

European Union's Digital Diplomacy The Case of the War in Ukraine¹

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Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Undoubtedly, neither the European Union nor the international community were prepared and organized to deal with such an incident. The EU has taken a clear and strong stance on supporting the independence of Ukraine and promoting peace. European leaders use public diplomacy and especially social media to provide awareness and promote their messaging and actions towards European citizens and the world. In particular, Twitter has been widely used as a tool to present European decisions and create a common stance and understanding of the invasion.

This article seeks to advance the understanding of how digital communication and information technologies create a different environment in which public diplomacy functions by changing the medium of public communication, obfuscating the line between foreign and domestic affairs, and emphasizing on the role of direct communication between political leaders and the public (Bjola, et al, 2019, p. 84). Bearing that in mind, its purpose is threefold:

1. To provide an introduction to what is understood and defined as digital public diplomacy
2. To provide an introduction to the EU's digital public diplomacy
3. To examine how key political figures of the EU's institutions have used digital public diplomacy to provide awareness, share their views, actions, and political decisions, and engage with their audiences

Digital Public Diplomacy

Communicating with the citizens of other states and shaping public opinion are key components of diplomacy. The majority of governments and international organizations have as their priority the promotion of their image and reputation, with a commitment of creating a favorable environment for the acceptance of their positions and interests. Therefore, public diplomacy is the “public face” of traditional diplomacy (Frangonikolopoulos, 2022, p. 119). More precisely, public diplomacy is a communication process that aims at the balanced and honest presentation of the positions of a state or an international organization to international public opinion.

Following the end of the Cold War “public diplomacy” (Cull 2009), “nation branding” (Aronczyk 2013), and “digital diplomacy” (Bjola & Holmes 2015) have gained attention as practices of communication and information sharing. By interpreting or analyzing the content of public diplomacy or digital campaigns we

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can understand the crucial topics for the public and political debate (Bjola and Jiang 2015; Manor 2017). In this way, governments, politicians, organizations, and think tanks have a new form of communication and engagement with the public. Moreover, the audiences by using these new technological communication and information tools can actively and easily participate and shape the discussion (Manor & Crilley, 2020, pp. 68-69). Governments and their representatives use these tools to shape the public perception and frame events, figures, and policies internally and externally.

By 2016, for instance, 170 MFAs had created their own websites through which they communicated with the public (Kurbalija, 2016) and by 2018, 97% of governments and leaders in the 193 UN member states had an official presence on Twitter, including 131 MFAs, 107 ministers of foreign affairs, more than 4,600 embassies, and 1,400 ambassadors (Twiplomacy Study 2018). The speed and accessibility of information provide the opportunity for various stakeholders to engage in the political debate without the barriers that traditional public diplomacy may have. In addition, it also eases the daily work and advocacy of political leaders and practitioners, who can reach wider audiences and increase engagement, by facilitating the possibility for interaction and dialogue (Bjola & Manor, 2016 & Graham, 2014, p. 522). Due to the enormous and high-speed development of technology, “borders” and the differentiation between national and international news have disappeared. Moreover, and given the power of global media networks to draw the public’s attention to specific topics and narratives, crises and wars, and the need of politicians and diplomats to cope with their reporting (Brewer 2006; Gilboa 2005). In this sense, the internet and more precisely social media can play a crucial role (Chadwick, 2013), providing governments and diplomats space and time to present their views and policies to the public, target specific audiences and promote direct messages (Hocking & Melissen, 2015, p. 31) and share their narratives with wider audiences (Dimitrova et al. 2005), shaping and affecting what the traditional media and consequently the public are discussing.

Scholars have already introduced the term “new” public diplomacy, which represents an attempt to adjust public diplomacy to the conditions of the Internet-driven information age (Gilboa 2008, p.58, Cull 2009, pp.12-13). The use of information and communication technologies is no longer peripheral to the conduct of world affairs (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2021). This was made clear at the very beginning of the pandemic: as the coronavirus went viral, diplomacy went virtual, with Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) and International Organizations (IOs) moving from conference rooms to online spaces, which would have been unimaginable in the very recent past. This reality, combined with today’s global crises, forces diplomatic institutions to better utilize the benefits of digitalization, which is much more than just a technological shift. Digitalization, as Manor suggests (Manor, 2017), is the growing use of information and communication technologies and social media platforms by countries or IOs seeking to achieve their foreign policy goals and practice public diplomacy. Furthermore, and taking into consideration that *diplomacy is a social institution, the digitalization of diplomacy is a long-term process that does more than simply offer new functionalities – it actually promotes new norms, such as increased openness and transparency, dialogue, collaboration, and network mentality, which in turn have an impact on every dimension of diplomacy: audiences, institutions, practitioners, and the practice of diplomacy itself.*

