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It's the context, stupid: The European Union's public diplomacy in times of ontological insecurity

Andrea Pavón-Guinea
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9991-3349
apavon@alumni.unav.es
Universidad de Navarra

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Abstract
Public diplomacy, despite its numerous and varied definitions, is essentially a communications process. By engaging the academic literature of public diplomacy with Lasswell's model of communication and Braddock's rearticulation of his model, this paper proposes an integrated framework that allows for the systematization of public diplomacy research. The framework is composed of the independent variable of context, which influences a set of dependent variables: the actors, publics, messages, objectives and tools of public diplomacy. Accordingly, this paper argues that public diplomacy research has been traditionally approached from an agent-centric perspective, and despite its obvious significance, the influence of context has been understudied. In order to test the utility of the model, the paper applies it to the case study of the European Union's public diplomacy during two different settings. First, it will expose the main characteristics of the EU's public diplomacy during times of globalization, where the EU's public diplomacy was characterized by its normativity. Subsequently, the current context of deglobalization and de-europeanization will be introduced and analyzed through the following research question: what happens to the EU's public diplomacy when the founding myth upon which it is constructed is under threat? By altering the context, one can easily see an emerging but clear transformation of the characteristics of the EU's public diplomacy. By analyzing official, policy, and legal documents, and engaging with the academic literature on the topic, the paper concludes that the main objective of the EU's public diplomacy in a changing world should be to provide for ontological security through (emotional) strategic metanarratives.

Keywords
Public diplomacy, European Union, communication, context, ontological security.

1. Introduction

Public diplomacy scholarship is eclectic. Different academic disciplines have tried to capture, from their own epistemological perspectives, the essence of what is a much more consolidated practice. For instance, public relations scholars usually focus on the relationship

management function of public diplomacy in order to achieve mutually beneficial relationships, whilst realist international relations scholars pose that the main objective of public diplomacy is to advance the national interest. On the other hand, liberalists argue that bringing about global cooperation and conflict prevention should be the main tenet of public diplomacy. Furthermore, in terms of practice, state and non-state actors have displayed a wide array of tools and utilized them, despite their disparities and variations, under the public diplomacy's umbrella.

Consequently, a lack of definitional consensus has emerged, and public diplomacy remains an essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1955). While Edmund A. Gullion coined the first modern definition of public diplomacy in 1965, referring to the cultivation of foreign public opinion by governments (Public Diplomacy Alumni Association, 2008), Tuch (1990, p. 3) believed that public diplomacy was a "government's process of communicating with foreign publics to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and cultures, as well as its national goals and current policies." In the years thereafter, public diplomacy was redefined as "an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes and behavior; build and manage relationships; and influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values" (Gregory, 2011, p. 353), and also as a strategy to establish a friendly climate overseas by building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between governments and foreign citizens (Fitzpatrick, 2007).

The above-mentioned understandings of public diplomacy do not represent a linear evolution of the term but are otherwise influenced by the sociopolitical contexts in which they were elaborated. For instance, in the case of Gullion's definition, at that time the United States needed a concept that avoided the term propaganda, which had clearly negative connotations, while simultaneously encapsulating all the cultural and exchange activities of the US Information Agency (Cull, 2006).

The main argument of this paper is that communication lies at the very roots of the scholarship and practice of public diplomacy. In this sense, by considering public diplomacy as dependent on and rooted in communication (van Ham, 2010, p. 116), all public diplomacy definitions can be systematized by applying Harold D. Lasswell's (1948) model of communication. To rephrase, if public diplomacy is essentially a communicative practice, Lasswell's model of communication might offer an integrated framework for the classification of public diplomacy definitions according to their underpinning common elements. Furthermore, by incorporating subsequent reconceptualizations of Lasswell's formula, specifically the introduction of contextual factors by Richard Braddock (1958), the integrated model also accounts for the influence of the structural context in the conceptualization of public diplomacy.

Taking all of this into consideration, this article is structured as follows. First, I will introduce a brief overview of the main problems associated with definitions of public diplomacy. Secondly, I will engage the literature on public diplomacy with Lasswell's model of communication and Braddock's (1958) reconceptualization to propose an integrated framework that allows for the identification of the main elements of public diplomacy and their interrelationships. Lastly, the integrated framework will be applied to the case study of the evolution of the European Union's public diplomacy, which has been rearticulated in the light of the current context of deglobalization and de-europeanization.

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2. Lasswell and Braddock to the rescue: an integrated framework for public diplomacy

2.1. *Public diplomacy research: bricks lying around*

Public diplomacy is an emergent (and now fast growing) area of study (Sevin, Metzgar & Hayden, 2019). It can be argued that even though one can find public diplomacy expressions as far back as ancient times, the development of the discipline is still in its infancy (Cross, 2013). Different intellectual traditions and academic disciplines have contributed to public diplomacy's theory building, leading to an enormous ambiguity surrounding the conceptualization of the term. However, this lack of consensus is inherent to any progress in social sciences. Public diplomacy scholars seek to order the reality of public diplomacy practices through the construction of concepts, and it is through conflicts over terms and definitions that progress in social sciences is made (Weber, 1949).

