

Middle Power Influence in International Narrative Competition

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Abstract:

In the international community, middle powers, due to their relatively limited hard power such as military strength and economic scale, often find it difficult to exert significant influence on the international agenda solely through traditional means of power. However, the ingenious application of soft power, especially through the construction and dissemination of persuasive strategic narratives, has become an important means for middle powers to influence the international community and shape external perceptions. Based on an in-depth review of the theories related to soft power and strategic narrative, this article proposes the “Narrative Impact Model” and takes Ukraine’s diplomacy towards Germany as a case study to analyze how it has, to a certain extent, promoted the adjustment of Germany’s energy policy through strategic narrative. The analysis in this article indicates that through strategic narrative competition, middle powers can reshape their image, guide public opinion, and influence decision-making on the international stage, thereby making up, to a certain extent, for the deficiency of hard power and achieving international influence beyond the scope of their traditional strength.

Keywords: Russia–Ukraine relations; Germany; middle powers; strategic narrative; soft power.

1. Introduction

In international competition and exchanges, hard power - that is, military, economic and resource control - has always been the fundamental backing for a country’s survival and security. However, for middle powers with relatively insufficient hard power, they are defined as countries that have limited influence globally but possess certain mediation and promotion capabilities in specific regions or issues, such as Can-

ada, Australia, South Korea and Ukraine [1]. They find it difficult to influence the international order or directly counter the pressure from great powers by their traditional strength alone. To safeguard their own interests and strategic space, these countries often tend to employ „soft“ tools such as cultural diplomacy and strategic narratives. By shaping international public opinion, enhancing value resonance and expanding moral influence, they aim to make up for their deficiencies in hard power, seek external

support and improve their agenda-setting and discourse power in the international environment and specific affairs. After the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, Ukraine, as a middle power with relatively limited national strength, launched systematic public diplomacy actions in the international public opinion field. Germany is a core country of the European Union and has long been dependent on Russia for energy. Coupled with its high sensitivity to historical responsibilities during World War II, it has become a key target for Ukraine's diplomatic efforts. This study focuses on the operational mechanism of Ukraine's public diplomacy towards Germany, exploring how the construction of its strategic narrative influences German public opinion and, to a certain extent, has an indirect impact on the country's government policies.

Specifically, this study focuses on three interrelated dimensions: First, how the Ukrainian government constructs its strategic narrative and shapes its national image; Secondly, through what channels does the Ukrainian government disseminate its narrative? Finally, how does this narrative infiltration influence the German political decision-making level and grassroots groups, and thereby interact with Germany's collective EU action logic, existing energy security considerations, and historical reflection awareness.

By analyzing this case study, this paper constructs a three-level narrative influence model for middle powers, which includes the narrative construction layer, the media dissemination layer, and the target country embedding layer. It attempts to provide a new theoretical perspective for understanding public opinion games and asymmetric diplomatic interactions in international crises and is also committed to providing empirical support for the „narrative competition“ theory in the field of international relations. Through systematic analysis, this model will become a new theoretical analysis framework that is more explanatory, more practical, and more applicable, to deepen the understanding of the operation mechanism of narrative power in international politics.

2. Literature Review

In contemporary international relations and public diplomacy practices, „soft power“ has long been regarded as an important source of a country's influence. In its public diplomacy towards Germany, Ukraine has been using „soft power“ as the core means, striving to win the sympathy and support of German society through emotional narratives, historical metaphors and cultural dissemination, and further promoting the transformation of Germany's stance on energy policy and military aid. Joseph Nye proposed the concept of soft power in 1990, which refers to

the ability to influence other countries through cultural, value and policy means rather than military or economic ones [2]. Soft power, especially in the post-Cold War era, has become an important theoretical basis for countries to promote public diplomacy. Governments of various countries have been shaping positive national images, spreading soft power, and seeking international support through media, educational exchanges, cultural exports and other means [2]. However, the traditional theory of soft power overly emphasizes the static characteristics of resource accumulation and „attractiveness“, focusing more on the assessment of the total amount of „resources“ such as cultural projects, the number of international students, and the coverage of international media. It can be said that the effect depends on the active acceptance of the target audience. However, there is a lack of mechanism analysis on how attraction translates into behavioral change [3].

