

Digital Diplomacy and Small States: The Case of Kosovo

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Abstract. Digital diplomacy in modern times is increasingly being used and gaining momentum. With advances in technology, the methods of conducting diplomacy have also evolved. One of these evolutions is digital diplomacy. This paper examines the role of digital diplomacy in affirming Kosovo as a new and small state in the international arena. Considering the challenges Kosovo faces in gaining international recognition and improving its image, it has used diplomatic approaches and digital tools to enhance recognition and build international relations. This paper analyses the strategies and messages of Kosovo's institutions and diplomats on social networks and digital platforms. This study identifies the advantages and limitations that small states with different international statuses and capacities face. Based on the analysis conducted in this paper, the findings show that Kosovo uses digital technology to strengthen its international relations and image, to challenge political obstacles, and to build support. In this paper, we highlight the importance of digital diplomacy as a strategic tool for small states in the modern era and amid ongoing technological development. This analysis reveals that digital diplomacy is an appropriate method and mechanism to address the limitations of traditional diplomacy, thereby strengthening the influence of small states in the international arena, with a particular focus on the case of Kosovo.

Keywords: Kosovo; Digital Diplomacy; Small States; Public Diplomacy; International Relations.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalisation and significant technological development, many fields have undergone major changes and reforms. Among these fields, diplomacy has undergone a substantial transformation. Diplomacy has shifted its focus towards digital media, digital platforms, and social media. Through technological advancements and digital progress, diplomacy has overcome many challenges and obstacles that were present in traditional forms of practice.

Digital diplomacy is a form of diplomacy that uses technology and digital platforms. It also includes the use of social media and online platforms by both governmental and non-governmental institutions to build international relations, influence global public opinion, and increase international visibility. Through digital diplomacy, countries aim to improve their national image, communicate electronically, and combat various forms of disinformation. In sim-

ple terms, what a country may not be able to achieve through traditional diplomacy for multiple reasons, it can more easily, clearly, and quickly achieve through the use of digital diplomacy.

This research study aims to examine the role and use of digital diplomacy by the state of Kosovo as an effective instrument and strategy to influence the international arena and construct a favourable narrative aligned with its national interests and objectives. Through the analysis and study of concrete practices such as the engagement of the diaspora, the use of social networks and digital platforms, various digital campaigns, the promotion of cultural heritage and identity, as well as sports diplomacy this study will explore, analyse, and evaluate to what extent digital diplomacy has contributed to Kosovo's international recognition and affirmation, and what limitations, challenges, and obstacles it faces in this critical and complex process.

Small states face significant challenges in achieving international representation, given their limited economic power, diplomatic capacity, resource constraints, limited recognition, and other factors. One of these states is Kosovo. Based on the above context and the difficulties commonly encountered by small states, Kosovo clearly represents an interesting case for study. As a small and newly established state that is not recognised by all United Nations member states and is not itself a UN member, Kosovo continues to face challenges in building its international image, along with a range of other political and diplomatic barriers on the global stage.

Precisely for these reasons, Kosovo's case is particularly relevant for exploring how the country has used digital diplomacy to overcome these obstacles and limitations, as well as to promote and affirm its identity in the international arena.

Through this study, we *aim* to explore and analyse, to the extent possible, how the Republic of Kosovo has utilised digital diplomacy and digital platforms to construct its identity, international image, and global influence despite the challenges of limited international recognition.

More broadly, this analysis seeks to contribute to both the theoretical and practical understanding of digital diplomacy as a form and an instrument of soft power for small states in an increasingly technology-driven, globally interconnected world order.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

With the development of technology and the advancement of various fields worldwide, the need to adapt to these changes has increased. Technological advancements and evolving strategies across all areas of life have not bypassed international relations, politics, and diplomacy. Digital advancements have necessitated transforming traditional diplomacy in many ways, including through digital diplomacy.

Digital diplomacy is not only a method or tool of diplomacy; at its essence, it is the exercise of soft power and its influence in the international arena. Moreover, digital diplomacy is public diplomacy itself; it is its extended hand, demonstrating influence and delivering results in a comprehensive, integrated manner.

