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The European Union and Digital Diplomacy: Overcoming the 'Expectations-Capability Gap' [1]

As a regional organization with an active presence on the world stage, the European Union (EU) has embraced social media and other digital technologies as communication tools deployed to engage with foreign audiences and to project its image globally. The use of digital technology to achieve foreign policy objectives, or what is known as "digital diplomacy," has acquired a central role in the EU communication strategy, and more resources and personnel have been dedicated to this policy area. By turning to online platforms to conduct foreign policy, the EU has followed the lead of public organizations (both national and international) that have been early adopters of digital technologies in their communication practices.

However, the Union’s foray into digital diplomacy differs from other organizations because of its hybrid institutional arrangement mixing intergovernmental and supranational characteristics and its foreign policy’s decentralized structure, with EU-level actors and member states sharing responsibilities in this domain. These unique features have shaped the approach and practices that constitute the field of EU digital diplomacy, from its governance (centred on the EU diplomatic unit, the European External Action Service, but complemented with other EU units and EU member states) to the narrative it has constructed to engage with foreign audiences. In this context, digital channels of communication (websites, blogs and social media) represent a compelling set of tools available to the EU to promote its “soft power” in world affairs.

Despite its newly acquired prominence, EU digital diplomacy faces various challenges in its quest to improve the regional organization’s relevance and visibility on the global stage. As the latest addition to its communication and public diplomacy toolkit, the EU digital efforts suffer from a legacy of neglect and self-centeredness regarding external communication, which, despite recent improvements, still negatively affects this policy domain. EU digital diplomacy is also constrained by the complexity and weakness of the Union's foreign policy. The lack of a unified voice and the limited coordination among the various actors who speak on behalf of the EU (especially member states, which maintain a degree of autonomy with regard to foreign policy) limit the ability of the organization to provide a coherent narrative about what the EU stands for.

Another challenge, which is related to the social nature of the communicative platforms used for digital diplomacy, is the still widespread lack of genuine engagement with the targeted audience, a problem that, in fairness, the EU shares with other international organizations. EU digital diplomacy also has to counter the growing number of online activities that openly contest the organization. Some of the forces behind these activities have a malign intent (e.g. cybercrime, trolling, misinformation). Others reflect the shortcomings of the EU in tackling the various internal and external crises the organization has had to face in the last decade (the "Euro crisis," the "refugee crisis," and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic).

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The case for greater digitalization of EU foreign policy should not be overstated, however. Social media has been hailed as having a positive impact on private and public organizations in terms of meeting their mandates and performing their functions. However, it is not clear whether this assessment applies to foreign policy, and particularly for the EU, given its sui generis status. For all the talk about digitalization as the future of EU foreign policy, digital tools might not be the solution to EU foreign policy problems after all. On the contrary, there are inherent tensions with these tools that might be detrimental to the success of the EU on the world stage.

Some of these issues have to do with the very characteristics of social media. While social media platforms promote a more visible digital presence, their decentralized, informal and personal nature, combined with their capacity to multiply the number of voices that speak on behalf of an organization, means that the message they convey can come across as inconsistent and confusing, and, as a result, it weakens their efforts at projecting a coherent identity. In this way, social media can exacerbate an inherent tension that characterizes the EU's identity, namely the one between the EU's quest for a collective sense of community and member states' emphasis on their unique features and histories.

There are also questions about the compatibility of digital channels and EU foreign policy. Part of the reason is that, unlike domestic politics, foreign policy in general is resistant to what Brommesson and Ekengren (2017) call the "media logic." As the authors put it:

> *Foreign policy is traditionally seen as a conservative policy area characterized by caution and prudence. Because foreign policy decisions are frequently made in small, closed groups, it is not publicly debated as frequently as other policy areas. Foreign policy issues are therefore less public and debate in the media is more limited. These characteristics stand in sharp contrast to the media logic, with its short-sightedness and focus on individual cases along with its sensationalism rather than long-term perspective (Brommesson and Ekengren 2017: 3–18).*

This characterization does not imply that mediatization of foreign policy never occurs, but only under certain circumstances, which depend on contexts, time periods and types of questions.

The EU is not unique in its struggles to use digital diplomacy effectively. Indeed, other governmental organizations are in a similar predicament. For digital diplomacy, however, as is the case for other aspects of its foreign policy, the EU suffers an additional handicap, namely the digital version of what is known in EU foreign policy literature as the "expectations-capability gap" (Hill 1993). This term refers to the belief that the EU should be able to perform its duties as a major foreign policy power, given its size and its constituent parts' political and economic prowess. Since the EU presents itself as a progressive, future-oriented entity at the forefront of innovation, it has raised the expectation that it should be a leader in digital diplomacy as well. In reality, the resources allocated to support these efforts and the limited autonomy of the EU in foreign affairs mean that these expectations have not been met. Until this gap is bridged, the EU digital tools might not turn out to be the "extraordinary channel of diplomacy" (Mogherini 2014) that EU officials have envisioned.
