BULLETIN
OF "CAROL I" NATIONAL DEFENCE UNIVERSITY

https://buletinul.unap.ro/index.php/en/

The Credibility of Public Diplomacy Narratives in the Age of Fake News and Growing Mistrust Among International Political Actors

Assoc. Prof. Ecaterina HLIHOR, Ph.D.*

*"Carol I" National Defence University, Bucharest, Romania
e-mail: hlihor.ecaterina@myunap.net

Abstract

The possibility of a widespread conflict between actors possessing nuclear weapons and ultra-sophisticated military technologies is increasingly mentioned in academic analyses and debates, causing concern among the international public. Democracy as a form of government in peaceful times can undergo fundamental changes in situations of conflict. The political leaders of the major powers can use democracy and diplomacy to reduce or prevent war, but when violence breaks out between two states, both sides use democracy to make people sympathise with their objectives and tactics and to damage the reputation and image of the other side. Under these conditions, psychological warfare and information warfare gain more importance and applicability than public diplomacy activities. And yet, in this conflictual communicative environment, public diplomacy does not disappear from the international public agenda. The stakes are 'whose public diplomacy narrative wins' rather than 'whose army wins,' because international politics and communication have entered a competition of credibility. The answer to this question is complicated because the communication environment has changed in the digital age, with wars involving multiple forms of violence. In this type of international conflict, there are several communication actors who play the role of narrators with different objectives, and the credibility of public diplomacy messages and narratives is affected by the phenomenon of fake news and post-truth.

Keywords:

Public Diplomacy Narratives; Global Wars; Credibility of Public Diplomacy; Propaganda; Cognitive Warfare.

Article info

Received: 12 February 2026; Revised: 20 February 2026; Accepted: 16 March 2026; Available online: 8 April 2026

Citation: Hlihor, E. 2026. "The Credibility of Public Diplomacy Narratives in the Age of Fake News and Growing Mistrust Among International Political Actors." *Bulletin of "Carol I" National Defence University*, 15(1): 239-251. https://doi.org/10.53477/2284-9378-26-14

'Winning the hearts and minds' of an audience in another society is an expression commonly used in the context of public diplomacy activities and is the main goal of any public diplomacy activity. The phrase 'win hearts and minds' was first used by US President Lyndon B. Johnson while preparing the public opinion for the intervention in Vietnam: 'So we must be prepared to fight in Vietnam' (...) 'but the final victory will depend on the hearts and minds of the people who live there' (Hess 2015, 112). In fact, the president's speech was a rhetorical device for what military specialists (Memorandum 1968) at the time and analysts today have defined as 'the other war' in Vietnam (Hemingway 1994; Peterson 1989). It was also a signal to certain media organizations and the American elite to use cultural and artistic strategies and means to gain the support of the Vietnamese people against the communist insurgency. Today, the expression is still used to describe efforts to create a favourable image of a country or group in the eyes of foreign audiences, with the aim of building trust, understanding, and cooperation. A wide range of activities is used to achieve this goal, including cultural exchanges, educational programs, media involvement, and public discourse by cultural and academic elites. These activities aim to promote the values, interests, and policies of a country or group and create a positive image in the minds of foreign audiences. Successful public diplomacy campaigns have a significant impact on a country's reputation and influence in the world, as well as on its ability to achieve its foreign policy goals. By interacting with foreign audiences and building relationships based on trust and mutual understanding, public diplomacy can contribute to a safer, more peaceful world.

An essential element in achieving the objectives pursued in public diplomacy is the credibility of the message. Credibility is the initial basis for motivating a target audience to decide to listen to someone's message. In a geopolitical and geostrategic context dominated by security and relationships of esteem and cooperation between different actors on the international stage, achieving real credibility with the target audience does not seem so difficult. It is not as easy to gain credibility in public diplomacy when uncertainty and the psychosis of global conflict dominate international politics, as has been the case in recent years. In such a world, psychological warfare and information warfare seem to gain more importance and applicability than public diplomacy activities. Deep-fake and fake-news phenomena strongly erode people's trust in messages circulating through various channels in international communication, including those specific to public diplomacy.

