**Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding in the Wake of the Russia-Ukraine War**

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**Abstract:**
This academic Forum aims to identify academic concepts, theories, and assumptions from the field of public diplomacy and nation branding, which have been cast in doubt – or need to be re-examined – in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Forum's goal is to raise new questions and provoke new inquiries into the complex roles that media, communication, and public diplomacy play in the Russia-Ukraine War, and in military conflict more broadly. Contributors to the Forum also reflect on how a major world event can challenge the foundations of academic thought, be it at the macro level of great power rivalries, or at the micro level of personal emotions and traumas. In order to encourage continued engagement, each of the eleven essays in the Forum, as well as this editorial Introduction, conclude with a section that outlines specific gaps in public diplomacy scholarship and directions for future research.

**Why did Russia invade Ukraine?**
In the early hours of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – before various political agendas, ideological narratives, and well-worn academic theories had reasserted themselves – two questions appeared in the headlines of numerous Western media: Why did Russia invade Ukraine? And what did this mean for the rest of the world?

The invasion should not have been a surprise. Its start had been preceded by a prolonged period of Russian saber rattling, accompanied by public denials of plans to invade. As the Russian Army amassed troops along Ukraine's eastern border for weeks, global news media were clamoring about the significance of these maneuvers, and intelligence reports from the US and the UK warned of an imminent attack on Ukraine.

On the eve of February 24, the president of each country gave a televised address, widely covered by international media. Russia's Vladimir Putin announced the start of a "special military operation" on the territory of Ukraine and listed a litany of grievances, old and new, which, in his telling, left Russia with "no other option" but to take military action (Al Jazeera, Feb 24). Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, standing in front of the Ukrainian national flag, appealed to ordinary Russians to reject the false narratives of a hostile Ukraine and stated, "The people of Ukraine want peace. The government of Ukraine wants peace" (Reuters, 2022).

As scholars of international communication and public diplomacy, interested in the legacies of the Cold War, each of us had been following these events with trepidation. For two of us, hailing from countries in immediate proximity to Ukraine, Russia's invasion was literally hitting very close to home. It also brought back memories of personal experiences of life under Soviet domination and of the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc in the early 1990s. According to a commonly repeated narrative, the Cold War had been won by the West, and the Russian Federation, one of the states to emerge from the defunct Soviet Union, had recognized the sovereignty of Ukraine as an independent state. Yet, three decades later, we

were seeing images of explosions and destruction in Ukraine on media screens and reading reports of rockets falling on Ukrainian kindergartens, hospitals, and apartment buildings.

The stark and brutal reality of a major ground war in Europe stunned us – not because the attack had been unexpected, but because, despite its many foreshadowings, it appeared senseless and irrational. Despite our research expertise and personal familiarity with Eastern Europe, we couldn't help but ask ourselves the same questions. What did the invasion mean – for Ukraine, for Russia, and for the entire foundation of the post-Cold War world? Could scholarly theories and concepts, commonly used to analyze the geopolitical order that emerged after 1989, and the role of public diplomacy in it, explain this War? And, if they couldn't, where did they fall short? These unsettling questions motivated us to edit this academic forum.

**Aims and scope of the Forum**

As we developed the idea for this Forum, just days after the start of the invasion, we understood that our task was not to predict the outcomes of the Russia-Ukraine War. Contrary to media and political commentators, who were quick to issue half-baked analyses and prognoses, we wanted to identify academic concepts, theories, and assumptions that were cast in doubt – or needed to be re-examined – in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In other words, we hoped that a timely academic Forum could create a space where the seeds of new thinking could be planted so that future research might avoid academic solipsism.

The Forum's goal is to raise new questions and provoke new inquiries into what appears to have been a collective sense of denial that the Russian military threat had been real. In particular, we wanted to invite new critical insights into the complex roles that media, communication, and public diplomacy played in this War. We also wanted to reflect on how a major world event could rattle the foundations of academic thought, be it at the macro level of great power rivalries, or at the micro level of personal feelings of uncertainty and doubt.

