

WORDS, IMAGES AND IDENTITIES: COMPETING FOR INFLUENCE INTO THE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION REALM

Ioana LEUCEA

Social Sciences Department, Mihai Viteazul” National Intelligence Academy, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract: *The article intends to discuss the concept of identity when speaking about strategic communication within the realm of international politics and to propose a framework to systemize the messages which speak louder for certain audiences or determine the expected results of the communicator. A basic definition of power envisages the ability to accomplish certain goals by using certain instruments of power (of identity?). When referring to strategic communication arena, we wonder why certain messages are considered strategic, while others are perceived as noise. Why some messages have profound effects on people while others have no meaning? To answer to the questions formulated above, we propose a framework of analysis correlated to concepts like identity, state - system, identification theory and legitimacy in order to decipher why certain messages are strategic silver bullets while others are not.*

Keywords: *personal identity; social-identity; state - system; legitimacy; strategic messages*

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of strategic communication, correlated to concepts like propaganda, fake-news, disinformation, manipulation, has recently become in Romania and worldwide a sound thematic. As well within the realm of international politics, the challenges for democracies are related mostly to phenomena like populism, extremism, radicalism or sovereigntism. For instance, the “ideology of sovereignty” won when speaking about BREXIT, a major political event for the international politics scene and of biggest importance for the European Union. Influencing people’s political choices becomes a tool for achieving certain political goals, and not only for the internal political arena where parties competing during electoral campaigns may exploit identity narratives, yet for the international global actors as well, the result having profound influences in designing the future world society.

The concept of identity we employ when speaking about strategic communication within the realm of international politics involves a framework of systematization of identities in accordance with the configuration of identities of the targeted audience. In order to generate the expected results, the identities of the audience have major importance. The messages should be

addressed to a certain public and configured in such a manner that the public to resonate with its.

The framework of analysis we propose is correlated to concepts like personal identity and social identity, national-state identity, identification and legitimacy.

2. NATIONAL-STATE IDENTITY AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

At the beginning of the 20th century an important principle was adopted by the international society as an organizing social category: national collective identity. As the collective identities configured by the nation-state system have been generated during history by the elites, the process being most of the time a top-down approach, nowadays we may asses that the process is reversed. Nowadays we believe that the collective identities are generated by a bottom-up approach, starting with the personal level and then collectively aggregated. The identification process is required in order collective identities to emerge.

Perceived within the European Union context, the identity issue is challenged by the variety of interpretations: national identity, European identity, multiple identities and citizenships, and so on. The theme of national identity of a Romanian-born citizen, for instance, living in another country, becoming a citizen of another country, speaking

another language, accommodating to another country's culture, is very hard to be defined. What is national identity nowadays? Should we acknowledge that fundamental changes in conceiving personal and national identity have occurred recently?

When speaking about national identity, diverse specialists reveal that nationalism fetishizes the nation in the form of a "we" – identity (Fuchs, 2020:22-23):

the nation is a part of human essence and that is distinguished from enemies (outsiders, other nations, immigrants, refugees, etc.) who are presented as intruders, aliens, sub-humans, uncivilized, parasites, criminals, terrorists, etc. in order to deflect attention from class contradictions and power inequalities.

On the other hand, the scholars analyzing populism consider that the political phenomenon is characteristic for the 21st century and that the populist leaders have succeed to disturb traditional models and practices of electoral competition within occidental societies (Norris & Inglehart, 2019: 3). The most dramatic case of populism they perceived to be the election of Donald Trump as US president. In the European context, the anti-immigration and xenophobic politics are assimilated with the populist movements, while in Latin America, populism is associated with political clientelism. Populism is perceived as an ideology, as a movement or as a syndrome (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017:2).