In this sense, a consensus has not been reached regarding the agent and target of public diplomacy initiatives: whilst some authors constrain the agency of public diplomacy practices to state actors (Hartig, 2015), it is equally accepted by others to include a broad range of non-state actors: from NGOs (Gregory, 2011) to business organizations (White, 2015), virtual states (Melki & Jabado, 2016), stateless nations (Vela & Xifra, 2015) or even private citizens (Goodman, 2006).

Regarding target publics in public diplomacy, although the literature almost coincides in pointing out that the target of public diplomacy is foreign public opinion (Mor, 2009), there are studies that also include domestic publics (Sun, 2008).

Furthermore, the goals of public diplomacy are sometimes vague and abstract –they range from objectives based on a soft power approach (Nye, 2004), such as building mutually beneficial relationships (Fitzpatrick, 2007), enhancing a positive image and the reputation of a country (Kunczik, 1997), or fostering understanding among cultures (Gregory, 2011), to more realpolitik aims such as achieving foreign policy goals (Macnamara, 2012), advancing the national interest (Gilboa, 2008) or managing the international environment (Cull, 2009).

On the other hand, public diplomacy's actors utilize a range of tools to realize their planned objectives. Among the most analyzed tools in the literature of public diplomacy are the use of communication tools, including international broadcasting (Potter & Copeland, 2008), framing and agenda-setting (Golan & Viatchaninova, 2013), social media (Zhang, 2013), strategic narratives (Pamment, 2014), PR campaigns (Chang & Lin, 2014), intercultural communication (Rawnsley, 2015) and nation-branding (van Ham, 2003). Cultural tools have also been the focus of many studies, which revolve around education and cultural exchanges (See Suri, 2011), cultural diplomacy –culture, books, movies, art– (Wu, 2019), sporting events (Buarque, 2015), ideas and values (Angell & Mordhorst, 2014) or academic activities (D'Hooghe, 2008). Thirdly, the study of policy tools, such as dialogue, engagement, relationship and network building (See Hayden, 2009), foreign aid and development (Hall, 2012), high-level visits (Wastnidge, 2015) or conflict resolution and peace mediation practices (Zhang, 2013) has also been commonplace.

These myriad public diplomacy elements have surely contributed to deepening the theoretical development of the discipline; however, scholars with multidisciplinary backgrounds, and a research agenda that is predominantly case-driven, corporate-centric (with the infusion of public relations) and more practical than theoretical (Snow, 2020), together with the fact that there has not been any attempt to systematize public diplomacy's definitions, have resulted in definitional ambiguities and disparities. Consequently, definitions and understandings of public diplomacy remain scattered among these efforts at public diplomacy theory building and among the more policy-oriented publications: they are "like bricks lying around the brickyard rather than bricks that are used to build a wall" (Platt, 1964, p. 352).

This paper argues that public diplomacy's analytical force suffers from the fact that it encompasses such a vast array of different elements, of which study remains relatively isolated and unrelated. Furthermore, there is one level of analysis that has been often underappreciated or taken for granted in public diplomacy research and that is the influence of contextual factors. As Brown (2013) has claimed, public diplomacy does not occur in a vacuum. The action of public diplomacy is influenced by other contextual variables that may impact its success: for instance, the legitimacy and institutional reputation of the agent (Hall, 2012), the existing power relations and historical structural conditions (Bean & Comor, 2012) or the personal, cultural and political characteristics of the audience and the message (Graham, 2014).

By engaging the literature on public diplomacy with Lasswell's model of communication (and the subsequent reconceptualization put forward by Braddock), this paper attempts to introduce a framework that allows for the integration of the different elements and levels of analysis of public diplomacy into a holistic and coherent perspective.

2.2. *Building a brick wall*

Taken at its most basic and standard understanding, public diplomacy aims at influencing (foreign) publics. In the role of influencing public opinion, be it through changing perceptions and attitudes or through the much-publicized expression of "winning hearts and minds" (Nye, 2004), communication plays a crucial role. Therefore, by approaching public diplomacy as fundamentally a communications process (Wang, 2006), this paper postulates that Lasswell's question of "Who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?" helps simplify and synthesize the multiple and diverse interpretations of public diplomacy. Furthermore, Lasswell's formula has been reconceptualized by Richard Braddock (1958), who advocated for the inclusion of the category *under what circumstances* in order to account for the influence of the spatiotemporal context in the communication process.

The interplay between Lasswell's formula and Braddock's category of "context" creates an integrated framework that acts as a "meta-definition" (Sapienza, Iyer & Veenstra, 2015) for the synthesis of public diplomacy's disparity of elements and levels of analysis. The reason is that underpinning Lasswell's fundamental questions about the communication process and Braddock's variable of "context" are the main categories that should compose any basic understanding of public diplomacy: *who* points to the agent of public diplomacy, to *whom* refers to the target public, *what* is the message, *with what effect* alludes to the objective of a given public diplomacy action and *the channel* are the tools planned to achieve those objectives. Likewise, *context* is understood here as the opportunities and constraints that influence the relationships between variables (Johns, 2006). Context is therefore a way to visualize the individual-environment relations (or to rekindle the agency-structure debate) in public diplomacy. For instance, the European Union's public diplomacy towards its Southern Mediterranean neighborhood should always consider the influence that existing unequal power relations due to the colonial past of the majority of the EU Member States might have in the success of its public diplomacy narratives and strategies in the region (Pavón-Guinea, 2021). In the case of the US, for example, the employment of Al-Hurra in the Middle East to spread a given public diplomacy message hampers the success of the action due to the lack of legitimacy of the TV station in the region (Hayden, Waisanen & Osipova, 2013).

