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EU Digital Diplomacy and the Global South

Cecilia E. Sottilotta

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY AND STATECRAFT
POLICY BRIEF

GIGA
German Institute for Global and Area Studies
Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien

Author

Cecilia E. Sottilotta is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Department of International Human and Social Sciences of the University for Foreigners of Perugia (Unistrapg). Before joining Unistrapg, Sottilotta was an Assistant Professor of International Relations and Global Politics and Director of the MA Program in Peace Studies at the American University of Rome. Previously, she was a post-doctoral research fellow at the Department of Political Science of LUISS Guido Carli, working on the research project "The choice for Europe since Maastricht: Member States' preferences for economic and fiscal integration – EMU Choices" funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program. She has been Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Salzburg, Austria (2016), Visiting Professor at the Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, Colombia (2017), DAAD Visiting Research Fellow at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies – GIGA Hamburg (2019), Visiting Researcher at the Jacques Delors Centre of the Hertie School, Berlin (2021). Since 2021, she is a Visiting Professor at the College of Europe, Bruges, where she teaches Political Risk Analysis in a European perspective.

"Digital Diplomacy and Statecraft" is a research project funded by the Federal Foreign Office. It explores how digitalisation offers new opportunities, challenges, and instruments for foreign policy. By bringing together international experts, it identifies prospects and threats of digitalisation. Digital technologies are fundamentally transforming societies worldwide. The Global South is an important shaper of this change. The project analyses drivers and consequences of digitalisation across the world regions and delivers useful impulses for German foreign policy and for timely responses of (digital) diplomacy.

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Abstract

Digital diplomacy defined as an extension of traditional public diplomacy, i.e. the use of social media to achieve diplomatic goals has become a key channel for the EU to engage with foreign audiences and promote its soft power. According to a narrative widely embraced by Western media and policymakers, the war in Ukraine unleashed a "battle for hearts and minds" in the so-called "Global South", with Russia seeking the support of emerging countries and the US, the EU and their allies trying to counter its moves. Against this backdrop, and especially since Russia's annexation of Crimea, the EU has intensified its digital diplomacy efforts directed at fighting disinformation and winning over countries in the Global South. If it wants to rise up to the challenge, the EU will need to fine-tune its approach. More specifically, without giving up its commitment to values, the EU should embrace a more realistic discourse articulated in terms of interests and, without renouncing its commitment to fight disinformation, it should become more proactive in its digital diplomacy efforts.

Policy Recommendations

- The assumption that the EU is the sole bearer of universal – and often vague – the values should be abandoned and a more concrete discourse developed in terms of interests should be embraced.
- The EU should become more assertive and "proactive" in its digital diplomacy with messages that are specifically tailored to "glocal" audiences, rather than being "reactive," which means leaving the control of the narrative to rivals.

In order to reach these objectives, more specific measures are in order, such as:

- Prioritizing the development of a shared social media culture, for instance in the context of the European Diplomatic Academy, would be important, as diplomats coming from different member states may have very different perceptions and convictions about if and how to interact with the public on social media.
- Creating a mechanism for delegations to provide systematic feedback about what works and what does not work in communicating with audiences in the Global South.
- Providing delegations on the ground with more leeway and resources to take bolder initiatives in the context where they operate, in order to enable them to deal with criticism and take control of the narrative without shutting down communication.

Introduction

Over the past few years, the term "digital diplomacy" has become an important buzzword in Brussels policy circles. This development is not surprising, considering that, in a trend which has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the "twin green and digital transitions" have become a centerpiece of the EU long-term strategic vision. It should be noted that in the meaning embraced by the EU "digital diplomacy" refers to a set of new topics in the diplomatic agenda, indicating diplomatic efforts having at their core a set of strategically important policy issues, such as cybersecurity, data protection, internet governance, e-commerce, the governance of artificial intelligence (AI). In the context of this policy brief, however, we look at digital diplomacy defined as an extension of traditional public diplomacy, i.e., the use of social media to achieve diplomatic goals. In this sense, the EEAS (its headquarters in Brussels as well as delegations operating on the ground) remains the natural institutional "house" of EU (public) digital diplomacy, which is why this policy brief is based on interviews with EEAS officials.

While the most relevant social media platform for its activities remains Twitter – recently renamed "X" (Interview a), the EEAS is also present on Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, as well as on other social media sites such as Weibo and Vimeo via the EU Delegations and EU missions in third countries, which, with a few exceptions, all have a social media presence (EEAS 2023).The role of EU Delegations and Missions (144 in total as of November 2023) is crucial insofar as they are best equipped to intercept local audiences and to mediate the key messages the EU aims to spread (Interview b, Interview d).