From this perspective, we aim in this study to analyse the current environment and communicative changes in public diplomacy in an era of uncertainty and globalization of conflicts. Two essential research questions for this analysis arise from the aforementioned objective: 1. What has changed in the communication environment of public diplomacy today? 2. What are the winning narratives of public diplomacy in this period? To answer these two questions, this study examines the transformations in the phenomenon of war and in the communication environment

that are taking place in today's modern world. The actors who communicate today in the new environment, the credibility of the narratives and messages conveyed to different target audiences, and the functioning of soft power as a narrative/exposure of the country's values through public diplomacy will be analysed. The paper will first explore the transformations and changes that have taken place in conflicts in recent years in different regions of the world, and then the significance of narratives and their importance in public diplomacy activities, and their connection to soft power used by actors involved in conflicts of lesser or greater magnitude. Given that today's world is characterized by interconnected societies, social networks, and multiple communication actors, the environment of public diplomacy is also changing. In addition, trust in information and narratives disseminated online is declining. This requires an explanation of the concepts of post-truth and cognitive warfare (fifth-generation warfare), which are linked to fake news and manipulation through the use of words as weapons (Saliu 2023, 209-224).

Change and continuity in the nature and character of war. Is public diplomacy becoming a player on the battlefield?

Observation and research of war throughout history have shaped and established multiple representations of this phenomenon, which have followed one another under the pressure of both objective and subjective factors (Hlihor and Băncilă 2024, 32-60). Throughout history, its essence as a social and political phenomenon has remained constant. Violence, bloodshed, imposing one's will on the defeated, cohesion in battle, camaraderie within units, the concept of honour—these remain unchanged. However, the character of war—the way wars are fought in terms of the strategic environment, technologies, weapon systems, creativity in combat, and leadership—is changing rapidly. The conflicts of recent years, particularly those in Ukraine and Gaza, have highlighted the first signs of a transition to a completely new paradigm: the era of digital warfare, with a multidimensional battlefield in which, alongside the physical dimension, cyberspace and the information environment are becoming increasingly important. Classic combatants, who use instruments of physical destruction against their adversaries, are assisted by specialists trained to use the weapons of words and images. This category of combatants also includes professionals in public diplomacy (Sukhorolskyi and Sukhorolska 2024, 272; Hlihor 2023, 20).

Geopolitical and geostrategic developments in the second half of the 20th century show us that rivalries and confrontations between superpowers were not only about possessing remarkable material resources, but also about the ability to dominate the international political scene through discourse, in other words, the ability to propose and popularize attractive ideas, values, and norms and to control political discourse on the international stage (Hlihor and Melinescu 2021; Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, 283–315; Liao 2017, 110–133; Arquilla 1994, 24-30). Through communication mechanisms and means, a state imposes its status as a hegemonic power, managing

