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Image at Gunpoint: Public Diplomacy of Ukraine in Terms of War

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Abstract

In today's global politics and economy, a country's image is just as important as its natural resources or scientific and technological capabilities. Building a strong, positive brand is closely tied to shaping an external image through public diplomacy. But is an appropriate public diplomacy possible during wartime? This paper covers the ways and strategies of Ukraine's public diplomacy after the Russian full-scale invasion. Embedded in the participative warfare theoretical framework, it sheds light on how public diplomacy may serve as a tool for building Ukraine's resilience and enable civic response in terms of the foreign armed aggression. Based on the document and content analysis, the authors assess how effective public diplomacy has been as a way to promote a positive image of Ukraine abroad. Implementation of public diplomacy tasks in several particular cases (cultural, science, sports, culinary and digital diplomacy) is also considered.

Keywords

Public Diplomacy; Digital Diplomacy; Ukraine; War; Soft Power; Country Image

Introduction

Public diplomacy has traditionally been a pivotal mechanism for shaping national image and fostering communication between states and international audiences. In the rapidly evolving information environment of the 21st century—characterized by heightened competition for influence and intensified global interconnectivity—the practice of diplomacy is undergoing substantial transformation. This shift is particularly evident in Ukraine where the diplomatic system has experienced foundational change following Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. As we know, 'when a nation goes to war, its warriors are in the driving seat and the job of diplomacy—negotiation—is relegated to the back seat' (Taylor 2009, p. 15). The invasion represented a critical juncture, compelling Ukrainian diplomats to recalibrate their strategies and instruments, prioritizing the dissemination of accurate information about the conflict and the cultivation of a resilient, credible international image. The sweeping geopolitical shifts resulting from Russian aggression have thus provided the primary impetus for this research. These developments have not only triggered a severe humanitarian and military crisis but have also brought about far-reaching transformations within Ukraine's political, communicative and institutional frameworks.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reshaped global security dynamics, underscoring the role of diplomacy in conflict resolution. However, contemporary diplomacy increasingly mirrors hybrid warfare where manipulation and strategic ambiguity prevail. As Moisi (2009) argues, governance and policymaking are becoming more susceptible to mass mobilization and emotional influence, making weapons of mass attraction and manipulation as significant as conventional military threats. Diplomacy in wartime differs significantly from its peacetime counterpart; while traditional and public diplomacy may help prevent or mitigate war, once hostilities commence, conflicting parties leverage public diplomacy to mobilize support and delegitimize their adversaries. Consequently, information warfare and psychological operations often take precedence over conventional diplomatic strategies (Gilboa 2024). Against this backdrop, we seek to address a fundamental question: how can a state in terms of war effectively construct, project, and sustain a positive international reputation in an environment defined by warfare, global instability and intensified struggles over truth and legitimacy?

This study attempts to shed light on the ways and strategies of Ukraine's public diplomacy after the Russian full-scale invasion. The structure of the paper is as follows: first, it outlines the theoretical framework on the concept of public diplomacy in international relations, as well as the correlation 'traditional diplomacy–public diplomacy' in wartime, and the role of strategic narratives and nation branding. The next section describes ways and strategies of Ukraine's public diplomacy in wartime covering periods before and after the current warfare. The article's findings summarize cases of public diplomacy of Ukraine, proceeding from several key areas (cultural, digital, science, sports and gastrodiplomacy). The discussion frames current challenges and threats for public diplomacy of Ukraine in terms of war.

Theoretical Framework

Public diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy in that it engages directly with foreign publics rather than operating through governmental channels. Its primary objective is to shape public opinion in other countries to advance specific policy goals (Broadbent et al. 2009). This form of diplomacy encompasses a broad range of activities including cultural and academic exchanges, leadership identification among foreign youth, and scholarship programs. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which focuses on persuading foreign governments to support an advocate country's strategic interests, public diplomacy seeks to promote the country's ideals, values, and objectives through engagement with civil society and NGOs.

Historically, public diplomacy referred to governmental efforts to shape foreign public opinion, aiming to generate support for specific policies and foster a favorable image (Manheim 1994). In contrast, efforts

to engage domestic audiences in supporting foreign policy were categorized as public relations or domestic outreach. However, with the onset of the Cold War, public diplomacy increasingly aligned with international information dissemination and propaganda. This shift was not merely semantic but reflected changes in diplomatic practice where key events were recognized as strategic public performances.

[Zaharna \(2010\)](#) conceptualized public diplomacy along multiple dimensions, each focused on fostering relationships between governments and foreign societies. The first dimension, relationship-building public diplomacy, involves disseminating information to support political objectives. The second, propaganda-oriented public diplomacy, focuses on informing, persuading and influencing audiences. [Zaharna \(2022\)](#) later expanded this framework by advocating a shift from a ‘lens of separateness’ to a ‘lens of connectivity’ when analyzing public diplomacy. Her approach integrates political communication, propaganda and cultural exchange—elements traditionally considered distinct—into a cohesive diplomatic strategy.

Following the end of the Cold War and the decline of ideological confrontations, the role of public diplomacy evolved. The emergence of soft power, a concept introduced by [Nye \(2005\)](#), redefined international relations by shifting the focus from coercion—whether military or economic—to strategies based on cultural appeal and ideology ([Nye 2008](#)). Soft power highlights the importance of a state’s cultural impact and international prestige in shaping foreign policy. It suggests that a country can achieve its objectives not through force or coercion but by generating interest and support within the international community through its attractiveness. Nye’s research thus identified fundamental aspects of public diplomacy that have become integral to contemporary foreign policy strategies.

