

# The role of the Internet and social networks in diplomacy and relations between states

Dana Gabriela PLEȘA

**Abstract:** *Social networks have changed significantly in the 21st century, affecting all fields from politics, media, business, and tourism to diplomacy. The working hypothesis of the article is that social networks, in particular Facebook, Twitter and Instagram platforms have had a significant impact on diplomatic practices and relations between states. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are used by foreign policy makers to communicate more easily with their counterparts, so that their messages reach more and more of the public opinion and to promote their language, culture and tourist destinations as a soft power tool.*

**Key words:** *Twiplomacy, eDiplomacy, soft power, Facebook, Instagram.*

## Introduction

Before the advent of the great inventions that revolutionized the way of transmitting information, it took days, weeks and even months for some news to reach from one part of the world to another. The telegraph, the telephone, the television, and since the end of the twentieth century, the Internet, would significantly change the way information is transmitted in real time<sup>1</sup>. This did not mean an advantage only for ordinary people who had easier access to information but also for policy makers who could talk in real time, over the phone or via video conference. The new technologies have helped to solve numerous crises that could have degenerated into armed

conflicts. An example could be the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the most stressful moment of the Cold War, when the world was very close to a nuclear war. At that time, the decryption of messages sent by both the United States to the Soviet Union and vice versa lasted up to 12 hours, the exchange of information required too much time which further strained the situation<sup>2</sup>. Thanks to the use of unofficial channels and by conducting video conferences attended by representatives of the two great powers, the events did not degenerate<sup>3</sup>. From that moment, a “red phone” would be set up<sup>4</sup>, a direct line between Washington and Moscow that would facilitate communication between the two superpowers. In 2008, it was improved by

creating a direct fiber optic link for email and quick phone calls<sup>5</sup>. This communications channel was to be used frequently by the United States and the Soviet Union at different times such as the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973, when Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974<sup>6</sup>, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979<sup>7</sup>, but also in other recent events such as the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in the summer of 2014<sup>8</sup>. Besides the fact that the new communication methods have led to the rapid resolution of the problems between the states, they have facilitated the collaboration and the improvement of the relations between them. A good example is the gesture made following the September 11<sup>th</sup>2001 attacks by the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin. He was the first leader to personally call the President of the United States at that time, George W. Bush, to express his condolences and support in the fight against terrorism<sup>9</sup>. Also, new communication methods have facilitated negotiations between leaders and improved diplomatic practice.

Due to the development of the Internet and social networks the collection and transmission of information has become much easier than 30-40 years ago<sup>10</sup>.

### **Diplomacy without Facebook, Twitter and Instagram**

4500 years ago, since the historical events began to be recorded, the

kings sent their emissaries to solve different foreign policy problems. So, we can say that diplomacy appeared with the birth of the first forms of organization of the people, evolving with the passage of time<sup>11</sup>. Thus, until the 19th century, the rules, instruments and diplomatic institutions have evolved greatly.

The first evidence of the existence of diplomacy can be dated to 2500 BC, in the area of the Middle East, more precisely on the present territory of Iraq. Archaeologists have discovered a series of clay tablets written in the Sumerian language, containing information on alliances, territorial disputes, coalitions and struggles between city-states<sup>12</sup>. With regard to diplomacy at that time, it contained a whole series of rules governing this practice, from royal messengers, protocol, to the use of an international language, the Sumerian language. Around 2300-2400 BC the international treaty was to be introduced by the Sargonic dynasty<sup>13</sup>. From 1700-1670 BC, diplomatic practices spread to Europe, Africa and Asia and at the same time they developed<sup>14</sup>. The emissaries obtaining the status of plenipotentiary ambassadors, who had the right to negotiate and conclude treaties, had immunity, a diplomatic passport, and a letter of accreditation<sup>15</sup>. The Roman Empire and later the Byzantine Empire developed diplomatic practices and the latter created an institution in charge of foreign affairs, similar to a foreign ministry<sup>16</sup>. In the Middle Ages, in the fifteenth century

