NATIONAL LEVEL IMPLEMENTATION OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY MECHANISMS AND FUNCTIONS BASED ON EU EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: *As information and communication technology has developed, its impact has been felt in many areas, including international relations. In the diplomatic field, changes have not been long in coming, while many European countries pioneering the use of the online environment to promote national interests and achieve foreign policy objectives. In this paper, we aim to highlight the main benefits of developing the field of digital diplomacy, the biases that the process has generated and to argue the urgent need to implement these technologies in Romania, based on existing experience in various EU countries.*

Keywords*: digital diplomacy; foreign policy; digitization; biases; international relations.*

Introduction

Digital diplomacy has begun to become a foreign policy desideratum of the 21st century, which means that the states of the world are trying to implement it as a foreign policy strategy and capitalize on its ability to influence and shape political agendas in critical areas of international relations. Following these trends, it is important for the European Union to implement digital diplomacy within the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as a strategy for managing change in the international environment.

This implementation must aim to go beyond the sphere of public diplomacy, in the classical sense of the term, by capitalizing on the technologies that, in fact, signed the birth certificate of digital diplomacy – AI, big data, data mining, IoT, ML. Their inclusion determines the supplementation of the additional functions of diplomacy (representation, communication and negotiation) with new ones (creation and dissemination of knowledge) useful for identifying new ways to achieve foreign policy objectives. Firstly, the contribution of these technologies consists in generating a type of advanced knowledge of complex international contexts, which allows the identification of the most coherent scenarios for the evolution of the international environment and the establishment of the most relevant indicators. Thus, decision makers can make decisions with a higher degree of accuracy, in which there are valid variants of action/reaction depending on the transformations of the international environment.

This is a substantial change in the content of diplomacy, as it was traditionally understood, as it transgresses from a reactive field, which limits the effects of crises, threats, vulnerabilities or the potential for undesirable situations, an anticipatory field that can contribute to the establishment of a country on a desired path.

Through this article we aim to argue the need to design and implement a digital diplomacy strategy in Romania, based on both the literature and good practices already existing internationally.

1. Main Variables of the Digitization of Diplomacy Process

The versatility of information and communication technologies has led to the inclusion in the field of diplomacy of digital public diplomacy, e-governance, network diplomacy and cyber diplomacy. While the extensive use of digital technologies in different sectors of activity determines a serious increase of the digital vulnerability of the states, the cybernetic war became a reality that the national security of the states of our century is facing (Weiner 1996, 1).

The transformations that the field of diplomacy has undergone lately have determined the inclusion of the aspects generated by the use of ITC in the sphere of diplomacy taxonomy from the perspective of (Cull 2008):

1. changes caused by the use of ICT technology in the environment in which diplomacy takes place (geo-political, geo-economic, sovereignty, interdependence);

2. the emergence of new topics on diplomatic agendas (internet governance, cybersecurity, privacy and more);

3. the use of new tools (social media, big data and many others) offered by ICT technology in the practice of diplomacy.

The concept of digital diplomacy, which emerged as e-diplomacy, diplomacy 2.0 or twitter diplomacy, along with other associated concepts, has created an abundance of new terms, more or less overlapping, often confusing in implementing the political agendas of new forms. of diplomacy. Although the concept of digital diplomacy is still being clarified and developed, the *Cultural Diplomacy Dictionary* defines it as "a new form of public diplomacy, also called e-diplomacy, which uses the internet and new information and communication technologies as means for strengthening diplomatic relations. The main differences with the classical public diplomacy lie in a greater access to information, greater interaction among individuals and organizations, and greater transparency" (Chakraborty 2013).

The previous taxonomy indicates that cyber security is two-dimensional on the agenda of digital diplomacy as the advances in the digital field cannot be fully operational without addressing risks, vulnerabilities and opportunities of cyber space. 1. On the one hand, cyber security is becoming an intrinsic part of global phenomena such as cybercrime, information protection in the online environment, trust building, internet freedom and internet governance. These issues enter, by right, the area of manifestation of diplomacy, but through the complexity and specialization of the field has given rise to a new branch in the diplomatic field - digital diplomacy. 2. On the other hand, by implementing technologies specific to the field of information and communication, including activities continued under the auspices of traditional diplomacy (such as communication or negotiation between diplomats), they must use cybersecurity to ensure confidentiality in the online environment. Cyber security is intrinsically connected to phenomena such as cybercrime, confidence-building, internet freedom and internet governance. Both state-run personnel and diplomats can become victims of hackers, with the particular aim of obtaining confidential information that would serve purposes contrary to the interests of states.