[Leonard, Stead & Smewing \(2002\)](#) propose a segmented look to public diplomacy, categorizing its activities into three areas: news management, strategic communication and relationship-building. While being practical, this framework overlooks other crucial dimensions, such as culture, education and national image. [Cull \(2008\)](#) presents a more comprehensive model, outlining five key components of public diplomacy: (a) listening, (b) advocacy, (c) cultural diplomacy, (d) student exchange, and (e) international broadcasting. This categorization provides a structured basis for diplomatic engagement.

Melissen suggests another seminal approach that has shaped the theoretical landscape of public diplomacy. He argues the latter should be seen as ‘old wine in new bottles’ ([Melissen 2005](#), p. 3). In this discussion around new public diplomacy three concepts should be considered, namely propaganda, national branding and foreign cultural relations. The new public diplomacy and cultural relations emphasize engagement with foreign audiences over message promotion, prioritizing mutual exchange and lasting relationships instead of short-term political campaigns, and focusing on long-term trust-building rather than merely ‘winning hearts and minds’ ([Melissen 2005](#), pp. 16–23).

The post-Cold War era witnessed the emergence of nation branding as a key instrument of public diplomacy. [Anholt \(2007\)](#), who introduced the concept of nation branding, argued that countries could promote themselves in much the same way as corporate brands. This approach soon developed into a widely adopted diplomatic strategy, grounded in the belief that a carefully designed branding campaign—supported by persuasive narratives and creative marketing—could strengthen a nation’s global image and reshape international perceptions.

The increasing integration of digital technology into diplomacy—accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, sustained by mediating potential crises between states, and complicated by disinformation and populism—highlights the urgent need for a coherent research agenda that addresses the co-production of technology, society and international relations, a relationship still largely neglected in existing scholarship. It also leads to a broader application of the ‘theory of disruption’ with the establishment of new practices of public diplomacy, international negotiation and peace-making ([Aggestam & Duncombe 2024](#)). Despite claims that good policies make public diplomacy unnecessary and bad ones render it useless, public diplomacy remains vital for national security in an era when public opinion shapes policymaking,

as its effectiveness depends on the alignment between foreign and domestic credibility—leaders distrusted at home are unlikely to gain trust abroad ([Gilboa 2024](#)). We agree with [Cull \(2024\)](#), who contends that a nation's image and public diplomacy are integral to its long-term security, defining reputational security as protection gained from international goodwill, which requires governments not only to communicate effectively and counter weaponized information but also to address internal weaknesses that undermine their credibility.

Based on the recent studies on public diplomacy in digital and wartime contexts, we can trace how public diplomacy functions in terms of war. [Lee \(2023\)](#) examines how Ukraine's diplomacy has been shaping international perceptions during its war with Russia, arguing that Ukrainian diplomatic services have played a central role in creating a positive global image, particularly through communicating evidence of war crimes and the humanitarian crisis. This framework evolves ([Tsyryfa & Bielousova 2024](#)) in the analysis of how the instruments of public diplomacy shape the global perception of Ukraine and the outcomes they generate for the country amidst war. However, this analysis could be expanded by addressing how these diplomatic narratives interact with civil society initiatives and non-state communication channels, which increasingly shift international opinion in the digital age. If we start with an assumption that diplomacy is undergoing a profound digitalization and radically transforming with its structures, methods and priorities ([Bjola & Holmes 2015](#), [Bekturgan Kyzy & Ayhan 2022](#), [Manor & Huang 2022](#), [Stivachtis 2023](#)), then it is highly relevant to observe new opportunities and technologies for use by diplomats of Russia and Ukraine in terms of current wartime activities. However, despite offering a thorough analysis, these works overlook the potential long-term implications of these technologies for Ukraine's international reputation. On the other hand, we can look through particular cases of wartime diplomacy with focus on Ukraine where scholars and practitioners ([Axyonova & Lozka 2024](#), [Dobko 2024](#), [Matiaszczyk 2024](#), [Kuleba & Yaroslavskiy 2025](#)) are increasingly examining different dimensions of the country's diplomacy during the war, such as the operation of its diplomatic institutions and the nation's global image. Yet, these studies fall short in a comprehensive analysis, and it would be difficult to find some common ground treating them as part of an overall strategy.

To evaluate the effectiveness of public diplomacy in wartime, it is essential to consider the soft power dynamics of both Russia and Ukraine. As [Snow \(2020\)](#) argues, soft power effectiveness is determined by three key dimensions:

- 1) Access to multiple communication channels to influence issues framed in the global media;
- 2) Cultural and ideological alignment with prevailing global norms;
- 3) Credibility enhanced by its domestic and international policy.

By comparing these factors in the context of war, it becomes possible to assess how Ukraine's public diplomacy strategies have challenged and, in some cases, successfully countered Russia's influence on the global stage.

