

Original Paper

Latvian Digital Diplomacy—Approaches and Policy

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Abstract

Changing the habits of information consumption and the presence of digital communication in society necessitates also the national diplomatic services to adapt to the new challenges and use of digital communication channels. The aim of the study is to find out the development of the implementation of digital diplomacy tools in the diplomatic service of Latvia and the influence of institutional factors in the mentioned processes.

Study of publicly available documents regulating the communications process were carried out and direct interviews with the management of the MFA Communication Directorate were executed.

According to the study findings, digital diplomacy is regulated by the general procedures of public administration as well as the MFA Communication Strategy, which establishes the general principles of communication and relationship building with stakeholders.

MFA is aware of the importance of digital diplomacy and the need to develop this direction, but more exigent activity is limited because of other diplomatic service priorities. The limited institutional capacity and the available financial and human resources limit the implementation of these processes in a short time period, thus possibly losing the competition to the countries with similar historical, political and socio-economic level of development in the battlefield of public diplomacy.

Keywords

digital diplomacy, social networks, e-government

1. Introduction

Diplomacy plays a crucial role in the implementation of foreign policy through bilateral relations, consular services, communication, and negotiation, thus making one country's policy understandable and acceptable to other countries (Todhunter, 2013). Recently, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs have undergone significant changes in foreign affairs management as governments have adopted new approaches to interacting with foreign countries (Hanson, 2010).

Information Communication Technology (ICT) plays an increasingly extensive role in today's political scene. International politics, international relations, and diplomacy are no exception. Researchers in digital diplomacy claim that ICT has facilitated communication between foreign ministries and diplomats, as well as foreign ministries and local communities (Hanson, 2012), thus, obviously referring to the impact of ICT in the field of public diplomacy.

The entry of ICT into diplomacy is also referred to as the "Revolution in Diplomatic Practice" (Bjola, Homes), simultaneously pointing out a slight delay, as digital technologies have already been able to change the ways in which companies run their businesses, people form relationships and countries organize their forms of government. Digital diplomacy within the framework of this study is to be understood as the use of social media (mainly Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube platforms) for diplomatic purposes.

Digital diplomacy is a relatively new field of research, especially because the digital platforms and the opportunities they offer are developing rapidly and dynamically, opening up new opportunities for the users of these platforms—including diplomats and researchers of diplomacy and political science. Researchers of this subject such as Corneliu Bjola (Oxford Associate Professor of Diplomatic Studies), Marcus Holmes (Associate Professor at The College of William & Mary), Paul Sharp (Professor of Political Science, Director of the Alworth Institute for International Studies at the University of Minnesota), Brian Hocking (Professor of International Relations at Loughborough University), Jan Melissen (Senior Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute and Senior Fellow International Relations and Diplomacy), have found that, with the entry of ICT into diplomatic processes, a new framework—"Integrated Diplomacy"—has emerged (Hocking, Melissen, Riordan, & Sharp, 2012), which combines elements of traditional diplomacy (negotiation) and digital diplomacy. Researchers conclude that digitization processes in our daily lives are here to stay—so their presence in diplomacy is inevitable. Furthermore, the gap between countries that are not investing in raising awareness of the importance of digitalisation in diplomacy, and those that are, will expand at the same speed as the development of digitalisation in all walks of life (Hocking & Melissen, 2015).

The Latvian Foreign Service is gradually transforming its diplomatic practice and expanding and supplementing the tools of traditional diplomacy with the tools of digital diplomacy. This paper considers the status quo of the Latvian Foreign Service in the field of digital diplomacy integration and provides insights into the factors that influence the development of these processes.

2. Regulatory Framework of Digital Diplomacy

2.1 Foreign Ministry Annual Reports

The diplomatic service, represented by the MFA, performs the functions of public administration and is thus subject to legal regulation as a civil service. Latvian legislation (Law on Budget and Financial Management) states that, in order to inform the public of objectives and results of an establishment's operations, as well as the use of national budget allocation in the previous year, each civil service must

prepare and publish an annual public report. In turn, the contents of the annual public report are precisely stated in a lower level regulatory enactment—Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers (nr. 413), wherein section 8 “Communication with the public” paragraph 8.1 covers “measures taken to inform and educate the public”. The annual report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia reflects the priorities of foreign policy and the instruments used to achieve them, including those in the field of informing the public.