To overcome this limitation, the academic community has proposed the concept of „strategic narrative“, aiming to shift attention from the „static resources“ of soft power to the active construction, dissemination, and acceptance mechanisms of narratives. It emphasizes that the core of international influence does not merely lie in how „valuable“ the culture or values themselves are, thereby generating appeal. The key lies in how to organically integrate this resource information into a complete, coherent, and persuasive narrative, thereby shaping the international community's understanding of a certain country's role, policy goals and future vision [3]. This kind of narrative not only includes externally projected stories such as „guardians of human rights“ and „leaders of green transformation“, but also must consider self-positioning and external interpretation at different levels such as international system narrative, national narrative, and issue narrative, to effectively achieve the transformation of influence. Unlike traditional soft power which mainly relies on passive „attraction“, strategic narrative is an extremely active and strategic way of influence. It shapes the cognitive framework and value judgment of the audience through narrative construction. At the same time, strategic narrative places greater emphasis on the initiative of the „receiving end“, that is, the interpretation, acceptance and even resistance of the narrative, rather than merely assuming that the audience will passively accept the content being disseminated [3]. Therefore, strategic narrative is not only a natural extension of soft power in the new media environment and the global communication landscape, but also an important revision and deepening of the theory of soft power. The evolution of theoretical trends from soft power to strategic narrative reflects the academic community's concern over public diplomacy's response to the international communication environment, the complexity

of the audience, and the intensification of discourse competition. This transformation enables the country to shape its international image and build legitimacy through narrative in a more systematic and flexible manner, and ultimately achieve a deep-level transformation of influence and the realization of policy goals.

However, there are still two significant theoretical blind spots in the existing research: First, the focus of strategic narrative research is overly concentrated on the geopolitical competition among great powers. For instance, it pays more attention to how the United States establishes its global leadership through the narrative of „freedom and democracy“ values and how China builds the new order concept of a community with a shared future through the Belt and Road initiative. Research on how middle powers can strive to exert influence on others through soft power under the condition of limited hard power is relatively limited.

Secondly, most of the existing analyses remain at the level of interpreting narrative content and surface texts such as diplomatic statements, media speeches, political speeches and official documents, lacking an examination of how the narratives constructed by a country are specifically embedded in the internal political structure of the target country. For instance, how a middle power influences the decision-making path of a major country through the narrative strategy of evoking the specific historical memory of the target country. A systematic analytical framework and verification model still need to be established. This paper constructs a „three-layer model of narrative influence“, taking Ukraine’s public diplomacy towards Germany as a case, and attempts to reveal how middle powers like Ukraine specifically influence the policy agenda and social cognition of target countries through mechanisms such as narrative construction, media dissemination, and internal embedding, thereby filling this research gap at both the theoretical and practical levels.

3. Narrative Influence Model of Middle Power

On the international stage, although middle powers cannot compete with great powers in terms of hard power resources, they can indirectly influence the policy-making of target countries through ingenious strategic narratives. Based on the „strategic narrative“ theory of Miskimmon et al. and taking the specific case of Ukraine’s public diplomacy towards Germany as a reference, this paper proposes a three-level narrative influence model applicable to middle powers, emphasizing the progressive influence path of narrative construction, media dissemination, and

target country embedding. This „Narrative Influence Model“ aims to explain the process by which middle-income countries shape the policy environment of target countries through systematic narrative strategies in the context of resource asymmetry. This model consists of three interrelated and progressive layers, namely the narrative construction layer, the media dissemination layer and the target country embedding layer.

The first layer is the narrative construction layer, which is the „production end“ of strategic narrative. This layer mainly addresses the issue of „what story to tell“ and serves as the foundation of the entire model. That is, how a country, around a specific event or international dispute, constructs a narrative framework with emotional, symbolic and moral features to explain its position to the outside world and strive for international recognition [4,5]. For instance, by shaping the country as a „victim“, „pursuer of freedom“ or „guardian of justice“, a kind national image can be established in international public opinion and a moral high ground can be occupied. At the same time, by choosing specific narratives and symbols that can evoke emotional resonance in some countries, the country is placed in a position unified with the target group to enhance its appeal and persuasiveness.

The second layer is the media communication layer, which is the „channel end“ of narrative communication. Its core function is to solve the problem of „how narratives reach the audience group“ and play the role of a connecting hub in the model. In the international context, middle powers usually cannot rely on their monopolistic position in global media as major countries do for extensive communication, which forces them to adopt more innovative and cost-effective communication strategies. On the one hand, by leveraging digital diplomacy tools, such as Posting pictures and text on social media, narrative content is disseminated in an immediate, visual and emotional way, bypassing the filtering mechanism of traditional media and directly reaching the audience [4]. This communication model not only has a lower cost but also bypasses the media monopoly barriers dominated by traditional great powers, enhancing the sensitivity of the narrative among the target group.

