea is one of direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking and, ultimately, that of their governments” (p. 199). Even current researchers emphasize this fact that the aim of public diplomacy is to “change the attitudes of the foreign audiences to influence the state behavior” (Sevin, 2015, p. 2).

#### 4.2. Narratives and images of a country

Changing the behaviour of foreign audiences is intended to be obtained through communication, which conveys the soft power values of a country so that it becomes attractive in their eyes. Hence public diplomacy is seen more and more as a communication process (Di Martino, 2019; Jönsson, 2016), “world politics and foreign policy have become highly mediated thanks to the rapid evolution of communication technologies, which have allowed information to travel beyond national borders” (Fanoulis & Revelas 2022, p. 1). All these affect the international image of a country. As a foreign public’s perception of a nation, national images are also “a social construction based on personal experiences, the experiences of personal connections and mediated messages” (Fjällhed, 2021, p. 230).

If we define the image of a country as being how foreign citizens view it through description with certain adjectives or different qualities, the formation of this image (be it positive or negative) is a very complicated, long-term process that incorporates a wide range of different communication sources and interacting actors (Saliu, 2020a, 2020b). Humans construct their worldview via interaction with their surroundings and indirectly from the stories of others (Fjällhed, 2021). In other words, a country’s international image is what others think about it. The process of its creation includes: (a) personal experiences from travelling to or studying in another nation or by consuming locally branded products; (b) experiences of our personal connections in the form of tales we hear from friends and family; and (c) mediated messages as conveyed through all kind of media, including portrayal of the specific nation in films and books (Lee, Toth & Shin, 2008).

This process starts from the first narratives that a person receives in childhood: from fairy tales, children’s books, and then from the media and other people. These earlier perceptions can be confirmed or refuted when the individual visits that place (Kunczik, 1997). These forms of information promote the country (Dolea, 2015) and can increase its positive image in the eyes of the public of another country (Jönsson & Hall, 2005; Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). They are often narratives drawn up by state or non-state actors, or even by communication experts (Saliu 2020a).

#### 5. Narratives in the modern communication environment: actors and beliefs

Communication strategies nowadays have been transformed both internally and internationally. We have different platforms, different users, and different outcomes (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). In general, the changes in society and communication have been quite dynamic, especially after COVID-19, where things were “changing in real time” (Mundy, 2021). Social media have already become an everyday tool in politics, which allows individuals to construct their profiles, build connections, and explore these connections as well as those made by other users (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In social media, citizens have multiple opportunities to “engage with political and media actors that compete for their attention, resources, and loyalty” (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021, p. 16).

Even public diplomacy has been digitized to a large extent, with 142 countries having diplomatic representation on Twitter (Sevin & Manor, 2019). Many news organizations have become so active on Facebook, promoting their stories there and chasing likes, shares, and comments (Tandoc & Maitra, 2017). Commercial television generates about 48 million hours of worldwide video messages each year; over 300 billion emails are sent and received every day. Twitter users generate more than 500 million tweets a day; and over 100 million photos are uploaded to Facebook every 24 hours (Potter, 2016, pp. 35-36). Also, more than 50 billion technological devices are connected to the Internet (Floridi, 2014). The large presence of online messages has “the potential to mobilize shared or prominent soft power assets to influence behavior” (Wu & Sevin, 2022, p. 74).

In this *infosphere*, where there is a lot of *hyperhistory* (Floridi 2014), it is difficult to manage the continuous and irregular information and images that are projected abroad, especially in

an ecosystem where the multitude of media, the Internet, real-time journalism and mobile phones have broken the barrier between the local and international spheres (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2011). Public diplomacy's primary activity is communication through *information management* and *strategic communication* (Gilboa 2008; Leonard, 2002; Nye 2004, 2008, 2019) or *listening* according to others (Cull, 2009, 2010, 2019). But, in the digital age with the large circulation of online messages, this management has weakened, and online information has become democratized. Through social media, we have false narratives and disinformation (Dawson, 2023) as well as the online presence of hate speech for others in different narratives (Doncel-Martin *et al.*, 2023). In recent years, this has culminated especially with the post-truth era.