The common elements the specialists invoke when characterizing populism are related to using different identity categories of the members of the society. The citizens are characterized by populist leaders using some identity-codes or etiquettes which generate simplifying dichotomies, like: the masses and the elite, the corrupt people and the innocents, patriots and traitors, the rich and the poor etc. The common feature of the populists are the narratives which invokes "the people" and denounces the few, be them the elites, the minorities, the LGBTQ, the immigrants, the women, the criminal organizations etc. (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017:5). For instance, notices Cruz (2021:316), the Russian President emphasized the use of extremists, separatists and nationalists and the manipulation of the population in order to affect other countries' foreign policy. The quest for personal identity has very important consequences for the world architecture. William Bloom (1990:x) has been raising questions like why do

individuals and mass national populations give their loyalty to the nation-state? Why are they prepared to die for it? The author indicates the identification theory to explain a behavioral dynamic that has not previously been made explicit

Nation building is then concerned with describing how a general national identification is evoked. [...] Insomuch as every identification is made with an external social actor, identification is, of course, a social act as much as a private psychological one. (Bloom, 1990:23-26).

As the constructivist approach of the international relations reveals, the world order depends on people's identification with a "social actor", depends on how people interpret their personal identity and how they act accordingly: if they wish to live in another country, for instance, or if they choose to live where they were born, if they identify as human beings, upholding human rights, or if they adhere to the principle of prioritizing a certain identity, be that the national identity, be that the professional identity, the European identity or the member of the global society.

The right-wing parties' narratives, reveals Fuchs (2020:2), are characterized by top-down leadership, nationalism, the use of the friend/enemy scheme for scapegoating minorities and political opponents, and law and order politics. In right-wing politics, the elements of patriarchy and militarism take the form of law-and-order politics (the belief that crime and social problems can be solved by policing, surveillance, and tough prison sentences) and the form of repressive state apparatuses (the police, the army, the judicial system, the prison system). "They want to organise society as a dictatorship that is built on and uses means of terror."

Another example is highlighted by Cruz (2021:315), showing that Kremlin's relationship with other regions and players of the international scene is intended to uphold and legitimize a significant portion of Moscow's internal policies, thus contributing to reinforce Russian nationalism." Another example, taking into account the slogan "America first", is a clear indication in prioritizing the national identity. As a consequence, the subject of migration is interpreted in correlation with the otherness, and not the sameness with other human beings, elevating and exaggerating the identity differentiation.

3. NARRATIVES AND PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION

Having in mind the globalization process, the digital revolution and the widespread means of communication, the possibilities of anyone in influencing the public opinion have expanded. The migration issue or the crisis of migration may be seen as manifestations of identity crisis as well when speaking about people risking their lives crossing, for instance, the Mediterranean Sea on improvised boats (Moceanu, 2016). The personal identity within a world of states has become a resource to be negotiated within the realm of international politics. Being a Chinese, a Russian, an American or a Romanian has no longer unequivocal significations. The condition of an individual of having a certain citizenship or multiple citizenships or being a non-citizen complicates the global puzzle in organizing personal identities, as well the global trends when speaking self-understanding. During previous historical periods, personal identities were not attributes to be regarded as negotiable, but as objective definitions of the Self. The ideology of liberalism upholds the interpretation that the definition of the Self depends mainly on people's personal interpretations and desires. The fact that the Chinese authorities have expanded a system of surveillance of their citizens even abroad, by establishing 102 clandestine police stations acting within 53 countries (Costiță, 2022) is a clear indication that the Chinese authorities adopt unilateral definition for the Chinese people, disrespectful for other possible personal identities or for the human rights doctrine. The Chinese People's Party promotes and implements measures towards their citizens as if they definitively belong to China, giving no consideration to their opinion or other political options.

