Could digital diplomacy help combating disinformation?
The impact of Romanian's Digital diplomacy in the Eastern Partnership countries

Radu CARP
Professor, Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest
E-mail: radu.carp@fspub.unibuc.ro

Mihaela Daciana NATEA*
PhD, Associate Professor, "George Emil Palade" University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Sciences and Technology of Târgu Mureş
E-mail: natea.d.mihaela@gmail.com
*Corresponding author

Lucian SĂCĂLEAN
PhD, Lecturer, "George Emil Palade" University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Sciences and Technology of Târgu Mureş
E-mail: lsacalean@gmail.com

Abstract

Living in the "*digital era*" to ask ourselves how we communicate is a matter of vital importance for the public dimension, with the acknowledgement that most questions are born in relation to communication methods, the transmission mechanisms of the desired message and the impact that communication strategies have on message recipients, especially in the political-diplomatic environment. If in the private sector the freedom of expression using modern communication means is considerable, in the public institutions case things are drastically different, as they are subjected to various constraints, either political and legislative in nature or related to the peculiarities of their activity. In matters of diplomacy the entire spectrum of sending a message is even more complex, due to the international implications that any act of communication may generate.

The study analyses the digital communication policy of the Romanian embassies in the area of the EU Eastern Partnership, respectively in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine - OSCE Member states as well. Our analysis had as objective a double dimension, on the one hand the evaluation of the activities promoted on the internet page and in the social media by Romanian embassies in these states and on the other hand the impact of the messages on young people. As research method for the second part, we have used the interview applied to 80 respondents, in order to estimate the impact and expectations of young people regarding public communication policy of the Romanian embassies in three countries - Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus. Starting from this experience we argue that OSCE needs to adapt to the new international realities generated by disinformation and to adopt a more intensive and individual driven communication strategy in order to have a greater impact in its mission.

Keywords: e-diplomacy, digitalization, Eastern Partnership, European Union, OSCE

1. Introduction

The fall of communism and the readjustment of the international political geometry at the beginning of the 1990´s marked the political geography of the world by the reconfiguration of Eastern Europe map. The political and ideological changes, the end of the Cold War, the disintegration of US's traditional enemy, the Soviet Union, and the onset of a unipolar international system convinced the famous philosopher Francis Fukuyama to affirm, in Hegelian terms, that mankind is witnessing the "end of history"[1]. The American philosopher with Japanese roots had in view the instauration of a period of tranquility in a history seen in a linear dimension[2], generated by the triumph of liberal democracies, that appeared to send the world in the direction of "eternal peace"[3]. The theory raised controversial reactions in the literature, starting from the philosophical aspects[4] and ending in ample historical and international relations debates, regarding the transfer of international conflicts from the ideological aspects into the civilizational one, identifiable in the rim zones of different cultures meddling[5]. The Eastern expansion was perceived by some authors, in accordance with previous projects, as a means of defending the first line of Christianity, the *antemurale christianitatis* limit of Catholic Europe, proposing a differentiated treatment of former Communist states[6]. The expression of these politics in the 1990´s was the use of the concept of Central and Eastern Europe when referring to former Communist states, which are part of the Central Europe - the Visegrad Group, (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary), more advanced on the reforms route and the South-Eastern ones, Bulgaria and Romania[7]. But gradually, authors differentiated their approach[8] due to political realities, new threats[9], the international dynamics[10] and the prevalence of the economic dimension of the EU expansion to the East.

For Eastern Europe it became a priority to reorient its external politics towards the West, by accessing Euro-Atlantic structures, generating the "return home" ideal. Thus, states in Central and Eastern Europe rushed into sealing partnerships with the EU, opting for the Western European model, connecting the national politics to the new priorities that would bring national warrantees of political security[11] and economic stability. These countries had the opportunity to choose their development model based on the best practices in other countries[12]. The process of joining NATO unfolded as a supplementary warrantee, military in nature, to the threats occurring in the region, which gives asymmetric status to Eastern European states, forming a puzzle of security policies and interests in the area[13].

In this context the OSCE developed its policies and build upon national narratives of independence and security, in order to strengthen regional security.

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2. Romania and its regional projects as an EU Member State

For the Eastern Europe states, accession to the EU became the miracle solution for all the problems generated by the fall of the statist economies, interethnic conflicts, unemployment, and crimes, phenomena that characterized the first years following the fall of communism.