the ambassadors had their permanent residence where they were posted until they were to be changed. In the sixteenth century, Emperor Charles V states that the title of ambassador will be granted only to persons of noble life and from this moment the term of ambassador would be used frequently<sup>17</sup>. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were to be dominated by French diplomacy, which introduced the principle of certainty that provided that the treaties contained very precise clauses. Also, the French diplomacy at that time was far beyond that of other states due to its organization, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs was divided into several departments which had a clear delimitation of duties<sup>18</sup>. The nineteenth century would revolutionize diplomatic practice because this area is professionalized, bureaucracy is growing within the foreign affairs ministries, the ambassador has a much more important role and a series of steps will be established that will be followed by those who wanted to reach this position: selection, education, promotion and retirement<sup>19</sup>. The Vienna Congress of 1815 was to lay the foundation for a series of rules for diplomatic practice, a general agreement between the great powers regarding the diplomatic procedure. Thus, following the Vienna Congress three categories of diplomats were recognized: “1. ambassadors; 2. emissaries, ministers or other agents accredited to a sovereign; 3. entrusted with foreign

affairs accredited to the ministries of foreign affairs”<sup>20</sup>. Nineteenth-century diplomacy lays the groundwork for twentieth- and twenty-first-century diplomacy and enhances diplomatic practice.

### **Social Networks and a new type of diplomacy**

In the 21st century, social networks, especially Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, have boosted diplomacy as well as relations between states. With the help of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram the ideas, messages and initiatives of foreign policy makers are promoted, can reach public opinion instantly and can be made known globally. Unlike television, radio, press and online magazines, social networks offer access to a much larger and more diverse audience. Also, the social networks allow leaders to analyze the reactions of the followers on different policies promoted by them before implementing them. This helps them cancel the implementation of decisions at foreign policy level that could cause them to drop in polls or protests. At the same time, foreign policy makers use social networks because they want to be made known among young people who no longer use the traditional means of communication, television, radio, print media, etc. Last but not least, social networks facilitate direct dialogue between foreign policy makers. State leaders as well as foreign ministers and ambassadors

have Twitter, Facebook and/or Instagram pages. Also, institutions dealing with foreign policy, presidential administrations, governments, foreign ministries and embassies have accounts on these social networks and numerous followers. In this way, public opinion is constantly and timely informed about the state's activities in the field of foreign policy and beyond. Moreover, on social networks states can promote their language, culture and tourist places by attracting visitors. This can be an advantage for small states that have the chance to become known globally. Therefore, social networks become a powerful *soft power* mechanism. Also, through the pages of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, embassies can win the sympathy of the citizens of the states in which they are accredited. At the same time, through these platforms, leaders can come into contact and communicate directly with citizens. Leaders and institutions can follow each other on social networks in order to be able to know better their activities and positions regarding foreign policy and not only. I will try to present below how the new communication technologies influence the foreign policy of the states.

The information can flow much faster from external missions to the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and later to decision-makers. Real-time data transmission ensures fast information and the chance to be prepared to react to different events. Thus, in 2002, the

US State Department established a unit to deal with the various diplomatic objectives with the help of new communication technologies<sup>21</sup>. Thus, the concept of *e-diplomacy* was born, which, according to Ferguson Hanson, uses the Internet and new information technologies to solve different diplomatic tasks<sup>22</sup>. The tools with which this concept operates are the blogs and social media networks like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *LinkedIn*, *Snapchat*, *YouTube*, *Instagram*, *WhatsApp*, *Tumblr*, *Skype*.

With regard to the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages of the embassies and foreign ministries, they are means of transmitting information within which diplomats can publish photos and provide additional details about their current and future activities (daily and weekly visits and meetings). The aforementioned social networks allow foreign missions, diplomats, foreign affairs ministers, and state and government leaders to constantly inform public opinion and maintain direct contact with citizens. At the same time, it allows them to be able to communicate more easily with each other. Today's public is one that benefits from the development of the media and acts accordingly: it gathers information from a variety of sources and expects to be informed about the areas of interest, including foreign policy. These expectations have led to the need for a new approach to diplomacy. The successes or diplomatic failures of a state have become no longer evaluated only in meetings

of the foreign ministries, but also in front of the computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone.

Through these platforms, leaders, ministers and diplomats can further promote the image of their country and use them to transmit messages on an unofficial channel. Very interesting is that the US Department of State created in 2012 a socialization platform similar to LinkedIn, called “*Corridor*”, reserved for diplomatic personnel. Also, the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a similar platform, called “*Connections*”, for the staff of that ministry in order to simplify the exchange of information between the employees of this institution<sup>23</sup>. The US Department of State has also created a platform called *Diplopedia*, similar to Wikipedia, which is intended only for diplomats in which various information of common interest is published and shared<sup>24</sup>. In 2006, the Twitter network was created. This social media network soon became an useful means of communication for heads of state, government, foreign ministers and diplomats. Through Twitter they notify the public about their daily activities, thus satisfying the need to inform the latter. Moreover, leaders have found in this network a way to report some false information<sup>25</sup>. Thus, people can be quickly influenced on a large level on certain things and events. In 2013, *Twiplomacy* was launched, a site that conducts annual studies that analyze the presence and activity on Twitter, Facebook and

Instagram of heads of state and governments and their institutions.

