

Anna Kobierecka

University of Łódź (Poland)

ORCID: 0000-0002-2492-6452

e-mail: anna.kobierecka@uni.lodz.pl

Sweden's Public Diplomacy in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of Day-to-Day Communication

Abstract: In turbulent times of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are many challenges to a country's international reputation. During the pandemic, Sweden, especially in its first stage, was frequently presented by international media outlets, sometimes negatively. Such adverse reporting may have imposed some reputational threats on Sweden. This research aims to investigate Swedish communication through a short-term perspective of public diplomacy (its day-to-day dimension) with the foreign public during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was based on qualitative content analysis of official statements made by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, the Swedish Institute's Instagram account, and interviews with the Swedish Institute employees. The main argument of this research is that in Sweden, day-to-day communication within PD served as a tool supporting the crisis management process. The research question refers to whether Sweden, through the activity of the Swedish Institute, used some elements of its public diplomacy conduct to react to the coronavirus pandemic. The hypothesis states that the day-to-day dimension of public diplomacy can be associated with the crisis management process.

Keywords: *public diplomacy, reputation, reputational security, Sweden, COVID-19, international communication*

Introduction

In the contemporary world, soft power and the potential to influence other international actors have become necessary. Strengthening this power to influence is today a significant part of the international activity of states as it allows for increased reputational security. Nicholas Cull identified this phenomenon and explained it as ensuring security through reputation, higher visibility, recognizability, and significance of an actor in an international environment (Cull, 2019). Sweden is one of the countries that has successfully shaped its image and reputation according to numerous reputable rankings. Those can be perceived as not entirely objective or neutral and generate a false image of a country. However, they

still can provide some basic information about how others perceive states and what others observe in international relations (Grincheva, 2022). For example, the Portland Soft Power 30 is based on subjective and objective indicators. However, objective data is derived mainly from Western-dominated institutions such as the World Bank. All the limitations make such polls unreliable (Nisbet, Rofe, 2022).

Sweden is highly ranked in terms of its nation brand – in 2021, it was ranked 9th in the Anholt-IPSOS Nation Brands Index (IPSOS Nation Brand Index, 2021); soft power – in 2019, it was ranked 4th in the Soft Power 30 (Soft Power 30, 2019). Sweden also shines in terms of innovation (ranked 2nd in the Global Innovation Index in 2021 (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2021)) or gender equality (ranked 1st in the Gender Equality Index in 2021 (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021)). However, in turbulent times of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are many challenges to the international reputation of a country and the process of its image creation.

Sweden, during the pandemic, especially in its first stage, was presented by some international media outlets in a rather negative light (Erdbrink, 2020; Europnews, 2021; Soric, 2021; BBC News, 2020). Thomas Erdbrink (2020) in the *New York Times* called Sweden a 'pariah state' owing to its distinct strategy of counteracting the pandemic. The *Guardian* was reporting about a decision made by Norway and Denmark to prolong closed borders with Sweden because of the higher death rate in this country (Henley, 2020). On another occasion, it can be read in the *New York Times* that Sweden conducted an 'unorthodox, open-air experiment' which 'allowed the world to examine what happens in the pandemic when a government allows life to carry on largely unhindered' and finally, that 'they gained nothing' (Goodman, 2020). Criticism referred mainly to a different way of managing the crisis than other European countries (Erdbrink, 2020). While most EU member states decided to introduce hard lockdowns, the Swedish government limited itself to issuing mainly recommendations. Negative media coverage can be perceived as a potential challenge to public diplomacy efforts and its transmission methods, according to the latest research by James Pamment (2021), and impose threats to a nation's reputation, at least from a short-term perspective (Rosamond, Hedling, 2022).

The purpose of this research is to investigate how the Swedish communication with foreign publics through public diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic pursued by the Swedish Institute worked as a tool for reacting to this health crisis and how compatible it was with the official communication provided by the government. The main argument of this research is that in light of a specific situation in Sweden during the coronavirus crisis, which resulted from how Sweden was handling the health crisis, day-to-day communication within public diplomacy rhetoric served as a soft tool supporting the crisis management process. The research thus attempts to answer the research question referring to whether Sweden, through the activity of the Swedish Institute, used some elements of its public diplomacy conduct to react to the coronavirus pandemic (R1). The hypothesis states that the day-to-day dimension of public diplomacy can be associated with the crisis management process.

Theoretical Framework

The research is firmly embedded within public diplomacy (PD) as a communication process. PD is focused on government-to-people (G2P) or people-to-people (P2P) communication (Huijgh, 2016), defined as a tool for reaching foreign publics and influencing their perceptions (Gilboa, 2008; Anholt, 2007). The influence process is exercised by engaging foreign audiences to support their government's foreign policy objectives (Snow, 2020). At the same time, PD is perceived as a tool for communicating and explaining one's interests and, as a result, exercising soft power (Nye, 2021). Georgy Szondi (2008) outlined the main goals of public diplomacy as changing behavior and political attitudes. A similar definition is proposed by Melissen and Davis Cross (2013), who state that PD is the process of a government with the foreign public to improve foreign perceptions. Wang (2006) even argued that managing the reputation of a nation is of crucial significance within PD. Fostering reputation, image, and international perceptions as goals of PD translates into increased political influence (Widler, 2007). PD is also essential for producing soft power (Nye, 2023). However, its conduct in democratic and non-democratic countries can have a different impact. In the case of democracies and open societies, PD, can be more effective in producing soft power as civil societies are engaged in the process of PD. In the case of closed societies and authoritarian regimes, the process can be more problematic and less precise because of the lack of such engagement (Nye, 2021).

