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Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

Romania Wants To Become a Public Diplomacy Player ^[1]

BUCHAREST --- When public diplomacy issues are discussed, focus tends to be on major powers that are particularly active in this field – the United States, China, Israel, the United Kingdom, Russia, and a few others. But Romania has now announced that it wants to join the big guys’ club, and it is taking purposeful steps toward doing so.

A new public diplomacy program has been created within the office of Romania’s president, Traian Basescu, who has put his personal clout behind its efforts. At a conference in Bucharest last week marking the beginning of the new public diplomacy venture, Basescu said, “Romania is proud of itself,” and he criticized the common depiction of Romania as the source of other countries’ crime problems. This reputation is at least in part a product of racism directed toward Romania’s Roma, or Gypsy, population, members of which are actively discriminated against throughout much of Europe.

Migration of workers continues to be a contentious issue within Europe, and to some extent Romania’s new emphasis on public diplomacy is responding defensively to this, saying in effect, “We cannot let others define us; we must do so ourselves.” That is merely a stop-gap

approach, lacking the breadth of outlook that public diplomacy, like other elements of foreign policy, requires. To be fully beneficial, public diplomacy must be strategic, not tactical, and must convince European publics that Romania is a solid citizen of the community of Europe. Romania's public diplomats will need to work on this.

Former foreign minister Cristian Diaconescu, along with his colleague Dan Dima, is directing the public diplomacy effort, which he defines as "the management of external perception...that aims to offer to the international realm the necessary arguments for a solid structuring of our credibility and reputation abroad." For those tempted to think Romania just needs a new "brand" identity, Diaconescu said that perceptions of Romania "cannot be magically created out of imaginative promotion, but must be built on policy."

All this is encouraging, but Basescu's team is in the midst of domestic political battling that is far nastier than anything seen these days in Washington. The president and the current foreign minister belong to different political parties and are so at odds that the foreign ministry chose to send no representative to the kick-off conference. This needs to be fixed. In any country, successful public diplomacy requires a long-term commitment that transcends partisanship.

Keeping that cautionary note in mind, Romania's new emphasis on reaching out to foreign publics – not just other governments – should be considered a useful step forward in a number of ways. It is likely to benefit Romania's regional stature and it will widen the circle of public diplomacy practitioners. In Europe, the collective political blood pressure tends to reach dangerous peaks. Public diplomacy may prove a helpful antidote.