The Copenhagen Conference in 1993 opened the accession path for Central and Eastern Europe. Accession waves reached the former communist states one by one, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary and Romania[14]. The process of EU accession generated a series of projects and political programs in order to harmonize states interests in the region, respectively the Eastern Partnership, the Black Sea Synergy and the Northern Dimension (EU, Norway and Iceland) - financed through specific EU programs[15]. The EU intends by all these initiatives to improve its external action, based on a mix of political and public management approaches[16].

Romania, along with Bulgaria and Greece, initiated the *Black Sea Synergy.* Part of this political project are also Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation, Turkey and Ukraine[17]. Officially started at the beginning of 2008, the project aims at generating cooperation in the strategic area of the Black Sea[18], a heterogeneous space with complex economic, social and political issues[19]. The main policies regard the increasing cooperation in the region aimed at stimulating economic and democratic reforms, increasing stability and promoting growth, common projects and peaceful resolution of conflicts through cooperation and joint actions[20]. To implement these objectives, strategic policies and partnerships were developed such as: Integrated Maritime Policy, Environmental Partnership under the Synergy, Energy, Transportation, Citizen's mobility and improving security; Research, science and education networks; Democracy, Civil Society and Youth, Tourism and cross-border cooperation[21].

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Romania's active involvement was emphasized by the initiatives it proposed, such as the *NGO Forum in the Black Sea Region[22],* in close cooperation with the Federation of NGOs for Development (FOND), which periodically organizes meetings aimed at developing collaborations, finance projects and disseminate good practices in aspects of social and political aspects[23].

The Eastern Partnership is the second political project addressed to the Eastern Europe, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

As a part of the neighborhood policy of the EU, it has the role to increase cooperation and stability in the region by generating a space with common principles and values based on democracy, prosperity, stability[24]. These principles are part of the project '20 results by 2020'[25] who develops four priority development axes: stronger governance, stronger economy, stronger society, and better connectivity.

In this context, Romania, a state on the border of the EU, has the interest of playing an important role in regional politics, because some of these states are in its vicinity, because of the interests that are common with the Republic of Moldova, as well as due to the regional dynamics which directly affect its state security.

Romania's strategic objectives, as defined in the National Defense Strategy 2020 - 2024 are "consolidating the security in the Black Sea region, as well in the Balkans" and "projecting the Romania's profile as stability factor and the promotion of EU values in the region, by supporting the European course of the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans states"[26].

One of the commitments made by Romania over the presidency of the EU Council is the consistency and effectiveness of the EU action in Eastern Neighborhood (The Incoming Romanian Presidency of the EU Council, 2018). This aspect is strengthened by the Government commitment to focus on policies to update the *"Black Sea Synergy"* and *"making stronger connections in the Eastern Partnership".*

These objectives are underlined by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which states Romania's commitment to the continuous development of the cooperation within the political project Black Sea Synergy, especially in the context of increased uncertainties in the region[27]. To this end, Romania pleads for a resizing of EU politics in the Black Sea area, by increasing involvement in the development of resilient societies and good governance together with security policies[28] from a multidimensional perspective.

As a result, the policies towards the member states of the Eastern Partnership and Black Sea Synergy represent priorities in the development of Romania's external politics in the region, and within the European Union.

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3. Soft power, public diplomacy, and digital diplomacy

From the initial definition of soft power offered by Joseph Nye, who described it as being: "*the capacity to obtain what you want by attraction more than by coercion or payment methods. It is born from cultural attractiveness of political ideas and the politics of a state*"[29], the practical application of the concept has witnessed many variations. The author himself returned to the definition several times, trying a stricter delimitation[30] and adaptation to the realities born from its application.

Regardless of the shape the definition takes, soft power is primarily a means of communicating politics, culture or ethical and political values with the international environment, the desire to win by persuasion and not force. In Eastern Europe, Western soft power politics meant a dream for citizens living the reality of dictatorial regimes, a dream of freedom, prosperity which contributed to the desire for emancipation. Possibly, the most adequate example of soft power is the way in which American culture penetrated these states with political and social systems strictly controlled and won the hearts of the youth by music and films[31].

Soft power politics develops in parallel with public diplomacy[32] seen by Hans Tuch as "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies"[33]. But as Jan Melissen points out, the concept evolves due to the development of vectors used in communication, context in which public diplomacy is like an "old wine in a new bottle"[34]. The new bottle is certainly very modern, when we speak of the Internet and online communication. Thus, concepts such as e-diplomacy, cyber- diplomacy or digital diplomacy slowly find their place in the professional language giving rise to serious taxonomical issues[35]. States have easier access to the international public, but in this path the success of a policy is based on a totally different approach[36], that country must learn to master.

