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Digital diplomacy of the European Embassies in Kazakhstan

by Neil Collins and Kristina Bekenova

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Introduction

At the beginning of her term, Vice President of the Commission Federica Mogherini decided to make Twitter and Facebook fundamental tools for EU's diplomacy and for promoting core European values of democracy, human rights, rule of law, good governance and international cooperation. In a short time, various digital channels have become an important part of the communication strategies of the European External Action Service (EEAS). This is reflected in the organisation of pre-posting trainings for European ambassadors and in strategic communication seminars. This type of social media engagement, according to Michael Mann, Head of Strategic Communications at the EEAS, 'has proved paramount in strengthening EEAS Digital Diplomacy efforts, considerably expanding our reach to new audiences' (2015). Currently, 123 EU delegations are involved in virtual communication, dialogue and engagement through different platforms, such as Flickr, for creating a visual identity; Twitter, a fast and easy way to send out messages and react to events; and, Facebook, vital for interaction with people and for highlighting some of the work of the EEAS. So, 'the question today is not so much a question of "if" but "how" to use social media in public relations' (Taylor and Kent, 2010: 207).

The exercise of measuring how active missions abroad are in engaging with the local audience is not new. For example, there are studies on the of the Israeli, Polish, Norwegian and Finnish communication strategies and online activities at both the ministry (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and embassy levels; on the role of social media tools in German public diplomacy, etc.

To date such research has not been conducted in Central Asia though this is a region where European countries in particular have identified a need for greater diplomatic engagement. The signing of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) between the European Union and Kazakhstan on 21st December 2015 is 'a strong sign of the political investment by all EU Member States and the European institutions in a strategic partnership, a strategic relationship with Central Asia'. As the agreement came into force in May 2016, it is timely to evaluate how this 'strong sign' is reflected in digital communication used so far by the European missions.

Research Parameters

To find out the how digital diplomacy is conducted by the European embassies in Kazakhstan we analysed and compared the diplomatic e-strategies of 14 European embassies in

Kazakhstan, which have Facebook accounts: Germany, Finland, Estonia, Poland, Hungary, France, Italy, Sweden, Netherlands, UK, Latvia, Austria and Belgium, as well as that of the delegation of the EU. The choice of the social media was set on Facebook instead of most used platforms in Kazakhstan - Vkontakte, and Instagram - as European embassies do not use them. The data was collected from April 2015 to May 2016: the period was marked with highly political occasions, such as presidential elections, as well as many cultural events with local and European resonance. The posts collected were categorised into two main groups: 1) sense of belonging, which implies an embassy's engagement with the local audience in order to achieve social acceptance, includes the posts on embassy activities, cooperation with the country located in, and various interactive posts; 2) self-presentation, when an embassy through its posts promotes their own country's education and tourism, culture and language, values and traditions, national holidays and historical facts. Sense of belonging is calculated as a sum of the posts (cooperation with Kazakhstan, embassy activities, cultural events, interactive posts) divided by the months the Facebook page was observed. In addition, the value of self-promotion is calculated as a sum of the such groups as domestic news, cultural events, education, tourism, culture & society and language, also divided by the number of months.

Evidence and Analysis

- There are 22 EU member states' embassies in Astana, and 14 of them have Facebook accounts. The embassies started using Facebook gradually since 2010, with that of the UK being the first, in February 2010. The embassy of Belgium, the most recent of those covered here, registered in September 2016.
- Between April 2015 and May 2016, **2,455 posts shared by 14 embassies** with a Facebook account were collected (see Table 1). These included posts with text or a picture only, text with a picture, as well as links or movie clips.
- Facebook use was primarily motivated by **promoting the country** that the embassy represents. The embassies that shared almost two times more posts on self-presentation are Belgium, Latvia, Sweden, the UK and Italy. The relatively equal content was posted by the embassies of Germany, Finland, Austria, Estonia and Poland. Hungary, France, Netherlands and the EU shared slightly more posts on engagement with the local audience.

Nº	Embassy	agenda-setting								Total amount of news
		Cooperation with Kz	Embassy activities	Domestic news	Cultural events	Promotion				
						Education	Tourism	Culture&Society	Language	
1	Hungary	4	9	4	4	0	0	0	0	21
2	Finland*	48	26	9	11	10	17	63	0	221
3	Italy**	17	3	8	56	14	32	20	13	171
4	Estonia	7	8	6	7	1	3	10	1	43
5	UK***	118	81	156	40	39	125	124	30	741
6	Germany****	42	74	33	44	38	27	82	34	463
7	France	25	27	28	19	0	0	2	0	101
8	Poland	11	28	31	22	13	1	15	0	121
9	Sweden	13	13	23	9	8	15	12	0	93
10	Netherlands	52	33	14	13	1	1	0	0	114
11	Belgium*****	0	1	6	3	1	1	1	0	13
12	Austria*****	3	8	21	26	0	0	0	0	58
13	Latvia	49	20	112	14	2	41	36	0	274
14	EU*****	1	4	0	14	0	0	2	0	21
Total amount of posts										2455