The post-truth era emerged in 2015 during the campaigns for the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump, where blatant lies and so-called 'alternative facts' circulated freely in political speeches and media reporting (Fischer, 2021). It represents "the transition from relatively centralised systems of falsification to the multiplication and fragmentation of the ways lies are spread and perpetuated in the contemporary communication chaos" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 21). Post-truth is often understood as a situation in which people are inclined to accept claims based on their beliefs and emotions, rather than on facts (d'Ancona, 2017; Kleinman, 2021). "Hence, post-truth does signal something that is both 'post' and a return, a re-legitimation of arguments based on their emotional appeal and symbolic value and subjective rather than impersonal truth" (Kalpokas, 2018, p. 2). This is also closely related to fake news, but these two concepts are not the same thing.

Propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation are phenomena as early as communication itself, but social media are crucial for the new phenomenon of fake news. "The deliberate distortion aimed at profiting from people's ignorance and misinformation is as old as rhetoric and persuasion" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 19). Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2017) point out that fake news is understood as news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising, and propaganda. "While it is currently used to describe false stories spreading on social media, fake news has also been invoked to discredit some news organizations' critical reporting, further muddying discourse around fake news" (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2017, p. 139). The boom in fake news is mainly attributed to social media and political polarization driven by ideological and financial motivation (Tandoc, Jenkins & Craft, 2019).

In the era of post-truth, fake news, and populism, reality is distorted in public communication and the distribution of norms and values is often viewed with skepticism while "the spread of lies is not exclusively controlled or operated by powerful states and corporate actors" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 22). Given the multitude of media messages and the marked decline in credibility, the nature of communication between countries and targeted foreign audiences has begun to change in the digital age (Snow, 2020; Bjola, Cassidy & Manor, 2019). "The preponderance of new social media technologies, hyper-transparency and adaptations to these conditions through new public diplomacy programmes compel a revision of soft power thinking" (Hayden, 2017, p. 21). Therefore, with these new circumstances in international communications, both soft power (in terms of its effect) and public diplomacy (in terms of its purpose) should be reviewed. Moreover, this is reflected by what we have seen in recent times concerning the decline in the reliability of information sources.

## **6. Whose story wins in the digital era? Rethinking the values of soft power and the main aim of public diplomacy**

Soft power studies to date have largely focused on the counting of tools or resources; in other words, in analysing assets and capabilities "rather than focusing on the effects of such capabilities" (Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 71). The digitization of public diplomacy has brought a series of problems, especially after COVID-19 and the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and the need has arisen to review the values of soft power in the digital



age (Manor & Huang, 2022). Communication channels and actors have changed, but what has most affected the concept of soft power are its attractive values and sources.

At the time when Nye (1990) described these values and sources of this 'attractive power', the world was in completely different circumstances. At the time of the Cold War, the peoples of Eastern European countries under the influence of the Soviet Union were suffering under communist dictatorships. These peoples dreamed of freedom, democracy, and Western lifestyles. Western values of that time were extremely attractive, and efforts to embrace these values had begun in some European countries, while attempts to overthrow the communist dictatorships had provoked human casualties. Now, three decades later, circumstances have completely changed because all European countries generally have similar values and similar goals. Today, the values between countries in Europe do not differ to the extent that they did in the 1990s, when soft power was first defined. This distinctive gap in soft power resources between European countries has narrowed, and in some cases no longer exists. Political values such as freedom, democracy, individual opportunities, well-being, and quality education, etc., are already values which have been consolidated among European countries. Nye (2021) himself acknowledges this dynamic when he says that "all concepts arise in a context, and contexts change" (p. 19). Therefore, relating to the first research question, the sources of soft power today do not have the desired effect on competition within European countries.

However, the attractive abilities of soft power remain in relation to some other countries: the United States, for example, continues to retain soft power over the publics of certain Latin American or Asian countries, as does Europe for countries outside of the EU. Since these resources are not attractive as before, citizens do not have to exert pressure on their governments to maintain a friendly attitude towards other countries, especially since within the EU there are no frosty relations between countries, as was the case in the past. The sources of soft power, such as culture, democracy, human rights, individual opportunities, foreign policy rich in moral authority, well-being, economic development, etc., are consolidated by the European countries and are no longer a dividing gap as at the time of the Berlin Wall. The EU is a unique market with joint institutions as a normative power (Birchfield, 2013; Whitman, 2011); countries are governed by common values, promoting creativity, peace, security, intercultural dialogue, enhancing economic growth, jobs, innovation, enrichment, and lifelong learning etc. (Cross, 2014). In general, there are no longer those profound differences between European countries, while today, there is competition for progress, tourism, etc. and not for the essential values of soft power. Here we can therefore conclude that the purpose of diplomacy as 'influenc[ing] governments by influencing audiences' is already ineffective not only between European countries, but also between Western countries (including the United States, Canada, Australia, and certain other countries). This answers the second research question.

