

OBSTACLES TO PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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Abstract. The aim of the article is to analyze the effectiveness of soft power and public diplomacy which has been labelled its instrument. The article focuses on the goal of democracy promotion and its potential to succeed. If we acknowledge that soft power is a non-coercive power, then together with public diplomacy they depend on the will of the foreign publics. Most of the research in public diplomacy deals with the governments' along with the non/state actors' part e.g. how to create a successful strategy. Less research is done in the publics' part – as the influenced target. This article therefore attempts to use the knowledge from sociology to discuss these issues. The conclusion is that there are many obstacles to achieving aims such as democracy promotion which reside just in the undiscovered nature of public opinion and attitudes.

Key words: soft power, public opinion, values, attitudes, democracy

Introduction

Soft power is a controversial and highly discussed concept in contemporary debates about the nature of power. There are scholars who approach this topic differently from the views of its author, Joseph Nye, (e.g. Ronfeldt and Arquilla, Mattern) and scholars who follow his original ideas, slightly changing or adding new perspectives to it (e. g. Gallaroti, Gray).

In spite of the existence of different points of views, we will not dig deeper into the debate about the nature of soft power in this article. Instead we acknowledge the changes in the international environment reflected in international relations and move towards exploring obstacles to soft power and public diplomacy – its instrument, with the focus on value spreading, with democracy promotion on the forefront.

Democracy promotion has become one of the top priority objectives of some countries and the United States is a leading power in this effort. There have been different tools employed in the attempt to fulfil this aim including public diplomacy. Some scholars see the possibility of convincing the foreign publics of accepting the democratic values. "...survey research could have helped the American public diplomacy realize that it did not need to 'sell' democracy to the Arab public, but rather to convince a sceptical audience of American bona fides on the issue" (Lynch 2006, p. 36) or the aim to establish a global moral norm against terrorism (Lynch 2006, p. 37). However in this article we argue that the efficacy of democracy promotion abroad is reduced by the nature of public opinion as well as the socioeconomic development.

1 The rise of alternative approaches to management of international relations

Since the end of the World War II, the world has been experiencing a significant shift from accepting the practice of wars for territorial gain to prohibiting the use of force or threat based on force; principles embodied in the Article 2 (4) in the UN Charter (Zacher 1998, p. 2) Beside this significant change, the world is undergoing a profound information revolution and economic development which leave an imprint on the shape of international relations as well.

All these factors can be considered to contribute to a diminishing violent conflict among states.

Reduction in the number of interstate wars however is not to be taken for granted (Gray 2011). Nevertheless, the present (postmodern) period is salient for a remarkably different approach to achieving national interests compared with the end of WWII or even more recent end of the Cold war favouring soft methods of influence based on persuasion rather than coercion.

Nye distinguishes direct and indirect model of soft power. In the first model soft power is built directly between state leaders on intergovernmental level, while the latter is a “two step model in which publics and third parties are influenced, and [they] in turn affect the leaders of other countries. In this, soft power has an important indirect effect by creating an enabling environment for decisions” (Nye 2011, p. 94). The indirect level of soft power is managed by public diplomacy.

Ability to educate, inform, spread propaganda, or teach habits of loyalty or respect to authorities was by Ellsberg (1968, p. 3) labelled “as less important in the relation between sovereign states.” These methods have in common with the Nye’s concept of soft power the absence of coercion¹. Drawing conclusions from Mattern’s (2005) analysis, we also allege that contemporary international politics between states is marked predominantly with symbolic coercion hidden in information exchange based on economic rather than military threat or on economic inducement. A similar view is shared by Gray who points out to the limits of soft power as an effective instrument of foreign policy. His criticism is however directed more on the indirect model. “An important inherent weakness of soft power as an instrument of policy is that it utterly depends upon the uncoerced choices of foreigners. Sometimes their preferences will be compatible with ours, but scarcely less often they will not be. Interests and cultures do differ” (Gray 2011, p. viii).

Export of values or ideologies abroad is not only problematic, but also morally questioned, however some countries or regions strive for value spreading as it is the case of the export of democratic models overseas. The U.S is a leading power in promotion of democracy and the National Security Strategy under the presidency of Barack Obama confirms the ongoing determination. “Freedom of speech, the right to assemble without fear, free choice of religion, political leaders as well as dignity, tolerance, equality and fair jurisdiction are once again listed among universal values by the Barack Obama’s team.” (Kucharčík, 2010, s. 17). American values as Kucharčík summarizes are included among the priorities of the document, but are to be enforced refraining from the use of force (Kucharčík, 2010, s. 19) thus by means of the soft power and its instruments.