To connect with the new trends, states have developed digital diplomacy projects, by creating an online communication space with the public through official internet pages and social media pages. To avoid the phenomenon of cyber-squatting, states and official institutions[37], have received priority right in the use of domain names and the management of CCTLD (Country Code Top Level Domain)[38].

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4. Methodology

For states, the use of new communication techniques is essential to achieve objectives of external politics. Most countries use them, trying to achieve their political agenda by addressing citizens or by presenting their own system of values. In this regard states need to build communication strategies and measure their impact periodically in order to adjust them to the public and its specific needs.

Our research is focused on Romania's digital diplomacy politics in the non- EU Member States that are included in the OSCE. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine are the case - studies. Romania's communication policy inside the EU must follow other principles and mechanisms than with non-EU countries. At the same time, Russian Federation is excluded as Romanian public politics to this country presents special characteristics and sensitive topics on the bilateral agenda. In the context of the 2019 Romanian EU presidency, studying the aspects of digital diplomacy in the region is needed, because the image and communication capacities of Romanian in the area have a direct impact on the success of such an EU policy over the coming 6 months.

Starting from the model developed by Kent and Taylor based on five pillars: dialogic loop, the usefulness of information, the generation of return visits, the ease of the interface, conservation of visitors[39] we formulate four research questions:

RQ1 Do Romanian embassies in these states have Internet pages and if yes, how easy is it to use them and how useful the information is?

RQ2 Do Romanian embassies in these states have social media pages: Facebook, Instagram or Twitter?

RQ3 If yes, how heavily accessed are they and what type of information is published?

RQ4 How is the activity of embassies perceived on social media by the youth of the respective state?

RQ1 Do Romanian embassies in these states have Internet pages and if yes, how easy is it to use them and how useful the information is?
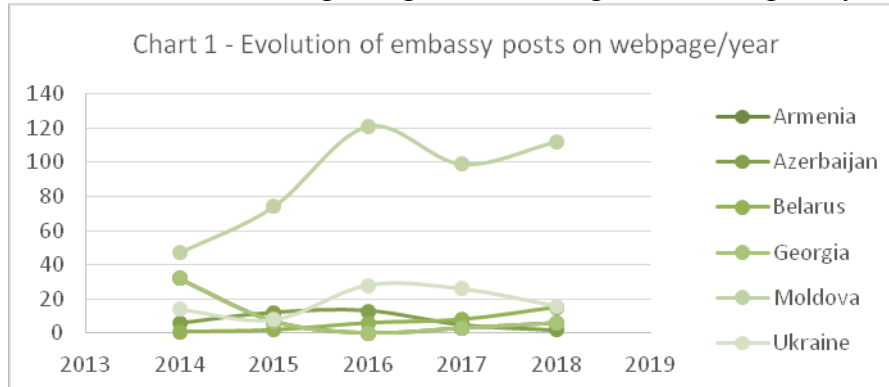
Through this question we try to look upon the existence of the page and its content. We followed the page activity, to see if it is dedicated only to the embassy or if it has special subsections for consulates and cultural centres, what type of information is found, what type of information is missing. Following the research, we found that all six embassies have web pages that shows only the embassy. The consulate or the cultural centre, if available (Republic of Moldova and Ukraine), are simply mentioned, with no active links or subsections. All of them offer information in Romanian, most of them in English and in Belarus and Ukraine, the page can be read in Russian too. Only the embassies in Azerbaijan, Moldova and Ukraine offer information on economic and commercial aspects; the first two give detailed qualitative information, while the latter have a business guide for the respective state. No page offers information regarding study opportunities and scholarships available in Romania for the citizens of the respective states and how they could be accessed.

Country	Type of diplomatic representation			Web page				Language
	Embassy	Consulate	Cultural Center	Political information	Visa	Economic	Exports	
Armenia	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes	-	-	Ro En

[39] Kent, M. & and Taylor M., *'Building Dialogic Relationships through the World Wide Web'*, Public Relations Review, vol. 3, no. 24 (1998), 321-334.

Azerbaijan	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Ro EN
Belarus	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes	-	-	Ro En Ru
Georgia	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes	-	-	Ro En
Moldova	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes.	Ro En
Ukraine	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Ro Ru Ua

As regards the number of posts, we can see from Chart 1 that their evolution in the news section fluctuates from year to year; in some states, such as Georgia dropping from 32 in 2014 to 0 in 2016, with 6 posts in 2018. An interesting fact can be seen from the analysis of the data, that in the year Romania celebrated its 100 years' anniversary no significant change in the number of posts can be identified, except in Republic of Moldova. This may indicate a certain passive attitude in communication regarding the events organized during this year.