In the 21st Century, a new category of the new public diplomacy has emerged. The new PD is more engaged in dialogue (Melissen, 2005) and is relational (Manor, 2019) practitioners and audiences of diplomacy. Throughout, the author argues that terms such as 'digitalized public diplomacy' or 'digital public diplomacy' are misleading, as they suggest that Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs). According to Nye (2023), PD based on propaganda would not be able to generate soft power; this is why two-way communication is much more effective than just simple official broadcasting conducted by the government. It is also multidimensional and multidirectional, aimed at an active and directly participating audience (Huijgh, 2016). Such new trends result in the necessity to acknowledge new communication techniques and incorporate new actors within the diplomatic and communication conduct (Melissen & Wang, 2019). In this sense, non-state actors or even individual citizens can participate in shaping the new PD and its content, among others, through social media (Ingenhoff et al., 2021). Information technologies and the digital revolution have strongly impacted communication patterns within diplomatic conduct (Kurbalija, 1999). According to Hocking and Melissen (2015, p. 6), "social networking sites have created new dynamics and opened up a plethora of previously unimaginable opportunities" for PD conduct. They allow the creation of new webs of diplomacy, leading to greater engagement of the officials with the external recipients. It is assumed that in the future, diplomacy will incorporate more and more new forms of communication through social media by providing quick real-time communication (Hocking, Melissen, 2015). Already existing literature on digital diplomacy

and IT for diplomacy's sake concentrates on how diplomatic actors use social media and how it influences the process and communication patterns within diplomatic conduct (Bos, Melissen, 2019). In Sweden's case, it is visible that social media channels already play a significant role in external communication.

Conducting effective PD can contribute to a higher potential of influence and higher levels of reputational security (Cull, 2019). Reputational security will be significant, especially during a crisis, as it secures potential support in an emergency, crisis, or conflict (Cull, 2019). All those aims can be gained through long-term perspective activities; according to Wally Olins (2005), effective management of a nation's brand and reputation is a complex and sophisticated process. Especially in the 21st Century, all those processes are becoming polycentric, networked, using many new channels such as digital tools or social media, and enduring (Huijgh, 2008). The perception of new PD as a tool of the long-term, continuous, and ongoing process is also changing in favor of ad-hoc initiatives (Szondi, 2008).

However, long-term strategic communication still plays a significant role in PD. Influence seems to be a core feature in defining strategic communication as it focuses on altering the behaviors or even attitudes of the recipients (Hallahan & Holtzhausen, 2007). Strategic communication is '*the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission*' (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, p. 225). J. P. Farwell (2012, p. xviii) defined it as '*the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behavior to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives.*' Different types of strategic communication can be distinguished. However, they all focus on presenting certain and selected information to influence the emotions of external audiences and promote national interest. (Farwell, 2012). The correlation between strategic communication and PD can be recognized in this sense.

Considering strategic communication as part of PD, Joseph Nye (2004) refers to the conceptualization made by Mark Leonard at the beginning of the 20th Century. According to the concept, strategic communication is one of the three dimensions of PD, with daily communication and developing a lasting relationship with key target groups. The first and most immediate dimension refers to daily communication, which aims to explain the context of government decisions within foreign or domestic policy. Officials must pay attention to what and how they communicate, especially to the international press. A significant element of such day-to-day communication is dealing with crises or potential attacks (Nye, 2019). In the case of dealing with crises and providing timely and day-to-day communication, social media channels emerge as a significant diplomatic tool (Ceasar-Gordon, Melissen, 2016). The second dimension of PD is strategic communication, which provides a leading theme and can be compared to an advertising campaign with certain events and communications that are supposed to advance governments' policies and decisions (Nye, 2019). The third dimension refers to relation building through PD, is aimed at two-way communication and dialogue, and has a long-term perspective (Nye, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a strong impact on PD. It drew attention to some new aspects within the field, such as the significance of government's communication during a crisis, especially in counteracting any disinformation or humanitarian issues within PD (Manor, Pamment, 2022). In international media, there is much coverage of how the pandemic is handled in different states. Sweden, during the pandemic, decided to choose its path and more relaxed attitude toward lockdown, and it is said that the Swedish way was communicated by the authorities aggressively by presenting Sweden as rational and following scientific evidence contrary to the "world of politicians in panic" (Falkheimer, Raknes, 2022, p. 27). The chief epidemiologist Anders Tegnell also acquired the name "the face of the Swedish experiment," which had a rather negative tone and attracted even more attention from international media (Bergman, Hedling, 2022)—increased media scrutiny and occurring criticism needed specific communication strategies to counteract them. According to Cull (2022), the pandemic provided space for acquiring new communication strategies within PD for their own sake and benefit. Such a perspective is typical for soft power and PD, which are usually perceived from a state-centric perspective. They focus on how undertaken actions can contribute to a state's reputation or image; however, the need to take a more humanitarian perspective emerged during the pandemic. The pandemic caused not only a health crisis but also other crises, such as psychological and financial, revealing still existing inequalities (both gender and racial). In such conditions, the public felt that the government failed to manage the pandemic effectively and thus did not meet the needs of humanity. In this sense, PD and soft power should focus more and more on the potential of a state to respond to global challenges or crises through "developing effective response strategies with humanity-level perspective" and focus on "collaborative problem-solving" (Zaharna, 2022, p. 5, 6). Another significant feature of PD during the pandemic is using digital tools to react quickly and efficiently to crises. Although governments and diplomats have long used digital diplomacy to manage security, during the pandemic, using the Internet and social media as a communication channel seemed to be the case for managing communication with the international public (Bjola, 2022).