According to Nye, soft power plays a crucial role in promoting democracy, values such as human rights and open markets. However this article explores the limits of soft power and effectiveness of its instruments such as public diplomacy which has been labelled as one of the instruments of soft power (Nye 2004, 2011, Melissen 2005). Drawing from the research in sociology, we explore the utility of soft power and obstacles to public diplomacy.

1.1 Public diplomacy: different descriptions, common denominators

Melissen (2005) states that ordinary citizens matter to diplomats. The official communication focused on publics has always been practiced; however in a new context it receives a new meaning as well. There are many definitions of public diplomacy. However they have common denominators from which we chose a few highlighted in italics below:

¹ Some scholars accept coercion in the concept of soft power. The author of the article however builds the difference between soft and hard power on Nye’s and Gallaroti’s conclusions. Soft power is free from coercion.

The Murrow Center defines public diplomacy on its webpage following, „Public diplomacy ... deals with *the influence of public attitudes* on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the *cultivation* by governments of *public opinion in other countries*; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as between diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the processes of inter-cultural communications.“²

Gregory (2011) describes the role of public diplomacy in the 21st century: „public diplomacy has come to mean an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes and behaviour; to build and manage relationships; and *to influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values*“.

Paul Sharp understands public diplomacy as „the process by which *direct relations with people* in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extent the values of those being represented.“ (D’Hooghe 2007, p. 5)

From the governmental point of view, e.g. the U.S. government describes the American public mission as to “support the achievement of U.S. foreign policy goals and objectives, advance national interests, and enhance national security by *informing* and *influencing foreign publics* and by expanding and strengthening the relationship between the people and Government of the United States and citizens of the rest of the world.“³

The common denominator is the goal of a state to affect public opinion, values and attitudes of citizens of another state in order to advance the interest of the influencing state. Aims of public diplomacy depend on the goals of the foreign policy. Some states hold democracy, democratization and defending democratic values worldwide as a crucial component of their foreign policy. For example there is a belief that foreign educated students are likely to promote democracy in their home country if they are educated in democratic country. However, value change as well as democracy spreading is not only a controversial activity, but difficult to achieve too. We claim that public diplomacy of states which strives for democratic spreading encounters many obstacles and leaves public diplomacy ineffective.

There are many articles dealing with the actors as producers of public diplomacy but less with the receiver’s end. We will therefore focus on the second story of public diplomacy which is equally important to the theory of public diplomacy or soft power – the *publics* part.

2 Importance of sociological research in the field of public diplomacy

As stated before, public diplomacy depends on attitudes of the influenced citizens. The uncoercive nature of soft power leaves the object his/her free will. Since public diplomacy’s aim is to influence attitudes or opinions of publics abroad, it is useful to explore the principles how society responds to influences and explore the characteristics of public opinion in general.

2.1 Public opinion and attitudes

Public diplomacy is focused on changing attitudes and opinions. We first define the two crucial concepts since there is a link between attitude and public opinion. The individual’s

² See <<http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Murrow/Diplomacy>>

³ See <<http://www.state.gov/r/>>

organization of attitudes and attitude change are crucial fields for studying the collective product known as public opinion (Katz 1966).

Attitudes represent an evaluation – predisposition to a favourable or unfavourable response to an object which consists of three components: feeling of liking or disliking (affective or emotional) and beliefs (cognitive part) (Katz 1966, p. 55). They involve direction (positive or negative) and intensity (expressing extreme, moderate or low feeling). Attitudes are an unthinkable feature of human beings which provide *orientation* in their lives and environment. To evaluate is to determine something as good or bad (Chaiken 2001, p. 903) Attitudes do not exist until first confronting the object. Most of them are learned through direct experience or can be formed indirectly as well.

It was long held for granted, that attitudes guide thoughts, judgements, and behaviour. However connection with behaviour has been questioned. „...individuals' behaviour is influenced by many variables other than their attitudes and the attitude-behaviour relationship is typically weak“ (Schwarz 2001, p. 907). The progress on attitude-behaviour relation has improved with the following assumption: „...if the behaviour one seeks to predict is specific with respect to action, object, context, and time, then attitudinal measure should be compatible with the behavioural measure in these respects.“ (Schwarz 2001, p. 910)

Sociologists started to differentiate between *weak* and *strong* attitudes which differ in their intensity and ability to be changed. „Inconsistency among beliefs, often termed ambivalence, is associated with attitude instability and heightened susceptibility to social influence. ...high consistency attitudes are better predictors of behaviour and are also more resistant to social influence attempts“ (Chaiken 2001, p. 902-903). The weak or strong characteristic will have consequences in public diplomacy.