ACCESS TO MULTIPLE CHANNELS TO INFLUENCE ISSUES FRAMED IN THE GLOBAL MEDIA

For a long time, international attention to Russia significantly outweighed interest in Ukraine, resulting in Western and other international media relying heavily on Russian narratives to cover regional affairs including Ukrainian issues. This imbalance, compounded by Russia's inheritance of the Soviet Union's extensive propaganda and manipulation experience, created significant challenges for Ukraine in engaging with foreign audiences. Although pivotal points in Ukraine's modern history—the Orange Revolution, the Revolution of Dignity, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the occupation of Donbas—momentarily attracted international attention, they did not fundamentally alter the structural disparity in soft power

between Russia and Ukraine. The full-scale invasion in 2022, however, marked a new turning point. Ukraine's public diplomacy efforts rapidly expanded, with civil society actors, government representatives and independent activists working to communicate Ukraine's position to foreign governments, businesses and the general public. This transformation was further reinforced by the rise of key political figures capable of resonating with international audiences. The phenomenon of leaders achieving global recognition or even quasi-cult status has been previously examined in cases such as U.S. President Donald Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Cooper 2020). The war in Ukraine has similarly propelled figures such as President Volodymyr Zelensky into the global spotlight, while international leaders such as former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson have also gained recognition for their strong stance in support of Ukraine. This shift has significantly enhanced Ukraine's visibility and access to international communication channels, challenging Russia's long-standing dominance in global media narratives.

CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL ALIGNMENT WITH PREVAILING GLOBAL NORMS

Another important transformation in public diplomacy comes to the evolution of its core objectives. The systematic practice of state communication with foreign audiences originated in the United States during the Cold War, primarily as a tool for national security within the broader ideological confrontation between the West and the socialist bloc (Gregory 2008). Over time, public diplomacy expanded beyond security concerns to encompass a wider range of national interests, including economic and cultural objectives. More recently, public diplomacy has increasingly been conceptualized within the frameworks of national branding and competitive identity where state image is viewed as a strategic asset in foreign affairs (Rasmussen & Merckelsen 2012). This shift has led some scholars to describe national branding as a 'silver bullet' capable of addressing a wide array of foreign policy challenges. Alongside these perspectives, another theory emphasizes the role of public diplomacy in promoting global public goods (Zhang & Swartz 2009). Russia's aggression and documented war crimes directly contradict global norms and values, particularly those related to peace, human rights and humanitarian principles. In contrast, Ukraine has positioned itself as a defender of these values, a dynamic that helps explain the unprecedented international support for Ukraine and the widespread implementation of 'cancel culture' measures against Russia.

COUNTRY'S CREDIBILITY ENHANCED BY ITS DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL POLICY

While perceptions of Russia vary significantly across different regions (Brand Finance 2022b), the full-scale invasion of Ukraine resulted in a dramatic collapse of global trust in Russia. Faced with this reputational crisis, Russia has pursued a dual strategy: first, undermining trust in Ukraine, the West, and Ukraine's allies, and second, eroding faith in international institutions and global stability itself—an approach scholars have termed the 'war on truth' (Bräuninger & Marinov 2022). By fostering an atmosphere of disinformation and distrust, Russia seeks to diminish Ukraine's credibility while further destabilizing the international order. For Ukraine, this presents a significant challenge, since it can be supported only in a world where international norms and institutions still operate, and where trust in Ukraine is much greater than in Russia. As a result, public diplomacy efforts must focus on countering viral disinformation narratives including false claims that Ukraine is a 'Nazi regime', is developing 'biological weapons', or is facilitating the transfer of Western military aid to terrorist organizations. If left unchecked, such disinformation could weaken international support for Ukraine and complicate diplomatic and military assistance efforts.

Research Questions, Methodology and Limitations

In view of the above, the main objective of this article is to analyze how Ukraine employs public diplomacy as a strategic tool during wartime, examining its key narratives, channels and effectiveness in shaping international perceptions, countering disinformation and securing international support. The study also

evaluates the effectiveness of these approaches in garnering global support and reinforcing Ukraine's national image. In this regard, the main research questions are as follows:

- How has Ukraine adapted its public diplomacy in wartime, particularly after 2014 (limited war) and 2022 (full-scale invasion)?
- What narratives have been effective, and what were the messaging and framing strategies that have successfully shaped international public opinion and influenced foreign policy decisions?

This study employed a qualitative research toolkit to examine Ukraine's public diplomacy in terms of war, focusing on strategies, institutional development and effectiveness in shaping international perceptions. We analyzed Ukraine's public diplomacy evolution by comparing pre-2014 efforts with post-2014 and post-2022 strategies. This involved examining key policy documents, such as presidential decrees, strategic plans and institutional reports, to identify shifts in priorities and approaches. Primary sources, including government publications, strategic communications frameworks and reports from relevant institutions both Ukrainian and international, were investigated to assess policy goals and implementation. This document and content analysis helped trace policy shifts, institutional commitments and international responses. Secondary sources, such as academic research, think tank analyses and media reports, provided additional insights.

A case study approach was used to trace particular initiatives within each specific area of public diplomacy. Framing analysis was applied to identify recurring narratives and counter-narratives. Selected cases included cultural diplomacy, gastrodiploacy, sports diplomacy, science diplomacy and digital diplomacy. Each case was analyzed using goals and objectives, actors involved, implementation mechanisms, impact and reception, challenges and limitations.

This paper is a single-country study, and its findings cannot be automatically generalized and applied to other countries. However, the conceptual and methodological contributions of this study may be useful for explicating similar processes in other cases.