Parties, politicians, and diplomats have been forced in some way to alter the way that they are operating and incorporate direct communication and interaction with citizens in their daily agenda. This creates a unique opportunity for them to promote their views, communicate with bigger audiences, and acquire legitimacy. At the same time, citizens and wider audiences have the opportunity to be informed from various sources, directly from individuals and not from media outlets, comment and share their views, and also engage directly with politicians and diplomats. Every day, diplomatic negotiations, policy efforts, and crisis management actions take place all over the world and involve a wide range of digital diplomacy operations that all significantly rely on digital technologies. These aspects of digital public diplomacy may be less noticeable than traditional public diplomacy, but they are nonetheless equally significant (Kurbalija, 2016).

EU Digital Public Diplomacy

The EU and its political representatives have widely used digital tools over the last few years. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social platforms are part of their work and advocacy methods to achieve various outcomes. The positive and utmost importance elements of this practice are direct communication with voters/citizens, participation in the political discussion and decision-making, enhancement of legitimacy, and up-to-date and immediate information. All these elements can actively help and promote a common European understanding and identity for various topics (Frangonikopoloulos, 2022, pp. 124-127). Indicative of the importance attributed to digital diplomacy is the fact that, while the EEAS's SNS channels were managed by two people in 2011, six years later, the Strategic Communications Division of the EU's diplomatic service had grown substantially to a staff of fifty-one. Moreover, the Strategic Communications team now covers languages ranging from Arabic to Armenian (Baumler, 2019). In fact, apart from the EEAS's main accounts on five SNS (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, You Tube), the Service is also present on many more (such as Weibo and Vimeo), thanks to the work of the 143 EU Delegations and 17 Missions and Operations on the ground. Engaging on SNS in local languages has become a best practice among all Delegations, demonstrating that the Service has recognized the value of customized and personalized diplomacy, in accordance with the latest trends in "new" public diplomacy.

Research indicates that EU Delegations have been effective in adapting to the "new" public diplomacy practices, focusing on dialogue rather than one-way communication and using a broad range of communication channels (Abratis, 2021). Almost all EU Delegations have a Facebook presence, and more than three out of four have a Twitter account. In some host countries, surveys have indicated that more than half the population uses social media as their primary source of information on the EU. This is why social media platforms are an important pillar of public diplomacy. This is an important development for the democratization of the EU, as Social Networking Services (SNS) can render IO bureaucracies- which can be perceived as rather obscure and impenetrable-more visible and "sociable" on the global digital stage (Bjola & Zaiotti, 2021).

Moreover, in cooperation with the European Commission's foreign policy unit, which focuses on international partnerships with "strategic countries" (Partnership Instrument), significant funds are being invested in the creation of full organizations that supply EU Delegations with program managers who oversee public diplomacy projects (among other things). Moreover, the EU Global Strategy and Global Gateway Initiative work towards defining EU foreign identity and its goals. Some of the focus areas that have been used by EEAS and EU representatives are international cooperation, international trade, humanitarian investment, and last but not least fundamental human rights and the importance of civil society. Hence, the meaning of public diplomacy lies in engagement and inclusion. Thus, and despite the distinctiveness of the EU and its organizational structure (supranationalism vs. intergovernmentalism) which can be an obstacle to a coherent and clear public diplomacy, its institutions and political figures have through the functioning of EEAS and the use of social media s to focus more on communication and public diplomacy, building a narrative of "who we are" and "what we represent". This became obvious during the pandemic. It was a marked contrast from the recent cacophonies and delays in decision-making by European institutions (debt and refugee crises), which had severely damaged the EU's institutional reputation, the EU demonstrated that possessed the three necessary preconditions of actorness in world affairs: opportunity, presence, and capability (Frangonikopolous & Spitiotakopoulou, 2022, p. 6).