While analysing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ public reports for the past 10 years (Note 1), it should be noted that the term “social networks” appeared for the first time in the 2012 report. The report lists the social networks used by the ministry to publish news and discuss current affairs. These are Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube. An identical reference can be found in the time period between 2013 and 2016. In the latest available annual report for 2017, for the first time, statistical data on the use of each social network within the calendar year is depicted.

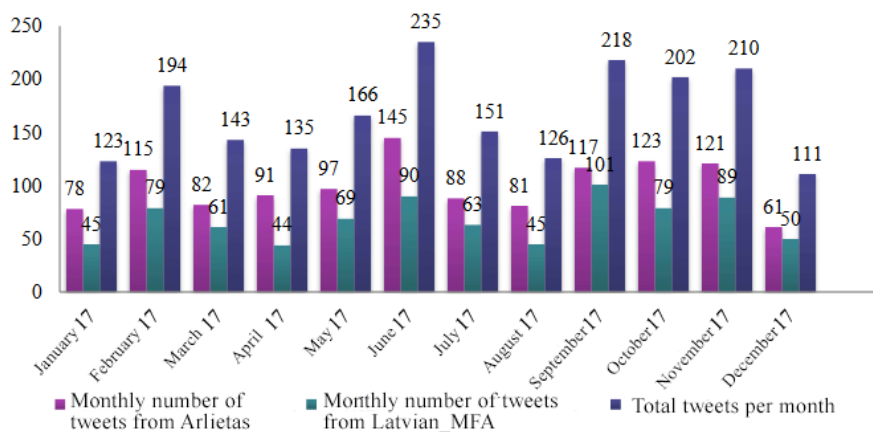


Figure 1. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Social Networking—The Number of Posts on Social Networking Accounts Managed by MFA

2.2 Legislations Subject to Social Networking Regulations

In order to determine the regulatory framework for the use of social networks in public administration, including foreign service, the following activities were carried out:

- Direct interviews with the senior management of the Communications Directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia—Head of the Communication Directorate, Ambassador and Press Secretary of the Ministry, and Counsellor—Deputy Press Secretary (Note 2).
- Analysis of the regulatory framework—the Latvian legislation.

According to the Management of the Communication Directorate, the use of digital platforms, including social networks are regulated by the general rules governing freedom of speech and expression:

- a) Regulatory enactments—laws, regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers governing the availability and circulation of information in the country;
- b) Guidelines for Social Media Use in Public Administration—document developed by the State Chancellery;
- c) The Communication Strategy of the MFA—Internal Document of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

2.2.1 Legislation—Laws and Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers

The purpose of the “Freedom of Information Law” (in force since 06.11.1998, as amended 03.09.2015) is to ensure that the public has access to information held by an institution or for creating which the institution is responsible within its competence. This law establishes a uniform procedure for individuals to obtain information from an institution and make use of it (Article 2).

The aforementioned law does not clearly regulate the use of digital platforms, but there are Cabinet of Ministers (CM) regulations issued on its basis—No. 611. “Procedures by which Institutions Place Information on the Internet” (Article 10). The aforementioned Cabinet Regulations prescribe general requirements for placing information on the official website and in the mobile application, such as determining the person responsible for the placement of information (the head of the institution), stipulates that the information must be presented to the user in a meaningful, structured and visually understandable way, regulates the accessibility of the website, and other issues related to its use (Chapter II).

When assessing both of the aforementioned regulatory enactments, it must be stated that they do not explicitly regulate the use of social networks and do not define the terms “social networks” or “social platforms”.

2.2.2 Guidelines for the Use of Social Media in Public Administration

“Guidelines for the Use of Social Media in Public Administration” is a non-binding document meant more as a recommendation, developed by the State Chancellery (SC) for the convenience of public administration officials. The SC is the central state administration institution, directly subordinate to the Prime Minister—and its main functions are to ensure the work of the CM, to participate in the planning and coordination of public policy, to ensure the development of public administration and to monitor its implementation (description of SC functions on the web).

Thus, the use of guidelines is voluntary and, as a matter of law, does not fall within the sphere of official responsibility; in the event of non-compliant behaviour, administrative liability does not arise.

The guidelines are divided into 4 parts (Guidelines for Use of Social Media in Public Administration): listing the benefits of social media, identifying potential drawbacks, defining the basic principles of communication and providing practical advice for communication in social media. The latter includes suggestions for creating a profile (account), differences in between communication maintained in social media from the institution’s official profile and in an employee’s private profile, recommendations on how to draft a message—use of language and visual materials, etc. practical tips for more convenient

and effective use of social media in public administration.