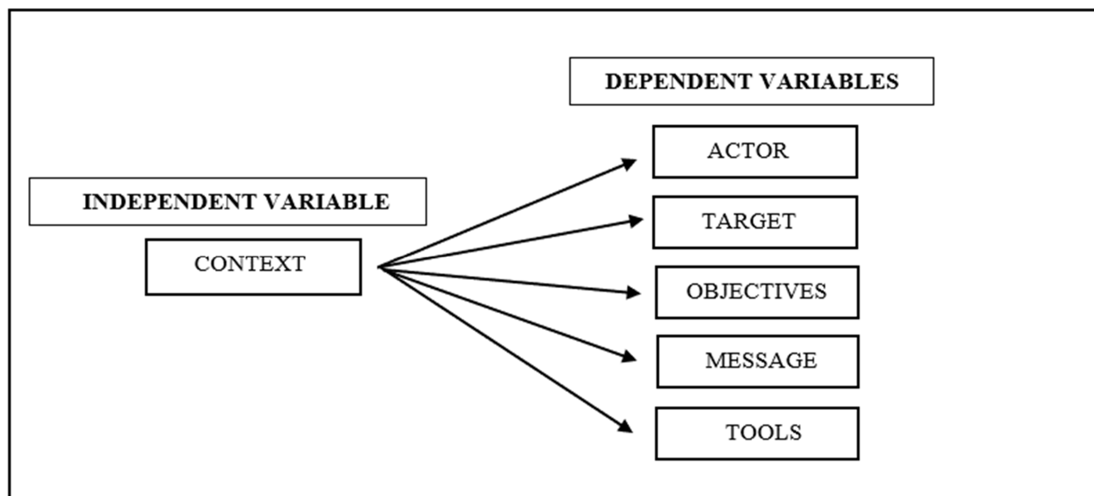
Consequently, the objective of introducing an integrated framework for public diplomacy research is threefold: first, it puts forward a holistic understanding of public diplomacy. The scholarship has disjointedly studied the main elements that compose any understanding of public diplomacy, ensuing ambiguities, and contradictions among them, and often conflates the definition of public diplomacy with one or some of its elements. Secondly, the identification and classification that the framework allows for is ahistorical and

atheoretical, which is to say, independent of any epistemological grounds or certain positions in political time and space (Cox, 1981). Lastly, it contributes to studying public diplomacy from a more structural perspective by making context visible and recognizing its influence and impact. Context is a variable that has been understudied; in fact, despite its obvious significance and influence, it has often been rendered invisible in public diplomacy (Kovala, 2014).

This internal complexity of the concept of public diplomacy means that the various elements that compose public diplomacy are interrelated and are mutually influential among themselves: in this sense, the *tools* employed will depend on the public diplomacy *objectives*, the *message* will be conditional on the *context*, the *objectives* will be influenced by the *agent* and the *target*, the *message* will have to be coherent with the *context,* and so on and so forth. In other words, all the public diplomacy elements should be taken into consideration in both theory and practice: it is worthless to align policy actions and messages if the public diplomacy agent lacks credibility or if the tools are not designed to achieve those objectives.

Nonetheless, this paper will focus primarily on context as the factor that influences the relationships between the other variables (Goertz, 1992), since the influence of context in public diplomacy has been often underappreciated (Zaharna, 2015) and understandings of public diplomacy have traditionally been framed from an agent-centric perspective. Particularly, this paper is premised upon the fact that the agent, target, message, tools and objectives act as the *dependent variables* of public diplomacy and there is an *independent variable* that has a direct effect and produces changes on them, and that is context. As it will be exposed through the case study presented in the next part of the paper, the integrated framework proposed here enables public diplomacy scholars to analyze the evolution of public diplomacy over varying time(s) and space(s).

Figure 1: Summary of the integrated framework for public diplomacy research and the main working hypothesis of this paper.



Source: Own elaboration.

3. Case study: the influence of context in the transformation of the European Union's public diplomacy

The utility of the integrated framework presented in the former section will be explored by analyzing the case study of the evolution of the European Union's public diplomacy in changing contexts.

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Qualitative case study methodology enables researchers to explore a given phenomenon within a specific context (Rashid *et al.*, 2019). Particularly, it aims at studying a phenomenon within a context, but with the consideration that context will create a difference (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999). Since the main premise of this study is that context, as an independent variable, influences the choice of actors, publics, messages, objectives and tools of public diplomacy, the case study is the preferred methodology to provide insight into the use of the integrated framework for public diplomacy described previously.