Against this backdrop, the EU has stepped up its efforts to engage digitally with audiences in the so-called "Global South". Coined in 1969 by Carl Ogelsby and popularized by the "Brandt Commission" in 1980, the term "Global South" became a shorthand for a diverse group of countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, transcending geographical and economic criteria. While some question its utility due to internal heterogeneity, others argue that it provides a unique lens for these countries to articulate their challenges distinctively on the global stage. The Group of Seventy-Seven (G77) at the United Nations, for instance, has claimed this label recognizing that just as widely accepted labels like "the West" or "Europe" oversimplify diverse realities, "Global South" serves as a useful term to engage with countries often dismissed as "the rest". In the context of the EU's external action, relations with the Global South are pivotal, with 111 out of the EU's 144 diplomatic missions located in G77 countries. The complexity of these relations is influenced by factors such as colonial legacies, cultural

ties, geographical proximity, and geopolitical positioning, especially in light of recent global events like the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In terms of content, the core messages conveyed in the context of EU digital diplomacy towards the Global South can be grouped in four broad categories (Abratis 2021): 1) informing about the EU: as multiple interviewees stressed, outside of academic and diplomatic circles there often is confusion about the EU and its functioning, hence the importance of using social media to explain to the wider public how the EU and its institutions work; 2) Promoting a friendly image, especially by stressing the importance of intercultural dialogue and people-to-people dialogue, and – an increasingly relevant task – by fighting disinformation deliberately spread by rivals; 3) Disseminating information about partnerships on development and beyond; and 4) Communicating EU values, such as gender equality, human rights, sustainability, peace, democracy, and a global rules-based order in general. Unsurprisingly, the way in which all of these messages are conveyed by EU social media accounts and interpreted by audiences has been heavily impacted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent war. The political and military support given to Ukraine by the EU, its members and other NATO allies, and the efforts by Russia to disseminate fake news around the conflict acted a major catalyzer for the "battle for the hearts and minds" taking place in the Global South. The next two sections, based on the interviews conducted with EEAS officials from both Brussels headquarters and delegations on the ground, offer some insights on the key issues and possible recommendations to make the EU's efforts in digital diplomacy towards the Global South more effective.

Key Issues in EU Digital Diplomacy towards the Global South

Indeed, the fact that values lay at the core of the EU's "brand" as communicated externally clearly presents some advantages, but it also gives rise to several challenges. Observers from the Global South tend to see discussions around values, including the issues surrounding the conflict in Ukraine, through the all-engulfing prism of colonialism, which means for instance that to many of them, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is as much a violation of international law as Western arbitrary interventions and exits in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya (Malhotra and Saran 2023), for instance. Accusations of double standards abound in EU's conversations with digital audiences in the Global South, sometimes dismissed as "whataboutism", are nonetheless important indicators of the evident

mismatch between EU's self-perception as the sole carrier of "universal" values and what the Global South believes (Interview a, Interview d, Interview g).

Further problems created by the emphasis on values in political communication emerge from the fact that it is difficult for partners and rivals alike to clearly understand what they really are, and that across the Global South there is a widespread suspicion that values actually hide interests, as it happens for EU "green" standards, which are often considered as protectionist tools in countries which may lose market access to the EU because of difficulties in meeting them (Interview c).

Another problem characterizing EU digital diplomacy towards the Global South is the contradiction between the occasional inability to empathize with those at its receiving end (such as in the case of the controversial "garden vs. jungle" metaphor used during a public address by EU chief diplomat Josep Borrell in October 2022 to describe the EU vs the rest of the world) and the sense of guilt surrounding some of the EU member states' colonial past, which is often transferred to the EU as a whole. The latter, in the interpretation of some of the interviewees, prevents EU public diplomacy from being more assertive in countering rival narratives – even surrounding values – by stressing how, for instance, the EU indeed provides funding for events at which the EU itself is criticized, while China or Russia would never do anything of the kind.

This lack of assertiveness as opposed to the aggressiveness of rivals means that EU digital diplomacy is "reactive" rather than "proactive", allowing the rivals to control the narrative and set the agenda in public debates about world affairs. This is also due to the fact that, apart from a few exceptions, the personnel of delegations on the ground are not empowered enough nor do they have a strong political mandate allowing them to engage more and more meaningfully on social media. The result is that, also due to the bureaucratization in the management of communication, the risks of engaging with the public and ending up caught in social media storms are often much higher than the perceived advantages (Interview d, Interview h). Reflecting the official nature of the messages coming from the EEAS headquarters, as well as this risk-averse approach to communication, the register adopted is also very bureaucratic (Interview d, Interview h). This may engender a sort of "identity crisis" for diplomats, caught between the caution required by their traditional role and the demands of today's digital diplomacy, which entails taking some risks (Interview h). Another obstacle hindering effective engagement derives from the fact that member states not only have different social media cultures, but also different rules and guidelines about who is allowed to publicly express opinions and

mechanisms of pre-approval/ screening of posts (Interview e, Interview g). To some extent, these differences persist when member states' diplomats move to the EEAS.