We approached our task as Forum editors with three important commitments. First, we resolved that a Forum about an attack on Ukraine could not proceed without including the voices of Ukrainian scholars. In contrast to analyses that view the War through a "great powers" lens, with Russia and "the West" holding center stage (e.g., Miskimmon & O'Loughlin 2017, Trenin 2014), we wanted to open a space for Ukrainian scholars to share their unique knowledge and perspectives on the events on the ground. We also included scholars from the region who had already been studying post-Soviet social transformations. Our intention was to contribute to the ongoing efforts to de-Westernize academic thought and encourage modes of inquiry that are more historically and culturally grounded.

Second, we actively sought to capture a variety of epistemic perspectives from fields such as public diplomacy and nation branding, strategic communication, global media studies, linguistics, cultural studies, and international relations. We were also determined that the contributions in the Forum should address a diverse range of topics related to public diplomacy – from widely cited theoretical constructs, such as soft power, strategic narratives, and digitalization, to understudied topics, such as gender, humor, emotions, and trauma.

Finally, we felt that we had to acknowledge our own moral stance in approaching this project. Although scholars are often asked to bracket their personal opinions and emotions in their research, we could not remain impartial in this context. Our position, which informed the

framing of the Forum and guided our editorial work, is one of unequivocal support for Ukraine's right to self-defense and condemnation of Russia's unprovoked invasion.

In the remaining part of this introductory essay, we first lay out the main themes and concepts that are explored in the 11 essays included in the Forum. We then point to some important gaps as a way to invite continued engagement by other scholars.

**The essays and themes in the Forum**

Four major themes emerge from the contributions to this Forum. The first focuses on the concept of "soft power" – one of the most widely cited and debated theoretical constructs in public diplomacy research. Russia's War on Ukraine caused some to ponder whether soft power was still a useful prism for analyzing state actions in international relations. In her essay, Maria Repnikova reflects on the "fractures" in the Western idea of soft power and highlights two developments. One is the waning appeal of Western values, on which the concept of soft power originally rests, in some parts of the world. The second is the use of anti-Western narratives as a form of "negative" soft power employed by states such as China and Russia.

Nick Cull's essay offers a re-interpretation of soft power through the concept of "reputational security." He proposes that a nation's reputation is an important component of national security, and argues that if one state were to withstand an assault by another, it must matter to people around the world. Both Repnikova and Cull conclude that a re-examination of soft power, and its predominantly Western focus, is important and necessary in the field of public diplomacy.

A second theme focuses on the digitalization of diplomacy and the consequences this has for efforts to influence opinions, beliefs, and worldviews. James Pamment analyzes the tactics used by the Kremlin to circumvent EU sanctions aimed at preventing Russian state-owned media from disseminating disinformation online. He highlights the threat posed by disruptive digital practices to legitimate uses of public diplomacy and shows how digital diplomatic accounts served to partially replace the reach of state-owned media. Pamment's essay introduces the concept of "infrastructures of influence" as a way to apprehend the dynamics and possible impacts of digital disruption on public diplomacy and information war.

Continuing the theme of digitalization, Ilan Manor examines a host of new digital tactics employed by the Ukrainian government, including crowdfunding of military aid from connected publics and using social media to pressure Big Tech CEOs into exiting the Russian market. Manor's central argument is that Ukraine's pioneering use of digital platforms may lead to some negative, long-term societal consequences, such as an increased willingness by digital publics to fund wars and invasions. He calls on digital diplomacy scholars to examine how the use of digital platforms by states impacts society at large.

The contribution by Stanislav Budnitsky focuses on humor in digital diplomacy. He contrasts Ukraine's decolonial humor with Russia's imperial humor and examines the instrumentalization of humor in adversarial relations. Budnitsky challenges the widely held notion that public diplomacy is only used as a tool of engagement. In contrast, he suggests that digital humor by Russia and Ukraine may have contributed to greater disengagement between the two states.

