Beata Ociepka’s book ‘Poland’s New Ways of Public Diplomacy’ undertakes the analysis of Poland’s public diplomacy between 2008 and 2015. This period is of significance to Polish diplomacy and statecraft as Poland was seen as “punching above its weight”, particularly in European politics. Polish policy-makers, as relatively new entrants to the European Union, manoeuvred through the complexities of European affairs; with a sense of excitement and energy, they tried to make a mark on European politics. In the post-EU accession period, European politics worked well for Poland too. In these political settings, public diplomacy played a recognisable role, and was placed at the forefront of the advancement of Poland’s European interests. Indeed, this is how Ociepka approaches the task of examining Poland’s public diplomacy of that period: her book’s analytical foci falls on the years of the governance by the Civic Platform coalition government, the foreign policy of which turned Poland into an out-ward looking, foreign policy initiative-taking (e.g. ‘Eastern Partnership’) European state, seeking to strengthen its statecraft and diplomacy to face new structural challenges such as global competitiveness of its industries, or by using its culture and heritage to challenge anti-Polish sentiments with a sense of greater confidence.

The book was published at a point in time when International Relations scholars with some sense of nostalgia reflect on the speed of changes that digital media technologies are making on international politics. Howard’s Pax technica (2015) sets the tone of international politics, impacting the ways in which diplomatic actors and citizens relate to foreign policy issues. Public diplomacy has been a centrepiece in the analysis of diplomacy for the past decade when, for variety of reasons, and the number of publications has on this practice has grown significantly. These epistemological developments, grounding the analysis of public diplomacy within the broader international relations, media and communication, sociological, but also culturalistic frameworks, drive the advancement of the field. While the practice of public diplomacy is inextricably tied to digital media, its field of studies is consumed with debates on the direction of theoretical approaches, it is also integrating institutional complexities with foreign policy challenges, e.g. cyber-diplomacy and its links to foreign policy.

The book is divided into themes, which guide the contents of each chapter as well as explicate particularities of Poland’s public diplomacy ranging from: geopolitical settings for public diplomacy such as soft power competition between the West and
Russia over Ukraine; messages and visual features of public diplomacy; cultural diplomacy with memory and identity politics; international broadcasting; foreign aid and transformational diplomacy; avenues of citizen diplomacy – all of which discuss what Ociepka argues is the ‘Polish model of public diplomacy’ (p. 49). While the richness of the themes may mesmerise the reader, from the beginning, one can wonder how does Poland’s approach, or even more specifically, the approach of the Civic Platform coalition government, can be juxtaposed against the dominant themes in the analysis of public diplomacy elsewhere? What are the grounds for thinking about ‘Poland’s model of public diplomacy’? The book is entitled ‘Poland’s New Ways of Public Diplomacy’, yet in chapters three and seven we learn that Poland follows the approach to public diplomacy positioned somewhere on the continuum between ‘new public diplomacy’ (Melissen, 2005) and the ‘network public diplomacy’ (Zaharna, 2006). These are not new approaches per se, and, if arguably Poland imitates Western features of public diplomacy, the question remains how do actors that engaged in its public diplomacy adopt and adapt to the field conditions or even evolving media landscapes, which shift the dynamics of practice?

The aim of the book, stated on p. 15, clearly sets out to explain ‘new public diplomacy’, “distinguishing it not only from propaganda but also from country branding”. This task is not only a conceptual one but, first and the foremost, an empirical one. This formulation of the research aim, seemingly, does not take into consideration the possibility of ‘compression of time and space’ and their emergence at the same time within the confines of Polish public diplomacy networks. The attempt to distinguish between propaganda and public diplomacy resonates in taxonomic issues, which tend to emerge in public diplomacy scholarship. Making sense of epistemological issues in the study of public diplomacy, and ways in which this practice intertwines with other communicative practices such as branding or public relations vis-à-vis debates on the nexus of domestic politics-public-diplomacy-geopolitics, has been posing terminological challenges for decades.

This is also explicit in Ociepka’s book in relation to the orientation of Poland’s public diplomacy. For example, on p. 16 she posits that since the publication of her previous book her “…understanding of public diplomacy as a form of external political communication has not changed significantly”, whereas on p. 36, in the context of the discussion of long lasting domestic consequences of the Second World War on Poland’s public diplomacy, she states that “one of the tools in this process is public diplomacy with its domestic dimension”. This inconsistency in conceptualising public diplomacy is not only problematic to media and communication scholars, but international relations theorists, as theorising blurring boundaries between public and foreign affairs has already been advanced in public diplomacy scholarship (e.g. Entman, 2008). Further, Ociepka sets the task of analysing Poland’s public diplomacy against such foreign policy considerations as Poland’s geo-political situation as well as the perceived status of Poland as the ‘middle-size’ actor in the international community. Whilst this might be an important explananda, the reader learns little about how exactly the middle-size status of Poland translates into the capabilities of public diplomacy, including the capabilities to innovate, which, arguably, constitute the grounds for ‘new public diplomacy’. The discussion of geo-political underpinnings of public diplomacy is linked with attempts to tackle geo-political myths about Poland. For example, the book demonstrates how policymakers drew from a collective identity of Poland as a Northern European state: a
public diplomacy strategy designed to foreground political stability, normalisation and ‘return to Europe’, whilst moving Poland’s Eastern political legacies of the past into a background.