Another aspect is the EU's soft power over non-European publics. Normative values, democratic values, free trade, strengthening credibility - these are the values that Europe promotes at a time when disinformation and propaganda damage Europe's international credibility (Manfredi-Sánchez & Smith, 2022). The EU has weak public diplomacy activities; there is no powerful media to spread its values, while nation states with non-European target audiences compete with it (Saliu, 2021). However, Europe has added values and can show its common history, art, literature, and cultural institutions (from Cervantes to Goethe, for example) for a liberalized digital market (Manfredi-Sánchez & Smith, 2022). These are the specifics that emerge from the first research question about today's winning narratives.

Meanwhile, regarding credibility and narrators, the communication environment has also changed significantly. Public diplomacy activities exposing narrative power (Winkler, 2019) can only be attractive when they are communicated. But circumstances have changed; online communications and soft power compete with several billion communicators online.

This competition is also increased by non-state actors, ranging from large corporations to non-profits as well as criminals, terrorists, and informal ad-hoc groups. “Moreover, many of those other actors can compete effectively in the realm of soft power” (Nye, 2019, p. 10). So, not only the actors of communication have changed, but also the competitors. Nowadays, state and non-state actors of different countries communicate even without the need for exchange programs thanks to the advancement of communication technologies, which enables contact between people from different countries in real time (Saliu, 2022a). People can get information online, interact by commenting on media posts through social networks, read their friends’ posts via text message, watch videos, watch information that others have shared, like or comment on it, talk with friends, share memories and photos about holidays, pets, and children. Social media provide a pre-dialogic opportunity for social activism by bringing people together to share information and build relationships. However, some interactions inevitably involve social issues where there is potential for disagreement (Kent & Taylor, 2021). This potential increases especially with populist leaders who have a “rhetoric of national self-presentation” (Mor, 2007, p. 678). The weight of state communication actors has fallen in the era of online networking because citizens are connected and express themselves there with the values they have. People share narratives, comment online on social media about various political actors, as well as about culture, sports, and news. Everyone comments through the lens of their culture: their emotions, and the management of these actors by the state is impossible in the global infosphere. In these complex communicative situations, the sender of the message is not able to design appropriate communicative strategies because the same message may have different effects on different audiences (Palmieri & Mazzali-Lurati, 2021). In online communications, this does not mean that people always select narratives which promote their country or other countries, especially at a time when we also have fake news presence in the post-truth era. These changes, therefore, are clearly related to the second research question about modern changes in how public diplomacy is communicated.

## **7. Conclusion**

In today’s networked world and in the post-truth era, the winning narratives are those of the citizens. This is because they are the main communicative actors of public diplomacy who create and distribute narratives online completely independently. Online communication has made the global public a communicative sphere where billions of online narrators compete among themselves through sharing their culture, knowledge, and attitudes.

This global democratization of public diplomacy, through glocal communication, has largely weakened the importance of state actors and has strengthened the role of online narratives of people from all over the world. These non-state actors, as actors of public diplomacy, are many times more numerous and in spreading messages than the 200 or so governments around the world. The state has lost its former primary role because it has moved from Gutenberg (top-down flow information) to Zuckerberg (horizontal and non-monopolistic flow of information). However, with the populists online today, we have moved from the so-called ‘ministry of truth’, when information was managed by the state, to the post-truth era.

On the other hand, at the continental level, European countries find it difficult to exercise effective public diplomacy activities towards each other. This is because, unlike previously, the soft power of these countries does not have obvious differences when they are in competition with each other. In addition, citizens of European countries circulate frequently within the EU itself. Their physical presence in other European countries excludes the effect that public diplomacy activities can have through the media and online communication etc. But the effects of public diplomacy at the global level are another issue, where European countries still retain soft power over the publics of other non-European countries.

“Influenc[ing] foreign governments by influencing their citizens” has now become quite difficult or almost impossible in European countries. This was effective during the Cold War, when the people of the Eastern bloc worshipped Western values one because of freedom, democracy, and their way of life. However, it can be argued that the main impact has now been achieved, not only for cultural, tourism, economic, and trade reasons, etc., but also regarding those publics who are now consumers of these values. Nowadays, though, changing circumstances and the advent of online communication mean that public sympathy for foreign values may not exert pressure for governments to change their orientation towards the values and countries that their public may worship. In this context, today’s public diplomacy narratives should be seen primarily as relating to a country’s international image, rather than as an attempt to influence governments by influencing their audiences.

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