

# DIGITAL DIPLOMACY ANALYSIS ON THE TWITTER ACCOUNT OF ROMANIA'S MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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**Abstract:** Digital Diplomacy represents a key factor in conducting foreign affairs in the 21st century, which was made possible through the usage of ICT technologies. This paper is focusing on defining Digital Diplomacy, the events that made its adoption and integration possible and how is it used by Romania's Ministry of Foreign through its Twitter account, analyzing its behaviour and ways of conducting digital diplomacy.

**Keywords:** Digital diplomacy, Romania's MFA, cyber-security, nation branding, Ukrainian Crisis, Covid-19 Pandemic.

## INTRODUCTION

Diplomacy is the art of conducting international relations, especially by a country's designated representatives abroad, looking to also maintain peace and aiming to find solutions to a conflict situation. From this perspective, digital diplomacy is following the same pattern, the difference between them is coming from the usage of different tools, tactics, and strategies to achieve foreign policy goals and objectives and at the same time to maintain cyber security at the national and international level. Romania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAF) Twitter account is the object of analysis for this paper, from which we extract conclusions regarding Romanian digital diplomacy.

Regarding the analysis carried out on Romania's MFA Twitter account, there are two aspects that one can see. On the one hand, there are weaknesses such as the lack of engagement with a larger number of states and zero engagement with the citizens. On the other hand, we can see an improvement in how the posts/tweets were built up and delivered during the month of January, when the behaviour has been shifting from *passive* to *active*.

Romania has the unique opportunity to be considered a regional cyber power and Bucharest could become a cyber-hub. Both of these objectives can be enhanced through digital diplomacy. In order to achieve them, first Romania has to build up a strong digital diplomacy strategy which will ensure the right level of communication and promotion and a cyber strategy which will make sure these two goals can be implemented at their highest level.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When we discuss *Digital Diplomacy* there are multiple interpretations and a highly debated subject among scholars is related to its meaning and to what its niche implies, to its purposes, strategies, and tactics. To further understand its nature which is defined by the cyberspace and the ICT technologies, we first have to comprehend its classical meaning.

One of the best-known authors to define diplomacy is the US diplomat Harry Kissinger who refers to diplomacy as “A new world order and modern diplomacy is the balance of power between the forces of war and peace” (Kissinger, 1994). Thinking in these terms today, classical diplomacy and digital diplomacy might seem like two different concepts but, in reality, digital diplomacy is just reshaping and repurposing classical diplomacy and adding new elements and capabilities from the ICT technologies. The essence of diplomacy has survived for centuries because of its capacity to reshape itself and adapt to the changing world.

In 2014, Henry Kissinger also referred to the new use of technology as “difficult to assess national capabilities, vulnerabilities are multiplying, and there is no clear distinction between war and peace. These new technologies are outpacing regulation, strategy, and doctrine, and there are no shared interpretations or understandings of cyber capabilities. Moreover, it is highly implausible that countries with different histories and cultures will arrive independently at the same conclusions about the nature and permissible uses of their new intrusive capacities” (apud Martino, 2021, emphasis ours).

We do not agree with this explanation, even though certain aspects of this perspective are true and cyber capabilities can hardly be seen as instruments or elements to be added to the foreign affairs dimension and it might be even harder to understand the threats that are coming alongside. We suggest that, when it comes to diplomacy, the cyber capabilities and ICT technologies created one of the most visible and tangible changes in this field, bringing diplomacy to the digital era.

We went from a classic diplomatic monologue addressed to citizens by the state to a two-way communication system, a dialogue which included citizens as well. The adoption of dialogue is represented by the use of ICT technologies such as social media platforms, which are used in two ways, one is intended to influence the foreign policy agenda of another state, and the other one is used to influence foreign citizens’ behaviour towards a state’s diplomatic agenda. (Manor, 2019).

This paper will look upon two definitions regarding digital diplomacy, given by Ilan Manor (Manor, 2019):

- i. Digital diplomacy is “the use of social networking sites by MFAs for gathering and disseminating information”.
- ii. Diplomacy 2.0 is defined as “follower-centric” and implies “ongoing engagement between MFAs and their followers”, the “adoption of an architecture of listening among MFAs”, calling for contribution “to the development of MFA and embassy websites, special web platforms and nation branding campaigns” and “crowd-sourcing”.