As the cultural turn and the Informational Revolution have produced worldwide turmoil, the personal identities and identifications, the human rights doctrine, individual liberty are subjects to be discussed and analyzed as organizing principles of the global scene. The personal identification process is mediated by perception, education, individual psychological treats, narratives, other people's worldviews or cultural lens when describing the world or how the world should look like. Addressing the questions of identities, the questions of how the international society should be organized, on which principles, which nations should have a state and which should not, the answers are fundamentally personal answers. It's hard to think that nowadays, in order to get compliance or obedience from the citizens, a

political regime would be successful using strategies of coercion: censorship, surveillance of communications, restrictions of free speech etc. Yet the challenge is related to acquiring consensus and legitimacy at the global scale. The United Nation organization and its Universalist path supports a universal personal identity, as "citizens of the world" and human security doctrine, yet the members of the UN are still the states, not the individuals. The organizing principles of UN combines the realist and liberal precepts. The international society expressed by the UN architecture is not firstly composed of people, but of states containing people having certain identities.

4. DEMOCRACIES AND PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION

The authoritarian leaders rejecting the democratic rules have used on the political arena diverse instruments of coercion, criminal code, death penalty and so on in order to reduce individual rights and to limit personal liberties of the citizens. Modifying the Constitution, for instance, Vladimir Putin or Alexander Lukashenko, have used the democratic mechanism of referendum which gave way to multiple presidential mandates, apparently legitimizing them on the will of we-the-people, yet denying the basic principles a democratic regime upholds: individual liberties and minimizing the risk a totalitarian regime to be implemented and the voice of the individuals to be put on silence. Using the criminal code, the leaders of the opposition in diverse countries (e.g. Russia, Turkey, and Belarus) have been annihilated by the governing parties. The argument that the voters have been manipulated by one of the candidates by an unfair electoral campaign determined in Romania the cancellation of presidential election in 2024. The Romanian case problematizes the public opinion formation as being the result of manipulative and disinformation campaigns.

As the global competition for power and influence shifts the arena, the people's minds and the people's perception are at stake. The identification of each person living on the planet Earth has become a very important issue for upholding certain social organization, starting with citizenship. The demographic dimension of a country, the cultural identity of the majority of the people, the influences the migration process might have on society have a great impact upon political choices, even when defining state-identity. The

strategic stakes are to be achieved by narratives, by words and images.

As an example, taking a look at the Republic of Moldova, the Russian propaganda had an objective to artificially promote a different cultural identity for the majority of people living in the Republic of Moldova: the Moldavian identity, presented as an identity different from the Romanian identity. When asked at referendums who they are, the majority of inhabitants of the Republic of Moldova have chosen to identify as Moldavians (Groza, 2025) although there was no specification for an ‘ethnic identity’, in order to delineate their identity as citizens of the Republic of Moldova (interpreted as Moldavians), from the ethnic identification as Romanians. The difference between ethnic identity and the identity derived from citizenship was specified, not highlighted as a different category of identification at the referendums organized in the Republic of Moldova. As a consequence, the Moldavian identity was propelled and the confusion between the two categories of identities, that derived from state-identity and that derived from ethnic identity, was maintained. Specifying on the referendum form “the Moldavian identity”, the authorities acknowledged the differentiation between two ethnic identities, the Romanians and the Moldovans, although objectively there is no distinction between them. The procedure of manipulation consisted in expanding the possibilities for self-identification and in propagating the narratives employed by the Russian propaganda, interested in legitimizing the idea of existence of two different people, the Romanians and the Moldovans.

The personal identity issue as a fundamental principle in organizing the international society is involved in defining the international architecture, scene or puzzle. Constructed, multiple, fluid, differentiated, personal identities have become a strategic resource in achieving different political goals. The questions like “what does it mean to be a patriot nowadays?” or “which rights should be universal?” require personal answers. The answers in authoritarian states are less or not debatable. The voice of the individuals has less or no importance.

5. DIGITAL DIASPORAS AND HYBRID IDENTITIES

Concerning the identity challenges generated by the diasporas, Brinkerhoff (2009:2) argues that migrant integration can be facilitated when the members of diasporas have the liberty and the

opportunities to express their hybrid identities collectively. Their hybrid identities refer to a sense of self that is neither wholly of the homeland nor exclusively reflective of the host land.