The relation between values, attitude and beliefs is following: while values represent a broader category, attitudes are narrower. Specific attitudes are organized into a hierarchical structure, they create a *value system*. (Katz 1966, p. 55) Beliefs are a part of attitude's structure as previously stated they are said to contribute into attitude formation Chaiken 2001, p. 900). „All attitudes include beliefs, but not all beliefs are attitudes“ (Katz 1966, p. 55).

Last but not least, it is necessary to define *opinion* as well: opinion is a verbal expression of an attitude. And what is the relation between attitudes and *public opinion*? Public opinion as Neidhardt argues does not represent silent personal attitudes, but instead openly presented opinions. However, *it is not the sum of all openly stated individual opinions*, but a *collective product* rising from a communication process – the *prevalent opinion*⁴ *in the society* (Neidhardt 1994, p. 28).

Noelle-Neumann (Noelle 1966, p. 20) defined public opinion as “a force which effects on two sides: on one hand it integrates the government, on the other the individuals with the society.” It serves an integrative function – to preserve stability within the society.

2.2 Principles of Public opinion

Public diplomacy as a foreign policy tool can be counted for political influence. Unlike the use of force, “political influence depends as much upon strength of the attitudes and opinions of the audience as it does upon the skill and resources of the political leader or the newspaper or other source” (Lane and Sears 1964, p.53).

Experts point out on interesting findings from the public opinion research such as the formation of opinions.

⁴ Prevalent opinion does not necessarily mean a consensus in a society, but public opinion at least requires existing agreement among the different opinions.

The exerted influence depends of three components: *respondent's opinion*, *evaluation of the source of influence* and *source's position*. One can observe or predict the development of a relation between these variables. "If a source with some prestige attempts to change opinions which are very different from his own and which are very strongly held, he is likely only to reduce his prestige. Source derogation rather than opinion is most likely to be selected as the mode of dissonance-reduction" (Lane and Sears 1964, p.47). The higher the respect for the source and the weaker the opinion, the easier it is to achieve a change. However, in the case of strong opinions, change is less likely to occur. This explains the importance of knowledge of opinion intensity which could have consequences for public diplomacy. Legitimacy of a source (reputation) belongs to one of the most decisive factors of opinion change. A message diffused by positively perceived source is more likely to be believed and vice versa (Lane and Sears 1964, p.47).

According to Noelle-Neumann, individuals build their opinions according to the prevalent opinion (Neidhardt, 1994, p. 27). Lane and Sears (1964, p. 72) observe that people seem to build their opinions before acquiring additional relevant information. This process can be found in the childhood, in which children take opinions and norms automatically over from their families, referent groups and cultures they live in. However, once behaviour patterns are learned, they tend to be applied in the course of the whole adulthood as well. Adopted opinions from the childhood seem to play a crucial role especially in unknown topics and situations.

Group reference belongs to the most influential factors on individual's opinion in such cases and it serves as an orientation if important information is missing (Lane and Sears 1964, p. 81). The reason lies in the function of a group. Groups serve as an „anchor“ which is immune to external influences. E.g. Schenk a Rössler (1994, p. 267) claim that media are unsuccessful in changing the group opinion; however they enjoy success when they support the already existing group opinion.

Lane and Sears also explore the principle of selective approach. If an individual adopts strong emotions towards an object without having additional information, he/she tends to select and accept the kind of information *supporting* his/her opinion. In praxis a selective approach is implemented: „Contradictory information is often ignored [...],“ or “information which bolsters an already firm opinion is accepted very often regardless of the reliability of its source; an argument from a disliked source is often rejected out of hand without adequate consideration of its merits (1964, p. 74-75).

The strength of learned values and attitudes is demonstrated in the following way „[...] the citizen often thinks that he is accepting information because of its intellectual merits, whereas in actuality the reason frequently has much more to do with its compatibility with the unconsidered premises of childhood“(Lane and Sears 1964, p.75). We shall entitle this phenomenon as *paradox of rationality*, under which we understand the misperception of acting rational; however it is the contrary.

2.3 Historical analysis

Changing norms and attitudes

Historical research brings interesting insights into the theory of public opinion. Bergmann (1994)'explored transformation of the antisemitism norm in West Germany from 1945 which changed from prevailing in the 40s, to retreating in the 60s to marginalized at present. Bergmann was concerned with the question how society managed to transform a norm of strong antisemitism from the time period of World War II to anti-antisemitist in the period of 40 years.