As the coronavirus spread, EU member states prioritized national protection by closing internal borders and imposing strict lockdowns. This worked against a sense of collective solidarity and undermined the effectiveness of EU public diplomacy. To face this challenge, the EEAS adopted practices and communications strategies that allowed it to become an indispensable source of information for SNS users. A textual content analysis of the EEAS's online/social media activity during the first six months of the pandemic revealed that the EEAS used countering incorrect media coverage, as well as framing and

narrative methods (Frangonikopolous & Spitiotakopoulou, 2022). The EEAS integrated its COVID-19 messaging into the existing “unity and solidarity” discourse. In so doing, the EU showed that it remains true to its guiding principles, even in times of severe crisis. Thus, it comes as no surprise that EEAS used framing to brand the EU as a resilient power over time, and as a reliable and robust partner for EU and non-EU citizens alike. More specifically, looking at the message, hashtags and tone of EEAS tweets, the key message of solidarity in the majority of tweets is expressed via hashtags such as #WeTakeYouHome, #UnitedInDistance, #Eusolidarity/#solidarity, #strongertogether, #TogetherWeAreEurope, #Westandtogether, #Together4Venezuelans, #Eu4HimanRights and #EUintheWorld. It is also interesting to note that the EEAS used visuals to support the EU’s linguistic frames and narratives. Specifically, many of the tweets were accompanied by some kind of multimedia, including infographics and videos. Overall, the results demonstrate that the EEAS used SNS to create a distinct brand for the EU during the COVID-19 outbreak, that of “Europe United in Distance”. In terms of engagement, the EEAS used links in most of its tweets, thereby validating the digital society’s norms of openness and transparency. Even though the Service chose English as the main language it uses worldwide, it still invests in translating the core message into local languages in accordance with the latest “new” public diplomacy trends towards a more personalized diplomacy. A great deal of effort was also invested in creating original visual content, as three out of four tweets included some kind of multimedia. The results were rather satisfying, as 80 percent of tweets received some kind of feedback (in the form of likes, mentions, and retweets), while 60 percent received comments from online users. In terms of interactivity, special mention should also be made of two surveys that asked users to assess the EEAS website, plus a knowledge quiz posted on Europe Day, as a way of “listening” to their views on the web experience and the EU in general.

Indicators are also the results of a study on the use of Twitter during the first year of the pandemic (Moral, 2023). As the pandemic developed, crisis narratives became more consistent. During the acute phase of the crisis, EU diplomats were less spontaneous, since their content was more dependent on their superiors (heads of institutions and governments), but in later stages, they produced proportionally more original content themselves. Therefore, as the findings of the study suggest, the EU’s performance on Twitter became more competent over time, making the European Commission and its president, the EEAS, and its head the most retweeted accounts. This provided the EU with virality, engagement, and the creation of bonds with audiences, which would not have been possible with a more hierarchical and rigid approach. Specifically, during January and February of 2020, the main European institutions did not pay much attention to the COVID-19 outbreak. The few tweets that referred to the novel coronavirus before March of 2020 (only 35 of 1,733 tweets) mostly served as amplifiers of videos of press conferences and institutional announcements. Some tweets focused on the repatriation of EU citizens thanks to the EEAS. Only when Italy registered its first deaths did COVID-19 become a salient issue. As the COVID-19 cases began to rise in other Member States, the EU communicated its readiness to face the pandemic. European institutions portrayed the EU as capable of matching concrete measures with ideational aspirations. For example, the EU presented as a key coordinator whose initiatives and regulations ultimately prevailed over the unilateral measures adopted by Member States (Sottilotta, 2022). Thus, the EU’s involvement enabled Member States to confront challenges together and equally, eventually producing tangible advantages for their citizens, such as the receipt of medical supplies and materials and economic funds, or in a later stage, the equitable distribution of vaccines.⁴

⁴ In fact, in regard to Europe and the discourse on solidarity, Europeans seemed to be deeply interconnected despite divisions, unilateral travel restrictions and export bans, according to the European Solidarity Tracker (ECFR: <https://ecfr.eu/special/solidaritytracker/>), an interactive data tool that visualized solidarity among EU Member States and institutions in the initial phase of the COVID-19 outbreak. According to the tool’s key findings, every Member State demonstrated solidarity towards its fellow Europeans. Moreover, EU institutions stepped up their response in financial and economic terms, but also when it came to the people of Europe. Thus, the European Solidarity Tracker contradicts claims that the European project had failed. In fact, according to the Standard Eurobarometer survey conducted in June-July of 2021, optimism about the future of the EU had reached its highest

Case Study: The War in Ukraine

With the above in mind our case examines how the EU has reacted to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and how key political figures of the European institutions have used digital public diplomacy to provide awareness, share their views, actions, and political decisions, and engage with their audiences. In doing so, we analyze the stance of the EU towards the war in Ukraine and how this has been presented over Twitter. In particular, our case study examines the individual accounts from draws on a dataset of tweets collected by the three key representatives and decision-makers of the EU institutions: Ursula von der Leyen (@vonderleyen), president of the European Commission, Roberta Metsola (@EP_President), president of the European Parliament, and Charles Michel (@eucopresident), president of the European Council.