Digital diasporas use the Internet to negotiate their identity and promote solidarity; learn, explore, and enact democratic values; and mobilize to peacefully pursue policy influence, service objectives, and economic participation in the homeland. (Brinkerhoff, 2009: 2)

Yet, the question of hybrid identities has been approached from diverse angles. From one perspective, the hybrid identities were interpreted as a threat to global security. In situations of conflict, diaspora communities may raise money to support continuing warfare, promote public opinion and international interventions in support of their cause, and may prevent resolution, even when their compatriots are prepared to negotiate (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Anderson, 1999). The diasporas can generate instability within countries and can have spillover effects with implications for global security.

Diaspora groups may use the Internet to promote secessionist movements and civil war [...] Diasporas’ potential constructive contributions encompass policy influence supportive of liberal values, integration and conflict prevention, and socio-economic development. Due to their attachments to the homeland and the ease of telecommunications, diasporas are increasingly apt to insert themselves into economic, political, and development processes vis-a-vis the homeland. (Brinkerhoff, 2009: 6-7)

The variability of the public engagement of diasporas is very large, depending on many factors: historical, cultural, economic, social, political and so on. The rules of engagement cannot be *a priori* prescribed, but contextualized, as there are no general recommendations in approaching, adopting and integrating diasporas, but continuing identity negotiations. The personal identities are multiple, contradictory or complementary, constructed, fluid, having no definitive contours.

6. PERSONAL IDENTITIES AND STRATEGIC USE OF REFERENDUMS

The identity narratives are very important for achieving political ends, like creating new states. As an example, Jacques True (2004) discusses how, in the decade following the end of communist regime in Czechoslovakia, a small group of

political élites with some popular support forged a new Czech identity. Without mobilizing identity as a concept, one cannot comprehend a number of key events in the Czech Republic's transition: the divorce of Czechoslovakia, the fast adoption of a neoliberal reform program, the exclusion of Roma from Czech citizenship, and the relative success of the Czech Republic's application for EU membership. (True, 2004:48)

Formed in January 1993, the Czech Republic is the product of a hegemonizing nation-state project:

the identity was projected as industrious, modern, rational, masculine, and Western against those groups positioned on the margins of the nation such as Slovaks, Roma, and women. (True, 2004: 48)

What's interesting in the description used in portraying the Checks is the similarity with narratives revealed by Edward Said (1978) in his book, *Orientalism*, when speaking about the differences between Occident and Orient. The exaggeration of difference and the application of clichéd models for perceiving the other has an important intellectual tradition reflecting a Manichean alterity.

The narratives employed and the 'weaponization' of some identity-codes portrayed the Slovaks as belonging to the Soviet sphere, economically backward and irrational. Roma people were presented as lazy, dirty, criminal, and sexually promiscuous. The associations of these groups with the socialist past were the exaggerated differential criteria employed for building the perception of a pro-Western Czech identity.

Ironically, just as European states were accepting that their identities were multifarious and in flux by recognizing the rights of minorities and equal opportunities for men and women as pillars of their citizenship and EU membership, Czechs were seeking to expedite their return to Europe by expelling minorities and women from public life. (True, 2004:49)

Nowadays, more than ever, the digital context highlights that identities are both phenomena that need to be explained and that can be exploited to generate or to explain the systemic change. Political actors use identity discourses in referendums to achieve their goals. "They do so deliberately and sometimes manipulatively with respect to the general public. Though the technical rules for the use of this device differ from state to state, actors recognize the referendum as one way

and perhaps at times the best way to resolve an issue in their favor." (Walker, 2003:1)

Authoritarian states, notices Walker (2003:1), have developed a fondness for referendums because they grant legitimacy to a policy position by utilizing the vote of the people. For the 21st century, the vote of the people can be extremely malleable. With the implosion of communicational environment, the will of the people may fluctuate and change from one day to another. Public opinion becomes day by day a perishable product. If we are to speak in term of maps for capturing public opinion on different subjects, the map would be different from one moment to another. As theoreticians of democracy inform us, referendums are not inherently democratic just because they measure the will of the people through popular votes (Fisichella, 2007:313; Walker, 2003:2), as legitimacy can be bestowed in principled and unprincipled ways.