How to deal with criticism and take control of the narrative without shutting down communication is a huge challenge, requiring attention and resources. Suffice it to think that an analysis of about six million Arabic-language tweets posted between 22 February and 15 March 2022 and discussing Russia and Ukraine revealed that approximately 12 percent of them also mentioned Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Palestine alleging double standards by the West (Pargoo 2022). This resonates with the fact that, for instance, in some cases the social media accounts of EU ambassadors – such as the EU ambassadors' to Israel and to Iraq – show disabled "comments" sections, suggesting a difficulty in the moderation of negative comments, which is comprehensible and yet creates a dissonance vis-à-vis the primary objective of modern day digital diplomacy, that is entertaining a dialogue with "glocal" audiences. Moreover, although heads of mission and officials from political, press and information sections indeed communicate constantly with the EEAS headquarters in Brussels, a mechanism for delegations to provide systematic feedback about what works and what does not work in communicating with audiences in the Global South is absent (Interview d, Interview e).

Finally, a problem that requires attention is the disparity in resources devoted by rivals to spread disinformation compared to those available to the EU to fight it and to build a more proactive communication strategy (Interview c). Ideally, more resources should be committed to further empower EU strategic communicators. However, as one interviewee noted, the EU is already making an effort in this sense, that is often more substantial than those made by member states (Interview f). In this respect, it should not be forgotten that important budget constraints derive from the sheer fact that the EU is accountable to its citizens for the cost of its activities, while rivals – namely Russia, but also China – are not (Interview f, Interview g).

Implications and Policy Recommendations

A great deal of effort is required for the EU to successfully adapt to shifting global political equilibria. Whether the bloc will manage to achieve the ambitious objective outlined by High Representative Josep Borrell in presenting the Strategic Compass, that is, to face its "security responsibilities, in front of [its] citizens and the rest of the world" (EU Council 2022) will largely depend on its ability to project

its priorities externally in a strong and consistent way. Needless to say, digital diplomacy will play a key role in this effort.

Some measures are in order to enhance EU digital diplomacy towards the Global South. Some refer to the *policy dimension* of EU digital diplomacy vis-à-vis the Global South, others speak to the dimension of *institutional adaptation* (Bjola 2015).

As far as the *policy dimension* is concerned, two considerations are in order.

1. Although overall the very inception of the EEAS has made the management of the EU strategic communication more consistent and coordinated compared to the past, contradictions in EU discourses – which had already surfaced before Russia's invasion of Ukraine (see e.g. Wagnsson and Hellman 2018) – seem to persist. On the one hand, in EU digital diplomacy efforts directed to the Global South there is still much emphasis on values and on the EU essentially being a "force for good" in the world. On the other hand, as discourse meeting "normative power standards" (Diez and Manners 2014) begins to fall flat in the context of Southern public arenas, EU policy makers have started to acknowledge that – while maintaining a firm commitment to fight disinformation – if the overall objective is to engage with Global South audiences in a non-antagonistic and non-condescending way it is necessary to make room for different interpretations of situations, interests and values. Abandoning the assumption – still prevalent in much of the EU's strategic communication as also suggested by extant research (see e.g. Narlikar 2022; Nitoiua and Pasatoiu 2023) – that the EU is the sole bearer of universal values, may allow for more effective public diplomacy, one that embraces a truly "globalised" approach by "recognising diversity" (Narlikar 2016).

2. The need for the EU to become more assertive in this respect is also in line with the assessment made by some of the interviewees that EU digital diplomacy so far has been "reactive" rather than "proactive", allowing the rivals to control the narrative. Evidently, such a shift is not easy to realize, considering the importance to EU identity and domestic audiences of normative discourse centered on universal values. At the same time, there is a clear indication that a shift in this sense is indeed necessary, as shown by the reluctance, even by like-minded allies in the Global South, to unconditionally embrace what used to be "normal" EU narratives about the state of world affairs. In summary, EU public diplomacy practitioners should keep emphasizing EU values but strike a balance by clearly articulating how those values align with the bloc's interests. This can help address accusations of double standards.

Turning to *institutional adaptation*, some policy recommendations are in order too.

1. It would be useful to harmonize social media practices across member states, especially as far as rules and guidelines on who can speak or post on behalf of the organization are concerned. In this sense, prioritizing the development of a shared social media culture, for instance in the context of the European Diplomatic Academy would be important, as diplomats coming from different member states may have very different perceptions and convictions about if and how to interact with the public on social media (Interview e). In general, an empowerment of EU public diplomacy practitioners with the provision of stronger political mandates to engage more meaningfully and proactively on social media is desirable, together with more investment in resources and training for effectively handling criticism, including improved comment moderation and thoughtful responses to negative comments.

2. It would be useful to have a set-up whereby feedback from delegations in the Global South is systematically solicited and incorporated in strategic communication choices, including those made by top officials. This would offer input and signal possible dissonances with local public opinion. Providing delegations on the ground with more leeway to take bolder initiatives in the context where they operate may be in order. In general, activities such as regularly assessing the impact of digital diplomacy efforts, monitoring audience response, and adapting strategies accordingly need to be potentiated to ensure the messages are resonating effectively with audiences across the Global South.

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