In 2012, according to *Twiplomacy's* first analysis on digital diplomacy, presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers and their institutions in 125 states from the 193 UN members had Twitter accounts<sup>26</sup>. At that time, US President Barack Obama, with 17 million followers, was the most followed leader in the world, followed by Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez with 3 million followers and in the third place was the White House, with 2.9 million followers<sup>27</sup>. In March 2007, Barack Obama was the first leader to create a Twitter account, followed immediately by Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto and Belgian Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo<sup>28</sup>. The number of leaders who have created accounts on social networks has grown considerably by 2019.

State and government leaders and foreign ministers have larger audiences on Facebook than on Twitter or Instagram. According to a *Twiplomacy* report from March 2018-March 2019, titled “World Leaders on Facebook”, the governments and leaders of 182 states, with seven more than in 2017, were present on social media<sup>29</sup>. This represents 94% of the 193 member states of the United Nations. Therefore, only 11 states are not present on Facebook, including Eswatini (Swaziland), Laos, Mauritania, Nicaragua, North Korea, Turkmenistan and a few small islands in the Pacific<sup>30</sup>. In 2018, 108 heads of

state, 83 prime ministers and 88 foreign ministers had Facebook pages and in general they are more popular than the pages of the institutions they represent<sup>31</sup>. In the interval analyzed by Twiplomacy, the Facebook page of Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, ranks first in the world with the highest number of likes, 43.5 million. The second place is occupied by Donald Trump, the President of the United States and the third place by the Queen of Jordan with approximately 17 million likes<sup>32</sup>. The top three most active institutions worldwide are the Government of Botswana, the Presidential Administration of the Dominican Republic and the Presidential Administration of Ghana<sup>33</sup>. Between March 2018 and March 2019, the Facebook pages of the first two had an average of 20 posts per day<sup>34</sup>. In this way, the institutions communicate better with the people both on a national and international level. With the occasion of the elections for the European Parliament and for the presidential elections of 2019, both the Permanent Electoral Authority<sup>35</sup> as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania carried out an extensive campaign to inform voters in the diaspora on Facebook about the voting method, but also about the locations of the polling stations<sup>36</sup>. At the same time, public opinion is quickly informed about the government's decisions and the decision-makers can observe the reactions of the people regarding certain decisions

implemented by the government. At the same time, decision makers can continuously present more information to the public on their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts than the media can.

In terms of leaders, the top three most interactive are Jair Bolsonaro, President of Brazil, Donald Trump, US President, and Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India<sup>37</sup>. Twiplomacy also achieved a top three of the most followed heads of state during the period March 2018-March 2019 by regions. The top is as follows:

- Sub-Sahara Africa
  1. Uhuru Kenyatta, president of Kenya – 3.6 million followers;
  2. Nana Akufo-Addo, president of Ghana – 1.6 million followers;
  3. Paul Kagame, president of Rwanda) – 900 thousand followers.
- Europe
  1. The royal family of Great Britain – 4.1 million followers;
  2. Emmanuel Macron, president of France – 2.3 million followers;
  3. Klaus Iohannis, president of Romania – 1.8 million followers.
- Latin America
 

Jair Bolsonaro, president of Brazil – 9.3 million followers;

Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, president of Mexico – 5.6 million followers;

Mauricio Macri, president of Argentina – 4.4 million followers.
- Middle East and Northern Africa
  1. Queen Rania of Jordan – 16.7 million followers;

2. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, president of Egypt – 7.3 million followers;
3. Sheik Muhammad Bin Rashed of Maktoum, prime-minister and vice-president of the United Arab Emirates – 3.8 milion followers<sup>38</sup>.

In February 2019, German Chancellor Angela Merkel deleted her Facebook account with 2.5 million followers. Merkel was at that time the most followed European leader on Facebook<sup>39</sup>.