to convince, persuade, and compel other states to share its value system or to doubt their own criteria of knowledge, norms, or values. One such conflict, which has recently come to the attention of specialists in polemology and military strategy, is cognitive warfare. The human mind is a battlefield, with its entire arsenal of perceptions and representations of socially constructed reality, in particular, but also of the factual reality in which the individual moves. The goal of the belligerents is to change the way their opponents perceive reality and to orient them toward the dominant ideas and beliefs in their own society (Pripoae-Șerbănescu 2023, 261-280; Chiriac 2021, 55-71). Through these operations, powerful actors can change attitudes, reshape knowledge systems, and alter societal consciousness, often guiding people toward specific ideological or strategic goals. By manipulating the mental landscape, this form of warfare creates new opportunities for influence in the digital age. Although many specialists define this type of conflict as specific to the century of the digital revolution, the phenomenon is not new. The confrontation between the USSR and the US in the final period of the Cold War was not decided in the classic theatre of operations, but by conquering the minds of people living under the communist totalitarian regime (Hlihor and Melinescu 2021, 18-53). Some analysts argue that cognitive warfare is only one part of hybrid warfare, but it stands out because it focuses directly on the minds and behaviour of a target audience (Vakhshtain 2023). However, the same can be said about propaganda during the two world wars, and there are no studies that clearly define, from a conceptual point of view, the difference between propaganda, psychological warfare, info-ops (Hentea 2008), or, more recently, cognitive warfare. There is no widely accepted definition among specialists regarding cognitive warfare. Despite the valuable efforts of researchers and practitioners, the concept of cognitive warfare has remained vague and closely linked to broader discussions about irregular warfare within military and intelligence communities (Nicholson 2001, 3-4). Therefore, we believe it is important to identify the elements that make up the cognitive battlefield. According to Polish military analyst Tomasz Gergelewicz, it is important to understand the components of 'cognition'. 'The cognitive dimension includes, among others, cultural beliefs, norms, motivation, emotions, vulnerabilities, identity, ideology, perception, will, awareness, attitude, understanding, opinions, experience, knowledge, assumptions, and behaviour. Defining these factors in a given environment is crucial for understanding by which means adversaries influence the minds of the target audience' (Gergelewicz 2024, 33). The cognitive dimension matters for both offensive and defensive operations. The mental strength of the parties in conflict, their understanding of objectives, and their will to survive constitute a hidden power of cognition, and the effectiveness of educational actions carried out in the realm of values and patriotic and civic consciousness depends exclusively on this power. If the cognitive dimension is at a low level, it can become a platform for hostile operations, and these operations can be instruments of expansion or even transformation of the perspectives, values, and interests of target groups. They arise from a deep knowledge of the mental space of certain target groups and societies and an understanding of how social and mental vulnerabilities can be exploited' (Gergelewicz 2024, 33).

Although, in theory, the use of cognitive warfare means and techniques should not differ from one country to another, it can be observed, for example, that 'The PRC's cognitive warfare methods go beyond NATO's recognised pillars and include gaining undue influence. Undue influence should be recognised as one of the pillars of the PRC's cognitive warfare operations. For instance, American investors in TikTok have been co-opted into becoming de facto lobbyists for PRC interests, and they have significant leverage in politics and business. The PRC seeks to co-opt politicians and government leaders into serving their interests and promoting PRC messaging' (Davis 2025). Concerns about forms of cognitive warfare have also grown in the Russian Federation, especially since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. According to sociologist Viktor Vakhshtayn (listed by the Russian Federation's Ministry of Justice as a foreign agent), cognitive warfare has three layers. The first layer/dimension, the most superficial, is a war of narratives, a clash of different stories. Stories in the military sphere can have varying degrees of emotional charge and persuasive power (Vakhshtain 2023). The success of a cognitive warfare operation in this dimension depends on how credible the narrative is among the target audience. The second dimension of cognitive warfare, according to the Russian sociologist, is semantic in nature. 'It is a much more costly (and bloodier) undertaking than the war of narratives. There is a word whose use—regardless of narrative—can land you in a Russian prison. Ten years ago, in much calmer times, many journalists lost their jobs for using the phrase 'Primorski partisans' (Vakhshtain 2023). Ultimately, beneath the semantic and narrative layers lie what one of the founders of sociology, Emile Durkheim, called 'classification grids.' These are fundamental axioms that cannot be questioned or revised. In fact, these are the grids for reading the socially constructed reality of any society, which are the result of a long-term systematic education process involving the family, the church, traditions, etc., as well as the institutional side. They are concerned in particular with social-political, economic, and cultural-spiritual life. It is well known that at Yalta, the three great leaders of the Coalition of Nations during World War II agreed that, after the defeat of Nazi Germany, the European societies under Berlin's influence would be democratized. Did the three leaders have the same framework for building democracy? Certainly not. Stalin's was based on the ideology and values of Marxism-Leninism, while that of the Western leaders was based on the totally different values of liberal democracy.