On the other hand, middle powers often achieve customized and precise communication through specific diplomatic occasions and multilateral communication platforms. The leadership group will proactively utilize diplomatic networks to disseminate carefully constructed narratives in the language of the target country and ingeniously incorporate local cultural symbols to enhance emotional resonance. Or one can also leverage influential local public events, communities or opinion leaders and other channels to expand the coverage of information and

achieve in-depth penetration of the narrative in the target society. In addition, middle powers can also effectively disseminate the narratives they have constructed by establishing in-depth cooperation with international media, for instance, by providing pre-prepared materials that are specialized and conducive to the promotion of their own narratives [5]. The above is only some of the communication methods that can be used in middle powers. Compared with the traditional „broadcast-style“ one-way publicity, an increasing number of middle powers tend to proactively explore their own advantages and effectively convey their national narratives to the target groups through diversified channels. The combination of point-to-point penetration strategies and multi-information source verification mechanisms has become an important path to enhance the credibility of narratives and the effectiveness of communication.

Thirdly, the target country embedding layer, which is the „influence end“ where the narrative ultimately takes root, is the terminal layer of the model. The focus of this layer lies in the issue of „how stories change policies“, which is also the terminal layer of the model. The key feature is to enable the narrative to have a substantial impact directly or indirectly in the political environment of the target country through an active embedding strategy. Middle powers can, through means such as issue grafting and elite interaction, embed their own narratives into the political timing and characteristics within the target country that are conducive to the dissemination of their own narratives, such as political differences and historical factors, and strategically integrate their own narratives into their decision-making environment, thereby influencing their policy-making process to a certain extent. Unlike traditional narrative theories that focus on the transformation of audience attitudes, this layer emphasizes the substantive institutional responses and action adjustments formed in policy games, that is, from „hearing“ to „adopting“.

4. Case Study Analysis

The three-tier narrative influence model explains from three dimensions: narrative construction, media communication, and target country embedding how middle powers can break through objective resource limitations through strategic narratives and influence the policy directions of powerful countries in unequal international relations. The specific cases of Ukraine's public diplomacy towards Germany can precisely verify and present the operational mechanisms and actual effects of the above three levels.

In its narrative construction, Ukraine not only blindly portrays itself as a victim to the international community to win sympathy, but also successfully constructs its own

security crisis as a regional threat with diffusivity [5]. This narrative strategy was reflected in the speech given by the president of Ukraine to the European Parliament, where he warned that „if Ukraine falls, Europe will no longer be safe.“ This highlighted the narrative core that „Ukraine is not only its own war but also a common war for Europe,“ thereby closely binding Ukraine's survival issue with the overall security of Europe and successfully evoking a collective sense of crisis in European society. This narrative not only highlights Ukraine's disadvantaged image as a „victim“, but also elevates the Russia-Ukraine conflict to another struggle for „defending civilization“ in the continuation of European history, continuing the long-standing perception in Europe that Ukraine is a security barrier for Eastern Europe. On the other hand, in terms of values, the president of Ukraine frequently uses keywords such as „freedom“, „democracy“, and „aggression“, shaping himself as a frontline fortress defending freedom and democracy in Europe, thereby transforming national security issues into value-defending actions for the „free world“ community. This elevates the narrative of the Ukraine crisis to a war to defend a „free destiny“, thereby reducing the resistance of Germany and the European political circle and society to war aid. For example, the German Finance Minister referred to renewable energy as „freedom energy,“ and the German Green Party's call to „liberate from fossil fuels is to defend freedom“ both illustrate this effectiveness [6]. This narrative strategy not only shaped Ukraine's positive and just international image, endowing it with moral legitimacy, but also successfully consolidated the support of Germany and even the entire European society for Ukraine at most levels, laying a more solid public opinion foundation for the energy transition and sanctions against Russia.

During the media communication stage, Ukraine attaches great importance to the cross-border dissemination of narratives. In its target country, Germany, it has adopted a multi-channel and multi-level communication strategy. Firstly, at the high-level political communication level, Ukraine is adept at using emotional visualization communication strategies. For instance, in his video speech to the German parliament, Ukraine's president presented images of post-war ruins and called on Germany to „stop paying for Russian energy“, transforming abstract geopolitical issues into concrete emotional impacts and allowing the narrative to directly reach the core circle of decision-making. This emotional mobilization strategy of presenting images directly led to a sharp increase in the discussion volume of related topics on the German Twitter platform on the day of the speech, greatly stimulating the emotional resonance of the German people. Secondly, the application of social media platforms has also effectively contrib-