* FB page also shared news on energy (8), other EU countries (3) and CA news (26)

** 8 interactive posts

*** 28 interactive posts

****89 posts were of interactive character

***** only one month analysed

***** five months analysed

Table 1: Facebook posts made by 14 European embassies in Kazakhstan, 2015-2016

- According to the data collected, most of the embassies concentrate their efforts on **promotion of tourism, education and culture of their own countries**. The Facebook pages of the embassies of Finland (46%, see Fig. 1), the UK (43%, see Fig. 2), Germany (39%, see Fig. 3), Italy (46%, see Fig. 4), Sweden (37%) and Estonia (32%) are primarily based on portraying their country as the best tourist destination, as offering high-quality and available education and diverse and captivating culture. The UK, Germany and Italy via various posts share best practices and advice on how to learn their languages. An interesting element of presenting one's country is used by the embassy of Finland. It portrays Finland as a country concerned with new energy, **innovations** and ecology. Additionally, the facts shared on Facebook emphasised the leading positions of Finland in each of the social-cultural dimensions: innovation ('3rd most innovative'), social care ('most family-friendly state'), creativity ('the most creative country'), happiness ('the happiest'), education ('3rd best education'), gender equality ('fronrunner'), etc. The way Estonia presents itself has its own features. While containing elements of promotion ('the most technologically advanced', 'leader of e-society'), Estonia, because of its historical past, also focused on informing their local audience about Estonian political victims repressed in Kazakhstan during the 1930s-1940s.
- The embassies of Belgium (46%, see Fig. 5), Latvia (41%, see Fig. 6), Austria (40%) France (29%) and Poland (26%, see Fig. 7) use Facebook to share with the foreign audience **the political, cultural-social and sporting events of their own country**. News on France was mostly about the conference on climate change (COP 21) hosted by the commune of Le Bourget in 2015. Latvia focused on foreign news and international relations in general, but also on sports. Sports was also the most shared item by the embassy of Belgium, as they supported their team during the Paralympic Games in Doha.
- Presenting the country through **the activities of the embassy** was the primary objective of Hungary (43%). Facebook was used as a '**notice board**' by Austria (45%) and the EU (67%), especially highlighting the Austrian National Day and the Day of Europe, respectively.

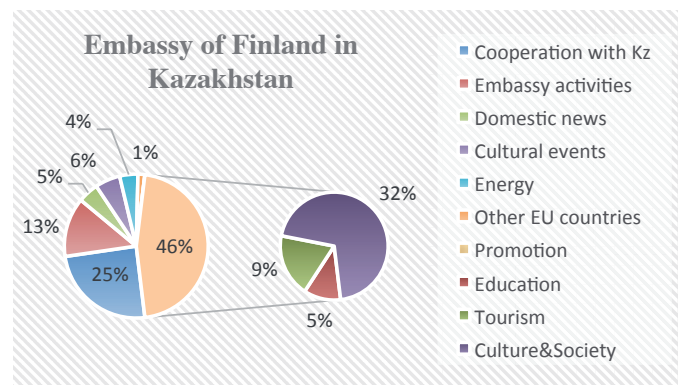


Figure 1: Facebook activity of the Finnish embassy in Kazakhstan.

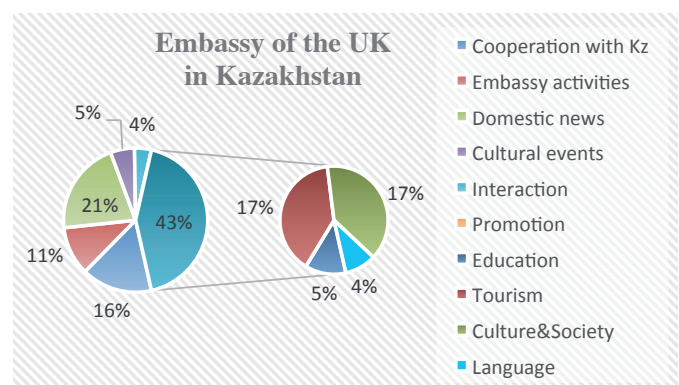


Figure 2: Facebook activity of the UK embassy in Kazakhstan.

