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The Public Diplomacy of Political Dissent ^[1]

The 2023 Munich Security Conference — a leading forum on international security that is often informally referred to as the “Davos of Defense” — understandably featured Russia’s war in Ukraine as one of its central topics. Taking place in mid-February, just a week before the war’s anniversary, the conference did not have representatives from the Russian government among its attendees. For the first time in nearly forty years of the conference’s existence, the Russian officials and diplomats were not invited. Instead, the conference organizers invited several leaders of the Russian political opposition.

In the world of diplomacy, where symbolism matters a great deal, the combination of not inviting official government representatives with explicitly inviting that government’s political opponents is a significant statement. An entire panel titled “Russia Reimagined: Visions for a Democratic Future” served as a platform for the Russian political dissent to present their perspectives on the war, Russia’s domestic politics, and Russia’s post-war prospects. The conference’s chairman, Christoph Heusgen, tweeted several months before the conference: “We will not give [Russian officials] a platform for their propaganda. We want to discuss

Russia's future with Russian opposition leaders and exiled people - THEIR voices need to be heard and amplified."

A lot can — and has been — said about the individual opposition leaders who attended the conference. Their personas, political stances, records of political activities and motivations for engaging in political dissent have been debated within the wider community of Russian political dissent, and since the start of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, by many Ukrainians as well. It is a separate and complicated topic. But what can the fact of their participation in the 2023 Munich Security Conference tell us about the role of dissenting non-state actors in public diplomacy?

Nevertheless, the role of political dissent in public diplomacy, as well as its potential to function as public diplomacy must be studied more thoroughly, examining these dynamics across different regions, political systems, and historical circumstances.

First, non-state actors who challenge their respective states can claim a stake in their countries' public diplomacy by relying on their diplomatic capabilities in the absence of official diplomatic status. Dissenting non-state actors utilize their diplomatic capabilities by systematically building and maintaining relationships with key foreign publics — those crucial for reaching dissenting non-state actors' political goals. For example, the participation of the Russian political dissent in the 2023 Munich Security Conference was in part a result of their systematic work that included a variety of public diplomacy activities for years before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

As dissenting non-state actors build and cultivate relationships with key foreign publics, they create and disseminate strategic narratives that contest the official, state-supported ones while also offering alternative narratives of their countries' identities. In the case of Russian political dissent, some of the core narratives prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine aimed at separating Russians — a large and diverse group of people — from the Russian government; pointing out the complicity of Western political elites in enabling the Putin regime over the years; and advocating for individual sanctions against corrupt Russian political elites. Since the start of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, some of these narratives have been understandably contested, reconsidered and readjusted. Indeed, as Masha Gessen wrote in *The New Yorker*, "... since Russia launched its full-scale invasion, hundreds of thousands of Russians have left their country. Many of them ... have been ... trying to grapple with the condition of being citizens of a country waging a genocidal colonial war." Heated discussions impossible in any Russian public spaces on what it means to be an anti-war Russian and a true ally to Ukraine have been occurring on various platforms, virtual and physical, supported by the Russian dissent. Critically for public diplomacy, various foreign publics – journalists, policymakers, scholars and activists – have been invited to take part in these discussions. Intentional engagement with non-Russian publics has been critical to the public diplomacy work of the Russian political dissent during the war.

Next, the diplomatic activities of dissenting actors remind us of the importance of

representation in public diplomacy. As Paul Sharp remarked, “the study of diplomacy... has tended to accept the identity claims of principal actors [of diplomacy] uncritically. Countries have been assumed to be more or less what those who act for them claim to be, rather than something else, such as an instrument of oppression.” To draw on the example of the Russian political dissent again, for many Russians who for years opposed the Putin regime, it has frequently been cringeworthy to watch Russian official diplomats “represent” Russia on the international stage. In fact, one could argue that many of the public diplomacy activities of the Kremlin have stopped being public diplomacy a long time ago, turning instead into what James Der Derian termed “anti-diplomacy” — propaganda among the people. Dissenting non-state actors attempt to reclaim representational power from the states.

Finally, as dissenting non-state actors reclaim representation power from the states, they certainly disrupt the states’ public diplomacy work. But can their actions be considered public diplomacy in its own right? Public diplomacy scholars addressed this question and offered various criteria that help distinguish public diplomacy activities from, for example, strategic communication. For instance, Kadir Ayhan suggested several criteria that allow consideration of non-state actors public diplomacy actors. These include institutionalization, intentional public diplomacy objectives, foreign policy oriented political goals, communication with foreign publics and acting in public rather than private interest. I argued elsewhere that many activities of the Russian political dissent can be considered public diplomacy in their own right because of their representational claims, intentional engagement with the foreign publics, and communication and negotiation as the means for reaching their political goals. Russian political dissent’s participation in the 2023 Munich Security Conference is just one example. Nevertheless, the role of political dissent *in* public diplomacy, as well as its potential to function as public diplomacy must be studied more thoroughly, examining these dynamics across different regions, political systems, and historical circumstances. This will help gain a more comprehensive understanding of the shifting dynamics of global politics and the role and place of public diplomacy in it.