Case studies explore and investigate issues through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events and their relationships (Merriam, 2009). The case study selected pertains to the typology of an *explanatory case study* (Stake, 2005), which adopts a case-as-argument structure where the case is precisely chosen for its instrumental value in testing a hypothesis or suggesting the usefulness of a conceptual framework (Rule & John, 2015). According to Yin (1989), explanatory case studies try to answer "how" and "why" questions. The purpose of the case study presented in this paper thus consists of discussing the general relevance and potential validity of the integrated framework for public diplomacy research introduced previously, in general, and specifically to analyze how context influences other public diplomacy variables. As such, it will analyze the main elements that compose the public diplomacy of the European Union during two different contexts: first, during times of globalization, and, second, it will show how the elements of the European Union's public diplomacy have been transformed by altering the context and including the present times of deglobalization and de-europeanization.

Lastly, the data-gathering sources utilized in the case study are multiple: they range from policy documents and official statements to legal documents and a close engagement with the academic literature. In this sense, the empirical material presented is illustrative and non-comparative.

3.1. *The European Union's public diplomacy in times of globalization*

3.1.1. The public diplomacy of normative Europe

The European External Action Service (EEAS) was created in 2011 and concentrates in one agency the management of the EU's diplomatic relations. It does so through a range of academics and students, policymakers, policy influencers and multipliers, civil society organizations, cultural operators, and artists, that collectively constitute the *who* in the EU's public diplomacy.

The cornerstone of the EU's public diplomacy in terms of *target publics* has always been non-EU countries, particularly its Eastern and Southern neighborhoods and their civil societies, through policy *tools* such as the Enlargement Policies and their respective Partnerships. Apart from that, the EU has also relied on communication and cultural tools, such as strategic narratives, international broadcasting, cultural activities, and visitor programs to reach its target publics (EEAS, 2022).

For the purpose of this paper, I am going to focus on strategic narratives as one of the fundamental tools the EU has used to convey its messages in order to achieve its public diplomacy objectives. Strategic narratives, from a social constructivist standpoint, tell us about the identity construction of the European Union, how it tries to shape foreign audiences' perceptions, and how both are mutually constitutive. More importantly, analyzing strategic narratives from a constructivist perspective helps shed light on the greater context in which public diplomacy operates (Cross, 2013). Strategic narratives focus on what means and methods of communication and influence are likely to work under what conditions: "Strategic narrative is soft power in the 21st century" (Roselle, Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 71). In this sense, despite the multitude of actors that might take part in the EU's public diplomacy, this does not necessarily mean that one cannot identify a common self-image and

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common messages at an abstract level (Rasmussen, 2010). These messages are intertwined with the *objectives* of the EU's public diplomacy, which have been clearly stated by the EEAS (2022): to increase understanding of EU views, policies, and priorities; to build trust and mutual understanding; to improve perceptions of the EU; and to promote the EU's values and interests. In fact, promoting the EU's values has been the pillar that sustains the EU's public diplomacy. Those values are enshrined in all its constitutive treaties. For instance, the Lisbon Treaty's article 2 (arts. 6 and 11 of the Treaty of the European Union and art 177 of the Treaty establishing the European Community are also illustrative of this point) reads as follows:

> The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

It thus goes without saying that the European Union seeks to influence foreign publics about its founding values: the EU aims to be a model for peace and lead by example: "Postmodern Europe is based upon the assumption that external partners in the pre-modern and modern world will in some sense wish to emulate the peace, stability and prosperity of EU members" (Cooper, 2003, cited in Duke, 2013, p. 3). Also, a second set of messages focuses on the policy objectives of providing global publics goods such as sustainable development, equality, or multilateralism.

These objectives, taken together with the messages conveyed in the strategic narratives, make the EU a normative power (Manners, 2002). The notion of normative Europe presupposes the force of power over opinion (Carr, 1962) and the EU's goal of establishing an international value-based society grounded on its own experience (Rasmussen, 2010, p. 28).

3.1.2. Normative Europe under normative circumstances?

However, Europe as a normative power has a historical context to it: the context of the legitimacy of multilateral institutions, agreed-upon metanarratives, a social pact about the virtues of liberal democracy, and an open and transparent information ecosystem.

The context of the EU's normative public diplomacy was the context of Fukuyama's "end of history" (1992), which postulated democracy and the market economy as the winners in the ideological contest of the end of the 20th century, rendering any other sociopolitical and economic alternatives obsolete and unfeasible, above all the alternative represented by the erstwhile Soviet Union. By democracy, Fukuyama meant liberal democracy, that is, a democratic system of government that establishes the primacy of the individual, the protection of individual rights and liberties and the limitation of the exercise of power by the rule of law (Parekh, 1992).

The powerful metanarrative that permeated international relations was that a new world order should be created on that basis. And so, it was: "The post-World War II order was a liberal order" (Börzel & Zürn, 2021, p. 282). Liberal values were embedded in the constitution of those multilateral organizations: they promote a free market economy (the "embedded liberalism" that Ruggie put forward in 1982) as well as the protection of political and civil rights. The UN Charter's Preamble (1945) is an illustrative example of this when it reaffirms "faith in fundamental human rights, in the equal rights of men and women." The NATO Preamble (1949) is similarly "founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law." The European Union has even taken this further by establishing the (liberal) conditions and criteria that countries need to meet if they are to become eligible members of the Union: stable institutions capable of guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, and a functioning market economy (apart from abiding by the EU treaties and the political, economic, and monetary union).

