

# Polish Public Diplomacy

Written by Beata Ociepka

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BEATA OCIEPKA, OCT 8 2012

In 2008 the department of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for promotion of the country abroad was renamed the Department of Public and Cultural Diplomacy. Following this, in 2009 an amendment of Polish law introduced public diplomacy as one of the tasks of Polish Foreign Ministry. These changes reflect developments in Polish foreign policy resulting from the need to reposition and re-brand the middle-size European country, located between Russia and Germany, in the international community.

Poland is a newcomer in the field of public diplomacy. The first definitions of public diplomacy implemented by the Polish MFA appeared in 2000; the current understanding (2012) is focused on influencing public opinion with messages about Poland in order to build dialogical relations with the public abroad. The basic document on Polish promotion from 2009 defines public diplomacy as

systematic communication and dialogue with societies and opinion leaders in other countries, attracting their attention, winning their hearts and minds for Polish *raison d'état*, Polish interest, Polish problems, Polish point of view, main values of Polish society, and eventually Polish culture and Poles as such. (Public diplomacy) makes an excellent method to improve Polish image abroad, to conduct “soft” pressure on institutions and people who take decisions (...) [1]

Promotion, brand, image and public opinion are the most important notions in the Polish approach to the use of soft power means in international relations. It is only in recent years that public diplomacy gained more attention and became the most important tool for managing Polish soft assets through coordinating cultural diplomacy and international branding and by frequently pairing with economic diplomacy.

After 1989 Poland suffered – as the other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries – from international invisibility and negative or neutral (based on lack of knowledge) perception abroad. As a post communist medium size country in the process of transition to democracy squeezed between Germany and Russia, Poland had to redefine its role as an actor of international relations. Thus, Polish public diplomacy has been developed in the frame given by the process of accession to the European Union, the most important task of Polish foreign policy after joining NATO. The upcoming accession to the EU triggered the first campaigns of economic diplomacy and strategies of country branding. The early task was to attract investors and tourists. As the result, Polish foreign policy underwent economization, the process observed also in other European countries with longer democratic and free market tradition. The economization of Polish foreign policy should be understood as the acceptance of the commercial logic of competition among states and introduction of some public relations tools into it. In the end of the 1990s first strategies on promotion of the country were launched and continued till 2004 when Poland became member of the EU[2]. Afterwards, the role Poland was striving for was defined as a middle power in European politics.

The year 2004 was significant for Polish efforts in rebranding the country. One of the government agencies, involved in branding campaigns invited W. Olins to elaborate a Polish brand. Olins is the author of “creative tension” as the Polish key message which illustrated well the dichotomies of Polish national identity but was very soon abandoned by the Polish right wing government coordinating re-branding of the country and public diplomacy after 2005[3]. In 2007 the liberal party won the elections and gave new speed to the development of Polish public diplomacy, with no

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comeback of “creative tension”, controversial for the domestic public.

## From “Polish Plumber” to 2011 Presidency of the Council of the EU and EURO 2012

After the accession the negative perception of Poland persisted and mounted up in France in the discussion on European Constitution in 2005. It was the time when the notion of a “Polish plumber”, who symbolized unwanted workforce from the East of Europe depriving the French from their jobs, was used in French discourse on Europe. However, “Polish plumber” turned very soon to be a successful campaign for the Polish Tourist Organization in Paris, which published a poster with a model dressed up as a plumber and suggesting “Je reste au Pologne, venez nombreux![4]” [“I’m staying in Poland, come in large numbers!”]. Since then the image of Poland and the international position of the country have changed dramatically. It was due partly to effective branding and public diplomacy campaigns, but the successful consolidation of democracy, and relatively stable economic situation of the country, with GDP growing despite the 2008 crisis, were also significant for a more positive perception of Poland. For the European public the 2011 Presidency of the Council gave a proof of Poland as a predictable partner. At the same moment, the Presidency gave a new impetus to work on Polish public diplomacy strategy and contributed to the continuation of elaboration of the country brand. The 2011 Presidency was accompanied by external and internal program of cultural events (I Culture), followed up in 2012 before and during UEFA European Football Championship in Poland and Ukraine (EURO 2012). Non-state actors were involved in preparation of both events, giving unique opportunity for the development of modes of co-operation with NGOs within the frame of public and cultural diplomacy. The presidency of the EU Council and hosting EURO 2012 were milestones in rebranding Poland as a normal country. EURO 2012 was significant for the deeper integration of popular culture into cultural diplomacy.

## Cultural Diplomacy and the Foreign Politics of Memory

Although the country is a newcomer in public diplomacy the same cannot be said about cultural diplomacy. Poland established the first cultural institute in Budapest in 1939; from 1994 institutes operate as a network of Polish Institutes, under the umbrella of the MFA. Since the establishment of the Department of Public and Cultural Diplomacy the integration of cultural and public diplomacy has been in process.