2.2.3 The Communication Strategy of the MFA

According to the Directorate of Communications of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a Communication Strategy was developed only in 2016, shortly following Latvia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2015. The communication strategy describes general principles of the work of diplomats in social media, "talks about goals, platforms, what embassies do and do not do, lists audiences with which to communicate in social media".

The Communication Strategy is a restricted-access document because it describes *inter alia* the approach of diplomats to cooperation and communication with specific subjects, including partners, etc. Thus, this document was not available for the purposes of research, and no possibility of verifying its content was provided.

3. Approaches to Digital Diplomacy Development in the Foreign Service

In order to clarify the views of senior MFA diplomats responsible for communication on approaches and developments in digital diplomacy in the foreign service, a list of questions was prepared and grouped by the following structure: general and legal issues, strategy and evaluation, organizational issues, monitoring and response, use of private accounts in social media, training and infrastructure. The main conclusions from direct interviews will be described below.

3.1 General and Legal Issues

Given that legal issues and regulatory frameworks were dealt with in the previous section, an overview of the general issues with the implementation and further development of digital diplomacy is given below.

According to the Directorate of Communications of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Latvian Foreign Service uses the following official social networks: micro blogging site Twitter (in Latvian and English), social networking site Facebook (in Latvian and English), photo sharing network Flickr. These social networks are regularly maintained and updated with new posts. At a lower intensity, video sharing network YouTube is used (Note 3). Meanwhile, the once popular Latvian local network, Draugiem.lv, is used as a post duplicator for Twitter.

In parallel with the official social networks of the institutions, some members of the diplomatic service, such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Parliamentary Secretary of the MFA, some of the ambassadors, etc. maintain their personal profiles on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

In terms of content, Twitter is used to deliver targeted political messages, while Facebook mainly serves as a continuation of news covered on the official MFA website. Latvian embassies and diplomatic missions abroad are authorized to independently communicate in social networks that are popular in their countries of residence or, at the discretion of the missions, are used by the target audience of the Latvian diplomatic service. In order to optimize news production processes, at the beginning of each week, the MFA prepares and distributes a so-called "Digital calendar" a summary of

the most important weekly events and messages that could be communicated on social networks—to the diplomatic missions.

Alongside this, the MFA maintains separate “thematic” platforms. The Development Co-operation Policy (Note 4) has a separate Twitter account. A separate Facebook account and an application “Travel Safely” “Ceļodroši” have also been developed for the communication of consular information.

3.2 Human Resources, Technology, and Training

As the management of the Communications Directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs admits, there is a limited amount of human resources in foreign service responsible for the use of digital diplomacy tools and social networks. Although access is granted to several diplomats, the official accounts of the central authority of the MFA are managed by a single employee, while monitoring (including press and other traditional media monitoring) is outsourced. In embassies and diplomatic missions, however, the organization of social networking is assigned to the head of these organizations—the ambassador or other authorized diplomat. There are plans to develop a list of responsible “communicators” in all institutions of the foreign service and to create a system for efficient account servicing in the future.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ technical and ICT infrastructure is generally adapted to the use of digital diplomacy tools; however, its renewal and development is a continuous and regular process.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not currently have guidelines for the use of social networks or any other suggestive material to support and promote diplomatic communication in social networks, although creation of such is slated for the foreseeable future. The Guidelines of the State Chancellery for the Use of Social Media in Public Administration (see 3.2.2 above) constitute the most relevant support material at the moment. One of the most important instructions that is monitored by the MFA management is the “absence of double identity”, or “the diplomat is always at work” approach, which prevents the publication of conflicting messages, opinions, or displays of behaviour that are in conflict with ethical and good behavioural norms between the official account of the institution and a diplomat’s personal account.

Likewise, the MFA does not currently have a specific training program for the use of digital diplomacy and social networks, but the diplomats are instructed are trained by the specialists of the Communications Directorate in the framework of a routine training program, as part of the annual meetings of ambassadors and other diplomats and before the regular rotations of diplomats, or before their transfer to diplomatic missions abroad.

3.3 Other Important Factors Related to Social Networking

The MFA’s Communications Directorate recognizes the need to communicate in native languages, especially by diplomatic missions in countries in which the use of English is less common. Social networking in the native tongue and/or mixed languages is organized by the Latvian Embassies in Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, the Federal Republic of Germany, the Kingdom of Denmark, and on several other diplomatic social network accounts.