The third theme of the Forum concerns the intersections of nation branding and national identities. Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg examine Ukraine's evolving nation branding efforts dating back to 2013 – before the annexation of Crimea and Russia's invasion of the Donbas. Revisiting some findings and conclusions from their previous research, they focus on the problem of "meaning management" by the state and conclude that nation branding and nation building may be indistinguishable in the context of war.

The impact of war on Ukrainian national narratives and symbols is also addressed in two essays by Ukrainian scholars. Olena Fomenko provides a perspective from inside Ukraine that contextualizes and problematizes internal processes of national identity (re)construction after Ukrainian independence in 1991. Drawing on linguistics and cultural studies, Fomenko highlights the symbolic struggles over Ukrainian cultural icons, the use of language, and of public space. She traces how these contestations also become subject to commodification and notes important differences in domestic narratives of Ukrainian identity versus the country's presentation abroad. Fomenko points out Ukraine's ongoing need to attract a "Western Gaze" while engaging in processes of cultural and political de-Russification.

Adding another Ukrainian perspective, Roman Horbyk and Dariya Orlova investigate the role of transmedia storytelling and "memetic warfare" in Ukraine's wartime public diplomacy. They describe important shifts in the strategic narratives about Ukraine – from externally dominated depictions of a divided country to a new narrative, advanced by the Ukrainian state, of a "brave, unified, and defiant nation." The authors' analysis emphasizes the structuring role of journalistic practices and logics in the construction of strategic narratives, as well as the effectiveness of memes and transmedia storytelling in counteracting and augmenting journalistic frames.

Lastly, Nadia Kaneva offers a critical discourse analysis of Ukraine's wartime branding, focusing on the country's Brave Campaign. Similarly to Horbyk and Orlova, Kaneva traces a significant shift in Ukraine's self-presentation to the world. However, she invites public diplomacy scholars to move beyond positivist analyses of messages and strategic narratives and argues that a critical discourse approach can address the underlying relations of power that inform nation branding and public diplomacy efforts.

The fourth and final theme of the Forum focuses on the significance of gender, emotions, and trauma in public diplomacy. Katherine Wright addresses the gendered aspects of war in her discussion of the UN's Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. She problematizes the West's commitment to the WPS and to women's rights, more broadly, and argues that NATO and Western countries often use discussions of gender only as an image-making strategy. Wright finds significant "gendered silences" in the West's response to the Russia-Ukraine War and calls for greater inclusion of feminist perspectives in diplomatic policy.

Alina Dolea's essay concludes the contributions to this Forum by bringing to the fore the need to examine emotions and trauma in public diplomacy. Focusing on the plight of Ukrainian refugees, she describes the invisible luggage of loss and dislocation that all migrants carry. She relates refugee experiences to the collective trauma experienced by people in post-socialist countries, which has also influenced efforts to support the refugees. Dolea calls for more interdisciplinary studies that would advance research on emotions in public diplomacy, and argues that this research can inform better policies for refugee integration in host places, as well as public diplomacy aimed at diasporic communities.

**Gaps and directions for future exploration**

In editing this Forum, we asked all authors to identify areas for future research related to the topic of their contributions. We were particularly interested in new questions and gaps that had been brought into relief by the War. As a result, each of the 11 essays concludes with a section that presents suggestions for further investigation. Nevertheless, as is the case with any academic collection, the Forum retains various blind spots and limitations. We trust that public diplomacy researchers are already working on analyzing news frames, strategic narratives, and social media practices related to the Russia-Ukraine War. Therefore, in this closing section we outline three broad directions for future research, which may be less obvious but seem equally important.