The difficulty of protecting the digital environment has been understood by the UN, NATO, EU, OSCE, OECD, Commonwealth, G7 and G20, which have adopted a series of cyber security recommendations and strategies, doubled by relevant legislation. The EU adopted a cyber-security strategy – EU Cybersecurity Strategy, in 2013, on the basis of which, in 2015, the European Council adopted a special decision on cyber diplomacy - Council Conclusions on Cyber Diplomacy, thus marking a proactive role in the process of developing international cyber policies.

In this process, diplomacy has an important role to play in determining partnerships, building coalitions, maintaining human rights online and promoting equitable economic access.

Managing hybrid threats, in which cyber threats will always have a well-defined place, will be impossible in the absence of digital diplomacy.

The digitization of diplomacy occurred at the confluence of two major, apparently opposite trends determined by the emergence of new technologies:

1. The first mega-trend is the prerogative of skeptics and focuses on the costs of implementing new technologies in relation to their expected potential effects, considered to be incomparably lower;

2. The second mega-trend supports the implementation of new technologies and digitalization and encourages foreign ministries to take steps to facilitate and accelerate this process. Their haste is easy to understand given the pace of change today. If the landline phone took 75 years to reach 100 million users, the mobile phone needed 16, and the social network Facebook – only 4 and a half (Dreischmeier, Close & Trichet 2015);

Strangely, although they act concomitantly, the two trends do not cancel each other out and continue to gain followers and ground. Digitization is therefore dependent on a number of additional factors and variables, the existence / non-existence of which will induce a prevalence of one of the above trends or another.

Therefore, the discussion on digitization should consider at least the context, process and structure of the digital transformation of diplomacy.

1.1. The context of innovation in diplomacy

If we analyze the organizational culture of the foreign ministries, the main question is related to the way in which diplomats perceive digital technologies in their work: as threats or as opportunities (Bjola 2017)? Technology confronts us with many question marks because every technological innovation can be translated into the most diverse applications. If 3G technology has facilitated the spread of social networks, no one can imagine today how 5G technology could impact the socio-economic environment - answers could include existing technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence (Sandre 2016), but whose evolution is difficult to predict. Spectacular changes have already taken place in many areas – even Romania was involved in 2016 in a disaster response exercise using virtual reality. Once the infrastructure is in place to support the optimal operation of these technologies, applications will not be long in coming, and the field of diplomacy, due to its specificity, cannot be exempted from the roller coaster of changes. If visa issuance, consular registrations or embassy assistance today are assisted by chat bots (Cresci 2017), the future may offer more sophisticated artificial intelligence algorithms capable of identifying or spreading fake news, deep fake or other forms of propaganda and misinformation (Cocking 2016).

How prepared are the foreign ministries and diplomacy to take over and capitalize on these new technologies with maximum efficiency? In order to respond, they should make an internal assessment of the degree of connection with today level of knowledge, identify ways in which technology could help achieving goals and build strategies whose application lead to the optimal implementation of innovations, including through the specialization of human resources.

1.2. Diplomacy as a reactive or anticipatory process

We have argued that the implementation of innovations an accelerated pace is strongly dependent on the human resources involved in the process. Without a suitable cognitive endowment both in terms of skills and knowledge, it is unlikely that the activity will translate from a reactive to an anticipatory paradigm. Diplomats are no longer in a position to wait for events to react for them to react also, but they have to imagine their probable scenarios and find ways to influence them.

In Romania, diplomacy seems to have become aware of the situation and is trying to outline the first steps: foreign affairs ministry is increasingly using social networks to communicate in critical situations or with the diaspora. But the stake of this period is who will become the first to be notified, in the digital environment, because that will be the one who will be able to produce the most influence.

Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA) sponsored the Embers project, which by extracting data from open sources, social networks, satellite images and blogs managed to identify with a good accuracy realistic scenarios of future civil unrest, outbreaks of epidemics, political crises (Embers 2016). Through a proactive attitude, states could be open to this type of approach and could, in turn, implement such tools in their diplomatic activity.

It is expected that sooner or later Big Data tools will become mandatory for use by all foreign ministries and embassies, because no country will afford to lose the valuable information they gain. The field is going to be standardized and regulated by its pioneers, therefore the early awareness and the taking of the necessary measures in this direction will increase both the competitiveness of the diplomacy and of the country as a whole.