Revisiting the nexus between public opinion and culture or "national identity" the results of a referendum may vary as it depends on cultural values. Buckledee (2018:25) argued in his book, *The Language of Brexit*, that the linguistic choices used during campaigns for leaving and for remaining within the EU represent an honest admission that the issue was complex. "In reality, no one could predict with any great confidence what would happen after a vote to quit the EU."

The issue of identities was reflected by the fact that a consistent feature of the Brexit campaign was the concern to the freedom of movement within the EU. The arrival of unsustainable numbers of migrant workers from countries like Poland, Romania and Bulgaria was a major preoccupation, therefore Britain's regaining control of immigration policy was fundamental. (Buckledee, 2018:25-26)

The issue of personal identity becomes a very important feature of the international system. As "the status of information in present day society lifts information warfare from a supporting role to a leading position" (Metcalf, 2021:195), the quest for self-understanding becomes central in defining the global architecture of identities. The most significant feature of the international context relies on the fact that it made almost everyone a participant in the brave new world of information, as Metcalf (2021:196) mentions. The common use of smartphones occurred in the late 2010s. Since then, smartphones have started conquering the world and as a consequence the democratization of information and identities has begun. "People started creating more information by carrying with

them a device that could monitor and record in different ways.” (Metcalf 2021:196). Therefore, propaganda has been lifted to new levels. The question of what information aggression means is elaborated upon. The personal identities may become an important resource as well for national construction, but as well for national deconstruction. And it starts with personal self-understandings in the national, regional or global contexts. We may assume that the personal identities are competing for relevance, be them professional, national, ethnic, European, global, regional, gendered, linguistic, religious or whatever feature might seem relevant at a certain point. The ubiquity of smartphones, invoked by Metcalf (2021), indicates the great potential of influencing people’s perception and psychology, since the smartphones permits people to be targeted directly, at the individual level.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Having in mind the systemic implications of the informational environment and the fact that the definitional characteristic of the international state-system relies on national-identity/state-identity, we believe that the diverse actors interested in modifying the global architecture may succeed in reaching their goals by prompting identity narratives favorable to them. As long as the human rights doctrine upholds an identification with the humanity and liberalism promotes individual freedoms, regardless of structured/secondary identities, be them national, religious, ethnic, gender identity, etc. the challenge would be to accommodate competing worldviews in organizing the international society, traditionally based on specific and constructed definitions of the Self. ”Propaganda is nothing new. What is new, is that it can reach you at any time, in any place and be spread by your friends and family.” (Metcalf (2021:201)

The quest for identity in the new era has become a very important issue since the global organizational puzzle is dependent on every individual interpretation. Since there is no ‘quality control’ of the content of communications, at least in the democratic state, the content may be configured in any manner ‘the author’ considers to do it. The temptation in democracies to ban communications should be resisted otherwise it would be the precise means to subvert democracy the enemies of democracies might envisage. The freedom of expression may involve as well the redefinition of the Self or of the personal identity

and the process or redefining might involve other people’s identity, too. Identity narrative might determine social movements hard to anticipate, especially when connected with the digital world or when developing hybrid/digital identities.

“I never realized democracy has so many possibilities, so much revolutionary potential”, confesses Keen (2007:14). “Media, information, knowledge, content, audience, author—all were going to be democratized by Web 2.0. The Internet would democratize Big Media, Big Business, Big Government. It would even democratize Big Experts, transforming them into *noble amateurs*.”