We would also emphasize Corneliu Bjola’s perspective on this niche (Bjola & Holmes, 2015), who is laying the stress on “*the use of social media for diplomatic purposes*”. He emphasizes that digital diplomacy “*could change practices of how diplomats engage in information management, public diplomacy, strategy planning, international negotiations or even crisis*

*management*”. Also, we would like to highlight that both authors are discussing in their work nation branding and how this phenomenon is possible through the use of social media tools.

There are many existing confusions regarding the difference between digital diplomacy and cyber diplomacy. The two are interconnected and share many similarities but some differences as well. One is more focused on the cultural and societal level (DD), and the other is more concerned with the cybersecurity capabilities, strategies, and cyber threats (CD). But as I mentioned, they work hand in hand. Another important and related notion which is often brought up and used in both types of diplomacy is the “cyber deterrence” or “deterrence in cyberspace”, which is defined by American researchers as responding to a “vast range of coercive activities directed against the United States and its allies” (Mihai, Ciuchi & Petrica, 2019), activities which take place in cyberspace and on social media platforms as well.

The best way in which one can try to understand a state’s behaviour and strategy when discussing digital diplomacy is to look at it from multiple perspectives. Given the limited research conducted on this topic, we cannot be sure about the perfect definition for digital diplomacy, and the combination of several definitions gives us a fair chance in understanding this niche and its objectives. We will continue by applying the main ideas of the presented theory to the case study of Romania, in order to identify Romania’s digital diplomacy, the behaviour on its social media accounts, who are the main actors that are engaging with Romania’s MFA on Twitter, how the pandemic has affected Romania’s digital diplomacy, what its major weaknesses are and how they could be overcome.

## THE ROMANIAN MFA’S SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT: TWITTER

Firstly, I would like to emphasize my decision regarding the Twitter account of Romania’s MFA rather than its Facebook page (although Twitter is not a platform used heavily in Eastern Europe it is seen as a better tool of communication and engagement in digital diplomacy). In foreign affairs, these two platforms serve as tools for different purposes. Twitter is more debate-oriented and is addressed to foreign societies and other states and MFAs, the used language being predominantly English, the communication and events expressed and mentioned there can be mostly found in foreign affairs agendas which are targeting other states, institutions or foreign citizens. Facebook is more oriented towards your own society and the most used language is the national language, in our case Romanian, (Ittefag, 2019) the posts tending to be written for the Romanian audience.

Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have expanded communication from monologue to a dialogue, allowing government officials to be able to engage in two-way communication with public individuals. These platforms have also made it easier for officials to expand their networks, making connections with the easiness of a click of a button (Verrekia, 2017).

Romania’s MFA plays a crucial role in the national strategy for cyber security, ensures the activity of digital and cyber diplomacy and coordinates the political level of the cyber issues.

The MFA is a part of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and a permanent member of the Cybersecurity Operative Council (COSC) and of the Technical Support Group (GST). Moreover, it is holding the dialogue with the diplomatic missions, states, and national/international institutions in this domain (EU, NATO, OSCE, UN) (Romania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Between January 1-30, 2022, we made an analysis regarding Romania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Twitter account in order to identify its behaviour, usage of digital diplomacy, the level of engagement with other actors, weaknesses, and solutions.

While conducting this analysis, we noticed two types of behaviour in Romania's digital diplomacy. One that can be noticed before the first of January up to the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2022, a behavior which featured similarities with public diplomacy focusing rather on a monologue-based communication. The second one manifested between 7<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of January, being based more on statements, security, alliances, hard power explained through the use of soft power, two-way communication but only with states and international organizations, the adopted changes highlighted the need/desire for Romania to express its position regarding the other actors in the IR arena:

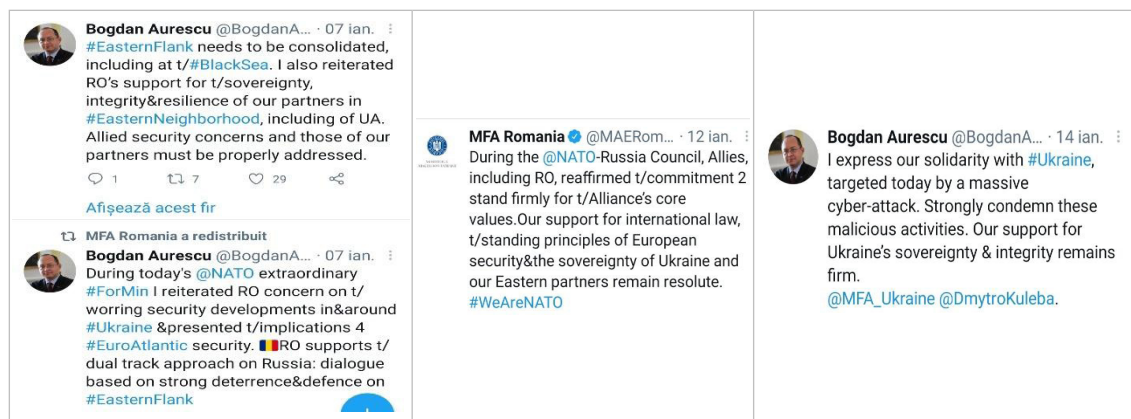
- Normally Romania's MFA was following a strategy which could be correlated to Public Diplomacy focusing more on the cultural side, the society's needs, official visits, the renewal of friendly agreements between states and international days. This type of friendly, passive, not statement-oriented behaviour was and, to a certain extent, still is Romania's approach to digital diplomacy. Even during this month (1-30<sup>th</sup> of January) we still have posts of this nature which are rather focused on raising the awareness on culturalism, friendship, and safety messages. Although all these elements exist in digital diplomacy, they only represent pieces of it, which used without a purpose, dialogue and engagement will not provide the benefits that are coming along with a strategic use of digital diplomacy.

*Romania's digital diplomacy conducted on Twitter tends to play it safe and not make controversial statements and mostly approves other states or international institutions.* From the first to the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2022, this was the overall approach of the Romanian MFA on Twitter (@MAERomania, 2022). Examples are provided on the following images:

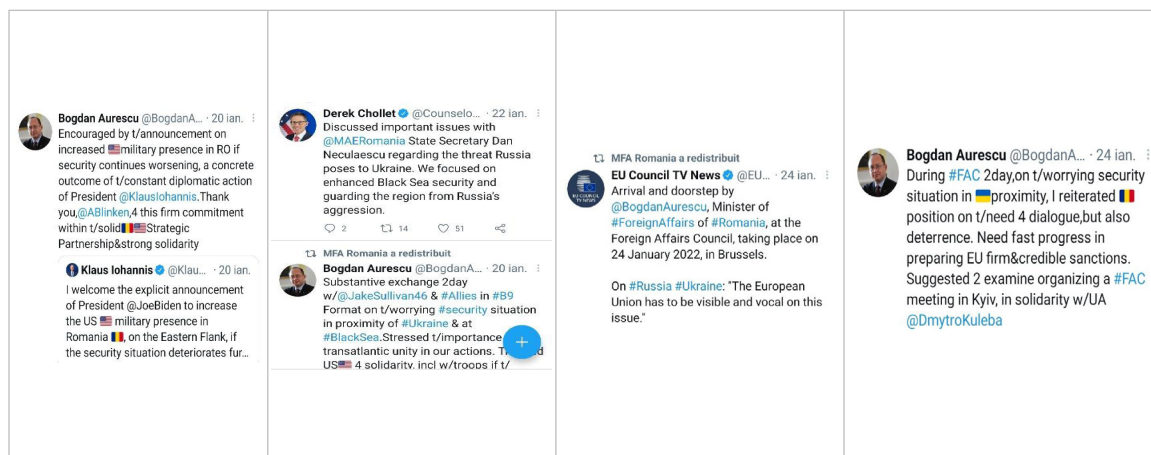


- The second approach/behaviour that Romania's MFA featured was more oriented towards the *actual usage of digital diplomacy and a two-way dialogue, international*

security, solving/de-escalation of a conflictual situation, expressing its position as an ally regarding NATO, and EU member states and strongly militating for Ukraine's sovereignty and the need for international interventions and preparation. Romania's tweets are not accusing the Russian Federation directly, but they are highly emphasizing NATO's support, the Black Sea security, and the need for foreign interventions through diplomatic means, sanctions and deterrence towards Russia. Romania criticized the presence of an increased number of troops on Ukraine's border (this was in advance of the 24 February invasion) and was encouraging the deployment of troops in Romania for conducting deterrence (here we deal with the concept as in the theoretical framework "cyber deterrence") through coercive means. One other aspect which is very important to mention with regard to this behaviour is Romania's increased level of engagement with multiple actors: NATO, EU, Ukraine, France, Spain and the US. (Examples are provided on the following images).