As can be seen, regardless of the perspective from which cognitive warfare is defined, many of its objectives and goals overlap or interfere with those of public diplomacy. However, we cannot fail to notice a fundamental difference, generated precisely by the state of war that arises at a given moment between states. In times of peace, the public diplomacy of a state/government can communicate directly with foreign audiences to establish a dialogue that informs and influences, with the aim of getting these foreign audiences to support a particular objective or policy of that state/government in another country. After the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian authorities have shuttered the country's last independent media outlets, banned platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and implemented

laws that make free speech – in the form of anti-war statements – punishable by as much as 15 years in prison. So far, the regime has arrested more than 15,000 people for demonstrating against the war, which is acting as a powerful deterrent. For those willing to risk arrest, censorship makes it difficult to discover how many others share their opposition to the war, and hinders the organisation of protests (European Council on Foreign Relations 2022). Since February 2026, WhatsApp is also blocked by Roscomnadzor (the Russian Authority for Regulating the Internet) because Meta, the American social media giant that owns it, refuses to store user data in the country. As early as March 2022, Meta was declared by the Kremlin `an extremist organization` which promoted Russophobia. On the other hand, Max, the local messaging service which comes preinstalled on all new devices, is aggressively promoted via billboards, TV ads, as well as in Russian mass media, as part of an ample campaign to replace foreign platforms. Max, an all-in-one app similar to WeChat from China, combines messaging, paid calls, and other services, allowing users to authenticate their identity with governmental platforms that offer public services. Serious questions are raised regarding the safety and confidentiality of user data on Max, as long as the app has excessive capacities for tracking and does not have adequate encryption (Chia and Tavener 2026).

Under these circumstances, Western public diplomacy is only possible in societies that reject war and military aggression against another state. On the other hand, even the state considered to be the aggressor no longer has the opportunity to promote its image and interests in states that condemn and oppose military aggression. The European Council has suspended since March 2022 the broadcasts of Sputnik and Russia Today radio stations in the EU, in the wake of the Russian Federation's aggression in Ukraine. Both stations bolster the systematic international campaign of the Russian state to misinform, manipulate information, and distort facts to justify and support the military aggression in Ukraine and to consolidate the strategy to destabilize neighbouring countries, EU member states (Council of the EU 2022). Under such circumstances, it is difficult to talk about communicating and informing a foreign audience, rather about hitting a wall as researcher Carlos Solar states: 'Russia and the West have gradually engaged in a 'dialogue of the deaf', with public diplomacy and cooperation being eliminated from the landscape' (Solar 2024). The battle to win the minds and hearts of a target audience through public diplomacy has been restricted to areas and regions considered neutral in relation to the war in Ukraine.

The battle between strategic narratives for credibility and legitimacy. Public diplomacy in 'neutral territories'

Strategic storytelling plays a key role in promoting the national image and interests through actions and means specific to public diplomacy. 'Strategic narratives are a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic

and international actors. They are a vital component of how states seek to establish and maintain influence in the world' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2018, 4). Through public diplomacy, political actors often use strategic narratives to try to create a common understanding of the past, present, and future of world politics, intending to influence the actions of domestic and foreign actors. These play a crucial role in the efforts of states/governments to gain influence, legitimacy, and prestige in the international arena through public diplomacy. The essential condition is that strategic narratives be chosen that are appropriate for audiences in territories considered neutral in relation to an ongoing war, such as the war in Ukraine, because they will respond positively to the messages received or, conversely, ignore them. Therefore, researching the profile of the target audience regarding the reception of narratives offers more opportunities for a positive reception of the messages conveyed. This reduces the risk of miscommunication on the part of public diplomacy organizations and institutions.

Renowned specialists in international communication point out that 'In contrast to disinformation (deliberate lying) or misinformation (accidental lying), miscommunication is understood in terms of the complexity policy makers face in communicating with different publics and policy communities across the world. Perfect communication is impossible. Different societies already possess different narratives about how world order has emerged, each emphasising different events and often interpreting the same events in terms of different narrative trajectories or timelines' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2018, 4). Their conclusion is that finding a common narrative between societies is difficult—but not impossible. One of the solutions for finding it is narrative credibility. Professors Robert H. Gass and Joh S. Seiter consider credibility to be a perceptual process. 'Whether a source possesses credibility or not defines credibility as 'judgements made by a perceiver' concerning the believability of a communicator, they say. They underline that 'credibility does not reside in a source. It is bestowed on a source by an audience' (Gass and Seiter 2020, 155-156). Joseph S. Nye reaches the same conclusion: Reputation has always mattered in world politics, but the role of credibility becomes an even more important power resource. Information that appears to be propaganda may not only be scorned; it may also turn out to be counterproductive if it undermines a country's reputation for credibility' (Nye Jr. 2019, 11). An obvious example is when the public diplomacy efforts of US organizations failed to counteract the decline in the credibility of the US administration in relation to the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo—in a manner incompatible with American values. The negative perception could not be reversed by broadcasting images of Muslims living well in the United States. Very little has been written in academic and public circles in our country about how credibility is achieved in public diplomacy actions and practices. When credibility on the international political scene is invoked, most often reference is made to the studies and works of Thomas Schelling (Schelling 2000). However, the renowned American professor refers to credibility in strategic negotiation in international politics. In this context, credibility refers to the