In addition to Facebook, we also have another social network often used by heads of state and government, foreign ministers and diplomats, known as Twitter. The most active institutions on the Twitter network in 2019 are the presidential administration of Venezuela, which posts an average of 42 posts / day, the presidential administration of Indonesia, which posts an average of 40 posts / day, and the presidential administration of Colombia, which posts an average of 31 posts / day<sup>40</sup>. In 2019, the most followed leaders on Twitter were Donald Trump, 66 million followers, Narendra Modi, 51 million followers, and Pope Francis with 49 million followers<sup>41</sup>. Among the most influential leaders on Twitter, however, was Saudi Arabia's King Salman – 231,000 reposts of his messages, Donald Trump - 21,000 reposts and Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand, whose messages were reposted by 9,000 users<sup>42</sup>.

As for Instagram, this social network is just as popular globally as

Facebook and Twitter. In 2018, all G7 and G20 leaders, with the exception of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, had an Instagram account<sup>43</sup>. In 2019, the top three most followed leaders on Instagram were the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Indonesian President Joko Widodo and US President Donald J. Trump<sup>44</sup>. The most active Instagram institutions are the Government of Brunei, the Government of Pakistan and Kuwait<sup>45</sup>.

The Facebook account of the Embassy of Sweden in Romania enjoys great success among the users due to its posts. The page is one of the most popular, liked by 70,000 people, being second in the number of likes on the Facebook pages of the accredited embassies in Romania. Through humorous posts, this has attracted popularity among Romanians and the page's posts are distributed by thousands of people<sup>46</sup>. The first place is occupied by the United States Embassy, with 110,000 people who like it<sup>47</sup>.

Therefore, the new communication technologies have helped facilitate global communication and make it easier for a diplomat to search for information as it finds a lot of information it needs on social media. In addition to this, new communication technologies also help in communication between institutions and leaders. In April 2014, several harsh replies were exchanged between the State Department spokesman and the Foreign Ministry

of the Russian Federation on their Twitter accounts regarding the situation in Ukraine<sup>48</sup>.

In May 2017, leaders of Fiji and the Marshall Islands addressed President Donald Trump directly through a post on Twitter, asking to not abandon the Paris Agreement on global warming<sup>49</sup>. In June 2017, the Prime Ministers of Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Norway and Finland addressed Donald Trump directly on their Twitter accounts, asking him to not leave the Paris Agreement<sup>50</sup>. They mentioned Donald Trump's account in their post, so that the social media platform can notify him directly about the message.

In November 2017, Donald Trump addressed the British Prime Minister - Theresa May at that time, through a message on Twitter, after she criticized his posts on this platform<sup>51</sup>. At that time Theresa May accused Donald Trump of redistributing anti-Muslim videos posted by the leader of a far-right group in the UK to the social network<sup>52</sup>. In his response to Theresa May, Donald Trump mentioned the name of her account in the post for the platform to notify her directly about the message of the US President. Donald Trump is one of the leaders who frequently use the Twitter platform to make their views and decisions known, using the other media channels less. In October 2019, after a phone conversation with his Turkish counterpart, Donald Trump immediately announced on Twitter that the United States will

withdraw its troops from Syria<sup>53</sup>. He skipped the custom of organizing a press conference to express his intentions.

## Conclusions

Therefore, the role of social networks in promoting and strengthening diplomatic relations is a particularly important one. However, both diplomats and heads of state and government should be especially cautious when using the Internet because they are exposed to very high risks of information high-jacking. This threat comes in the context of hackers increasingly conducting cyber-attacks on officials in different states to produce leaks. Thus, diplomats must protect their correspondence and the information they hold very well, which becomes increasingly difficult in the age of the Internet.

In 2007, hundreds of people were victims of a virus called "DarkHotel", after using the wireless network of hotels in countries such as Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan and other Asian countries. This virus was stealing all the information stored on devices connected to the wireless network<sup>54</sup>. This also becomes possible when a phone is connected to a wireless network and given that diplomats are accustomed to traveling a lot, the risks of accessing their information are very high. Whether they are in their spare time or while they are on duty, foreign policy makers and diplomats



connect to the Internet, which can often be unsafe. Another tactic used by hackers to obtain information is to break into the e-mail addresses of the diplomatic staff as well as of other state officials. A good example in this case is that of the Romanian hacker who hacked the email of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2013 and was able to access all her diplomatic correspondence<sup>55</sup>. This showed the dependency of diplomacy

on technology and the negative aspects of this dependency. Diplomacy has become the victim of media technologies due to their ease and speed. Therefore, although the new communication technologies help a great deal in carrying out the various tasks performed by diplomats, they also make them vulnerable to increasingly difficult threats, such as cyber-attacks.

## Notes

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