(@MAERomania, 2022)



(@MAERomania, 2022)

One can see the change in the Romania's MFA's behaviour in the context of the Ukrainian Crisis. The increased level of engagement is surprising (a strong emphasis on NATO was evident). We went from the first type of behavior focused on keeping peaceful relations to the second one where Romania adopted a more decisive approach based on statements and showing its status, and where it stands in the IR system alongside with its allies.



There is nothing out of the ordinary for Romania to behave like this in these changing circumstances, because, in geopolitical terms, Ukraine is a strategic point for both NATO and Russia and given the hostile relationship with the former Soviet Union and the proximity to Russia, it is a normal reaction to want to show your strong relations and alliance with NATO and to provide support for a state which finds itself under the threat of unjust war. What is new in this regard is the exposure, transparency, dialogue and statements conducted on Twitter by the Romanian MFA.

Digital diplomacy encompasses a wide range of diplomatic agendas, such as establishing communication and dialogue between state and non-state actors; preventing a cyber arms race; developing global norms; and promoting national interests in cyberspace through cybersecurity policies and engagement strategies. Capacity building in cybersecurity is meant to support the ultimate goal of deterring threats (Bryan & Manantan, 2022).

For the second type of behavior expressed by Romania's MFA, we see strong elements of digital diplomacy used strategically and we can also notice elements of cyber diplomacy.

## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS EFFECT ON ROMANIA'S CYBER DIPLOMACY

If we think about how digitalization in diplomacy was adopted and started to use ICT tools for foreign affairs purposes, we need to have in mind three milestone events (three crises that marked the humankind to a level which permitted the adoption of digital diplomacy as we know it today):

- i. The first event is represented by the 9/11 terrorist attacks (the fall of the Twin Towers in New York City in 2001), one of the reasons why the new technologies were adopted was because the terrorist group *Al-Qaeda* was already one step ahead of the states using this tool and social media to recruit new terrorists (Manor, 2018).
- ii. The second event took place in 2011, *the Arab Spring*, an uprising against the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North of Africa, the tool used for these uprisings was social media, more exactly Facebook. After this event the MFAs adopted this initiative to be able to monitor the events that were happening in other countries, this initiative was used by MFAs, diplomats and embassies (Manor, 2016).
- iii. The more recent third event that changed and reshaped again the employment and usage of digital tools and cyberspace in diplomacy is the Covid-19 pandemic which has had the most drastic outcome out of these three milestones. It affected every state, and forced everyone and every sector of life to digitalize and adopt the cyber realm.

Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes emphasizes the change management levels regarding the two types of diplomacy, classic and digital. On the one hand, we have *the top-down exogenous shocks* which refer to major crises and events which change our lives fast and drastically and force us to take fast measures. This is usually attributed to the classic diplomacy because there is a high need for face-to-face meetings and negotiations and it

is top-down because the problem is taken from its highest point to the lowest level. On the other hand, there is the *bottom-up incremental shifting* attributed to digital diplomacy, where the events are not traumatic and are happening gradually. There also exists a third type of change management, a *hybrid* one which includes both of the above-mentioned methods of change management (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). In this particular situation, the Covid-19 pandemic can be categorized through the hybrid type of change management, because it was represented by *top-down exogenous shocks* which had to be solved through digital diplomacy.

The outbreak in 2019 changed everything, not just in a single sector, but in all sectors of life, which were powerfully reshaped, diplomacy included. In the wake of the pandemic, the MFAs and diplomats played a crucial role, they joined the frontlines of the crisis, with embassies struggling to maintain their diplomatic footprint, strengthen important bilateral cooperation and provide consular services in a complex environment to citizens in need (Labott, 2020).

It is an easy conclusion that Romania was not featuring a high usage of digital or cyber diplomacy until 2019; the accounts existed but they were not used even half as much as they are used nowadays. The MFA's Twitter account was created in 2009 but it started to gain popularity in 2014 (the most used language was English). The engagement level dropped until 2019 because of the low level of activity. When the Covid-19 pandemic started to claim its first victims and unleashed the chaos, the level of activity and engagement on MFAs' Twitter account increased by 70% (Hanganu, 2015). And, even through the subsidence of pandemic woes, at least for now, it still finds itself in a constant growth and improvement.