The specifics of Polish public and cultural diplomacy rests on the importance of narration on culture and history and responds well to the understanding of public diplomacy by C. Schneider, who defines it as “all a nation does to explain itself to the world”[5]. Therefore it might be understood as the narration a society presents abroad, the story the society has to tell to the world. National versions of public diplomacy give insight into how societies translate their culture while using the means of international communication and cultural diplomacy. Poland, as the other new members of the EU, stresses the exclusion of Eastern European heritage from the mainstream European memory before 1989[6]. Still, Polish cultural diplomacy is on the way to find the balance between presenting tragic and glorious past and successful modernization (the dichotomy reflects well the cleavages in Polish society) and has a geopolitical dimension in relation to Germany and Russia[7]. This politics is hardly a success as there is a conflict of memories inside the society between the “new” and “old” Europe, and between Poland and its neighbors. It also confirms the expectation that narration on history is not easily translatable.

## International Broadcasting

Poland includes international broadcasting into public diplomacy as a consequence of the positive experiences of the pre-1989 Polish opposition, now governing the country, who listened to US and Western European radio stations before 1989. International broadcasting gives Poland an opportunity to play a role of an informational neighbor in relation to smaller states in the East and to improve its position in international communication while implementing media in democracy promotion. Poland incorporated asymmetric international broadcasting as a tool of public diplomacy with neo-authoritarian Belarus as a target country while launching radio (Radio Racja – Radio Reason and European Radio for Belarus) and television stations (Belsat TV) aimed at Belarusian audience. Belsat TV, supported by the MFA and TVP (Polish public service television) has the aim to substitute for the lack of uncensored information sources inside Belarus. The program has a universal character, consists of both information and entertainment and is aimed at a broad group of viewers. Belsat reaches up to 23 % (December 2010) of Belarusian

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society via satellite dishes. Paradoxically, the station was the first to broadcast its whole program in Belarusian[8]. Its viewers – according to surveys done by Belarusian Zerkalo – Info agency – were looking for an alternative source of information on politics.[9] Television aimed at Belarus follows the idea of Western radio stations during the Cold War operating for social change in authoritarian systems. Nevertheless, due to the cultural identity of Belarusian society, the majority of which speaks Russian, Russian media seems to be more attractive than European media broadcasting in Belarusian. As only 13 % of viewers perceived Belsat TV as a Polish television it has been criticized in Poland as counterproductive for Polish normative power in the East[10].

## Polish Model of Public Diplomacy?

For the middle-sized country as Poland, striving for the position of a middle power in European politics, the implementation of public diplomacy results from the adoption of the means of strategic communication and of the strong belief in the importance of perceptions, images and brands in international politics. The realization of the importance of public diplomacy supported the country's efforts to present itself as a reliable and stable partner and as a good citizen of international community.

The implementation of public diplomacy in Poland makes a shift to modernization in the field of foreign policy and at the same moment means acceptance of the logic of mediated political communication internationally. Identity and visibility problems forced the country to implement branding as a first tool. At this stage, non-state organizations participated in elaborating promotion strategies. In Poland they played the role of a go-between MFA and business and nowadays many of them specialize in development aid. Thus, the Polish model of public diplomacy includes NGOs. Official development aid and democracy promotion become gradually niches the country specializes in, as well as the European Neighborhood Policy with the Eastern Partnership as its main project. As the main target countries are defined as members of the EU and other European neighbours Polish public diplomacy, despite its recent implementation in Afghanistan and North Africa, should be seen in the European context.

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[1] Kierunki promocji Polski do 2015 r. (Directions of Polish Promotion till 2015.) Document accepted by the governmental Council on Polish Promotion, December 2009, p. 5

[2] See more on pre-accession campaigns: B. Ociepka, M. Ryniejska- Kiełdanowicz, Public Diplomacy and EU Enlargement: the Case of Poland. „Discussion Papers in Diplomacy”, No 99, July 2005

[3] See an interview from 20.05. 2009 with W.Olins on youtube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XOuHNTd48](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XOuHNTd48)

[4] The “Polish plumber” campaign became a huge success as the poster was followed by about 1000 commentaries and articles in media all over the world. See: E.Sciolino, Unlikely hero in Europe's Spat: The ‘Polish Plumber’, 25.06.2005, [www.nytimes.com/2005/06/26/](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/26/)

[5] C. Schneider, Culture Communicates: US diplomacy that works. „Discussion Papers on Diplomacy” Clingendael No 94, 2004

[6] J. Hrycak, Nowa Ukraina. Nowe interpretacje. (New Ukraine, New Interpretations). KEW Wrocław, 2009

[7] A. Wolff-Powęska, Polskie spory o historię i pamięć. Polityka historyczna (Polish controversies over history and memory). Politics of memory). „Przegląd Zachodni”, 1 (322), 2007, p. 34

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[8] [www.belsat.eu](http://www.belsat.eu)

[9] Zierkalo-Info. Sociologiczeskije i markietingowyje issliedowanija. (Sociological and Marketing Surveys) Monitoring TV Bielsat na Białorusi. Minsk 2011. (Monitoring of TV Belsat in Belorussia).

[10] Ponad połowa posiadaczy anten satelitarnych ogląda Bielsat (More than the half of satellite dishes' owners watch Belsat), 6.09.2012, [www.belsat.eu/pl/aktualnosc](http://www.belsat.eu/pl/aktualnosc) and an interview with the Director of the station A. Guzy-Romaszewska, August 2011

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