Considering the very specific context of the pandemic, daily communication appeared to be specifically significant as it supported messages and narratives provided by the government and its management of the health crisis. Conducting PD during a significant crisis can seem useful and accurate in coordinating all efforts related to crisis management. In addition, such a crisis provides space for new ways of reacting to the current challenges. Although PD generally focuses mostly on long-term perspective initiatives aimed at relation-building, some efforts can be perceived as ad hoc tools for responding to unexpected circumstances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many states incorporated within the scope of their PDs at least some actions referring to this health crisis. Since 2020, we have observed such new phenomena as 'coronavirus diplomacy' (Bocchi, 2020; Scimia, 2020; Kobierecka & Kobierecki, 2021), 'mask diplomacy' (Kowalski, 2021) or most recently, 'vaccine diplomacy' (Aspinall, 2021). In the case of Sweden, we can observe the combination of both short-term

and long-term tools in shaping consistent and influential communication with the foreign public. This process is visible throughout the pandemic; however, it is not only.

Firstly, in light of this research, the three-dimensional concept of PD has a fundamental meaning since the conducted analysis focuses on Sweden's communication patterns during the pandemic. Secondly, considering the Swedish Institute's communication with foreign audiences through social media channels during the pandemic, this specific day-to-day dimension of external communication within the PD can be framed as an example of the new public diplomacy. Using social media and providing more relational and inclusive PD is clearly visible in the Swedish Institute's communication about the COVID-19 pandemic. Thirdly, we can observe a specific humanitarian-driven narrative within strategic communication of the Swedish MFA and SI, mostly through stressing the importance of collaborative problem-solving. This theoretical framework provides fundamentals for understanding the PD under specific conditions of crises. PD, in general, is perceived as a complex process of multilevel and multidimensional communication conducted by state agencies. However, under crisis, day-to-day communication plays a crucial role. It should be combined with more in-depth and strategic narratives to target foreign audiences and communicate specific aspects of crisis within a wider context of already existing nation brand. Significant elements of such specific, crisis-driven PD are the use of digital tools and Internet channels of communication and more humanitarian focus. Analyzing PD from such a perspective contributes to further analysis. It serves in answering the research question, referring to whether Sweden, through the activity of the Swedish Institute, used some elements of its day-to-day PD conduct to react to the coronavirus pandemic.

Sweden and the COVID-19

Sweden decided to follow a relatively liberal strategy designed by the state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, referred to in some media as the herd immunity strategy (Korhonen & Granberg, 2020). The Swedish government did not decide on implementing a full lockdown – shops remained open, as well as gyms, restaurants, and schools, for children under 16 years old. All decisions related to the pandemic were based on suggestions made by experts from the Public Health Agency (Franssen, 2020). Furthermore, most of the measures were based on suggestions and recommendations assuming voluntary compliance of the citizens. Those recommendations included working from home, self-isolation, social distancing, especially for persons over 70, and avoiding public transportation. No obligation to cover their mouths and noses in public spaces was introduced, a ban on events and larger gatherings was introduced locally, and people were advised to avoid traveling abroad unnecessarily (Krisinformation, 2020). These regulations changed during the successive waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, when some restrictions were implemented, among others, limitations in public and private gatherings, indoor events, public transport, places

with cultural activities, venues serving food and drink, etc. were temporarily introduced (Krisinformation, 2022).

The Swedish model of crisis management. The crisis management model in Sweden has its specificity, which was often discussed during the first weeks of the pandemic. First, institutions responsible for specific policy areas also make decisions and give recommendations during crises (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020). Secondly, the participation of citizens in the process of crisis management is significant. It means the requirement of cooperation between the government and citizens. The government must provide transparent information, which gives a basis for making informed decisions. Citizens, on the other hand, are expected to act responsibly and follow government instructions (Petridou, 2020). Furthermore, general laws on communicable diseases in Sweden are based on voluntary measures (Andersson, Aylott, 2020). The characteristics of such a crisis management model derive strongly from certain historically embedded qualities, such as strong civil society and high levels of social trust in state institutions (Statista, 2021).

Another aspect of Swedish crisis management is decentralization and a substantial level of regional autonomy, which assumes that all the threats should be handled at the lowest possible level of the government (Petridou, 2020). Furthermore, crisis management in Sweden seems to be a depoliticized process where professionals and leading national agencies, not politicians, take responsibility for crisis management. Press conferences in the spring of 2020 were held almost every day by the Public Health Agency, and Tegnell was the face of Swedish crisis management (Andersson, Aylott, 2020). Many more factors shape the process of crisis management in Sweden. For example, high priority is attached to human rights or social equality. They can be reflected by the reluctance towards closing schools, which would undermine the right to schooling and, at the same time, would be detrimental to working and low-earning parents (Trägårdh & Özkırımlı, 2020). Those specific features of the Swedish crisis management model were explained at the beginning of the pandemic through day-to-day communication channels and by the government offices.

Method and Data Analysis

The research was conducted in several stages and based on different methods. As the first step, qualitative content analysis of official statements of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs was conducted. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs is Sweden's central public agency responsible for international communication. It is also responsible for communicating information about its crisis situation and management abroad. The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs manages health-related policies, including during the health crisis. At this stage, the main narratives and goals of official, governmental communication referring to the pandemic were identified. Identifying such official narratives and motivations of the government were crucial for the latter correlation of the PD communication conducted and how it corresponds with the governmental line

of communication. In this sense, finding a linkage between both types of communication can serve as evidence for a specific correlation between PD and responding to a crisis.