Public Diplomacy of Ukraine in Times of War: Ways and Strategies

For Ukraine, an implementation of public diplomacy has been driven by several factors linked to its historical trajectory and geopolitical context. Following the country's independence in 1991, Ukraine, like other post-Soviet states, faced the challenge of constructing and asserting its national identity on the international stage. This task was particularly given the widespread tendency to perceive Ukraine primarily through the prism of Russia, often equating both states due to their shared Soviet past. Establishing Ukraine as a distinct and sovereign actor became a key priority of the country's foreign policy. This aspiration was reflected not only in political rhetoric but also in conceptual works, such as the book by former President Leonid Kuchma *Ukraine is not Russia* (Kuchma 2003). In this publication, the author discusses the historical, cultural, and psychological differences between the two nations, underscoring Ukraine's independent identity and the legacy of Russian domination.

From the perspective of public diplomacy, such efforts play a crucial role in shaping 'background knowledge' about Ukraine among foreign audiences. Drawing on the concept of priming from mass communication studies, public diplomacy can determine how international audiences interpret information about Ukraine. By strategically disseminating information on Ukrainian history, culture and national identity, public diplomacy seeks to activate specific cognitive schemes, evoke associations as well as direct attention toward desired interpretations of Ukraine's image. This mechanism is particularly significant in the context of Ukraine's European aspirations and its struggle against Russian military aggression, where securing the support of foreign publics for the country's foreign policy priorities is vital.

The institutionalization of public diplomacy in Ukraine began in the mid-2000s. The adoption of Presidential Decree on the Cultural and Information Center within the Foreign Diplomatic Mission of Ukraine ([President of Ukraine 2006](#)) marked a significant step in this process. The document outlined tasks and principles of cultural and information centers operating within Ukrainian diplomatic missions. Among the primary objectives of these centers were the promotion of international cooperation in culture, education, science, tourism and sports, the dissemination of information about Ukraine, and the facilitation of cultural ties with Ukrainian diaspora communities. In addition, the centers were authorized to support the study of the Ukrainian language abroad and promote Ukraine's tourism potential.

By 2012, a network of 31 cultural and information centers had been established including 27 centers at Ukrainian diplomatic missions and four at Consulates General ([Cabinet of Ministers 2006](#)). However, the effectiveness of these institutions has been frequently criticized by experts ([National Institute 2014](#)). Key challenges included limited human resources, a shortage of professionals in cultural management, and a lack of strategic vision. The centers' activities often focused on passive dissemination of the information about Ukraine rather than fostering dynamic cultural cooperation. Moreover, their programs tended to emphasize Ukraine's historical and traditional culture, while largely neglecting contemporary cultural developments and civil society initiatives. Diplomatic agreements often prioritized formal events involving state officials rather than genuine cultural exchanges, raising doubts about the overall impact and relevance of the centers' work. These shortcomings point to the broader challenges facing Ukraine's public diplomacy, which required a more comprehensive, professional, and strategically coordinated approach ([Rozumna 2016](#)).

At the same time, the Ukrainian expatriates, including longstanding diaspora communities and new volunteer networks formed during the Revolution of Dignity and the war in Eastern Ukraine, have played a crucial role in promoting Ukraine's image abroad. However, the State Program of Cooperation with Ukrainians Abroad for the Period until 2015 ([Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2012](#)) did not foresee measures to stimulate joint cultural and educational projects or create a global communicative platform for Ukrainian expatriates. This limited the diaspora's potential as a strategic partner in public diplomacy ([Rozumna 2016](#)). Over time, Ukrainian diaspora leaders began positioning themselves not as passive recipients of public policies but as active agents advocating for Ukraine's interests. Despite this shift, cooperation between the state and expatriate communities remains inconsistent. Coordination mechanisms are still weak, cultural diplomacy projects are underfunded, and generational tensions between older diaspora representatives and younger activist networks further complicate collaboration. Addressing these challenges requires the creation of discussion platforms, joint cultural projects, and partnerships with influential political and business circles ([Kolesnichenko–Bratun 2015](#)).

The Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014, especially the full-scale invasion in 2022, significantly increased the diaspora's role in public diplomacy. Ukrainians abroad organized protests, demonstrations and media campaigns thus shaping global perceptions of Ukraine as a defender of human rights and democratic values. These efforts contributed to the widespread condemnation of Russia as an aggressor and helped mobilize international support for Ukraine.

At the institutional level, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) of Ukraine began active engagement in public diplomacy after 2014. The establishment of the Department of Public Diplomacy in 2015 marked a turning point, with the department authorized to strengthen relations with foreign communities and media, promoting Ukraine's image through cultural and image projects and coordinating state-supported initiatives ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015](#)). It covered three areas: 1) cultural diplomacy, 2) image projects, and 3) media relations, reflecting the multifaceted nature of Ukraine's public diplomacy efforts.

Cultural diplomacy, as a key dimension of public diplomacy, is often institutionalized through the establishment of specialized organizations that promote national cultures abroad. International examples include British Council (UK), Goethe-Institute (Germany), Cervantes Institute (Spain), Alliance Française

(France), Japan Foundation (Japan), and so on. In Ukraine, the idea of creating a similar institution gained support in 2015 when the Ministry of Culture announced an initiative to establish a national cultural diplomacy body. The draft Concept for the new institution was presented on 11 June 2015, following public discussions and expert consultations.