*Romania's way of conducting diplomacy was drastically changed along with the rest of its sectors: the governmental, medical, societal one, etc. One aspect that needs to be strongly highlighted regarding the pandemic and Romania's digital diplomacy is that without the strong push given by the pandemic in the digital direction, Romania would be at least a couple of years short of adopting the elements that it is using now.*

## ROMANIA'S DD: WEAKNESSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During our analysis of Romania's MFA's Twitter account (@MAERomania) for the period between 1-30 January 2022, we noticed a series of weaknesses alongside with a good number of strengths which used in the right manner can change Romania's status in the EU and NATO alike regarding the cyber security capabilities and the conduct of its digital diplomacy.

We can see the lack of an actual build-up strategy for digital diplomacy which should be followed and should aim at specific purposes. The majority of posts delivered on Twitter previous to the Ukrainian crisis are, as said, mostly cultural and far from being statements, they are neither targeting a specific state, citizens, nor meant to engage with Romania's most important allies or with states with which we maintain vital partnerships and bilateral relations.

MFA posts/tweets for the first type of behavior are, as one might say, not that different from the notifications found in Google calendar, the approached topics are based on international or national days, anniversaries, crises that are happening somewhere in the world or in some cases they regard a newly appointed diplomat or statesman. In reality, it is good to use all of these elements, but, like any tool, they have to serve as puzzle pieces for achieving a goal and a strategy in foreign affairs, not just for checking the attendance and posting the tweets for the day.

Another issue is the lack of engagement with foreign citizens and other MFAs in pressing matters, this is mostly non-existing. Even after the behaviour of the Romanian MFA changed, as previously mentioned and stressed that the MFA was improving its engagement with other states and institutions, we still have no interaction with the citizens, an element that is more than relevant and implemented in every Western state.

The third weakness that we identified in Romania's behaviour is the lack of digital education in the public administration and foreign policy sectors among practitioners. It is crucial because there is no way to create a good digital diplomacy strategy with accurate reachable objectives if we do not have well-trained human resources in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who would be prepared to identify opportunities, threats, and ways to send a message in such a manner as not to cause a diplomatic conflict in the social media environment.

In order to solve these issues identified previously, Romania's MFA has to develop a strong digital diplomacy strategy with a high focus on achieving several targeted goals by means such as two-way communication, massive engagement of companies with state actors, non-state actors and citizens. Romania is going through a huge cyber-development, with highly-trained human resources in the field of IT, but in foreign policy, public administration, or in the field of national security there is a gap in education regarding digitalization and how we should act when it comes to digitalization. Romania must overcome this impediment if it wishes to be a respectable cyber actor and to be taken seriously, and moreover, to have a strategy that would improve its foreign affairs.

The improvement can take place through international cooperation and the creation of a Special Commission of Experts regarding foreign affairs and practitioners in this field which would hold rigorous and well-built trainings and seminars with practitioners from this field. In the end, it all comes down to education, knowledge and experience and the will to improve more and more and make your content perfect while increasing your national cyber capabilities and constantly evolving as a cyber power.

In order to reach the last two objectives mentioned, Romania already has all it needs and can use what Bjola and Manor call "national branding", which is a nation's attempt to draw its self-portrait through different methods. This is a tool for both image and reputation management (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). The most successful attempts of nation branding happen during massive crises. Looking from this perspective Romania has all the assets to make this happen, it only needs a strong strategy in this regard.



Romania has multiple national institutions which deal with the state's national cyber security and collaborate with other international institutions, such as the National Cyber Security Directorate (DNSC) (National Cyber Security Directorate, 2021) and the Cyber Diplomacy Center. But the most important asset obtained by Romania in 2020 is represented by the first European agency with the permanent seat in Romania, namely the *European Cybersecurity Industrial, Technology and Research Competence Centre (ECCC)*. The decision to locate the European Cybersecurity Industrial, Technology and Research Competence Centre in Bucharest acknowledges Romania's firm commitment to consolidating the European project and its strong expertise in the digital field and the cybersecurity field and is placing Romania as a high diplomatic power in the cyber field (Cerulus, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

We live in the digital era where most of the time there is a very thin line between cyberspace and real life particularly when it comes to diplomatic digital strategies. Romania is a state with high cyber capabilities but lacks experience and proper education in the digital diplomacy field. This type of education should be provided in an in-depth manner to the foreign affairs practitioners and not only. All of the public administration employees should be educated and trained in what digitalization means, how it is used, for what purposes and how we could reach our goal by using these tools particularly given the importance of digital diplomacy in present-day foreign affairs.

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