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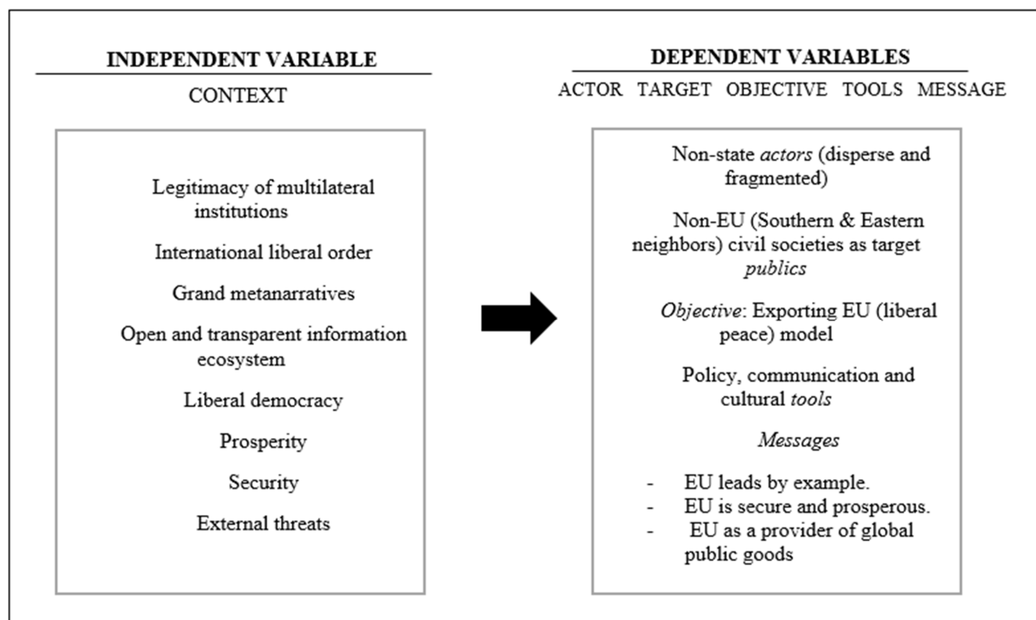
This liberal order also has an epistemological foundation with its reliance on the enlightenment values of reason and science and practices of truth production bestowed upon epistemic authorities (Adler & Drieschova, 2021). Among those epistemic authorities stand the media, underpinned by a free press that provides checks on governments.

It is in this context that the EU's normative public diplomacy flourished. In fact, the EU Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003 is titled *A Secure Europe in a Better World*. It is a positive context where "the EU has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free" (ESS, 2003, p. 27) and where "the EU remains an anchor of stability" (p. 7). The EU is a consolidated peace model (internationally acknowledged by the Peace Nobel Prize Award in 2012) and is characterized by being a global actor that provides for global public goods such as sustainable development or the reduction of poverty, praising itself for being the largest donor of humanitarian aid in the world (p. 8). In this context, large-scale military aggression against any EU member state is regarded as improbable and the use of force is explicitly discarded (Mälksoo, 2016).

As one can easily see, the *objectives*, *strategies* and *messages* of the normative European Union were perfectly aligned with the *context* of that specific sociopolitical time. There was also an emphasis on individuals as *agents* of public diplomacy, in line with the value placed by liberalism on individualism. The *target* of public diplomacy was mainly focused on civil society organizations of non-EU countries, with the aim of building mutual trust in a context underpinned by open and transparent communications, the power of logos and the ethos of the EU as 'a model for peace.'

Nonetheless, it goes without saying that threats were not absent in this context. The economic and financial crisis and the refugee crisis are two of the major challenges the EU has faced since its conception. However, they were exogenous threats, as they did not undermine any of the foundational values upon which the EU's identity is based.

Figure 2: Application of the integrated framework for public diplomacy research to the case of the European Union's public diplomacy in the context of globalization.



Source: Own elaboration.

Consequently, at this point, the following research question is posed: what happens to the EU's public diplomacy when the founding myth upon which it is constructed is under threat?

The following section will first introduce the main characteristics of the current context of deglobalization and de-europeanization and will subsequently discuss its impact on the EU's normative public diplomacy.

3.2. *The European Union's public diplomacy in times of deglobalization and de-europeanization*

3.2.1. Under what circumstances: deglobalization and the decline of liberal Europe

The independent variable –*under what circumstances*– has changed and, without any claim to be exhaustive, is now characterized by *internal threats* to the EU such as the rise of populism with its reliance on post-truth politics (materialized in the destructive outcome of Brexit), more state-centered economies, nationalist and autocratic governments, a contaminated and saturated information ecosystem, and the first presence of war on European soil since the end of World War II. All of these threats are intertwined, and they challenge both the principles upon which the international liberal order rests and, consequently, the epistemological foundations of the EU's public diplomacy.

The return of war to European soil after the Russian military aggression to Ukraine directly challenges the EU's public diplomacy towards its Eastern neighbors and the geographical proximity to Russia casts doubts about the essence of the EU as a model for peace. Furthermore, EU countries, such as Poland and Hungary, dared to directly confront the liberal foundation upon which the EU's public diplomacy is grounded, leading the EU to initiate the procedure under Article 7 in response to the risks to the rule of law and the EU's values. If the essential values that the EU tries to communicate to the world, namely, peace, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, are being defied from within the EU, the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union and the COVID-19 pandemic have ultimately managed to question respectively the inherent attractiveness of the EU's soft power and the EU as provider of global public goods.