All the official statements of the Ministries analyzed within this research were from a timescale from 1 January 2020 until the end of June 2021. The selected timescale covers the first year and a half of the pandemic. This period encompassed the first three waves of the pandemic. It seemed to be the most intensive, especially in introducing restrictions, lockdowns, and communicating information about the pandemic. All the statements were first filtered using keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic. This led to identifying 59 records that referred to COVID-19 on the Government Offices of Sweden website within the selected timescale. Those records were further coded and assigned to main categories:

- general information referring to travel restrictions (19 statements),
- referring to the model of crisis management in Sweden (4 statements),
- presenting Sweden as engaged and responsible (27 statements)
- referring to internal regulations within government support to health care and business (6 statements)

Three statements from all 59 records filtered on the government's website were unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic. Two first categories of statements – referring to general information on travel restrictions and those that refer to the Swedish crisis management model were treated as partially overlapping as they strongly highlighted the voluntary character of the restrictions.

The second stage of the qualitative content analysis referred to the Swedish Institute's (SI) social media activity as it is the main state agency responsible for conducting international communication within PD. The SI does not provide official statements similar to those issued by Ministries. Instead, Sweden's official social media accounts on Instagram and Twitter, managed by the SI, were under analysis. Such communication through social media accounts constitutes the main channels of the SI's direct and daily communication with foreign audiences. Therefore, the posts on Sweden's profiles on these two social media platforms were analyzed. In the case of other social media, Sweden also has its profile on Facebook; however, similarly to Twitter, those posts placed on Facebook are strongly compatible with the Instagram account. Thus, the posts are almost identical.

In the case of the SI's social media accounts, the same timescale has been acquired. The posts selected for analysis were chosen based on having any reference to COVID-19 based on the text of the post or the hashtags used. The first stage was to scan the descriptions provided with every post in the selected timescale qualitatively. The hashtags were considered if the text did not include COVID-19 references. Those were #pandemic (this hashtag was used 5,2 M times), #COVID-19 (28,4 M), #covid19 (46,1 M), #coronavirus (36,1 M), #corona (30,8 M), #socialdistancing (13,8 M), #stayathome (20,7 M), #stayhome (56,1 M), #staysafe (38,7 M), #quarantine (30,1 M), #quarantinelifelife (12,5 M), #workfromhome (19,3 M) as those were most frequently used hashtags in social media, based on information available on Instagram when entering the app's browsing option. Additionally, on the Swedish profiles,

other hashtags were identified as well, for example, #wereinthistogether (263 thousand), #solidarity (1,6 M), #vaccination (614 thousand), #dreamnowvisitlater (57,8 thousand), #dreamnowtravellater (136 thousand), #outdooractivities (466 thousand). Those are less frequent, however, indisputably referring to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on chosen filters (the timescale and COVID-19 reference), 106 Instagram posts (out of 641 of all Instagram posts in the chosen timescale) and 66 Twitter posts were selected for analysis (the number of overall posts on Twitter is complex to be assessed because of numerous reposts available on the profile). In the overall number of posts on Instagram, those referring to COVID-19 seem less frequent. However, the SI is quite active on its account, and even during the pandemic, the usual posts were still posted, e.g., referring to other areas significant to the Swedish nation brand and public diplomacy communication.

Qualitative content analysis of official statements by two selected Ministries provided the foundation for further analysis. All those statements were part of day-to-day communication run by the Ministries. They focused on communicating the current pandemic situation in Sweden, steps undertaken by the government to secure citizens and limit the spread of the disease. Narratives and messages identified within Ministries' day-to-day communication were then confronted with day-to-day communication run by the Swedish Institute, responsible for conducting and managing the Swedish PD. Thus, both content analyses allowed confrontation and comparison between two channels of Swedish day-to-day communication focused on the COVID-19 pandemic. This showed how and in which areas both channels were compatible and how day-to-day communication through PD strengthened certain messages issued by the governmental bodies. Obtained results show that public diplomacy can be useful in terms of long-term strategic communication and in building long-lasting and positive bonds with foreign nations. It can serve as an ad-hoc tool of day-to-day communication in a crisis situation, aimed at counteracting potential reputational losses and securing states' international position.

The third stage of the research included semi-structured interviews with the Swedish Institute representatives: Monika Wirkkala, Acting Director of the Department for Sweden Communication; Sofia Bard, Head of the Image of Sweden Analysis Unit; and Lena Allerstam – Head of the Global Communication Unit. Interviews served as an additional source of information on current Swedish PD and how it referred to the pandemic. Interviews can provide more in-depth information and reveal the bigger picture of the PD process. In the end, interviews allowed us to identify the short-term dimension of Swedish public diplomacy during the coronavirus pandemic. They helped explain the correlation between day-to-day communication through social media channels and day-to-day communication run by the government in response to the crisis. At the same time, it helped place the day-to-day communication of the SI within the wider context of the Swedish PD.