The creation of the Ukrainian Institute (UI) became one of the most debated issues in the cultural sector. As a state institution with a clear legal framework and strategic objectives, the UI was expected to play a pivotal role in advancing Ukraine's cultural diplomacy. Officially founded in June 2017 under the jurisdiction of the MOFA, the Institute began full operations in 2019. Its mission is to strengthen Ukraine's international standing through cultural diplomacy, contributing to both external and internal nation-building processes. The UI operates alongside other newly established institutions in the humanitarian sector, such as the Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, the Ukrainian Book Institute, and the National Research Foundation of Ukraine.

In July 2020, the UI adopted a medium-term strategy outlining its mission, vision and strategic goals until 2024 ([Ukrainian Institute 2020](#)). At the same time, the MOFA approved its first-ever public diplomacy strategy for 2021–2025, marking a significant step toward systematizing Ukraine's efforts in public and cultural diplomacy ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021](#)). The document defines:

- basic approaches and concepts of public diplomacy;
- internal and external environment;
- the goal, strategic goals and objectives of public diplomacy of the MOFA;
- positioning of Ukraine: the Ukraine NOW brand and key messages;
- target audiences, tools and channels of public diplomacy;
- geographical priorities;
- resources;
- cooperation and coordination with other state bodies of Ukraine.

Based on the SWOT-analysis ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021](#)), we can find the key problems in shaping a positive image of Ukraine in the world, such as low awareness of Ukraine and stereotypical perception of Ukraine through the prism of war and occupation, corruption and poverty. A survey by the [New Europe Center \(2020\)](#) showed that the three most persistent associations with Ukraine are war, poverty/unemployment, and season work/immigration. Ukraine's association with Russia remains, although it is gradually diminishing.

The effective implementation of Ukraine's public diplomacy strategy relies on coordinated interaction between the MOFA, foreign diplomatic institutions, the UI, and other state and non-governmental organizations. Public diplomacy, as part of the state's broader strategic communications, requires the involvement of multiple actors and interagency cooperation, rather than relying solely on the MOFA's efforts.

The institutional framework for public diplomacy expanded significantly after 2014. The Concept of strategic communications of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine and the Armed Forces of Ukraine, approved in 2017, defined public diplomacy as government communication with foreign audiences aimed at promoting national ideas, cultural values and policy objectives ([Ministry of Defense 2017](#)). Currently, key institutions engaged in public diplomacy include:

- The MOFA's Directorate of Public Diplomacy and Communications;
- The Ukrainian Institute;
- The Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications;

- The Ukrainian Cultural Foundation;
- The Ministry of Economy;
- The Ministry of Education and Science;
- The Ministry of Youth and Sports.

In Ukraine's information security strategy, public diplomacy is an important component for ensuring the information stability of the state and is an element of the state's strategic communications, i.e. coordinated and proper use of the state's communication capabilities such as public diplomacy, public relations, military relations, information and psychological operations, measures aimed at promoting the state's goals ([President of Ukraine 2021](#)). Additionally, the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada on Foreign Policy and Interparliamentary Cooperation identified 1) strengthening work on promoting Ukrainian narratives on international platforms, and 2) assistance to create a positive image of Ukraine abroad and develop cultural cooperation as key priorities in 2021 ([Verkhovna Rada 2021](#)).

Image as Weapon: Cases of Ukraine's Public Diplomacy

The MOFA strategy defines cultural, economic, expert, culinary, science, sports and digital diplomacy as key areas of public diplomacy of Ukraine. The implementation of the strategy requires a balanced approach to planning and implementing projects and events in the field of public diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy encompasses cultural practices that exert a strategic influence on other nations. According to [Rozumna \(2021\)](#), an essential function of cultural diplomacy is its capacity to offer a fresh perspective on one's own culture through the lens of the 'other', revealing new dimensions and opportunities. This perspective is particularly evident in contemporary cultural projects designed to foster dialogue with both the global community and individual states. Given the prioritization of culture in public policy, cultural diplomacy plays a crucial role in strengthening national security and enhancing a country's international image.

For Ukraine, the urgency of developing a robust cultural diplomacy strategy became particularly pronounced during the Revolution of Dignity and the subsequent occupation of Ukrainian territory by the Russian Federation. In response to Russia's active distortion of events through propaganda, Ukraine organized numerous cultural initiatives worldwide to counter this disinformation. The necessity for an institutionalized approach to cultural diplomacy led to the establishment of the UI, which has since assumed a leading role in advancing Ukraine's cultural presence abroad. The Strategy of the UI underlines that cultural diplomacy aims at achieving long-term outcomes rather than addressing immediate political concerns. Countries with well-developed cultural diplomacy framework derive additional national security benefits; however, scholars and practitioners alike caution against its potential instrumentalization as propaganda ([Rozumna 2021](#)).

Cultural diplomacy also addresses broader security-related questions: How can policy contribute to national well-being? How can we mitigate conflicts, environmental crises and human-made disasters? In Ukraine, these issues are examined within the context of warfare where diplomacy must counteract Russian information attack. A key example is the [Crimea Platform \(2021\)](#), an initiative aimed at strengthening the international response to the occupation of Crimea, addressing security threats, increasing diplomatic pressure on Russia, and advocating for human rights protection.