Despite conceptual inconsistencies stemming from Ociepka’s limited consideration for levels of analysis, the reader, however, learns about the latest developments in public diplomacy. Ociepka details the advancements of Poland’s public diplomacy. While the analytical focus of her book is on the period between 2008 and 2015, she accounts for the developments in the field preceding this period. Her book foregrounds the multiplicity of public diplomacy projects and provides the background, both domestic and international, to the practice and, by extension, demonstrates the sources and resources guiding the ongoing re-invention of Poland’s public diplomacy. For example, she tackles the conflicting narratives in the relationship between Poland and Germany, and demonstrates how cultural diplomacy, one of the linchpins of ‘new public diplomacy’, serves as a bridge designed to overcome ongoing cross-cultural tensions, or debates on the role of Polish public diplomacy in Ukraine.

As well as revealing the cross-institutional structures within which Poland’s public diplomacy is devised, Ociepka reports on multiple programmes and campaigns, which define Poland’s polyphonic public diplomacy, all of which increasingly follow the logic of networks. The reader learns about particularities of Poland’s public diplomacy and institutional strategies underpinning this practice. These developments are inextricably tied to media landscapes within which public diplomats and foreign policy makers operate. In turn, these also extend to the formation of human and organisational networks driven by coalitions and campaigns, and tailored with the support of the Polish state, particularly, but not exclusively, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In that sense, the Polish state behaves as the facilitator of public diplomacy and embraces the participatory approach to the practice of public diplomacy. Another shift in Poland’s public diplomacy has been that of its scope. To that end, Ociepka’s book discusses the expanding and consolidating scope of the practice, as leveraging its economic strengths, including the resilience of the Polish economy during the 2008 global economic crisis, but also, and this is particularly interesting, the transformational features of Polish public diplomacy such as democracy promotion and humanitarian aid.

The book tends to be uncritical of the shortcomings of Poland’s public diplomacy. For example, Ociepka reveals that Polish diplomats dropped democracy promotion in North Africa due to “cultural differences” (p.163). This statement is left with no interpretation on the part of the author and, in addition, Ociepka underplays how democracy promotion yields great opportunities for Poland’s global engagement, the practice of public diplomacy can greatly benefit from this too. This and other ‘missed opportunities’ of Polish public diplomacy, are very frequently taken for granted. Another example of missed opportunity in the practice of public diplomacy is the cancellation of the 2015 Polish Year in Russia, which was triggered by Russian foreign policy behaviour towards Ukraine. In the situation of any conflict, the significance of cultural exchanges, as exemplified by the UK-Russia Year of Culture and the German Russian Year of Language and Literature, is paramount. Yet, Ociepka downplays this issue, and states that “three countries adopted different behaviours in the domain of cultural diplomacy” (p. 105), omitting the discussion of the consequences of this decision on the part of the Polish Government. Two reflexive
points emerge from this observation. On the one hand, during the Cold War, Poles were at the receiving end of U.S. public diplomacy and, as it stands, no evidence has emerged that U.S. public diplomats did not wish to engage with Poland because of “cultural differences” or a “conflict situation”. On the other hand, it is apparent that shortcomings in the practice of Poland’s public diplomacy can be identified in Ociepka’s book, but it remains unclear why these have not been addressed explicitly.

Ociepka puts forward an interesting argument, suggesting that foreign policy makers as well as citizens in Central and Eastern Europe are sensitive to their international reputations (p. 23). Whilst this argument constitutes a solid ground for making the case for additional resources for public diplomacy, the question remains, why are the Central and Eastern European nations, including Poland, so sensitive to their overseas perceptions? After all, Ociepka’s book tells a positive story of Polish public diplomacy, and it is a tale of the advancement of statecraft, public diplomacy capability-building as well as a story of the Polish nation making a mark on European politics. Is this sensitivity to international perceptions driven by long lasting legacies of state socialism? Is it driven by issues during the state socialist era political and historical issues that are slowly catching up with Poland’s public diplomacy? Seemingly, Ociepka’s book reports on the composition of the means for the articulation of collective liberal self-esteem. Speaking in realist terms, it is a story of catching up with the West, and re-learning statecraft as a requirement of geopolitics as well as new foreign policy orientations. But beneath those tenets, there might be something more complex and subjective: whilst Poland was praised for the performance of its political economy, it re-enforced and mirrored this ‘success’ narrative through public diplomacy simultaneously marginalising the complex issues brought about by political changes in the last thirty years. In 2018, when this review is written, Polish public diplomacy is having to face deteriorating global perceptions of Poland as a populist, nationalist and ultra-Catholic conservative state in the middle of Europe, which are less anchored in Poland’s superb political economy performance, but more so in the mix of political culture and collective psychological issues, which go back to Poland’s past. Certainly, these issues constitute a case for further analysis of public diplomacy that go beyond Ociepka’s complex book. Her work, however, lays the foundations for it.

‘Poland’s New Ways of Public Diplomacy’ makes a few contributions to the field of public diplomacy: it scrutinises this communicative practice in its appropriate historical settings; it reveals dynamics of its evolution and, in many ways, a capability-building of public diplomacy of a medium-size European state; it reveals contextual features of Poland’s public diplomacy; offers a perspective on public diplomacy, as an extension of the political field. Even though the book largely draws from U.S. scholarship, paradoxically, in as far as the object of the analysis goes, it speaks to one of the fastest advancing themes in public diplomacy research, namely that of the de-Americanisation of public diplomacy scholarship (Thussu, 2013). The book is certainly worth reaching out for, as it embraces multi-disciplinary approach to public diplomacy, even though the reader runs into some epistemological challenges. Its richness and complexities of themes are certainly a good introduction to Poland’s public diplomacy for scholars of international relations, media and communication, and cultural studies.
References