Results

Official statements of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) communicated certain messages to foreign audiences during the pandemic. The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (MHSA) was noticeably less active. Of all 59 records, only 6 were the official statements of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, while 53 were statements made by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs representatives. Some of the statements were made by other Ministers (for example, the Minister for International Development Cooperation); however, they are still classified as statements made through the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Analysis of the selected material allowed identification of the main narratives and core messages communicated by the Swedish government as a response to the undergoing crisis. The first category of statements was rather informative and referred to unnecessary travel abroad during the pandemic. It was one of the basic tools for providing current information to citizens and foreigners. However, even in those simple messages, some deeper meanings could have been noticed between words. The statement from 26 August 2020 reads: *‘A high degree of personal responsibility must be taken by travelers regardless of where they travel.’* (MFA, 2020h). The same message was voiced in September when informing about potential travel to Cyprus (MFA, 2020i). This narrative can be related to the character of Swedish crisis management, which relies on social trust and social responsibility. Statements referring to travel restrictions specifically stressed the voluntary nature of restrictions and relied on personal responsibility. Several statements were made already after the first weeks of the pandemic that focused on a clear explanation of the Swedish crisis management model. In April 2020, two statements from the MHSA were made which strongly emphasized the specificity of the Swedish model. The first one, from 15 April 2020, provided a joint statement on journalists’ safety and free access to information during the COVID-19 crisis. The statement reads, *‘Free, independent, and pluralistic media play an indispensable role in informing the public during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Everyone has the right to comprehensible, accessible, timely, and reliable information on the nature and level of threat COVID-19 poses to their health, allowing them to follow evidence-based guidance on how to stay safe.’* (MFA, 2020X). The meaning of free access to information remains a significant element of the Swedish model, which was also strongly accentuated on all official channels provided by the government and on the websites of all specialized agencies. On 29 April 2020, Lena Hallenberg, during a WHO briefing, tried to explain once again all the foundations and mechanisms of the Swedish crisis management model. She referred to the uncertainties already existing in the international discourse about how Sweden responds to this health crisis. During the briefing, five core elements were evoked: the response of Sweden is based on recommendations made by expert agencies, introducing some legal restrictions aimed at protecting the elderly, generous welfare system as a fundament for self-isolation as it allows people to stay at home, aiming at strategies on

a long time perspective and having public trust and finally providing flexible adaptation. She also emphasized that *'There is a tradition of mutual trust between public authorities and citizens. People trust and follow the recommendations of the authorities to a large extent.'* (MHSA, 2020a). The first category of messages issued by the MFA corresponded with the typical day-to-day communication, which provided basic information about steps undertaken by the authorities to respond to the crisis. The decisions made are explained through the lens of the specific character of the Swedish crisis management model, which can also correspond with accentuating Swedish exceptionalism.

The second category of messages the MFA and the MHSA communicated referred to a wide range of Sweden's involvement in international cooperation in counteracting COVID-19 and the potential threats and challenges it has generated. This narrative corresponds closely with the swift change in the field of PD from state-centric to more humanity-driven and based on solidarity and international cooperation, as proposed by Zaharna. In the statement from 9 March 2020, we can read about the government's contribution of 40 million SEK to the World Health Organization's Contingency Fund for Emergencies, whose aim is to strengthen the WHO's ability to act rapidly. Lena Hallengren, Minister of Health and Social Affairs, declared that *'By contributing to the WHO's emergency fund, Sweden is contributing to global efforts to combat health threats and strengthen public health. This increases security internationally and here in Sweden'* (MFA, 2020u). The Swedish government also noticed many negative impacts of the pandemic on a global scale. On 6 May 2020, a joint statement of the ministers of 59 countries was made on Protecting Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Promoting Gender-responsiveness in the COVID-19 crisis, in which it was stated that *'the pandemic worsens existing inequalities for women and girls, as well as discrimination of other marginalized groups (...) and risk impeding the realization of human rights for women and girls. All women and girls' participation, protection, and potential must be at the center of response efforts.'* (MFA, 2020x). Similar statements referring to the need for joint international cooperation that contributes to gender equality and protection of women's rights were made on 3 July (MFA, 2020C), 30 October (MFA, 2020K), 10 November (MFA, 2020L), 24 November (MFA, 2020M) and 25 November (MFA, 2020N), 2020. Analyzing these statements, it can be said that the declared interest in protecting human rights with special regard to women's and girls' rights falls into general policy areas in this country. Sweden has traditionally been focused on defending those rights not only in times of pandemic. It is also one of the narratives provided within Swedish PD, where gender equality is one of the core values communicated to foreign audiences (Jeziarska, Towns, 2018); thus, it is visible how day-to-day communication providing ad hoc response to the crisis through PD corresponds with more long-term and strategic dimensions of PD.

The Swedish government also decided to support the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in providing regional development, stability, and security for Palestinian refugees facing new threats and challenges caused by the COVID-19

pandemic. Such support was highlighted in several statements, among others, on 14 April (MFA, 2020v), 22 April (MFA, 2020w), and 24 June 2020 (MFA, 2020B). Other examples of Swedish engagement in global issues and its responsibility for contributing to a better world were voiced frequently. As the Minister for International Development Cooperation, Peter Eriksson, said at the Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development on 13 May 2020, ‘Sweden has a strong commitment through our bilateral and multilateral development cooperation to address climate change (...) and more sustainably out of the COVID-19 crisis.’ (MFA, 2020y), which again corresponds with the general directions of the Swedish policies focused on building a sustainable world. Sustainability is one of four core profile areas within the Swedish strategy for its promotion abroad (Strategy for Promotion..., 2017).

The government decided to present Sweden as a responsible and engaged actor by communicating actual actions and political decisions that refer to Sweden’s contribution to counteracting the major challenges in Sweden and, more importantly, on a global scale. In October 2020, the government announced a support package worth 170 million SEK to combat global hunger. Peter Eriksson, Minister for International Development Cooperation, said: ‘We are facing the largest hunger catastrophe ever seen. The need for humanitarian relief is increasing as more countries reduce their aid amid the crisis. However, Sweden will stand by the 1% goal and is working actively for more countries to take greater responsibility.’ (MFA, 2020J). Also, 140 million SEK was allocated to combat the negative impact of the pandemic on sexual and reproductive health, especially about African states (MFA, 2020L). Such engagement communicated by the MFA provides evidence of Sweden’s engagement and devotion to resolving major humanitarian challenges and the pandemic’s negative consequences that all humanity shares. Swedish PD narratives fit new trends focused on the humanity level in this field. All this serves to structure a positive Swedish image through positive humanitarian engagement.