In this sense, it might be argued that the Brexit campaign reflected larger trends that have been profoundly altering the liberal paradigms upon which the EU's identity and external communications lie. On the one hand, the Brexit campaign contained a larger narrative that is playing out within the EU: the tension between Westphalian notions of the repatriation of sovereignty (be it in the case of Brexit or in the case of centrifugal nationalisms such as the Catalan in Spain) and the globalizing and universalist forces grounding the economic, social, and political project of the EU (Lake, Martin & Risse, 2021). The Brexit campaign was, on the other hand, a primary example of the deployment of truth-subversion practices that undermine the very epistemological foundations of liberalism. Consequently, the core objective of the EU's normative public diplomacy of building mutual trust and understanding has been called into question.

In this context, the deliberative democracy that Habermas (1984) exposed in his theory of communicative action, or the public sphere that Castells (2008) envisioned to be the ideational form of public diplomacy, understood as being the diplomacy of the public, become difficult to achieve. Truth subversion practices make rational communication almost impossible and challenge the rational-legal authority of institutions (Weber, 1947). We live in Putnam's (2000) society of *Bowling Alone*. Apart from the decline in social capital and civil engagement, there is a decline in trust in science, coupled with increased political polarization. These trends are further fostered by the evolution of a media landscape characterized by filter bubbles, alternative epistemological realities, and the extreme incivility of the political discourse (Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017). In this world, everyone is entitled to their own facts, instead of the liberal maxim of the freedom to express your own opinions. Nowadays, disinformation spreads faster, deeper, and farther than genuine information (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). And although the reasons are multifold, the digital infrastructure of social media

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(and their related business models) enable the production, dissemination, and consumption of disinformation. In that regard, the latest Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report* (2022) points out that trust in the news has fallen in almost half the countries surveyed, plummeting in the case of the US, with only 26% of people trusting the news.

This context poses significant consequences for the EU's normative public diplomacy. First, the lack of trust in the news, the decline in trust in science, and the affordances of social media to create filter bubbles and alternative epistemological realities may cause a scenario in which a consensus on the provision of global public goods by the EU, such as sustainable development, is no longer feasible, when the opinion market on Twitter determines, for instance, that climate greenhouse gas emissions do not actually cause global warming, as 97% of domain experts say they do (Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017, p. 353). Reason, argumentation, and truthful and genuine communication are central in achieving mutual trust (Adler & Drieschova, 2021). The lack of trust in the news poses significant consequences for the European Union, since achieving mutual trust through strategic narratives and international broadcasting remain the cement of its public diplomacy project. What is more, achieving mutual trust and international understanding is undoubtedly a long-term endeavor that is further hampered by the politics of acceleration and impatience that characterize current political communication. In other words, there is an emerging desynchronization between social acceleration and the temporalities of public diplomacy (Bødker & Anderson, 2019).

On the other hand, the proliferation of new media and the evolution of the media landscape are also conducive for populist communication (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018). Populist communication uses emotional storytelling, which is usually impregnated with nativist arguments about the past greatness of a given country and the myth of a quasi-homogeneous nation-state (Wodak, 2015). The possibility for Europe to resort to these types of narratives is foreclosed since the imperialist past of the EU countries will be in direct opposition to the normative dimensions of today's EU public diplomacy. The emotional dimension of populist narratives was particularly stressed in the Brexit campaign. The battle lines were starkly drawn from the beginning of the campaign between the rational "Stronger in Europe" and the emotional "Vote Leave." As Hobolt (2016, p. 4) clearly stated: "The messages were clear: vote Remain to avoid the economic risk of a Brexit or vote Leave to regain control of British borders, British law-making and restrict immigration –take back control–." The campaign was often described as a conflict between heads and hearts, and in a context of post-truth politics where people trust their emotions instead of evidence and facts (Moss, Robinson & Watts, 2020), pathos triumphed over the enlightenment logos and the unthinkable procedure of the TEU's Article 50 was activated. Even more problematic is the fact that these populist emotional narratives, often expressed in false dichotomies and characterized by the rosy view phenomenon, are also filling the void left by the collapse of metanarratives. This is especially dangerous within liberal democratic societies, since these populist narratives usually prioritize emotions that support certain identities seen as superior to others.

In conclusion, the current context of the EU's public diplomacy is characterized by trauma: the basic trust system of the universality and attraction of the EU (liberal peace) model has been eroded and for the first time in the history of the EU, a member state has decided to leave the Union. The narrative of the EU's normative public diplomacy actor has been threatened and destabilized, and, as a consequence, the EU now feels ontologically insecure. Ontological security, or the security of one's identity (Huysmans, 1998), refers to "the efforts of an actor to safeguard the survival or persistence of a sense of self in contexts of recurrent uncertainty" (Johansson-Nogués, 2018, p. 2). Actors need "biographical continuity" and a sense of stable agency if they are to feel ontologically secure, and they strive for that biographical stability through the use of narratives (Giddens, 1991).