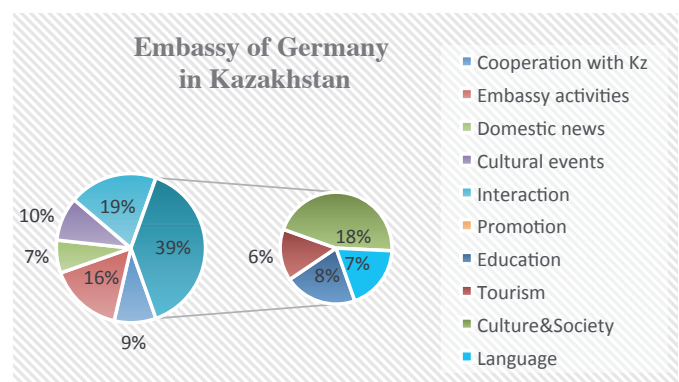


Figure 3: Facebook activity of the German embassy in Kazakhstan.

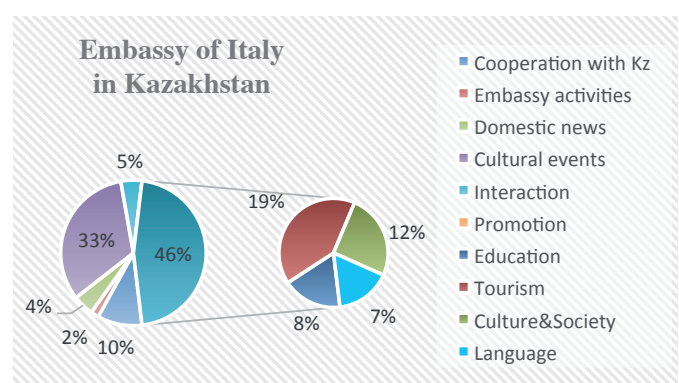


Figure 4: Facebook activity of the Italian embassy in Kazakhstan.

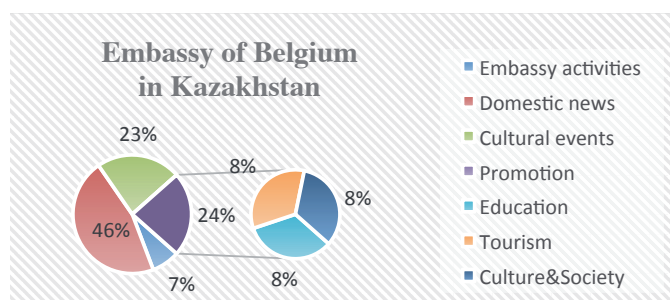


Figure 5: Facebook activity of the Belgian embassy in Kazakhstan.

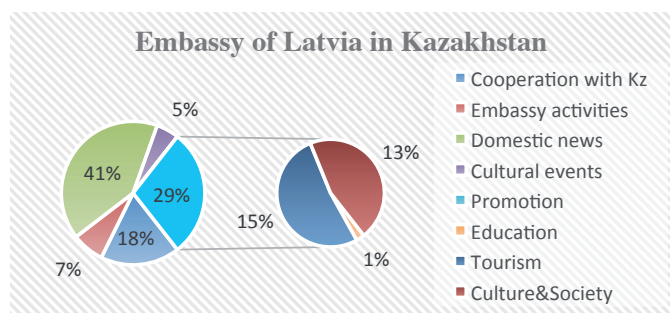


Figure 6: Facebook activity of the Latvian embassy in Kazakhstan.

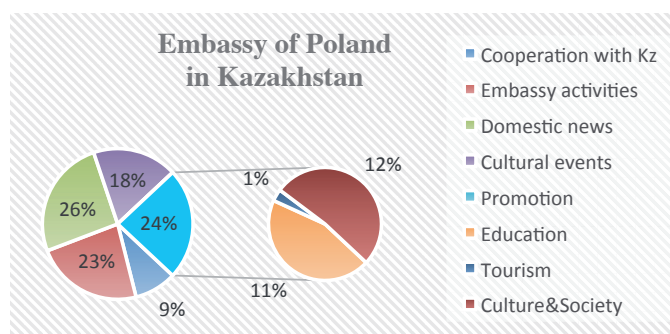


Figure 7: Facebook activity of the Polish embassy in Kazakhstan.

- **Cooperation with Kazakhstan** was top only for the Netherlands. Their Facebook page during the monitoring period allocated 46% of information to telling the audience about the various spheres in which Kazakhstan cooperates with the Netherlands: floriculture, education, cyberspace, environment and water management, human rights, energy, green economy, etc.
- The Netherlands is the only **'political' embassy** that commented on the April election of the President of Kazakhstan using their Facebook account. Jointly with the embassy of Finland, the Dutch also expressed 'support for, and solidarity with, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities in Kazakhstan' (embassy of the Netherlands). This is a very sensitive topic in the country because 'inherited from the Soviet Union attitude, homosexuality is considered an illness... the situation is far from ideal' (Blua, 2005).