In 2021, the Swedish government, similarly to other countries like China, engaged in a general trend of promoting wide access to COVID-19 vaccines. In February 2021, the government announced doubling its financial support to COVAX. We can read in the statement that Sweden, through its aid, wants ‘to make COVID-19 vaccines accessible in low and middle-income countries (...). This is about solidarity (...).’ (MFA, 2021P). Similar statements referring to vaccines and making them more accessible were made numerous times (MFA, 2021R; MFA, 2021S; MFA, 2021U, MFA, 2021V).

The last category of statements made by both Ministries in the selected timescale referred to typically internal aspects and described implemented solutions on a national level, which were aimed at supporting business and health care and thus are not significant in terms of international communication (MFA, 2020Y; MFA, 2020Z; MFA, 2020ii; MHSA, 2020c; MHSA, 2020d).

Sweden’s social media communication. Swedish Institute, which is responsible for communicating with Sweden abroad and managing the process of PD, is also responsible

for administering social media channels. Within the selected timescale, 66 Twitter posts on the @swedense account were identified as referring to the COVID-19 pandemic compared to 106 posts on the @swedense account on Instagram. The posts are duplicated; those posted on Instagram are also posted on Twitter, however, often in a shortened version.

Analyzing the content of the posts placed on social networks reveals that such channels are used to send quite similar messages to those that were identified in the official statements made by the MFA and MHSA. Many posts focused on promoting self-isolation, staying home, social distancing, personal responsibility, and voluntarily following the government's recommendations, which all stand for the specific character of the Swedish crisis management system. For example, in a post from 26 March 2020, we see elderly neighbors drinking coffee together on a staircase while keeping a safe distance (Instagram, 26 March 2020). What is more, by presenting many examples of grass-root origin initiatives of responding to or combating COVID-19, the day-to-day communication focused in general on promoting the main narratives of the government that referred to solidarity, engagement, and responsibility at the same time showing the role played by the citizens in the process of crisis management. This one corresponds with the humanitarian-driven PD during the crisis. For example, a post from 17 March 2020 was about a local initiative to assist people affected by COVID-19, e.g., from high-risk groups (Instagram, 17 March 2020). On 9 May 2020, a post about Europe Day was published, where it can be read: *'Today is Europe Day, but let's turn it into World Day! Let's celebrate peace and unity all around the globe! Unity is more vital than ever, with the coronavirus crisis putting cooperation between countries to the test. (...) We're in this together!'* (Instagram, 9 May 2020). Several days later, a post was published about Skania. In this Swedish company, employees can enjoy additional layoffs to volunteer and help during the coronavirus pandemic (Instagram, 12 May 2020). A similar solution was introduced in SAS (Instagram, 25 April 2020). Also, a post from 20 April 2020 about Princess Sofia working as a volunteer at Sphiahemmet Hospital in Stockholm was supposed to promote solidarity and unity in fighting against the coronavirus (Instagram, 20 April 2020). However, some of the posts were rarely used to strengthen the government's messages, referring to the introduced restrictions. Posts on traditional holidays in Sweden were used mainly for this purpose, such as the post from 16 June 2020, in which the government's recommendations to avoid gatherings were presented in the context of one of the most significant holidays in Sweden, Midsummer (Instagram, June 18, 2020). All those elements are strongly embedded in the Swedish-specific national character as well as the character of the political system where the government can enjoy relatively high levels of social trust, and civil society is actively engaged in public and political life.

Another interesting initiative within the Instagram @swedense profile was to use the already well-established #SwedishWordOfTheDay cycle, which uses social media for language promotion about the pandemic. Many promoted words referred strongly to the pandemic context, like *möte*, which means meeting. The post related this word to the pandemic and the potential of using many digital tools that provide opportunities for online meetings and

keeping social distance or self-isolation (Instagram, 19 March 2020). Similar posts with #SwedishWordOfTheDay were frequently posted throughout the selected timescale (Instagram, 23 March 2020; Instagram, 24 March 2020; Instagram, 28 March 2020; Instagram, 8 April 2020; 30 September 2020; Instagram, 9 February 2021). Using already established tools of communication suggests that day-to-day ad hoc communication tackling a crisis can be effectively combined with those tools in use. In the case of a pandemic, it was expected that it would last for a longer time, thus making it vital to combine both dimensions – day-to-day and more long-term and strategic. Such a combination makes communication more effective, convincing, and reliable.

The Swedish Institute. The Swedish Institute currently focuses on innovation, sustainability, culture, and democracy in its communication process within PD (Interview with Lena Allerstam...). Looking at the activity of the SI in social media during the coronavirus pandemic, the coronavirus narratives seemed to be correlated with those core areas of communication, thus combining both dimensions of the Swedish PD.

Lena Allerstam, Head of the Global Communication Unit, highlighted that the SI is not a tool for crisis management. However, considering the impact of corona and its global range, the SI's representatives admitted it was impossible not to react to the new situation. She declared that:

We realized quite fast at the beginning of the pandemic that we had to adapt the communication due to the global circumstances (...), so we had a focus on solidarity, like people helping each other, helping elderly people with shopping (...) and also innovation and innovative initiatives from the business, like flight attendants starting short education course in hospital to be able to support hospitals (...) Showing how the whole society switched during that time. We do not normally communicate what the government is about to do (...). However, there were certain regulations about the coronavirus restrictions, so if you look at our website, we still have an article titled "Sweden and Corona – in brief.