The following section will analyze the evolution of the EU's public diplomacy in this traumatic context of deglobalization and de-europeanization.

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3.2.2. From normative Europe to the search for ontological security

Back in 2016, the former President of the European Commission acknowledged in his State of the Union speech that the "EU is, at least in part, in an existential crisis" (European Commission, 2016). In a context where the grand narrative of peace, democracy, rule of law, and human rights is no longer dominant, has the EU's public diplomacy changed?

In an attempt to answer this question, the paper analyzes the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS), published in 2016, immediately after the Brexit vote and in a context where the EU's liberal values were being challenged *ad intram* and *ad extram*. Therefore, the question will be: what concrete evidence can we find in this document about the influence of context in the rest of public diplomacy's variables? Policy documents are here understood as "autobiographical narratives" that illustrate how an actor simultaneously builds their identity and communicates it to the world (Mälksoo, 2016, p. 376).

Very differently from the former EU's Security Strategy of 2003 (ESS), the main opening abandoned the optimism that characterized the previous context and accepted that the EU was "under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, [was] being questioned" (EUGS, 2016, p. 7). In this context, as an *actor*, the EU needs to be stronger (p. 7). The *target publics* are no longer primarily focused on non-EU countries located in the Eastern and Southern Neighborhoods, but rather the EU's public diplomacy has turned domestic: the objective of the EU is to promote the security and prosperity of EU citizens and to safeguard the EU democracies (p. 8). In the pursuit of its objectives, the EU declares that the target publics of its actions are "core partners, like-minded countries, regional groupings, civil society and the private sector" (p. 8). In this sense, building mutual understanding and trust has been traded for the more realpolitik message of the EU as a "global security provider" (p. 3). In a context where "the world does not want to be like us Europeans anymore" (Morillas, 2019, p. 135), the main objective of the EU's public diplomacy is no longer normative, but more strategic. The intrinsic goodness of EU liberal values and the inherent attractiveness of them are now complemented by a more calculated interest perspective, to "move away from the outwards looking idealism of the early 2000s, without swinging all the way to the opposite end of realpolitik" (Tocci, 2017, p. 55).

Interests and values must now go "hand in hand" (EUGS, 2016, p. 13). In other words, the main objective of the EU in the world is no longer for other peoples and countries to share its values, and to understand its policies and contribute to mutual trust. Instead, the objective is becoming more focused on a "principled pragmatism" (p. 16) by which the EU's responsible leadership is based on the values of peace and security, prosperity, democracy and a rules-based global order. However, the main difference is that the EU no longer seeks that the rest of the world adopts them: "The EUGS introduces a bottom-up approach to security: citizens' protection becomes a salient objective and replaces the traditional approach of the EU as an entity projecting values" (Barbé & Morillas, 2019, p. 8).

The *objectives* of the EU in the world, consequently, have also turned inwards: instead of leading an overambitious liberal peace-building project in the world (Tocci, 2017), characterized by exporting its model, the EU now focuses on itself: "The EUGS starts at home" (EUGS, 2016, p. 1). The EU still has confidence in "its enduring power of attraction" (p. 9), yet it tempers its universal aspirations on its liberal democratic model and "rather seeks reciprocal inspiration from different regional experiences" (p. 32). As a foreseeable consequence, the EU adds hard power *strategies*, such as the ambition of "strategic autonomy" (p. 4), "defense capabilities" (p. 10) and "economic weight" (p. 10) to its soft power toolkit. The use of force stops being unimaginable and becomes a feasible response in the present geopolitical context. All in all, the EUGS "downscales the EU's normative approach to foreign policy, which now rests on the more ordinary principle of sovereignty rather than the radical principle of human rights" (Barbé & Morilla, 2019, p. 9).