Moreover, we have chosen three specific periods: a) the beginning of the war (28 February 2022 – 15 March 2022) 2) The Bucha Massacre (3 April 2022) 3) One year of war (28 February 2023). In those three cases, we can identify the first reaction and how this has evolved in specific cases such as the massacre in Bucha and how the message has changed one year after the war has begun. In order to have some comparative results and an understanding of the findings, the authors made a qualitative analysis of the number of tweets reproduced over that period. While, at the same time, we conducted a content analysis focusing on the narrative of the tweets and the dominant discourse by observing the tone, the use of specific wording or framing, and the audiences that they referred to.

Ursula von der Leyen

The first case study that we have chosen is Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission since 2019. In order to analyze the statements and narrative that von der Leyen pursued from the first day of the Russian invasion, the research focused on her official Twitter account and the content that she decided to post and share with the EU citizens and generally the world. It is worth mentioning that during the period of the research, Ursula von der Leyen had 1.4 million followers on her Twitter account.

From the 24th of February 2022 until the 15th of March 2022, the first 20 days of the war, the president of the European Commission published 43 tweets related to Ukraine and the war. The hashtag that has been mostly used was *#Ukraine*.

The Bucha Massacre was the second milestone that was chosen. Bucha as a hashtag or as part of the text was used in 7 tweets. On April the 4th when the tragic incident became known, she communicated with President Zelenskyy and directly commented on her social media. In this vein, she immediately presented the events to the European public with various posts that followed the speech in the European Parliament, her own visit to the region, and the fact-finding mission as well as follow-up commenting one year after (31 March 2023).⁵ She also clarified the strong support of the EU on the investigation of the crimes and the message that everyone responsible will be brought to justice. As she stated, “The EU is ready to send Joint Investigation Teams to document war crimes in coordination with the Ukrainian Prosecutor General”.⁶

The last timeframe is February 24, 2023, the anniversary of the first year of war in Ukraine. On that day, von den Leyen wrote 7 tweets reaffirming the support of the EU towards the fight for freedom and independence in Ukraine. Once again, she highlighted the increase in the military support and supplies towards Ukraine and expressed the will of the Union to welcome Ukraine into the European family. She

level (49%) since 2009, and trust in the EU remained at its highest level since 2008 (36%). Nearly two-thirds of Europeans trust the EU to make the right decisions in the future in response to the pandemic.

⁵ <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1641748513946992642?s=20>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1510964491378384898?s=20>

stated “Ukrainians are fighting for their right to choose their future. And they have already chosen. They have chosen the European Union. In these dark times, their hearts are warmed by the confidence that Ukraine will join the EU one day.”⁷

Ursula von der Leyen used her Twitter account mainly for two reasons: first to inform and comment on the latest developments on the war in Ukraine and second to present and promote the decisions of the the EU Commission regarding the war. For that reason, an important amount of them focused on real-time commenting on actions by both sides (Russia-Ukraine), emphasizing the condemnation of the Russian invasion and the support and solidarity in all possible ways towards the Ukrainian people. The president of the EU Commission also constantly tweeted any debate and decision that took place in the European Commission during that period. For example, she provided crucial information for [statements](#), [meetings](#)⁸, possible measures,⁹ and finally sanctions¹⁰ against Russia.

Roberta Metsola

Roberta Metsola, the president of the EU parliament is also a key political figure who uses social media to promote the work of the Union and its stance on various topics. Roberta Metsola has currently 416.1 thousand followers on her Twitter account. The War in Ukraine is one of the topics that she actively commented on and highlighted on her Twitter account.

From the 24th of February 2022 until the 15th of March 2022, the first 20 days of the war, the president of the European Parliament published 40 tweets related to Ukraine and the war. The hashtag that has been mostly used on tweets related to the war were #Ukraine, #standwithukraine, and #EPPlenary.

Regarding the Bucha Massacre, Roberta Metsola as Ursula von der Leyen, used Twitter as a platform to comment on the news and developments that spread from Ukraine at the beginning of April 2022. In particular, she tweeted five times on the incident from April until December 2022, in which she commented vividly against those war crimes, atrocities, and war criminals that need to be brought to justice and by emphasizing on EU’s actions to support the Ukrainian people.¹¹ Commitment to European values, support for President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian people, condemnation of Russian aggression, and after-war justice were some of the messages that the president of the EP advocated over her Twitter account. One year after the beginning of the war, Metsola posted 4 tweets using phrases like “Ukraine is Europe”, “Peace with dignity. Peace with freedom. Peace with justice” and “Europe can be proud of the choices it made.”¹² highlighting the importance of freedom, security, and peace in the region.