Lena Allerstam, Head of Global Communication Unit, SI

According to this, it may be assessed that the SI, while conducting its regular work, has also functioned as a specific supplementary tool of day-to-day communication. Since the pandemic occurred as a new everyday reality, it was incorporated within the usual areas of strategic communication. The messages that were communicated focused on areas that were accentuated in the government's official statements. For example, during the pandemic, social media profiles focused mostly on strengthening the messages about the necessity of social distancing, self-isolating, or following the recommendations made by the government. Another significant motivation for the raised social media activity was to *communicate how the Swedish society adapted to all the restrictions that we had to live with. Moreover, we*

had on Instagram what we called *Word Of The Day*, for example, “ute gym” [outdoor gym]’. Monika Wirkkala, Acting Director of the Department for Sweden Communication, added that the SI generally focuses on building trust in Sweden. Therefore, social media presents everyday life in Sweden (Interview with Monika Wirkkala...). During the pandemic, this focus did not change, and since everyday life looked different because of the coronavirus, the profiles on Instagram or Twitter had to reflect that. The second aspect can relate to criticism towards Sweden resulting from its distinctive crisis management strategy. Taking into consideration the rather high number of deaths in comparison to other states, trust in Sweden could have been undermined. Showing through social media that the government is encouraging its citizens to undertake specific safety measures can be perceived as a way of convincing the foreign public that the criticism of the Swedish model is not ineffective.

Using already existing communication tools can also be exemplified by the #quarantinedads initiative. It refers strongly to the earlier idea of Swedish dads, a photo exhibition that visited tens of cities worldwide. This initiative was established by photographer Johan Bävman, who decided to portray fathers who stayed with their children at home for six months during their parental leave. The exhibition toured internationally with the SI as it presents significant values constituting the Swedish brand, in this case, gender equality and generous welfare. During the pandemic, #quarantinedads was introduced by the Swedish Embassy in Pakistan in March 2020, followed by Uganda, Cuba, Italy, Kenya, Finland, and Jordan (The Swedish Institute, 2021).

An important role that the SI played during the pandemic was to analyze the international media and identify potential criticism in international media outlets regarding managing the Swedish crisis and the level of restrictions. In general, according to the SI's analysis, international media reporting was rather neutral; however, in May 2020, much criticism occurred due to the high number of deaths caused by the coronavirus. *‘The responsibility of the SI is rather to monitor international media and social media and report it to the government only, and the Swedish Institute does not react to this information.’* (Interview with Sofia Bard...). Although the SI's main priority is not reacting to crises or engaging in crisis management, taking into consideration the content of the posts on social media, it can be assumed that the SI, providing day-to-day communication on its social media platforms, tried to strengthen messages issued by the government as well as combine both dimensions of day-to-day communication and long-term strategic communication under crisis.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research analyzed Sweden's day-to-day communication within the PD framework during the COVID-19 pandemic. Particular focus was placed on the meaning of the day-to-day dimension of PD during a crisis and how it can contribute to the general process of crisis management and communication with external recipients. Sweden's reputation is strong and

well-established internationally; however, at the beginning of the pandemic, some international media outlets criticized Sweden for its distinctive handling of the crisis, accusing the government of following a herd immunity strategy and not reacting to the threats sufficiently. The SI noticed the risk of potential reputational and image losses, which kept analyzing international reporting about Sweden and forwarded the information to the MFA.

As the theoretical basis for the investigation, an explanation of public diplomacy's three dimensions was used with special regard to day-to-day communication as well as new perspectives on PD during a significant global crisis, namely the COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus pandemic dominated world politics for more than two years and had an overwhelming impact on societies and economies all around the globe. It was not only a health crisis, but as a result of strict lockdowns and other restrictions, it led to serious economic, financial, and, finally, social crises. Most states, even those perceived as wealthy and well-prepared for the crisis, did not manage to handle all the risks and negative effects of the pandemic. As Zaharna (2022) states, the international public focused on how states behaved in the wake of one of the biggest health crises in recent decades and how they managed to handle it. These aspects had a significant influence on their perceptions of other states. Strictly speaking, governments quickly became aware that positioning their states as united, in solidarity with others, and focused on humanity can contribute to their soft power and create a strong external image. Such attitudes were visible in many cases, such as China, which quickly positioned itself as devoted to humanitarian assistance through health diplomacy. It sent medical equipment and medical staff to other developing countries in need and later embarked on vaccine diplomacy. Already at the end of March 2020, China provided masks to 120 countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2020), including Huawei, Alibaba Foundation, and ZTE, sending masks to Italy, Netherlands, and Spain (Kobierecka, Kobierecki, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced the perspectives and meaning of PD and generated new possibilities for it. Nicholas Cull (2022) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic provided a new space for implementing multiple strategies to maximize advantage, build soft power, and secure states' reputational security. Cull identified four main strategies of communication during the pandemic: praising the self, criticizing the other, engaging others through gifts, and initiating multilateral cooperation. At least some of these narratives were identified within the Swedish government and the SI's communication patterns during the pandemic.

The content analysis of the official statements issued by the Swedish MFA and the MHSA allowed the identification of the main narratives of the government during the pandemic, which were:

1. Explaining the specificity of the Swedish crisis management model during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current pandemic is not the only occasion where specific behavior patterns are observed in Sweden. According to Lawler (1997), the idea of a particular Nordic way of doing things was a central point in constructing national