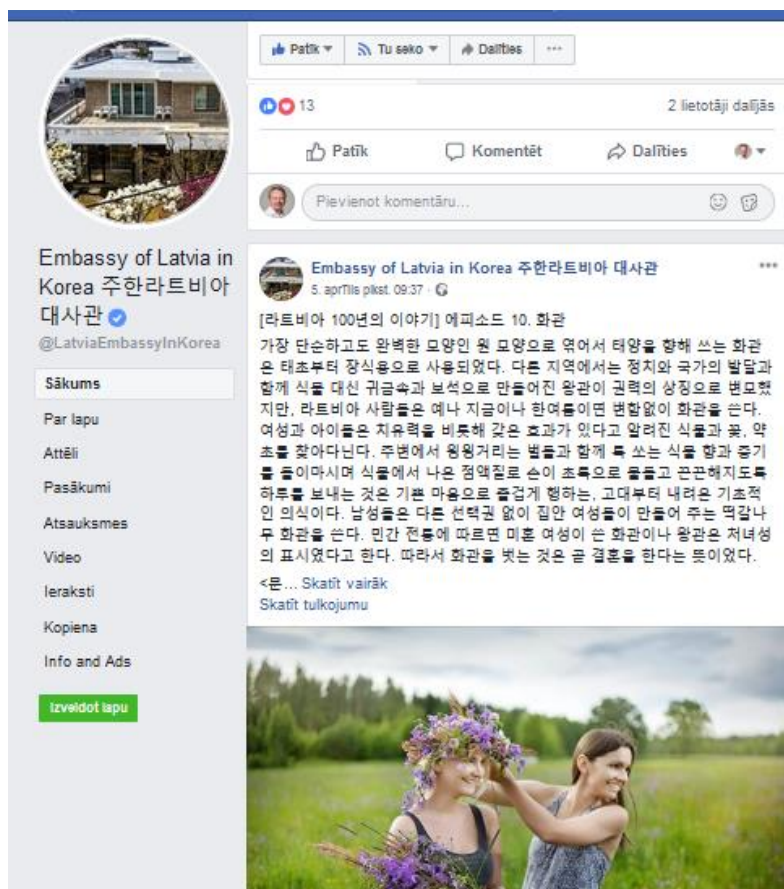


Figure 2. Facebook Page of the Latvian Embassy in Korea (Screenshot)

To promote the communication of a unified position among some or all of the European Union, NATO or individual regional entities, the Foreign Service has developed coordinated information/messaging campaigns on social networks. For example, coordinated messages were created in the context of the anniversary of the annexation of Crimea, and in the context of investigating the poisoning of the former Russian agent Sergei Skripal, as well as other cases.

At the same time, the leadership of the MFA Communications Directorate recognizes that there is a lot of room for improvement in the development of two-way communication and systematic assessment of existing communication. At present, two-way communication (i.e., answering messages addressed to the MFA or diplomatic missions and developing conversations) is conducted mainly to solve consular issues, but to a much more limited extent, in communicating political or everyday issues. Each case is individually assessed in terms of involving the necessary human resources.

The Foreign Service also recognizes that there is no systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of digital diplomacy at this time, nor does it thoroughly analyse the posts made by the target audiences, and has characterized this process as “under observation”.

The leadership of the MFA Communications Directorate believes that digital diplomacy is in a state of continuous development, but its advancement requires much larger financial and human resources. The

current MFA political leadership is aware of this situation and the need to improve the tools of digital diplomacy, including human, material and technical resources.

4. The Impact of Institutional Factors on Digital Diplomacy Development

In order to find out what institutional factors influence the development of digital diplomacy in the Latvian Foreign Service, a focus group survey was conducted, which included the leadership of the MFA and senior diplomats in the ranks of Ambassador and Counsellors.

The focus group survey was created on the basis of a study by the University of Bradford and Swansea University (Al-Muftah, Weerakody, Rana, Sivarajah, & Irani, 2018), which was dedicated to observing factors affecting digital diplomacy.

4.1 Conceptual Issues

All respondents fully agreed and expressed support for the conceptual idea that the Latvian Foreign Service should use social networks to achieve its goals and perform everyday tasks. When asked to rank social networks, respondents prioritised Facebook and Twitter.