- At the **conversation-generating level**, the analysis shows that most of the embassies do not use Facebook to interact with their followers, preferring only to use social media as a channel to disseminate official information. The use of Facebook to generate conversation with Kazakhstani followers, however, is evident only in the embassies of the UK, Germany and, to a lesser degree, Italy.
- **The German embassy** organised online activities featuring the Bundesliga, its national football league (37 posts); Deutschland-Quiz (33); and, two photography contests (19) that attracted a lot of reposts, likes and comments. The Bundesliga activity generated 1,447 likes, 182 reposts and 766 comments in total. No less popular was the quiz organised by the embassy to improve knowledge of German culture, society and architecture. This activity collected in total 1,082 likes, 379 reposts and 967 comments. For each event, the German embassy recognised the most active followers and the winners of the contest with pictures, congratulations and special awards. Because of the engaging character of the German embassy's posts, their followers are very supportive and interactive. Comments ran along the lines of 'The nature is of an amazing beauty! Germany is amazing, beautiful and great country! The food is delicious! I like everything about your country! I love your country!'.
- In its turn, **the British embassy**, as the leader in terms of amount of posts, organised the communication channel with its audience through the ambassador's video blogs. In these videos, the British Ambassador, Dr Carolyn Brown, shared her congratulations on national holidays in the Kazakh language as well as offering posts on English vocabulary and traditions. Video blogs received a lot of admiration and support, especially those in which the Ambassador speaks in the Kazakh language. For example, the most successful post is the video clip in which Dr Brown congratulated Kazakhstan on Nauryz, the most important holiday in the local calendar, in Kazakh. This post received 1,500 likes, 971 reposts and 134 comments. Another popular post is an announcement of a Chevening scholarship that received 2,200 likes, 339 reposts and 49 comments. Third place in popularity are photos of the royal family – 228 followers congratulated Queen Elizabeth on her birthday in April 2016.

- A feature of the success of British and German embassies is their **engagement with the local audience in local languages** as much as possible. Personal congratulations from the ambassadors and embassies are given on every occasion in three languages: English/German, Russian and Kazakh. Moreover, both embassies' information is balanced. It promotes not only their own country, but also shares social-cultural news from Kazakhstan, noting the beauty and uniqueness of Kazakh nature and cuisine. Similarly, their Facebook pages not only provide information on officially organised events but also introduce personnel and interesting moments from the embassies' everyday lives. In these ways, the messages mix policy communications with a more personal touch. All these features involving followers, engagement in local languages, as well as personal and diverse content contribute to creating understanding, gaining sympathy and increasing visibility.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

In Kazakhstan, European countries and the EU itself operate in fairly favourable waters. While it is a Muslim-majority country, Kazakhstan is largely secular and it has no history of European imperialism. The dialogue with the local population is not conditioned by inherent distrust or hostility. Thus, for an assessment of whether social media present a quintessentially different medium for engagement with the local public, Kazakhstan presents an interesting case-study. Only two thirds of European embassies have Facebook pages, and a majority of those that do engage to a limited degree. Public conversation is largely banal and heavily one-sided. The content is generally apolitical, and self-presentation clearly trumps agenda-setting. The active use of digital media channels, of course, will not replace 'the handshake as the most important tool of diplomacy', but its complementary character may enhance the effectiveness and visibility of EU actions and even contribute to the positive image of the Union, i.e. strengthen its cultural, science and innovation digital diplomacy. However, while culture and innovations of the European countries are well represented, science cooperation and scientific achievements are less evident. Indirectly, it was expressed in the posts about country's education system, scholarship opportunities, and the meetings where countries shared with Kazakhstan their own experiences/achievements in the spheres of, for example, environment and water management. Some joint projects, for example with the Netherlands, were developed.

The results reported here are not surprising and are in accordance with the soft power ranking and digital diplomacy index, where the UK (69.22) and Germany (68.67) get leading positions (Portland, Soft Power 30, 2016). Nevertheless, despite the hype associated with the use of social media for diplomacy, the majority of the European embassies used Facebook as a one-way communication channel.

Ways to Move Forward: Recommendations on How to improve the Use of Digital Diplomacy in Kazakhstan

In order to attract wider audience and get local support and acceptance, the Facebook posts should:

- Use local languages as well as those of the embassy;
- Engage citizens in online activities;
- Place news in a broader context of European politics, culture, science and innovations;
- Renew content frequently;
- Avoid banality and heavily one-sided content; and
- Reflect local interests in sport, culture, educational opportunities, tourism, etc.

About the authors



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