- identity. It seems that during this specific crisis, even though the source of criticism towards Sweden derived from its distinctiveness, the Swedish Institute decided to use this argument for its own sake still. The specific system of crisis management was widely communicated in international media by the MFA, the SI, and others. The official line stressed different aspects of the specific Swedish system and its national character to spread knowledge and understanding of the Swedish way of handling the pandemic. Even the latest brochure from the Swedish Institute addressed to foreign publics within the Swedish PD communication is entitled 'Sweden. A country less ordinary' (Sharing Sweden, 2022), which can be used as a strengthening message, supporting this specific distinctiveness argument in defense of such a different COVID-19 strategy. Such communication focused on Swedish distinctiveness can be identified as an element of counteracting negative press and potential image losses. Moreover, it also resembles niche diplomacy, where a state identifies its specific resources, in this case specifically driven distinctiveness, and focuses on them to secure the best outcome (Cooper, 1997).
2. Presenting Sweden as an engaged and responsible actor through communicating the Swedish government's donations or engagement in international cooperative endeavors. Praising self and inspiring multilateral cooperation corresponds with Cull's observations referring to new strategies of communication during a pandemic. Presenting Sweden as an engaged and responsible actor was visible in its government's and Swedish Institute's actions. MFA reported about financial aid contributed to the WHO or within bilateral cooperation, about providing assets in fighting against gender inequalities additionally exacerbated by the pandemic and engaging in international initiatives combating all the non-health related negative consequences of the pandemic. At the same time, these narratives stay in line with the core strategic and long-term communication within PD and Sweden's foreign policy.

Both main messages communicated by Sweden can be perceived as elements of combining day-to-day communication (delivering current information about restrictions in force and recommendations) with strategic communication providing a long-term perspective, mostly about international engagement and cooperation of the Swedish government in contributing to the humanity, in this specific case during corona crisis and through providing health and humanitarian assistance. These messages reached foreign audiences intending to influence their perceptions by presenting Swedish foreign contributions. In the interviews conducted at the Swedish Institute, this narrative has been confirmed:

Taking the lead in a way that is responsible for what is happening and being able to contribute is also important to us and for our identity today. To convey that we are a global actor, that we don't do things just for ourselves, and that we like to

find common solutions together. We are such a small country that we must reach out; we can do wonders if we work together.

Monika Wirkkala, Acting Director of the Department
for Sweden Communication, SI

Another stage of the research was a content analysis of social media channels managed by the SI, additionally supported by interviews conducted in the SI. This part focused mostly on the day-to-day communication through social media channels within the Swedish PD. The interviewees from the SI stated clearly that the activity of the Institute is not aimed at managing the crisis, nor even responding to potential disinformation and negative effects it can cause, but is focused on strategic communication in a long-term perspective. However, the qualitative content analysis of the SI's social media posts, which can be perceived as a day-to-day communication tool, identified numerous responses to the coronavirus crisis. Moreover, communication through social media corresponded with core narratives provided by the MFA and MHSA, serving as a supporting tool for communication during crises. These narratives are additionally strengthened through day-to-day communication provided by the SI and its social media channels. SI frequently commented on the need and significance of solidarity, being united in the fight against COVID-19, and supporting all groups at higher risk. The most visible theme referred to personal responsibility, which provided a foundation for the government's explanation of the specificity and exceptionalism of the Swedish model. The posts encouraged both Swedes and foreign recipients to self-isolate, keep social distance, and follow travel restrictions. In general, as was also said during the interviews, social media reflected the actual life of Swedes during the pandemic and adjusted the content of posts to the reality of the pandemic. Another aspect is solidarity, where numerous posts on Instagram have promoted international solidarity and cooperation in fighting the coronavirus crisis and its negative impact. This corresponds directly with the narratives and communication provided by Sweden during the coronavirus crisis.

Referring to the three dimensions of public diplomacy, it can be said that strategic communication and lasting relationships are PD's core areas. However, day-to-day communication, especially during a crisis, gained additional meaning. What should be noted here is that the reference to traditional patterns can be observed within the core communication channels of the Swedish Institute. The main narratives remained the same. However, the context of the pandemic was strongly incorporated into this everyday communication with foreign audiences. On the other hand, messages issued through day-to-day social media communication corresponded with the wider context of the Swedish PD and referred to its core values. Promoting social distancing through digital tools, which is related to the highly developed innovation in Sweden, engaging in international cooperation to limit the negative effects of the pandemic on gender equality, women's rights, children's rights, and refugees can serve as an example. Thus, the communication provided by the SI combined

both dimensions of strategic communication (based on core values and areas of public diplomacy and Sweden's promotion abroad) with its day-to-day elements, referring to how Sweden functions in the specific context of the pandemic and corresponding with the governmental narratives.

Considering the analysis results, it is visible that the day-to-day dimension of the Swedish PD is rooted in the official narratives presented in the governmental releases, thus serving as an additional and supportive tool for managing this serious health crisis. Furthermore, day-to-day communication within the Swedish PD during the coronavirus crisis corresponded significantly with the wider context of strategic communication based on long-term relationship building with external recipients. Thus, day-to-day communication used tools and rhetoric within the Swedish PD to communicate how the pandemic was handled in Sweden. For example, since innovation is a strong element of the Swedish brand communicated to external recipients, it was used in social media to show how it can assist in the self-isolation and protection of the elderly in Sweden. In this sense, day-to-day communication was considered strategic communication elements and supported the crisis management process, especially in potential image or reputation loss. According to the surveys conducted by the SI on how Sweden was perceived during the pandemic, a general conclusion was made that negative media reporting did not significantly influence in long-term its image and reputation; this suggests that the use of social media channels and everyday communication in managing image and reputation can prove successful. The case of Sweden also suggests that the day-to-day dimension of PD can be effective if combined with long-term strategic communication and uses core narratives and messages to strengthen the general tone of communication. As it was revealed through the interviews and in the example of Sweden, overall communication should reflect the actual life of a society; thus, a crisis generates new context and new content for such. In the case of Sweden, being at risk of reputational loss, using social media and everyday communication channels was incorporated into the usual and already well-known values and messages used within Swedish PD, which made it more credible and well-thought. The Swedish evidence can serve as a good practice and benchmark on how to adjust public diplomacy and external communication on different levels, so it can be a useful and effective tool for managing potential negative reputational consequences of a crisis.

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