credibility of threats, promises, and commitments—it is linked to future events, in the sense that an actor in international politics tries to influence the other's perception of the consistency between present messages/commitments and future actions. But here too, issues arise regarding how much trust each party has in the other. The history of the 20th century has countless examples of written or verbal commitments that were not honoured. In achieving credibility through public diplomacy, things are very different from classical diplomacy. 'The stake is not the convergence on an agreement but rather the persuasion of a target audience' (Mor 2012, 397). The way in which these limits for narrative credibility have been surpassed in diplomatic practice in the case of armed conflict can be identified in the Russian-Ukrainian war that started in February 2022. Argumentation plays a decisive role in this situation because it matters whether the opposing party agrees with your ideas and opinions or not. Each of the two parties tries to convince the other of a certain thesis/opinion.

Gaining credibility for messages conveyed through public diplomacy actions to a target audience is an important step in gaining that audience's trust, especially today, when the world seems to have entered an era of mistrust (Cohen 2016), but also of a veritable information explosion due to the digital revolution. Joseph S. Nye Jr. emphasized that 'Technological advances have led to a dramatic reduction in the cost of processing and transmitting information. The result is an explosion of information, and that has produced a 'paradox of plenty'. Plenty of information leads to a scarcity of attention. When people are overwhelmed with the volume of information confronting them, it is hard to know where to focus. Attention, rather than information, becomes the scarce resource. Reputation becomes even more important than in the past, and political struggles occur over the creation and destruction of credibility, which is affected by social and political affinities (Nye Jr. 2019). Any public diplomacy organization/institution strives to achieve effective (i.e., persuasive) communication and, for this reason, attempts to build as solid a credibility as possible. However, practice in public diplomacy shows us that developing a plan that works (strategy development) and what actually works (the question of results) are not one and the same thing. Credibility does not come about by itself, 'naturally'. Being a perceptual product, it is achieved through interaction, which means that material, financial, and other resources alone are not enough. A message/narrative is also needed that speaks to the consumer's heart, sticks in their mind, and eventually spreads to others. From this point of view, it is also necessary to build a credibility strategy (Mor 2012, 395). Such a strategy must lead to surpassing the limits existing between the two societies in conflict. One of these limits refers to the very credibility of the message coming from the opposing society, which is almost by default relegated to disinformation, manipulation, and war propaganda. For this very reason, the public diplomacy organisations and institutions focus mainly on different target audiences in the international public opinion arena. Here as well, the public diplomacy practitioners who build such credibility strategies must take into account the limit engendered by the asymmetry between the two conflicting states. Although the most powerful has superior military power, the

constraints related to image coming from public opinion and the fear of international damnation often limit the operational freedom. This dynamic produces an effect of reversed asymmetry: the weaker players use mass media and images as weapons to attract sympathy, to mobilise international intervention, and to counterbalance their military inferiority (Yarchi 2025).

The way in which these limits for narrative credibility have been surpassed in diplomatic practice in the case of armed conflict can be identified in the Russian-Ukrainian war that started in February 2022. Russia's image in the eyes of foreign audiences is an aspect that must be taken into account when analysing Russian public diplomacy. While Russia's image as undemocratic, corrupt, and aggressive can be attributed to the Soviet image during the Cold War, the impact of foreign policy can be presented as significant in terms of low credibility. This brings us back to the discussion of the relationship between foreign policy and domestic policy, as well as the importance of co-optation rather than publicity in the field of public diplomacy. The Ukrainian conflict was an example that contributed to the image of an aggressive Russian Federation. The Russian occupation of Crimea has shattered its international image, which is seen as a rogue state by more and more countries and their citizens. Russia's image in the EU was consistently tarnished all the while Vladimir Putin was talking about the weakness of NATO's Eastern European partners in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states (Tătar 2023, 82). The large-scale war against Ukraine made it impossible for public diplomacy to take any steps to restore Russia's image in the West and liberal democratic societies, due to its association with an aggressor state.