The picture describes the great Informational revolutions the humanity is experiencing, but correlated with the information aggression and with the weaponization of communication the picture at the global scale seems very turbulent and requires a new type of answers and new type of social approach as the stakes are of global magnitude. When speaking about populism, extremism, radicalism, it seems like

democratization, despite its lofty idealization, is undermining truth, souring civic discourse, and belittling expertise, experience, and talent... it is threatening the very future of our cultural institutions. For the real consequence of the Web 2.0 revolution is less culture, less reliable news, and a chaos of useless information. (Keen 2007:15)

Applying the above rationale to identity issues, the personal identification processes may lead to unanticipated dynamics having uncontrollable effects at a global scale.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Anderson, Mary B. (1999). *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – Or War*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers..
2. Bloom, W. (1990). *Personal Identity, National Identity and International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Brinkerhoff, J. (2009). *Digital Diasporas. Identity and Transnational Engagement*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
4. Buckledee, S. (2018). *The Language of Brexit. How Britain Talked its Way Out of the European Union*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
5. Costiță, G. (2022). Secție de „poliție” chineză în România. Activist Safeguard Defenders: „Beijingul exportă teroare politică”. *Europa Liberă România* [online]. URL: <https://>

- romania.europalibera.org/a/statie-de-politie-chineza-romania-dobroesti/32162512.html [Accessed on 21.04.2025, 12.05].
6. Cruz, M. (2021). Russia in the Western Balkans: Interests and Tools of Influence. In M. Holger, V. Sazonov, A. Chochia & T. Kerikmäe (eds.), *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare. Influence Operations in Europe and Its Neighbourhood*. Berlin: Springer. 315-333.
 7. Fisichella, D. (2007). *Știința Politică. Probleme, concept, teorii*. Iași: Polirom.
 8. Fuchs, C. (2020). *Nationalism on the Internet: Critical Theory and Ideology in the Age of Social Media and Fake News*. New York: Routledge.
 9. Goff, P. & Dunn K. (eds.). (2004). *Identity and Global Politics. Empirical and Theoretical Elaborations*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
 10. Groza, D. (2025). Câți cetățeni din Republica Moldova se mai declară români și câți ruși. Au fost publicate rezultatele recensământului din 2024. *Ziare.com* [online]. URL: <https://ziare.com/recensamant/cati-cetateni-declara-romani-republica-moldova-rusi-1920890> [Accessed on 21.04.2025, 12:12].
 11. Keen, A. (2007). *The Cult of the Amateur. How Today's Internet is Killing our Culture*. New York: Doubleday.
 12. Leucea, I. (2012). *Constructivism și securitate umană*. Iași: Institutul European.
 13. Metcalf, K.N. (2021). Information Agression – a Battlefield for Smartphones. In M. Holger, V. Sazonov, A. Chochia & T. Kerikmäe (eds.), *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare. Influence Operations in Europe and Its Neighbourhood*. Berlin: Springer. 195-212.
 14. Moceanu, R. (2016). Criza refugiaților din Europa, bilanț cutremurător și în 2016. *Agenția de presă Radio România Rador* [online]. URL: <https://www.rador.ro/2016/12/28/retrospectiva-criza-refugiatilor-din-europa-bilant-cutremurator-si-in-2016/> [Accessed on 10.04.2025, 10:30].
 15. Mudde, C. & Kaltwasser R. (2017), *Populism. A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
 16. Norris, P. & Inglehart R. (2019), *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Authoritarian-Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 17. Said, E. [1978] (2001). *Orientalism: Concepțiile occidentale despre Orient*. Timișoara, Amarcord.
 18. True, J. (2004). Engendering Social Transformations in the Postsocialist Czech Republic. In P. Goff & K. Dunn (eds.). *Identity and Global Politics. Empirical and Theoretical Elaborations*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
 19. Walker, M.C. (2003). *The Strategic Use of Referendums. Power, Legitimacy, and Democracy*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.