First, the Russia-Ukraine War raised the specter of nuclear disaster in a palpable way. Speculations about nuclear escalation have been used in instrumental ways in public discourses by Russia, Ukraine, NATO, and the EU, and have received wide coverage by global and national media. Fears of a nuclear attack or a war-created accident at one of Ukraine's large nuclear power plants, have certainly influenced the conduct of the War, as well as public opinions about it. Furthermore, nuclear anxieties have added to the lingering effects of pandemic uncertainty and loneliness, concerns about energy and cost-of-living crises, and a general sense of global instability. Memories of the Chornobyl nuclear calamity have also been revived, especially among the populations of countries neighboring Ukraine. All of these issues deserve attention by public diplomacy scholars as they have multiple implications for international relations. One obvious task would be to gather empirical evidence about the effects of nuclear fears and collective post-socialist trauma on levels of international support for Ukraine or Russia in different parts of the world. Another line of inquiry might consider the securitization of public diplomacy discourses in response to heightened awareness of a nuclear threat.

Second, public diplomacy and nation branding have always been interested in exploring different modes of communication (technological, narrative, visual) as well as various genres and forms of appeal in the service of foreign policy objectives. Videos, photos, memes, and other graphic elements have been a major part of the Russia-Ukraine War. They have also been integral to various efforts to shape public perceptions of the War. Several essays in this Forum touch upon the significance of visuals as cultural icons, memes, or national symbols. However, the Forum format does not allow for systematic empirical analyses of visual representations of war and violence, and their effects on the strategic influence operations of different actors. Such analyses are urgently needed as public diplomacy is quickly shifting to visual modes of communication, yet the practice is outpacing the research.

Research on modes and appeals of communication should also include historical and comparative studies. There is a lot to learn from comparing propaganda messages from the Russia-Ukraine War to themes and tropes that were used in Cold War propaganda or in other military conflicts – past and present. Scholars often prioritize novelty and change in their studies, but identifying and analyzing continuities and repeating patterns across time and space can be equally important.

A final area of research that demands greater attention concerns the gendered and racialized nature of war and displacement. These dynamics should be studied in the context of wartime public diplomacy by Ukraine and Russia, but also in relation to other actors and to other military conflicts. According to a recent UN report, women and girls inside and outside Ukraine are disproportionately affected by the war-induced crisis (UN News 2022). Over

87% of Ukrainian refugees are women and children (UNHCR 2022). At the same time, more than 370,000 Russian citizens – most of whom young men – are reported to have fled the country in the first two weeks after the announcement of a military mobilization in September 2022 (Van Brugen 2022). These unforeseen waves of migration, with streams of refugees that are gendered in very different ways, will affect public attitudes towards the Russia-Ukraine War. These developments also raise questions about the gendered nature of international policy frameworks for peace and security, which have been explored very little by public diplomacy scholars.

From the onset of the War, news coverage has pointed out the different reactions of Europeans towards Ukrainian refugees, not least because they "look different" from previous refugees, especially those coming from Syria during the 2015 crisis. How will these racialized public narratives, as well as the media coverage around them, influence the public diplomacy discourses of states and non-state actors in relation to the War? How might they exacerbate anti-Western sentiments in some parts of the world or be strategically co-opted to undermine Western unity? What concepts from feminist, queer, and critical race theories could help to advance such inquiries? And how can the insights they produce guide policies that would improve attitudes towards all refugees, ease the social integration of newcomers, enhance diaspora diplomacy, and contribute to greater multi-cultural understanding overall? Finally, could the recognition that public diplomacy and nation branding are inherently gendered and racialized lead to positive changes in modes of international engagement?

We invite you to engage with the many questions raised in this Forum and to identify additional ones. If one purpose of public diplomacy scholarship is to advance worthy social goals on a global scale, then ending war and conflict, protecting rights and freedoms, and increasing international understanding surely must be among them.

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Alina Dolea is an Associate Professor in Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy in the Faculty of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University, UK. Her research is situated at the intersection of public diplomacy, migration, media and communication studies, with a focus on discourse. She is particularly interested in the role nonstate actors have come to play in public diplomacy, reproducing, but also contesting and disrupting, the state's strategic communication. As a 2022–2024 Research Fellow of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy, her current work focuses on diasporas and emotions, exploring the opportunities as well as the consequences of their transnational existence for public diplomacy.

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