2. Which social networks do you think would be most useful for the diplomatic service?

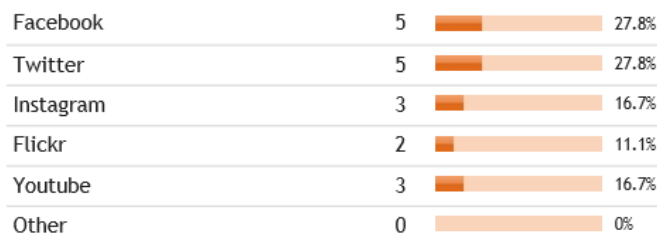


Figure 3. Question on the Priority of Social Networks in the Diplomatic Service

For the question requesting to evaluate whether the Latvian Foreign Service is currently making full use of the opportunities provided by social networks to carry out its tasks, none of the respondents gave the maximum possible score on either the positive or negative side of the scale. The total score expressed in points was 3.8 out of 5 possible points.

4.2 Positive and Neutral Factors

Respondents were asked to evaluate the impact of several factors on the development of digital diplomacy in the foreign service. Factors were divided into 3 groups—neutral, positive and negative.

Public support, or traditions of social networking and culture in society, was evaluated as the most influential factor that positively contributes to the development of digital diplomacy (Hick, 2011)—both in Latvia and abroad, in the diplomats' home country—which sets the demand for diplomats to communicate with the public and with stakeholders in the digital environment.

Respondents mentioned the human resource factor next, being the professional, intellectual and technical skills of foreign service staff to use social networks for work purposes. The human resource factor is considered neutral because of the ability to influence the use of digital platforms in a positive

way (if diplomats have good or at least sufficient skills) or, on the contrary, negatively (if these skills are non-existent or deficient).

According to the respondents, equal weight is carried by legal factors, or normative regulation, which determines the rights of diplomats and opportunities to use social networks for both work and private needs, as well as meaningful factors such as trust (belief) and confidence in the usefulness and benefits of using social networks and other digital diplomacy tools for successful job performance and the idea that the use of these tools helps and facilitates the daily work of diplomats.

A no less essential role is played by organizational factors such as the structure of the foreign service, organizational culture, the bureaucratic and hierarchical system (Batora, 2006), financial and economic factors (Czosseck & Geers, 2009)—or funding for the maintenance, development and growth of ICT systems—as well as the availability of training for the use of social networking and technology platforms.

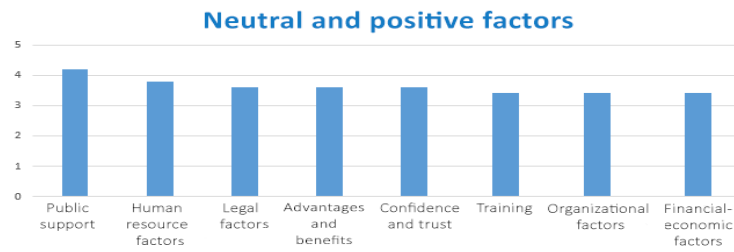


Figure 4. Neutral and Positive Factors Influencing the Development of Digital Diplomacy

4.3 Negative Factors

Negative factors create causal relationships that restrict the use of digital diplomacy platforms in foreign service. Respondents were asked to evaluate four negative factors. Factors had to be assessed both at the level of institutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diplomatic Missions) and at the level of individuals (foreign service staff).

Political factors that could be the cause of some specific actions that would deny or limit the possibilities of the foreign service to use social networks for work purposes were identified as the most significant negative factors. For example, political instability in a country where utterly uncontrollable (as is characteristic of social networking) statements by public officials (diplomats and foreign service staff) might influence political forces' proportions or positions of power. This factor was highly recognized at the individual level but scored relatively low at the organizational level.

At the organizational level, however, the most critical negative factor was the desire to resist change (Cummings & Worley, 2014)—a subjective factor that hinders change of habit and adaptation to new demands and challenges, including social networks and other digital diplomacy instruments. In the opinion of the respondents, the organisation's overall environment and culture are conservative and not focused towards changes, while individual attitudes are less interfering and possibly rather supportive.

So-called risk factors were named as disruptive at both the organizational and individual levels (Kampf, Manor, & Segev, 2015), defined as leading to effects opposite of what is desired and therefore discouraging an individual from specific action. Namely, potential social network usage risks such as hacker interference in ICT systems, hacking of social network accounts, provocations, etc., discourage employees from using these tools for work purposes.

Likewise, the secrecy of the diplomatic services and the desire to maintain control over information are equally troublesome at the level of both the organization and the individual.