One of the crucial findings about the change was the necessity of implementing new *social conditions*. It was „a conscious fight against anti-Jewish prejudices [which] launched relearning and the process of forgetting daily anti-Jewish moods“ (1994, p. 316). Consensus of all crucial opinion-makers such as political parties, churches, media etc. was crucial since they united public opinion that gradually transferred into individuals' opinions.

As Bergmann points out, changing the way by communicating a norm as such scarcely leads to the direct change of personal attitudes. It was the transformation of *political culture* over time which served as the key of the change.

Several factors decided about the transformation; allies' influence as an external factor among them. „Mass communication in Germany was controlled by Allies by having their own press and radio stations present there or the German ones licensed. Negative projections of Jews were thus excluded“ (1994, p. 300). New ruling as well as publicist elites stood up for the support putting antisemitism under pressure which was guaranteed by the state will (e.g. constitution court's prohibition of radical right wing party or scandalizing public statements supporting antisemitism).

Despite widespread negative public opinion in the 50s and 60s, a remarkable change can be observed since the 80s. Sensitive reactions as well as condemnations of any antisemitist behaviour are the result of a long transformation process. Bergmann however underlines that it is *more a result of a generation change through newly established social conditions rather than change in attitudes of the old generation*.

Influencing the attitudes of domestic publics in Slovakia serves as another example of observation. In the 2000s, Slovak government faced two objectives that were dependent on the wide support of citizens – the membership in the European Union as well as in the NATO. To achieve the two goals of the foreign policy, Slovak government intervened by shaping the attitudes of ordinary citizens and making them favourable towards these objectives.

Sláviková, Bilčík and Duleba (2009) describe that in the EU example, it were the citizens who were deciding about the future of Slovakia and their membership in the EU by voting in the referendum. The government therefore launched a wide communication strategy to mobilize the voters (50% of voting) and achieve at least minimal support. In the case of NATO, referendum was not held, however a support from citizens was inevitable for joining the organization which image was hurt by the war in Yugoslavia (1999) and engagement in Iraq (2003).

In both cases communication campaign was successful and in both cases Sláviková, Bilčík, and Duleba stress that there was a *strong consensus* among the elites (the ruling as well as the opposition) towards achieving these objectives, mobilization of the media, direct contact and informational campaigns by the government.

2.4 The impact of socioeconomic factors on value orientation: material and postmaterial values

There have also been established links between democracy and socioeconomic development. „Although economic development correlates positively with effective democracy, development's impact stems primarily from its tendency to encourage self-expression values“ (Inglehart and Welzel 2008, p. 138). Growing wealth and stability in a society plays a crucial role in developing attitudes which favour democracy in practice.

Inglehart divides values into two broader categories – material and postmaterial. Division is made according to the logic of Maslow's hierarchy and accounts for social as well as political implications. The materialist and postmaterialist orientations imply different opinions on a whole range of issues from women's' rights attitudes to attitudes on foreign policy (Inglehart, 1981 p. 885)

Material values stress the importance of security and economic growth while postmaterial values are focused on individual freedom, self-expression, and participation. „...people’s priorities reflect their socioeconomic conditions, and they therefore place the highest subjective value on their most pressing needs” (Inglehart and Welzel 2008, p. 130). All needs are subordinated to the survival; however, “they tend to take higher priority as survival becomes more secure.” (Inglehart and Welzel 2008, p. 133). There is a link between economic stability and prioritized values. “In a time of depression or civil unrest, for example, *security* and *sustenance* needs undoubtedly receive substantial attention. If a society can make significant progress in addressing these goals, then the public’s attention can shift to higher-order values” (Dalton 1988, p.80). Nevertheless, this change does not happen with a sudden economic growth as Inglehart further argues. The issue of value change is closely connected with *formative years* which are strongest in people’s childhoods.

An important finding for practitioners of public diplomacy could serve the assumption that early socialization has greater impact on person’s values than the later one. If one was raised in conditions of relative affluence, even in the time of economic crises during his/her adulthood, he/she tends to maintain the postmaterial values or vice versa. The hypothesis about disappearance of young people’s idealism and replacement by the emphasis on money during the life cycle was not confirmed in Inglehart’s research. Thus, individual’s fundamental values are not easily changed. They tend to remain fixed also in the period of adulthood as well. This finding should have important implications for the practice of public diplomacy or soft power.

Even if a country experiences economic growth, Inglehart stresses that economic development precedes the political effects, even by generations. “[Once again] the confusion is based on the implicit assumption that value change reflects an immediate response to one’s environment” (Inglehart 1984, p. 882).