Meetings and discussions with other politicians and country leaders are part of the public image and debate that Roberta Metsola selects to use on her social media. More precisely, in the first 20 days of the war, she published tweets from meetings with the European Commission¹³, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (Belarusian political activist)¹⁴, Robert Brieger Chairman of the EU Military Committee¹⁵, Ursula von der Leyen¹⁶, Maia Sandu President of the Republic of Moldova¹⁷, Oksana Zabuzhko Ukrainian novelist, poet, and

⁷ <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1629053519712903169?s=20>

⁸ <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1497197343371894787?s=20>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1497694812018991112?s=20>

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/vonderleyen/status/1501521959821225984?s=20>

¹¹ https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1511037113898258439?s=20

¹² https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1630201068821856256?s=20

¹³ https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1496928149736759302?s=20

¹⁴ https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1497493797428776968?s=20

¹⁵ https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1498966313716355074?s=20

¹⁶ https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1499028077250285573?s=20

¹⁷ https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1499778190834868225?s=20

essayist¹⁸, Kaja Kallas Prime Minister of Estonia¹⁹ and Emmanuel Macron²⁰. Another aspect that Metsola promoted in the public dialogue was gender issues on the war and the causes that violent actions may have on women and girls.²¹ In this vein, she referred several times to the refugees who fled from Ukraine, especially women and children who tried to survive by fleeing to other neighboring countries.²²

Charles Michel

Charles Michel, as president of the European Council and EU leader is the third case study. He wrote 71 tweets during the first 20 days of the war, being the most active political leader in comparison with the other two key political figures examined above, the president of the EU Commission promotes vividly the work and network of the EU. At that period, he had 1.2 million followers. There is a plethora of thematics that he has chosen to present to the audience, comment on, and inform European and international citizens. The main hashtags that he has used are #Ukraine, #StandWithUkraine, #EUACO, and #EU.

As he wrote in one of his tweets on March 13, 2022, “We can resist and defend a free and open 🇪🇺 society turned towards Europe. We are fully mobilized: firm, united, and with massive financial and humanitarian support.”²³ Furthermore, as president of the EU Council, Charles Michel shared important information regarding the decision-making, the procedures, and the EU diplomatic attempts to assist Ukraine and provide awareness to the public audiences. To an extent, it is obvious that he used public diplomacy to reassure and promote the EU as a global political actor. In this vein, he shared many discussions and communications that he had with international organizations and leaders, such as NATO²⁴, Prime Minister of Belgium Alexander De Croo²⁵, Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi²⁶, UN²⁷, and others. Following that direction, he attempted to promote a common European political conscience and understanding of the developments.²⁸

On April 3rd, 2022, when the massacre in Bucha took place Charles Michel focused on the necessity to investigate the incident and provide justice, by commenting on 3 tweets from his profile. One year of war on February 24th, 2023, Charles Michel continued on the same path. By tweeting 4 times he reaffirmed the support and solidarity of the Union and EU Council towards Ukraine and their flight for freedom and independence. “A free and independent Ukraine is a free and independent Europe. Ukraine will prevail,” as he stated.²⁹

Conclusion

The main aim of the research was to analyze the Twitter activity of the three key institutional political figures of the EU. By publishing their opinions about the war, by simplifying diplomatic statements, and

¹⁸ https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1501155015804829698?s=20

¹⁹ https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1501491872677703682?s=20

²⁰ https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1501961527372521472?s=20

²¹ https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1500914606411481088?s=20 &

https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1501170034156134404?s=20

²² https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1500047337095413762?s=20

²³ <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1503078772022591501?s=20>

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1497286049747423235?s=20>

²⁵ <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1498293646248001542?s=20>

²⁶ <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1498658949310132229?s=20>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1499072962695204867>

²⁸ <https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1502735306868539397?s=20>

²⁹ <https://twitter.com/CharlesMichel/status/1629005956733337601?s=20>

by shifting the communication to a public interactive platform (with short and accessible attachments, and hashtags) the leaders of the European institutions do not only try to explain the developments but also try to shape and frame the developments. As such, proved to be of special value to the leaders of the European institutions, especially in a period in which it is trying to become a significant actor by aiding the Ukrainian war effort, supporting refugees, sanctioning Russia, and turning Ukraine into a candidate for EU membership.