Nearly every country employs gastrodiploacy (culinary diplomacy) as a means to promote its gastronomic brand, boost trade and tourism, and cultivate a positive international image. One of the key objectives of gastrodiploacy is to challenge stereotypes associated with nation, counteract the negative impact of certain policies and ideologies, and enhance the country's global reputation by demonstrating transparency and a commitment to democratic values ([Braichenko et al. 2020](#)). When it comes to propaganda, the culinary theme gains additional importance. At one time, Russian diplomat Maria

Zakharova made a statement that ‘it was a kind of extremism when Ukraine refused to recognize borshch (borscht) as Russian food’ ([Zakharova 2022](#)). Actually, this ‘borshch diplomacy’ is a reason to discuss how much Russia claims a part of Ukrainian cuisine. The problem is that until very recently Ukrainian culture had been perceived through the Soviet or Russian lens. The relevant disputes over the historical origins of borshch are also present in Ukrainian practice, for example, when it comes to the case of Japan, where borshch has been perceived as predominantly Russian ([Gerasymchuk & Bureiko 2020](#)).

Ukrainian cuisine is gaining global recognition thanks to renowned chefs and media figures like Yevhen Klopotenko who played a pivotal role in securing borshch’s inclusion on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list. He actively collaborates with the MOFA and Ukrainian diplomatic missions abroad, conducting culinary workshops worldwide. While Ukrainian cuisine is diverse and rich, international audiences primarily associate it with borshch and varenyky ([Matiash & Slipchenko 2021](#)). In March 2021, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, together with the NGO Institute of Culture of Ukraine, launched a large-scale campaign to establish Ukrainian borshch as the country’s signature culinary brand and solidify the association between ‘borshch’ and ‘Ukraine’. As part of this effort, Klopotenko (2024) traveled across the country, gathering dozens of family recipes and filming a documentary. The recognition of Ukrainian borshch in UNESCO’s World List of Intangible Heritage further strengthened Ukraine’s cultural legacy on the global stage.

Sports diplomacy operates through the organization, hosting and participation in international sporting events, emphasizing the role of athletic ties in fostering intercultural dialogue and enhancing a nation’s international standing. The ostensibly apolitical nature of sport allows it to be an ice-breaker in diplomatic relations, shape a state’s global image and draw attention to pressing national issues. However, alongside these positive aspects, sports diplomacy also has an unattractive and sometimes aggressive side, often referred to as ‘negative sports diplomacy’, or sports anti-diplomacy. For instance, the Kremlin illustrated sports anti-diplomacy against the 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, when it launched military campaigns in Georgia and Ukraine.

Ukraine has been unable to implement major sports initiatives that could have bolstered its international image, such as hosting EuroBasket 2015, due to Russia’s aggression and the temporary occupation of Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In the context of Russian aggression, every international competition featuring Ukrainian athletes symbolizes a defense of national sovereignty and serves as a test of national identity ([Hridina & Movchan 2021](#)). Meanwhile, for decades, the Kremlin invested heavily in Olympic sports, using them as a key instrument of propaganda. The Olympic Games, rather than being a celebration of human potential, became a geopolitical tool. The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, for instance, were designed to project Russia as a dominant global power.

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia was largely excluded from international sports. However, on 26 January 2023, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced its consideration of allowing Russian and Belarusian athletes to compete in the 2024 Paris Olympics under neutral flags ([International Olympic Committee 2023a](#)). The IOC adheres to a hard line when it comes to punishing violators of the Olympic Charter, but at the same time states that athletes should not be held responsible for the actions of their government ([International Olympic Committee 2023b](#)). This case illustrates that sports remain deeply intertwined with geopolitics, and the Olympics, as a key element of sports diplomacy, will not remain unaffected by contemporary international tensions.

Science diplomacy is a key component of national image-making, public diplomacy and a strategic tool for advancing national interests on the global stage. However, reducing science diplomacy to a mere instrument of soft power would be an oversimplification. Beyond fostering academic and professional exchanges, science and education diplomacy are often directly linked to national security and economic priorities. In November 2024, President Volodymyr Zelensky, in his address to the Verkhovna Rada,

introduced Ukraine's Internal Resilience Plan which comprises ten points. One of these, 'Cultural Sovereignty', includes a commitment to the systematic establishment of Ukrainian studies departments at universities worldwide ([President of Ukraine 2024](#)). This emphasis on Ukrainian studies reflects Ukraine's growing recognition of knowledge diplomacy as a means of shaping international perceptions. However, declarations of intent do not necessarily translate into immediate implementation. The academic sector is characterized by structural inertia, and institutional changes tend to occur gradually ([Badjor 2024](#)). On one hand, there has been an unprecedented surge in global interest in Ukrainian studies. In September 2022, Western universities reported a substantial increase (30–50%) in the number of first-year students enrolling in Ukrainian or Polish language courses, alongside a significant decline in interest in Russian ([Lem 2022](#)). A study by [Koval et al. \(2022\)](#) identified 91 centers dedicated exclusively to Ukrainian studies, 73 that incorporate Ukrainian studies within broader regional studies, and five focused on Crimean Tatar studies. While most of these centers are based in Europe, they are also available in North America (31), South America (2), Australia (4), and select locations in Asia, including China, Japan, and Korea.