1.3. Degree of centralization in diplomacy: network or network of networks

In order to adapt more effectively to technological challenges, the foreign affairs ministries should relax the constraints of institutional centralization by ceding the autonomy of regional entities, thus making it possible to set up a national digital diplomatic system. Of course, everyone is subordinated to the foreign policy objectives of the states, but the diplomatic profile of the country could become systemic by including several types of actors, such as embassies, consulates, private companies, civil society (Hocking, Melissen, Riordan, Sharp 2012).

In order to adapt more effectively to technological challenges, the foreign affairs ministries should relax the constraints of institutional centralization and encourage forms and ways of digital interaction. From this perspective, the privileged role of the MFA should change and the institution should be placed in a broader structure – that of a so-called national digital diplomatic system – which it should further direct, while ceding autonomy to regional entities. Of course, everyone is subordinated to the foreign policy objectives of the states, but the diplomatic profile of the country could become systemic by including several types of actors, such as embassies, consulates, private companies, civil society.

The most important dimensions of such a system should be:

– Connecting those who need diplomatic assistance with those who have responsibilities in this field and can be assisted by digital tools (e.g. diaspora, embassies in conflict zones);

– Collaboration between the actors involved for exploring and implementing the functionalities of digital technologies in different contexts;

– Promoting innovation and disseminating good practices in digital diplomacy among system actors.

The intersection of these dimensions would require the permanent optimization of the field of digital diplomacy and would generate that impulse of creativity that allows the achievement of the proposed objectives in optimal conditions.

2. Digital Diplomacy in the European Union

2.1. Perceptions biases of digital diplomacy in the EU

We have previously shown that digital diplomacy is in its implementation phase with areas of competence transgressing from the simple communication of messages from foreign

ministries to the effective promotion of foreign policy objectives through strategies specific to current technological developments.

But the process of implementing digital diplomacy is full of obstacles, often the interpretation of the concept being erroneously made by states. According to Corneliu Bjola (2018), a common mistake is Superman Myth, which refers to the fact that digital technologies are associated with extraordinary advantages for those who use them; in the case of digital diplomacy, the use of these technologies can help increase diplomatic influence to levels that might not otherwise be achieved.

In order to have these advantages, states such as Sweden, the Netherlands, Mexico, Israel or Australia were among the pioneers of the process of digitizing diplomacy.

The misperception of diplomacy, called *the Walk in the Park Myth*, refers to the impression that the adoption of digital diplomacy is easy and inexpensive – one argument is that ordinary citizens have made the transition to digital, so it should be the same inexpensive for the states. However, the adoption of digital tools without a general strategy of how they should be used can create difficulties for foreign ministries in trying to build their digital profile and maximize the impact of their online presence. Therefore, it is necessary to invest in infrastructure, training and professionalization of staff, by developing skills with which they can strategically capitalize on the power of digital platforms in order to achieve predefined and measurable objectives.

The third misperception is Extinction Myth, according to which digital diplomacy will gradually replace all traditional forms of diplomacy. Moreover, that digital technologies have the ability to fundamentally change the way diplomats perform their traditional functions of representation, communication and negotiation to the point where diplomacy even end and is replaced with virtual embassies using virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies.

However, although digital technologies are revolutionizing the way diplomats operate, the essence of diplomacy (i.e. building and managing relationships) cannot be achieved without human contact. The number of diplomats can be reduced, part of their activity can be taken over by machines, but the human relationship is never feasible to be replaced.

Darth Vader Myth is another bias that promotes the idea that the positive potential of digital platforms is always hijacked for dark and hidden purposes, for propaganda use. Of course, regulating the digital environment and setting certain standards can eliminate or significantly reduce the occurrence of such situations.

As information and communication technology advances, people will continue to be even more connected, perhaps in different ways than they are today. That is why it is important for digital diplomacy to accept the risks and assume them in order to benefit from the related advantages.

2.2. Good practices in digital diplomacy in EU countries

The COVID pandemic has been a catalyst for the widespread use of digital technologies. Everyday face-to-face events have been replaced by platforms such as Zoom, Meet, Teams, Moodle, online commerce has become much more used, all of which being driving factors to increase digital interdependence. Data, artificial intelligence, fake news, social media are increasingly present topics in discussions between international actors.