This strategy, in response to the Russian invasion, has been aimed at encouraging Ukraine and mobilizing Western and international support, but it has not come without risks.

First, the need to promote that the EU operates as a cohesive and coherent diplomatic actor that acts to promote a shared set of values fails to close the widening gap between how the EU and the West see the world and how the “Rest” sees. Their efforts to support gender parity, minority rights, and environmental action, as well as universal principles, have sometimes been met with charges of hypocrisy. EU Member States shut out Syrian refugees but are welcoming Ukrainians. Some \$170bn in aid was pledged to Ukraine in the first year of the war – equivalent to about 90% of spending on all global aid in 2021 by the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee, a group of 31 Western donors. To the West, such generosity shows solidarity with a fellow democracy; to others, it shows that rich countries are willing to spend where it serves their interests. The worldview that places the EU at the core of what is just and stable needs to be put aside. The EU needs to grasp that the balance of power is changing globally. If not, it will undermine what remains of EU soft power, both *internally* and *globally*.

Second, although this communication strategy may be necessary, given the concern about the rising ineffectiveness of multilateral organizations and the divisions within the EU, it is also limited because of the few powers the EEAS has at its disposal to practice a coherent and stable diplomacy. Thus, a major challenge of EU public diplomacy is not only how to deal with the overstated objective of Ukraine joining the Union, but also as to how to reconcile the open-ended war effort with the economic and social dynamics within the member-states, as EU leaders and politicians have in their communication with their audiences downplayed the costs of economic warfare, inflation and living standards (Chaban & Elgström 2023).

The EU has to explain and motivate its policies (be it in accession negotiations, in refugee or health policies, on climate change) while listening to critique that emerges. However, the elite world of foreign affairs is still alive and well in the digital age. As studies have shown (Frangonikolopoulos & E. Spiliotakopoulou, 2022), during the pandemic only rarely was there an opportunity to engage in live dialogue or interact with the organizers or with other users directly. In fact, the only tweet that gave the public a chance to pose questions directly to an EU Ambassador was organized in the context of celebrations for Europe Day (in 2020) through a Facebook Live Chat. In addition, the EEAS did not reply to any of the users’ comments. In terms of networking, 22.5 percent of tweets mentioned other diplomatic actors as sources of information. Apart from other EU institutions, these included mainstream media and IOs, but not ordinary citizens.

Consequently, an effective public diplomacy strategy should not be limited to message promotion alone. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine invite a rethink of the role – actual and potential – of public diplomacy in European and international relations. Given citizens’ uncertainty and their difficulty in making sense of the world around them (Cull, 2022) public diplomacy should be more *human-centered*, embracing *empathy* and *perspective-taking* (Zaharna, 2022). This requires re-examining who constitutes the “public” in public diplomacy. Is public diplomacy still limited to foreign publics? Do feelings of uncertainty limit or constrain the practice of public diplomacy? Are the audiences of public diplomacy less likely to engage with the public diplomacy communication strategies of governments and international organizations, given a lack of trust in national and global governance institutions? If so, how can diplomats restore trust in such institutions (Manor & Pamment, 2022)?

The new iteration of the world that we are entering will be more diverse and complex, and citizens should be able to tolerate it and grow within it, not feel threatened by it. It is important to create space and time for new narratives and ideas, and to develop innovative processes for gathering and disseminating information, with the aim of not only increasing citizens' interest but also strengthening their will to press for sustainable solutions. The EU's Member States and institutions need to function as learning systems that can adapt, correct, and improve their behavior. What is called for is investment in dialectical public diplomacy through the establishment of *regular online interviews and discussions* with executives and officials from EU institutions. In this way, citizens would see their queries answered and official policies fully explained. The creation of *EU online forums/hubs* is also important, where citizens can find in-depth news and analysis, as well as links and forums for state actors and European Union officials who initiate policy proposals, and online connections with social movements and non-state actors to facilitate dialogue and the submission of alternative proposals and ideas. EU institutions are no longer the main or even the best source of information, and they no longer monopolize the collection of data and evidence or the production of information and research on European and global issues. Social movements and NGOs provide valid and reliable information that comes from outside the state and intergovernmental production and decision-making channels. EU politicians, diplomats, and citizens have an incredible opportunity to save European integration from polarization and to build a strong dialectical and deliberative culture for the future.

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