Another critical issue is the ongoing debate over Ukrainian studies emerging from the shadow of Russian studies. Historically, a Russo-centric framework has dominated through studies of the region, often uncritically shaping narratives in historical and area studies. As [Snyder \(2022\)](#) observes, Russian perspectives are frequently perceived as authoritative, whereas Ukrainian perspectives remain less familiar and are sometimes viewed with skepticism. [Kuromiya \(2023\)](#) and [Hosaka \(2025\)](#) further argue that the very delayed discourse on 'decolonizing' Russian studies just underscores the persistent influence of imperialist and authoritarian narratives imposed by Russia and the Soviet Union over the past century.

Digital diplomacy covers engagement with international digital platforms to promote Ukraine's global image, safeguard national security and advance the country's interests. It also involves utilizing digital tools for public diplomacy initiatives, leveraging social media, and interacting with online communities. The intensification of Ukraine's digital diplomacy, particularly through online image campaigns, has been driven by the need to counter Russian propaganda in the context of hybrid warfare ([Korniichuk & Rybchenko 2021](#)).

A key institution in this domain is the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine which oversees state policy in digitalization, digital economy, innovation, e-government, e-democracy and information society development. However, digital diplomacy should not be viewed solely through the lens of 'soft power' or 'smart power', but also as an instrument for national branding. An important step in this regard was the launch of the Ukraine NOW brand in 2018, developed by the [Banda Agency \(2018\)](#) and approved by the Ukrainian government. The initiative aimed to shape a positive international perception of Ukraine, attract foreign investment, and enhance the country's tourism potential. The campaign conveyed the message that Ukraine is a dynamic and evolving nation, inviting global engagement. Designed for both online and offline use by governmental, municipal, business and individual actors, Ukraine NOW received international recognition, including the 2018 Red Dot Design Award for Corporate Identity. Following its implementation, Ukraine experienced an increase in foreign tourism, positively impacting both local and national economic sectors.

Challenges and Threats for Public Diplomacy of Ukraine in Wartime

The full-scale war has provided renewed impetus for the development of public diplomacy in Ukraine. In the context of Russia's invasion, public diplomacy has acquired heightened significance, serving not only as a tool for enhancing Ukraine's international image but also as an essential instrument in countering Russian disinformation. Recent initiatives illustrate the dynamic evolution of Ukraine's public diplomacy including projects such as *Ukraine in 2 Minutes*, the English-language online course *Ukraine: History, Culture and*

Identities, the Ukraine NOW platform and various initiatives led by First Lady Olena Zelenska. These efforts exemplify Ukraine's strategic approach to shaping global perceptions.

Where political will among foreign leaders was initially weak, fragmented, or entirely absent, alternative diplomatic tools proved their efficiency when mobilizing international support. Grassroots initiatives including social media campaigns (e.g., #FreeTheLeopards), daily addresses by President Volodymyr Zelensky, mass demonstrations in world capitals, cultural interventions by artists, and boycotts of Russian-affiliated products played a critical role in shaping public opinion and policymaking. These elements of public diplomacy, in the context of Russia's aggression, demonstrated effectiveness surpassing that of traditional diplomatic negotiations. While formal diplomatic channels sought to persuade foreign governments, civil society actors exerted direct impact on political leadership, accelerating decision-making processes regarding military aid and economic sanctions (Bila 2023, p. 750–751).

Public diplomacy has been instrumental in reshaping Ukraine's global image and securing broad-based international support. However, structural challenges persist including limited funding, fragmented coordination with civil society, and institutional weaknesses. Addressing these constraints requires strengthening partnerships with the Ukrainian diaspora, supporting grassroots initiatives and ensuring sustained state funding for public diplomacy programs. Given the protracted nature of Russia's aggression, the development of a coherent, long-term public diplomacy strategy remains a crucial priority.

A key challenge for Ukraine's public diplomacy is countering Russian propaganda and disinformation, which form a core component of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy. Many of the Kremlin's contemporary tactics have their roots in Soviet-era information warfare designed to erode trust in factual reporting and create a pervasive sense of informational ambiguity. Scholars characterized those tactics as part of a broader 'war on truth' (Bräuninger & Marinov 2022). Following Russia's initial intervention in 2014, Ukraine intensified its engagement with foreign audiences to tackle Moscow's narratives. However, Russian influence operations continue to dominate the global information landscape, making this an ongoing struggle. Recognizing this challenge, Ukraine's MOFA incorporated countering hybrid threats and Russian disinformation as a core objective in its public diplomacy strategy for 2021–2025 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021). Similarly, the Communication Strategy of the MOFA identifies 'countering Russian aggression by political and diplomatic means' as a strategic goal, explicitly emphasizing the fight against disinformation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022, p. 11).

Despite Ukraine's efforts, Russia's longstanding investment in soft power has given it a significant global advantage. Prior to the full-scale invasion, Russia ranked 9th in Brand Finance's Global Soft Power Index, trailing only major Western countries, China and Japan, while Ukraine occupied the 51st position (Brand Finance 2022a). This imbalance explains the challenges Ukraine faced in competing with Russian propaganda, even with substantial support from Western allies. However, the events of 2022 significantly altered the landscape, with Ukraine's public diplomacy efforts gaining unprecedented international traction.