Further tests of the theory of the value shift

Inglehart’s theory and transition from material to postmaterial values was also empirically explored by Dalton (1988) (on four industrialized countries – France, Germany, Great Britain and USA) during the period 1970-1984⁵). Results at that time showed prevailing interest in materialist values, however demonstrated increasing interest in postmodern values as well in all three countries except France⁶. This change was reflected on political level as well. „Concerns for environmental protection, individual freedom, social equality, participation, and the quality of life have been added to the traditional political agenda of economic and security issues“(Dalton 1988, p. 94).

The shift from agrarian to industrial society is supposed to cause the value transition from traditional values towards secularization; post-industrialization process (the rise of service economy) is held responsible from survival towards self-expression, trust, tolerance, well-being, political activism and self-expression. However; Inglehart and Baker (2000) stress the importance of the *cultural heritage’s* influence on the value shift as an additional factor. Cultural heritage is held responsible for different developments in different societies despite the process of industrialization.

Societies are divided into different cultural zones based on their history, which affect the process of value change within a society. Different cultural heritages such as ex-communist, Confucians, English-speaking culture, protestant, catholic historical backgrounds constitute a strong variable having impact on the shift from survival values towards self-expression. This

⁵ Surveyed years were 1970, 1973, 1976, 1979, 1982, 1984

⁶ Until 1979 postmaterial values were increasing, in 1982 started to decline and in 1984 rose again.

can be illustrated on the example of the value of interpersonal trust: "...most historically Protestant societies rank higher on interpersonal trust than do most historically Catholic societies. ... rich Catholic societies rank lower than equally prosperous societies. A heritage from Communist rule also has an impact on interpersonal trust with virtually all ex-Communist societies ranking relatively low; thus the historically Communist rule (e.g., East Germany and Latvia) show relatively low levels of interpersonal trust" (Inglehart and Baker 2000, p. 35).

Despite the economic development traditional cultural influences of the society remain important, can affect the value change within a society and can determine a different evolution. Inglehart and Baker claim that religious traditions shape the contemporary society despite declining dependency on religion and their institutions. *National culture* of a society is said to have been shaped by particular religions (Catholic, Protestant, Islamic) or philosophies (Confucianism) for centuries and their impact remains present. These traditions are translated into nationwide institutions such as educational institutions and mass media, which now affect the entire population, „Despite globalization, the nation remains a key unit of shared experience, and its educational and cultural institutions shape the values of almost everyone in that society“ (Inglehart and Baker 2000, p. 36).

Conclusion

In this article we attempted from the theoretical point of view to explore the chances of effectiveness of public diplomacy. Since the aim of public diplomacy is to influence opinions and attitudes of people abroad, it is useful to explore the sociological dimension of public diplomacy as well. We drew knowledge from already existing research in the field of sociology.

We found many obstacles to a successful realization of public diplomacy or of a broader phenomena, soft power. From the survey of the nature of public opinion we draw the following conclusions:

Much of our attitudes are acquired automatically during the early years of our lives and we tend to receive the already existing attitudes and values of groups and environment which we live in. These attitudes however tend to be preserved and applied in the adult years as well. Formative years thus play a crucial role in adopting certain values and changing them later becomes a real challenge.

The particular historical case study pointed out that a transformation of a norm is likely to occur during the intergenerational change. In order to achieve it however, *all crucial key actors* have to be involved in the change, including political elites, mass media and key institutions (in the field such as education or culture). They cause value change between generations, since the new generation is raised in *different political culture*; nevertheless this new environment has to be built with the common effort in order to achieve the wished results.

We were also interested in the causal dependence of value change and socioeconomic development. Values have been divided (according to the Inglehart'view) into two broad categories – material and postmaterial values. The existing research showed that material values tend to be prevailing in countries with generations which have been raised in economic instability and insecurity. Population of these countries tends to prioritize values such as economic growth and physical security over postmaterial values such as freedom of speech or gender equality. Even with the development of economic stability people who were raised in harsh conditions tend to preserve their priorities and do not change their value orientation which confirms the findings of the previous research.

If a government attempts to implement democratic values in a foreign society, it rather faces these obstacles. Public diplomacy is labelled as a long term activity. Nevertheless even the long-term process can be assigned a questionable efficacy. First if a society is according to the Inglehart's classification oriented on material values, it will be difficult to convince the citizens to orient on democratic values such as freedom of speech or rule of law (which are considered as postmaterial values). Second, if it happens nevertheless, it is not likely because of the changes in their minds, but due to the intergeneration change. And last but not least, in order to achieve the change in new generations, the foreign government should rely not only on bottom up process (public diplomacy-publics and public elites). Engagement of political elites which are decisive (so called top down process) is also crucial if not inevitable.

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