The collapse of the credibility of the narratives used by Russian public diplomacy for audiences in Europe and America has led Moscow to turn its attention to other regions, such as Latin America, Asia, and Africa (Solar 2024). To achieve its public diplomacy goals in Latin American countries, it mainly uses news agencies to support the Kremlin's so-called 'special military operation' in Ukraine, openly challenging dissenting opinions. It also uses the local press, where Russian diplomats accredited in these countries publish articles justifying military aggression and condemning the West for so-called anti-Russian actions. In Mexico, for example, Ambassador Nikolay Sofinsky wrote an editorial in La Jornada in September 2023 criticising the West for 'using energy as a weapon' and causing turmoil in international hydrocarbon trade through 'illegitimate restrictions and anti-market measures'. For the Russians, it may be a favourable factor that Mexican President Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador has not taken a direct position in the conflict between Moscow and Ukraine (Solar 2024). Although the effectiveness of such activities in Latin American countries is unclear (Berg, Hidalgo and Ziemer 2025), leaders in Moscow insist on turning public diplomacy tools into disinformation campaigns that exploit the openness of democratic societies (Dunn 2025). 'RT en Español and its partner in crime, Sputnik Mundo, have embedded themselves across Latin America under the guise of alternative media. Their sleek production and emotionally charged content often present themselves as a counterbalance to Western influence. RT claims to be

the most-viewed international news channel in the world. At first glance, it seems to be just another successful world news network. However, their front-page articles weave misleading and critical narratives of U.S. foreign policy into their coverage of current events in Latin America. Their attempt at subtlety is strikingly obvious' (Dunn 2025). Ukraine, although not a minor power in international politics, has also played an excellent part with the help of public diplomacy. It has built an efficient public diplomacy strategy to bolster the engagement to fight for independence and Western democratic values, maintaining at the same time its credibility and encouraging international support. The Ukrainian case shows that narratives focused on resilience and common democratic values can efficiently counter contradictory messages, avoiding the risks of excessively negative or unidirectional approaches (Bjola and Fjällhed 2025, 2059–2083).

Conclusions

Since society has entered the digital revolution era characterized by geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics unprecedented in history, the communicational environment of public diplomacy has suffered essential changes. Once dominated by cultural exchanges, radio broadcasts, and carefully elaborated discourses, it now promotes – and faces – the dynamics of digital instruments which, on the one hand, have brought along good things such as speed and volume of communication and, on the other hand, negative effects which seriously affect the credibility of the narratives used by public diplomacy. Today, digital platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, and LinkedIn have transformed the practitioners of public diplomacy into participants in global conversations.

Since neoclassical forms of war have become prominent and the rapid spread of information via social media platforms raises doubts about the credibility of traditional diplomatic efforts, the importance of building trust via means and forms of public diplomacy characterized by transparency, empathy, and involvement has never been more apparent. Analyses and research in this field show that fake narratives and the deepfake phenomenon will not decrease in the near future due to the dialogue of public diplomacy organisations with foreign audiences. Consequently, the role of the digital revolution in public diplomacy cannot be overestimated or underestimated with regard to the credibility of the narratives specific to public diplomacy.

The present study aims to draw attention to the fact that it is important that we understand the objective and subjective factors that lead to the increase/decrease of credibility of the narratives of public diplomacy. In today's interconnected world and in the post-truth era, the winning narratives of any form/action of public diplomacy are those that conquer the mind and soul of the target audience. This can, in turn, become one of the main communicative actors of public diplomacy, creating and distributing narratives online in a totally independent fashion. Online

communication has transformed the global audience into a communicative sphere in which billions of narrators work together by sharing cultural knowledge and attitudes. The actions and activities run by public diplomacy organisations and institutions will thus be able to surpass more easily the limits that affect credibility in international communication.

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