In this wartime diplomacy, it is interesting to illuminate how the practice of appointing Ukrainian ambassadors considered after 24 February 2022 (See [Table 1](#)).

Appointment of Ukrainian ambassadors abroad has never attracted such keen attention as during the full-scale invasion. This topic interested society after several personnel decisions, and its highest point was the appointment of Olesia Ilashchuk, a person with a controversial biography and complete lack of experience in the civil or diplomatic service, as Ukraine's ambassador to Bulgaria (European Pravda 2022). This created a problematic background for the perception of the very idea of appointing the so-called 'political ambassadors'. The open competition of ambassadors announced by Minister Dmytro Kuleba (2023) against the backdrop of a personnel shortage also caused extreme reactions.

In fact, appointment of non-career diplomats to ambassadorial positions is common international practice. This is not surprising for many of the world's democracies including the UK and the U.S. The

Table 1. Background of the Ukrainian ambassadors appointed after the full-scale invasion
24 February 2022

Region	Africa	America	Asia & Oceania	Europe	Total
<i>Background</i>					
Diplomacy	8	3	5	13	29
Military	-	-	2	2	4
Politics	-	-	2	3	5
Academia	-	2	-	2	4
Business	-	2	-	-	2
Media and culture	-	-	1	1	2
<i>Total</i>	8	7	10	21	46

Sources: [President of Ukraine \(2025\)](#), Wikipedia

record number of such cases in the U.S. was during the first presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021) when the percentage of political appointments increased to 57% ([Borger 2020](#)). In the case of Ukraine, the number of ambassadors with no diplomatic background (37%) is smaller than number of career diplomats (63%). However, when assessing this data, we should keep in mind that wartime diplomacy follows specific tasks depending on relevant circumstances ([Kurenkova 2024](#)). For instance, some ambassadors work intensively to obtain the necessary weapons and financial assistance (this primarily concerns the ambassadors in developed countries), and for most Ukrainian diplomatic missions throughout the Global South the main task is to deliver reliable information about Russian aggression. That is, in times of war it is not obligatory for an effective ambassador to be a diplomat with decades of experience in the system. This has been proven in practice. On the other hand, a positive image, and experience in teamwork, conducting international negotiations from any other perspective—whether in government, business, or even non-governmental structures—may be the essential skills. This brings us back to the assumption of whether public diplomacy is probably the most multidisciplinary field ([Pamment, Fjällhed & Smedberg 2023](#)).

Conclusion

This study provides a systematic examination of wartime public diplomacy in Ukraine, thereby advancing our understanding of how communicative practices and national identity-building operate under conditions of existential threat. It demonstrates that public diplomacy in wartime is neither peripheral nor static but rather a dynamic strategic domain in which states engage in narrative contestation, networked diplomacy and digital resonance.

First, the findings show that Ukraine's public diplomacy has undergone a qualitative shift—from reactive, *ad hoc* communications toward proactively coordinated, institutionally grounded strategic outreach. This shift is reflected in the emergence of dedicated institutional structures that underpin coherent messaging and long-term planning. Second, the article establishes that diplomacy during war increasingly becomes multi-dimensional: state actors, civil society organizations, diaspora networks and creative industries co-construct the country's external positioning and amplify its reach. Third, the digital turn has expanded the spatio-temporal reach of public diplomacy: online platforms, viral campaigns and participatory online publics enable Ukraine to bypass conventional gatekeepers, contest adversarial narratives and engage global audiences directly.

In terms of substantive domains, Ukraine's public diplomacy exemplifies how cultural, culinary, sports, scientific and digital fields can all become arenas for strategic identity work and soft power mobilization. Through these diverse interventions, the country's image has been recast from a post-Soviet periphery to a resilient democratic polity defending universal values of freedom and dignity. This emphasizes that in the context of war, public diplomacy functions not only to attract attention, but to constitute legitimacy, solidarity and moral authority.

Theoretically, this analysis contributes to the growing literature on public diplomacy by treating it as a form of participatory conflictual communication and reputational security, rather than merely a soft-power tool. It underscores that in terms of war, information-strategy, identity-work and global narrative management are central components of national resilience. Thus, the Ukrainian case offers a compelling empirical illustration of how communication, culture and diplomacy converge under extreme conditions. Nevertheless, the study also identifies key structural constraints: persistent under-resourcing, institutional fragmentation and the asymmetry of Russia's propaganda infrastructure remain formidable obstacles. Addressing these challenges demands sustained institutional coordination, capacity-building and integration of public diplomacy into a broader strategic framework.

Looking ahead, several avenues for future research emerge. Comparative studies of other wartime or crisis-situated public diplomacy (for example, states facing hybrid threats) would help generalize the propositions derived here. Longitudinal investigations of how wartime messaging influences post-conflict national image trajectories would enrich our understanding of the durability and limits of reputational transformation. Finally, more fine-grained analyses of how digital publics engage with and internalize wartime diplomacy narratives would deepen theoretical and practical knowledge of this evolving field.

In sum, this study confirms that in the 21st century conflict environment, image is not merely an outcome of warfare—it is a theatre of war. The Ukrainian example illuminates that mastering the narrative terrain of international public diplomacy may determine not only a nation's reputation, but its very resilience and place in the global order.

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No AI tools were used in the development or presentation of this submission.

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