Chart 1 - Evolution of embassy posts on webpage/year

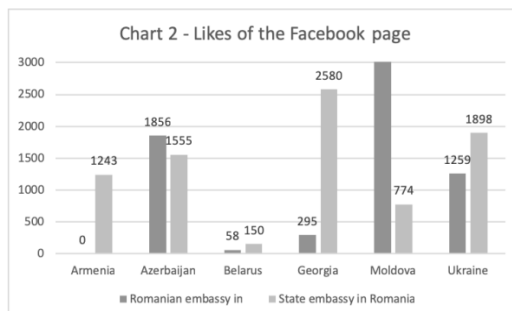*RQ2 Do Romanian embassies in these states have social media pages: Facebook, Instagram or Twitter?*

Romanian embassies opened Facebook pages, with only one exception of the Romanian Embassy in Armenia. None of the six embassies can be found on Instagram or Twitter. At the same time, we can notice in Table 2 that all pages, except for the Romanian Embassy in Republic of Moldova, were opened after the homologous embassy.

Table 2 – Beginning of the Facebook page		
Country	Romania Embassy to...	State's Embassy to Romania
Armenia	-	27-Dec-17
Azerbaijan	23-Sep-16	24-Nov-14
Belarus	15-Oct-17	31 May 2016
Georgia	28-Sep-16	02-Oct-13
Moldova	27.Nov.2014	29 Jan 2016
Ukraine	5 Sept. 2016	29-Feb-12

RQ3 If yes, how heavily accessed are they and what type of information is published?

Emphasizing the number of likes, we made a comparative analysis of the numbers of Romanian embassies in the Eastern Partnership states and those of the Eastern Partnership countries in Romania. By doing this, we have tried to analyze how followed they are in terms of page interactions. The results are debatable from case to case. There are significant differences in the case of Georgia, which can be explained by an increased interest in the evolution and situation of the country in the post-Soviet Union era. Another interesting case is the significant difference of page likes between the Romanian Embassy in Moldova (6400) and its counterpart in Romania (774). The situation can indicate a higher interest manifested by
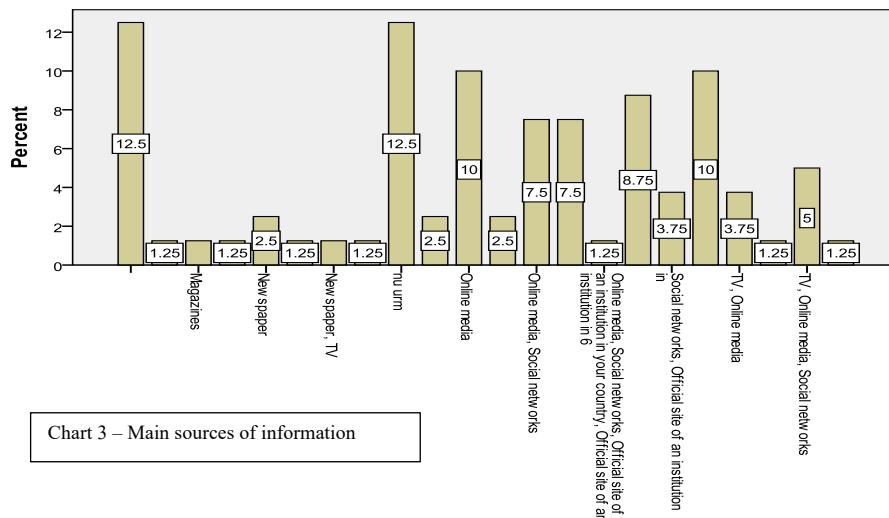
Republic of Moldova citizens over Romanian politics, values, and the advantages it offers and a low interest of Romanian citizens towards the official discourse presented on the page of the Embassy of the Republic of Moldova in Romania.

Chart 2 - Likes of the Facebook page

RQ4 How is the embassies activity perceived on social media by the youth of the selected state?

Our research approached 80 young people, aged 19 - 30 years, students at various levels: BA, MA, PhD. Out of the 6 states we chose to apply the study on Ukraine, Republic of Moldova and Belarus. We made this choice for practical reasons connected with the length of interviews and the choice of a relevant sample. The reason for selecting Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova is linked to Romania's economic and political interest, as well as an ethnic one, due to the Romanian minorities living in those regions. Belarus is a state with a low Romanian diaspora, but an area of interest for regional development. We selected this state to follow the way in which Romanian digital diplomacy policy is perceived at the opposed pole in terms of diaspora and direct interests.