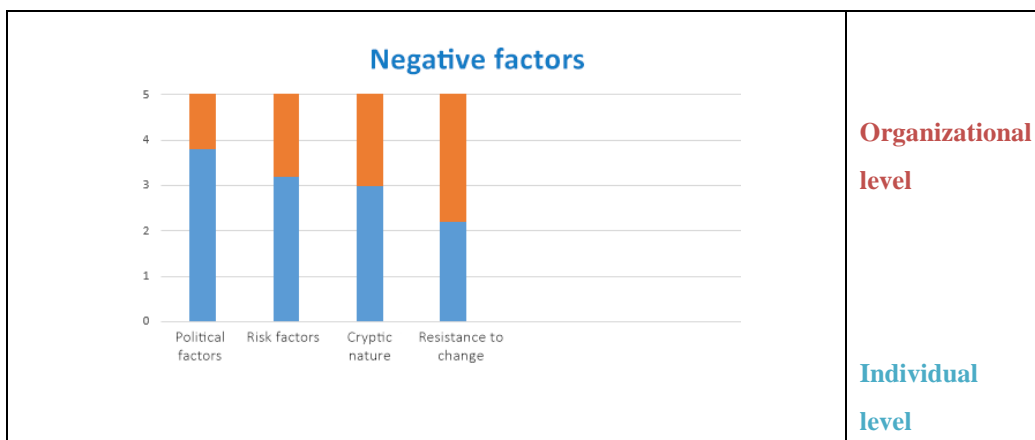


Figure 5. Negative Factors Affecting the Development of Digital Diplomacy

5. Conclusions

In the course of the research, an analysis of the available public normative documents regulating digital diplomacy was performed, and direct interviews were conducted with the MFA diplomats whose work included communication with the public and digital diplomacy, including social network management, with a further focus group survey focusing on the MFA management and senior diplomats in the ranks of Ambassador and Counsellors.

The regulatory framework for digital diplomacy at the time of the study is considered to be very general, i.e., it does not plainly regulate the use of social networks. Disregarding the fact that the MFA started using its first digital platforms in 2008 (Note 5), they are mentioned in the MFA Public Annual Reports for the first time only in 2012. Thus, it could be said that at the normative level Latvia's digital diplomacy is still in the growth stage.

Direct interviews and the focus group survey confirm that the foreign service uses the most popular social networks for public communication, managed by both institutions (MFA, diplomatic missions) and individuals (diplomats). As far as possible, the MFA provides support for social networking—providing ICT platforms, content creation, and training processes, but the amount of support is inadequate and, where resources are available, geared to increase in the future. This is especially true for tutoring and training issues—since no specific digital skills training is currently being developed—as well as the expansion of human resources, that, at the moment, are evidently

limited.

The most essential factors contributing to the development of digital diplomacy are public support and demand for communication in the digital environment, as well as the human resource factor—professional, intellectual and technical skills of foreign service staff. In turn, political factors, especially at the individual level, are considered to be the most crucial hindering factors, while at the organizational level the desire to resist change was mentioned as most debilitating.

Thus, the study carried out confirms that the MFA is well aware of the need to develop the presence of digital diplomacy elements in pursuit of foreign policy objectives. However, the limited institutional capacity and availability financial and human resources limit the implementation of these processes in a short period of time, thus possibly making the Latvian diplomatic service and the state as a whole perform worse than competing countries—with historical, political and socio-economical level of development similar to that of Latvia—on the battlefield of public diplomacy.

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Notes

Note 1. MFA website Annual reports available for the time period since 1998.

Note 2. Direct interviews took place on the 29th of November 2018. Questions aimed at gaining insight into the use of digital platforms in the Foreign Service were prepared and submitted in advance. The questions were divided into the following groups: general and legal issues, strategy and evaluation, organizational issues, monitoring and response, use of private accounts, training, and infrastructure.

Note 3. At the time of writing this article in March-April 2019, the MFA created and started maintaining a profile on the popular visual information sharing network Instagram, as well as significantly increasing the intensity of YouTube usage.

Note 4. Development Co-operation means helping poor and less developed countries by promoting the long-term social and economic development of these countries and their societies, reducing poverty and ensuring peace and security in the world. Development Co-operation Policy is part of Latvia's Foreign and Security Policy. <https://www.mfa.gov.lv/arpolitika/attistibas-sadarbiba/kas-ir-attistibas-sadarbiba>

Note 5. The official MFA Twitter account was created in October 2010, and the account on the image sharing site Flickr—in 2008.