For example, the French strategy adopts a paradigm of openness for an inclusive internet governance, promoting the need to take measures to increase confidence in the online environment (https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr). From his point of view, the European digital model should reflect a strengthened balance between the perspectives of states and stakeholders with different backgrounds, even nominating a technical ambassador who has the task of transforming France into an important digital hub (Kurbalija 2021).

In the Dutch strategy, the term digital security includes cyber security, human rights and the use of data, in terms of privacy, personal data protection, identity protection (Kurbalija 2021).

3. Digital Diplomacy in Romania

The need to digitize Romanian diplomacy is evident in the statements of officials, such as Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu, who stated that "between September 7-9, 2020, we organized, for the first time in digital format, the Annual Meeting of Romanian Diplomacy, on the impact of the pandemic". It was a real exercise in digital diplomacy - thus, the digitization of the most extensive, but also the most delicate analytical conversation of the MFA was, in itself, a conceptual and technical test" (Aurescu 2020).

Earlier, on July 1, 2020, during an international video conference dedicated to the digital response to the COVID-19 pandemic, he also stated that "the pandemic (Covid-19) has interrupted many processes, but certainly accelerated the digitization, which is a priority for the EU, including for the Government of Romania" (Aurescu 2020). From his point of view, the diversification of digital services and the education of specialized skills for human resources are priorities of Romania in this period. The Final Declaration of this videoconference, attended by foreign or communications ministers from 60 countries on five continents, states the "rapid consolidation of digital capabilities in health systems, ensuring a safer digital space, building modern healthcare systems. e-government, providing affordable connection in any area of the globe, protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, freedom of the internet, stimulating online commerce, improving digital skills and literacy, and reorienting financial resources to support transformation digital" (Aurescu 2020).

These positions represent clear evidences that digitalization is a priority for the relevant ministry of our country, included in the Romanian government program for 2020-2024. National objectives are conceptualized in accordance with the Digital Package adopted by the European Commission on 19 February 2020 (Communication on Configuring Europe's Digital Future, the European Data Strategy and the White Paper on Artificial Intelligence). The first step was taken in 2001, when the first website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was built, followed by the subsequent relatively intense use of social networks.

Despite the explicit intention to digitize diplomacy, Romania does not have a clear strategy that provides both an overview and clear ways to follow to achieve these goals.

However, in order to achieve these goals, it is necessary for the foreign affairs ministry to adopt a digitization strategy that will require in particular:
- an explicit, unambiguous vision of digitization
- unequivocal assumption by decision-makers of the digitization process
- training of human resources in the field of technologies, emphasizing the benefits and risks
- identification and popularization of good practices in the field
- designing training programs dedicated to the training of digital skills of diplomatic staff.

We consider that each aspect mentioned above is important, although the key dimension is related to human resources. Foreign affairs ministry' institutions such as the Romanian Diplomatic Institute, but also other training organizations in the field (SNSPA, University of Bucharest, "Carol I" National Defense University, National Institute for Research and Development in Informatics, European Security and Defense College of the EU) can be involved for achieving this goal. For example, the European Security and Defense College of the European Union has already developed a series of profile courses in collaboration with

institutions of European countries, including ICI Bucharest and can provide expertise to achieve the best results.

Conclusions

Once we understand the impact that technology has on international actors, we can identify possible behaviors and resources that are more likely to provide a stronger or weaker influence on the evolution of the international system. Each crisis is unique in its own way, and digital diplomacy will contribute to a better understanding of it through the knowledge produced regarding the various variables that led to its onset: the nature, stage, dynamics and location of the crisis, possible paths of evolution. These variables can be assessed through diplomatic analysis, including through the use of the benefits of digital technologies, which collect, process and report information to the competent decision-making and crisis management bodies.

We have previously shown that digital technologies need to be first understood and only then implemented in order to achieve the efficiency of the process. Also a few directions of action should be considered:

1. Measures that lead to the overlapping of the public perception with the foreign affairs ministry's self-image, in order to eliminate the errors of public perception towards the foreign policy of our country;

2. Measures to implement an infrastructure capable of supporting the activities subject to digital diplomacy and related online networks;

3. Measures dedicated to the training of the competencies necessary to carry out digital diplomacy activities for the human resource in the diplomatic corps.

The field of digital diplomacy is insufficiently implemented in Romania, but we have shown that achieving Romania's competitiveness is impossible if not all available methods are used to achieve national objectives. Therefore, decision makers are in a position to make fundamental modernization options that can strongly impact the future of Romania and its citizens.

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