From the questions addressed interesting qualitative data emerged, regarding youth interaction with the on-line and social media pages of the Romanian Embassy in their country. What was gathered in number of responses and percentages, due to the number of respondents, offers an image over a certain trend that can be corroborated in a form or another with the results we have got in the first 3 research questions. First, the interest is different depending on the country - the highest interest can be found in the case of the Republic of Moldova and the lowest in Belarus. We asked first if they follow news about Romania and if yes, in which area. This question is relevant in order to establish their interest on the country and who are the subjects they find relevant. Most of the respondents in Republic of Moldova and in Ukraine follow news about Romania from different areas, mainly on social aspects, which is relevant for 38,8% of the respondents, followed by international relations 35%, politics 32,5%, and education 27,5%. We inquired also about the source of their information, when they want to find out certain aspects regarding Romania. This data is quantified in percentage, in order to establish an order in their preferences. The overall data presented in Chart 3 points towards online media as the main source with 48,6%, followed by social networks - 42,9%, TV - 28,6%; only 20% acquired the information from an official website of a Romanian institution. Consequently, their intention to follow the official pages is low and if a communication impact is sought, then the official communication should be backed by media coverage and a social media activity.

Chart 3 – Main sources of information

This data is relevant because when asked if they used the official on-line page of the Romanian embassy in their country most of them answer that they either do not use or they do not remember using it. From the respondents that accessed the page, most of them are occasional users, who search for specific information and most of them described the content as being satisfactory in terms of information and ease of use.

For the social media we tried to see if they follow the Romanian embassy in their country, and if yes what type of information they seek. We also asked if they follow Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as a control question as Romanian embassy in these countries have page only on Facebook. From the overall respondents, only around 30% like/follow the embassy page on social networks, which they find good in terms of information, but most of them indicated that they would like to find more information about tourism in Romania, scholarships, economic aspects, or political news. We shall emphasize that some said they follow the Twitter of Instagram page which indicate that they are not familiar with the activity of Romanian embassy on social media.

5. Discussion

From the four research questions some conclusions emerge. As regards the website, the information presented is linked to the core functions of the diplomatic mission, such as visa information or documents and other procedures that address Romanian citizens living in that country. Some information can be identified in terms of economic developments and little to non about tourism or educational opportunities. As regards the content, the most active Romanian embassy is the one in Republic of Moldova, followed by the one in Ukraine.

As regards social media, we state that the communication in this area is a new approach and there is much to be done in order to get a relevant impact. From the interviews, in terms of desired content, the main two preferences of the respondents are tourism and educational information. The social page of Romanian embassies in Republic of Moldova and Ukraine offers information on tourist aspects, with regular posts about the traditions or touristic areas of Romania. In this context, some question marks shall be raised about the fact that the respondents indicated tourism as a desired content, which could mean that they do not really follow the activity on the page or that they do not relate with the way the information is presented. The outcome is different when an official information is presented *per se*, or when this is adapted to the social media public, which is informal and more accessible to the young reader. Regarding scholarships on the social media page, in these two cases, some announces are made related to the opportunities to study in Romania. They are mainly formal announces, so they

may not reach the interested public. In the case of the of the rest of the embassies the posts are few, with limited content.

A stronger communication policy should be developed, not only in terms of what should be done but also with whom. Specialized employees with competences in international relations and communication should be in charged with the on-line policy of the embassy, because creating content and communicating efficiently cannot be done without training the personal in charged and the correct strategy.

When considering a strategy, the impact of the web and social media page are important but not enough, because as shown in Chart 3 they should be doubled by blogs, mass media interviews and other means of communication on-line.

6. Conclusions

Romania has a strong interest in the area covered by the EU Eastern Partnership where one can find OSCE countries as well from a political and economic perspective and this interest shall be reflected in its policy on the region, political partnerships, common projects, economic ties, etc. If Romania wants to play a stronger political position in the region, public diplomacy shall be a priority, because without effective communication it cannot gather strong legitimacy related to the policies it promotes. Addressing the young is crucial, and the on-line environment is the key in shaping a positive attitude, but this shall be done in a consistent and constant manner.

Starting form this example, it is important to understand that even greater efforts need to be done at international organizations level, as there are numerous cultural historical and political aspects which need to be addressed in order to generate greater impact.

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