uted to the improvement of communication effectiveness. Ukrainian president maintains an average of 3 to 5 updates per day on his personal twitter account to release war information. The content includes pictures of children in hospitals to show the harm of the war to civilians, as well as touching stories of Ukrainian soldiers fighting bravely against the enemy during the war. This communication strategy enables the Ukrainian narrative not only to reach the political elite circle but also to reach a broader public. Form a multi-level communication strategy, so that the situation in Ukraine is not only seen by German parliamentarians but also directly known to the public, thereby exerting strong social public opinion pressure on the target country's government [5,7]. In addition, the narrative coverage is further expanded through breakthrough communication in the cultural field. In 2022, the president of Ukraine appeared at the 64th Grammy Awards ceremony via video link. The Grammy Awards is a top cultural event with a global viewership of over 90 million. Its audience covers the middle class and young people in Europe and America, and it is also a symbol of the West's soft power. Ukrainian president chose to give the relevant speech on this platform rather than in a traditional political setting, aiming to achieve a „cross-circle“ reach with audiences from non-political circles [7]. In his speech, he did not use abstruse professional military terms. Instead, he told the story of Ukrainian musicians wearing bulletproof vests and singing for the wounded and the deceased during the war, indicating that music is becoming a silent weapon against war. This emotionally rich narrative is more likely to evoke emotional resonance among people in the cultural and artistic fields, enhancing Ukraine's narrative dissemination and penetration in this area.

After completing the narrative construction and dissemination, Ukraine has further achieved an „embedded influence“ on Germany. That is, by influencing the policy discussion framework and public opinion within Germany, it ingeniously responds to the long-standing German society's recognition of core values such as freedom, democracy, and human rights, and forms a narrative alliance and consensus with environmentalist organizations and policies that criticize the country's reliance on Russian energy. This indirectly promotes a policy shift. In 2000, Germany enacted the Renewable Energy Act (EEG), aiming to phase out nuclear and coal-fired power generation and shift towards renewable energy. It aims to reduce the long-term reliance on imported fossil energy. Even before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, Germany had already planned to accelerate the deployment of renewable energy and set a target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 65% by 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2045 [8]. This means that even before large-scale public diplomacy,

Germany had planned to gradually reduce its energy reliance on Russia. In the process of narrative dissemination, Ukraine has gone with the flow, reaching a consensus between Germany's own policy shift trend and Ukraine's „de-Russification“, and embedding its own demands into the German political agenda. At the same time, Ukraine often amplifies the risk of energy weaponization in the Russia-Ukraine war at the aforementioned media dissemination level, which echoes the domestic concerns over energy security in Germany and further boosts the priority of related domestic agendas [9].

More strategically, Ukraine has gradually changed Germany's long-standing perception of the rationality of its reliance on Russian energy by reconstructing moral discourse and drawing on German history, transforming the issue of energy cooperation between Russia and Germany into a topic of moral responsibility. After the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in 2022, Ukrainian officials cited Germany's core historical statements such as „never war“ and „never tyranny“ after the war, placing Germany's reliance on Russian energy within the framework of „historical responsibility“ [10]. For instance, ambassador of Ukraine to Germany publicly questioned the authenticity of Germany's „never repeat“ commitment. President of Ukraine also used the metaphor of the Berlin Wall in his speech at the German Bundestag, comparing Germany's reliance on Russian energy to a „new wall“ and directly linking Germany's current policies to the lessons of World War II history. This has shaped the energy cooperation between Russia and Germany into a „moral burden“ imposed on Germany, directly evoking a strong historical emotional resonance among the German public, awakening Germany's identity as a „free leader“, and prompting Germans to view their reliance on Russian energy as an act of „funding the aggressor“, making the change in energy policy towards Russia more urgent and legitimate [9,11].

Since 2022, Germany's energy imports from Russia have sharply declined. The German government has begun to accelerate its energy transition policy and increase military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. It claims that Russia is no longer a reliable energy trading partner, which is clear evidence of the institutional impact of embedding itself in the target country [12,13]. Therefore, Ukraine's public diplomacy does not exert a one-way influence during its dissemination process. Instead, it interacts and resonates with the existing social issues and environmental protection movements within Germany. This embedded communication strategy ultimately forms a cross-national public opinion and policy-making linkage effect, demonstrating the unique influence of a middle power in the competition of geopolitical narratives.

5. Conclusion

Although middle powers have limited resources, they can still exert a continuous and profound influence on the policy directions within major and powerful countries through carefully designed narrative and communication mechanisms. Through the systematic operation of narrative construction, media communication and target country embedding in the three-layer narrative construction model, Ukraine, despite its significant disadvantages in resources and strength, still influenced Germany's policy towards Russia and the adjustment of its energy strategy to a certain extent under the background of the Russia-Ukraine conflict through meticulous narrative construction, multi-level media communication channels and specific embedding policies towards Germany. This can be called the successful application of Ukraine's „smart power“, which verifies the theoretical feasibility of the „Three-tier narrative influence Model of middle powers“. The case of Ukraine's public diplomacy towards Germany shows that middle powers do not merely passively accept the international order or the will of major powers. Instead, they can exert a significant impact beyond traditional hard power through the interaction of systematic narrative strategies with internal factors of the target country.

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