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# Performance and Performativity in Contemporary Diplomacy <sup>[1]</sup>

Contemporary diplomacy operates through two intertwined dimensions: performativity and performance. The expansion of digital diplomacy increasingly blurs the distinction between these two dynamics, creating conditions in which public visibility risks substituting structural impact as an indicator of institutional effectiveness. In diplomatic systems that manage both strategic agendas and large diaspora constituencies, as in Romania's case, the expectation to reconcile digital exposure with demonstrable impact becomes particularly salient.

The concept of performativity in the diplomatic context can be understood through the dramaturgical framework proposed by Erving Goffman in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959) . Goffman interprets social interaction as a form of staging, in which actors manage the impression produced on the audience, navigating between front stage, the visible space of interaction, and backstage, where institutional work remains outside public scrutiny. Applied to diplomacy, this framework allows diplomatic representation to be understood as a set of public practices and institutionalized rituals through which the legitimacy of the mandate is continuously reaffirmed and recognized.

The digital transformation of diplomacy has amplified the performativity dimension. Bjola and Holmes (2015) define digital diplomacy as the integration of digital technologies into diplomatic functions within an ecosystem of public, interactive, and continuously evaluated communication. Diplomatic institutions increasingly employ quantifiable indicators such as follower counts, likes, engagement rates used as proxies for institutional effectiveness, reflecting a broader tendency toward the metrification of public activity. Rogers (2018) terms these "vanity metrics", linking them with an organizational logic of success theatre: a staging of success in which performance is assessed through numerical visibility rather than substantive influence. Using such metrics as proxies for institutional effectiveness generates distorted incentives within organizations, systematically rewarding what is visible over what is consequential. A structural consequence is that diplomatic engagements are increasingly validated in real time, sometimes before formal reporting reaches the sending state.

A conceptual distinction is necessary here. Public diplomacy, as defined by Nye (2004) and systematized by Cull (2009) is fundamentally communicative, directed at foreign publics to create conditions favorable to foreign policy objectives. Performativity, as used in this article, is not public diplomacy but its possible pathology: the moment the communicative act detaches from the strategic objective that justifies it and becomes an end in itself.



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Performance in diplomacy, by contrast, must be understood as measurable institutional effectiveness. The public management literature offers a valuable analytical instrument in Young's (1994) taxonomy of outputs, outcomes, and impact, which provides a structured framework for assessing different levels of diplomatic effectiveness. Outputs refer to the immediate and directly quantifiable products of diplomatic activity, such as joint statements, official visits, bilateral meetings, or engagements with diaspora representatives. These outputs are tangible, documentable, and frequently amplified in digital media environments. Their high visibility, however, makes them vulnerable to being conflated with actual diplomatic performance. Outcomes, by contrast, refer to the substantive changes generated by these outputs, such as policy adjustments, activated cooperation mechanisms, improved service delivery and recognition of diaspora priorities in bilateral workplans. Impact designates systemic, long-term transformation: the advancement of strategic objectives, durable institutional alignment, and sustained improvement in the relationship between the state and its citizens abroad. Evaluating impact in diplomacy remains fundamentally difficult given its indirect causation and extended time horizons (Tallberg, 2006; Cull, 2010).

In diplomatic engagements, effectiveness can imply concrete shifts in what partners do, not only what they say. For states with large diasporas, effectiveness also means influencing host-country systems so that citizen needs are addressed more systematically, whether in labor rights enforcement, access to social protection, child safeguarding, or return and reintegration frameworks.

In the consular area, applying this taxonomy reveals a specific problem: official evaluations tend to operate predominantly at the level of outputs: processing times, documents issued, case resolution rates. Although useful for monitoring administrative efficiency, these indicators fail to capture institutional effectiveness, understood here as the strategic management of citizen vulnerability. Consular performance requires developing different institutional capacities: early identification of vulnerable populations, referral mechanisms with local authorities and civil society, crisis intervention protocols, and operational partnerships with host-state institutions. Consular service must therefore be understood not as an administrative production line but as an instrument of protection, measured by reduced vulnerability and the ability of institutions to prevent, mitigate, and respond to risks affecting citizens abroad.

Overall, the tension between performativity and performance stems from the different temporal and visibility regimes in which they operate. Performativity unfolds in real time and is immediately legible in digital public spheres. Performance is built through sustained institutional coordination whose effects emerge gradually, often becoming identifiable only retrospectively.

The distinction between operational performance and performativity is not determined by whether an initiative is high-profile or publicly visible, but by its design and follow-through. Genuine performance requires a structured pathway defined by three elements: a clear

strategic objective; a credible link between output and expected outcome or impact; and follow-up with assigned responsibility and measurable progress. Without these, visibility, however broad, remains symbolic.

The credibility of diplomatic institutions depends on their capacity to transcend symbolic representation in favor of verifiable operational performance. The emerging challenge is not public exposure itself but the normalization of communication without implementation as an indicator of institutional effectiveness. Diplomacy must sustain legitimacy through presence, yet credibility ultimately depends on institutional impact. In a digital environment that amplifies performativity, diplomatic institutions must use digital instruments to support genuine performance rather than substitute for it.

*The views expressed in this article belong to the author and reflect a personal analysis.*

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