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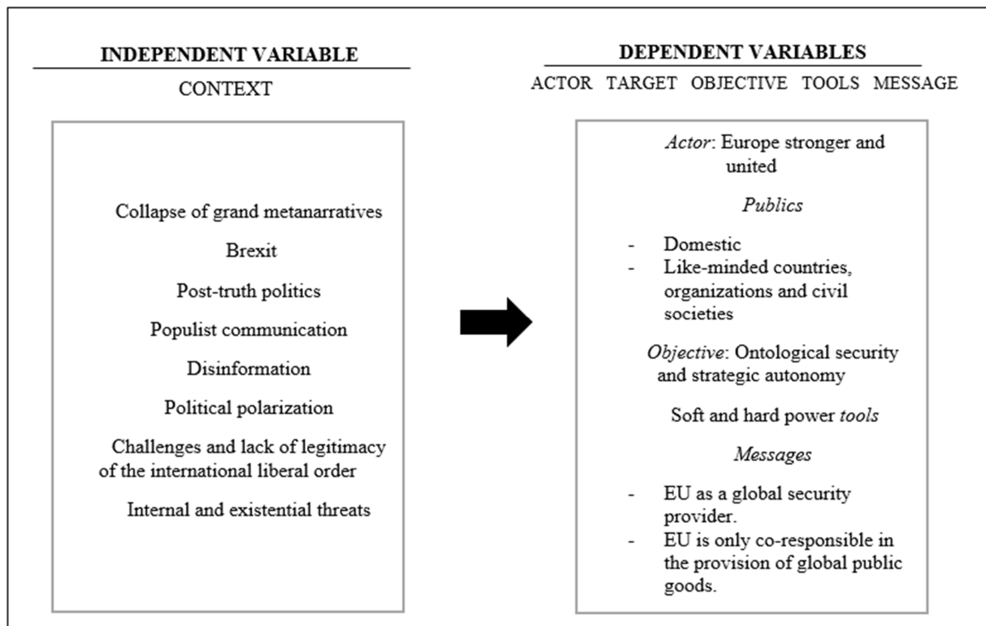
Finally, the concept of soft power that underpins those narratives is no longer based on attraction understood as a natural objective experience: the reality has shown that the EU model is not universally attractive per se. If during the context of globalization, the EU's public diplomacy focused on influencing foreign audiences so they would become attracted to EU's values, now the EU's understanding of soft power is closer to Mattern's (2005, p. 583) conceptualization of it as "a nonphysical but otherwise coercive form of power that is sociolinguistically constructed through representational force." The EU is making clear that its main objective is no longer informing others about its values; the EU has turned egotistic, and the main objective of its public diplomacy is now to secure and stabilize itself. The representational force vested in its soft power deems from the fact that the EU is no longer responsible for providing global public goods, but co-responsible. It still believes in international cooperation but focuses on engaging with like-minded organizations and core partners. Likewise, it will not discard the use of force if necessary. This way, the representational force underlining this new concept of soft power is generated by combining particular words and phrases in particular relation to each other so that it conjures up harm (Mattern, 2005, p. 604).

In conclusion, the crises the EU faces nowadays challenge the EU's internal identity and therefore cannot be placed within already existing narratives (Subotić, 2016). That is why the EU has turned to a new narrative that might overcome its current ontological insecurity: "The EU self-narrative of "EU as secure" has reached a critical juncture as the longstanding ontological reference points have become void of their past meaning" (Johansson-Nogués, 2018, p. 10). As a consequence, the EU is trying to transform its ontological insecurity through the articulation of alternative narratives that establish a new "we" and a new relationship with the world. It could then be argued that the public diplomacy of the EU in this traumatic context of deglobalization and de-europeanization should focus on the use of strategic narratives that might mitigate ontological insecurity.

Figure 3: Application of the integrated framework for public diplomacy research to the case of the European Union's public diplomacy in the context of deglobalization and de-europeanization.



Source: Own elaboration.

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4. Conclusions and future research

This paper constituted an attempt to offer an integrated framework for the study of public diplomacy research. By engaging the public diplomacy's literature in a conversation with Lasswell's model of communication, a set of dependent variables has been identified as the common elements underpinning the understanding of public diplomacy: actors, target publics, tools, messages and objectives. These dependent variables are influenced by an independent variable, "context," which results from Braddock's further rearticulation of Lasswell's model.

The utility of the model has been tested by applying this integrated framework to the case study of the evolution of the European Union's public diplomacy, whose actors, publics, messages, tools and objectives have been transformed according to the changing context. The main conclusion drawn from the analysis is that the EU's public diplomacy has evolved from a normative project to an emerging strategy to search for ontological security.

However, both the conceptualization of the model and its application to this specific case study might lead to further research questions. First, it would be worth exploring whether the integrated framework could serve for purposes of public diplomacy evaluation. Insofar as the dependent and independent variables of the integrated framework are interrelated and mutually influential among themselves, it could be tentatively argued that the success of a given public diplomacy action might be conditional upon all the variables of public diplomacy being coherent and consistent among themselves.

Secondly, the variables that compose the model could be further operationalized. Such is the case of the objectives of public diplomacy. By distinguishing between strategic, tactical and operational goals, the management of public diplomacy could be sharpened and become more effective. For instance, if the *strategic* public diplomacy goal held by a country is to achieve foreign policy objectives, the *tactical* objectives geared towards the achievement of that goal might be to influence foreign public opinion or to build up its soft power resources. Those tactical objectives will be, as a result, specified in *operational* ones. This way, the extant confusion about objectives and tools could be reduced.

Finally, as a proposal for the conclusion of this essay, and regarding the case study of the EU's public diplomacy, I argue that in the process of constructing a (new) secure "we" in the EU, public diplomacy scholars and practitioners should take the role of emotions seriously. Intensely capitalized by populist parties, emotions have played a very significant role in filling the vacuum left by the collapse of grand metanarratives. Populist communication has implemented strategic narratives that make people feel ontologically secure by appealing to the anxiety, fear, and anger experienced by the losers of globalization. The EU should, thus, abandon its project of emotion management via depolitization and bureaucratization (Terzi, Palm & Gürkan, 2021, p. 94) and create a "we feeling" to act united and stronger. At the end, neither populist communication nor illiberal states constitute a grand alternative to a liberal international order. Their efforts are destined to oppose it, but without providing a broad set of alternative ideas for the organization of world order (Ikenberry, 2018). It could be then that the type of public diplomacy needed for the EU's political project in the current context of deglobalization and de-europeanization is exactly that: a public diplomacy that provides for ontological security through strategic (emotional) metanarratives in a changing world.

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