With the development of the internet and the expansion of digital platforms and networks, digital

diplomacy has gained momentum and become an essential, unavoidable aspect of the international sphere. Increasingly, digitalisation is taking hold in our daily lives, institutions, and among both state and non-state actors.

In 2012, the United States Department of State took a historic step by institutionalising digital diplomacy through the establishment of a dedicated structure – the Office of eDiplomacy. This Office was created as part of the Department's Bureau of Information Resource Management and aimed to modernise how the United States engages diplomatically in the digital age [1]. From its inception, the Office did not limit its work to managing embassy websites or social media within a defined scope. Instead, it developed and implemented broad, inclusive programs to promote transparency, train diplomats in the use and strategic deployment of digital tools, and directly engage international audiences. These and other approaches positioned the United States as a leader in global digital communication, giving digital diplomacy its rightful place and importance.

Digital diplomacy is defined as the use of digital platforms by state actors to promote national interests and to communicate both publicly and privately in the international arena [2]. Through digital diplomacy and the use of digital and social platforms, communication methods have evolved and adapted to align with specific interests and strategic objectives. These platforms, when used by both state and non-state actors, have made it easier to influence and deliver messages aligned with their goals and priorities.

Digital diplomacy has transformed the way states and international actors engage with the public, build relationships, and contribute to conflict resolution across multiple dimensions and challenges. With technological advancements and the growing use of the internet, diplomacy has entered a new phase where digital platforms play a crucial role in diplomatic processes [3]. The evolution of diplomacy through new phases and methods, driven by technological progress, has provided various benefits – particularly for small states.

The use of public diplomacy by small states in a well-defined, strategic way can lead to highly positive outcomes and be achieved at relatively low cost [4]. Small states, which often lack the capacity and resources to exert influence through traditional means, especially in diplomacy, must

seek more accessible and appropriate solutions suited to their capabilities. A valuable opportunity for small states in this regard is the use of soft power. Within the framework of soft power, small states can employ various diplomatic strategies and instruments that are better suited and more effective for advancing their interests.

According to the author [5], soft power is the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. He emphasises that this form of power stems from a state's culture, political values, and the legitimacy of its policies. Small states, which lack military power, significant economic capacity, and adequate stability in many areas, can leverage soft power and its instruments as a strong strategic resource to advance their influence and goals on the global stage. Through this pathway, digital diplomacy serves as a cost-effective and suitable tool for projecting, utilising, and deploying this power internationally.

In this context, digital diplomacy is the most effective and accessible instrument for the application and projection of soft power. Through digital diplomacy, small states overcome borders and barriers as they extend their influence and communication internationally. Moreover, digital diplomacy enables small countries to enhance their image and effectively represent their interests.

Small states often face unique challenges in diplomacy, including a lack of recognition and limited resources. However, through digital diplomacy, they can challenge traditional norms and build broader networks of influence [6]. This "asymmetric" approach enables them to create a more substantial presence in the international sphere through digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram [2]. Digital diplomacy enables small states to overcome many obstacles associated with their limited international presence. Limited resources, economic power, military strength, the capacity to open and maintain embassies, and challenges related to international recognition can all be mitigated through digital diplomacy.

The use of digital diplomacy by small states enables them to build global networks and extend their influence in the international arena. Various digital platforms and the use of technology in general, when employed strategically and in line with national interests, can yield significant results and benefits not only for small states but also for larger ones.

Today, digital platforms have replaced traditional lobbying by diplomats, individuals, organisations, and other actors. These platforms offer lower costs, greater access, faster communication, and more concise and accurate dissemination of information. Many international challenges and crises are addressed through digital platforms by delivering timely and appropriate messages. Digital diplomacy has facilitated public communication, accelerated influence during crises or pandemics, and helped manage diplomatic tensions between countries. All of these elements make digital diplomacy a suitable and accessible tool for small states, especially in terms of cost-efficiency.

Recently, small states have found their place in the international arena through technological advancements, soft power strategies, and the development of digital diplomacy. These tools have helped them apply tailored strategies in areas where they previously faced limitations, enabling new contributions and progress that were not previously available to them.

Digital diplomacy and small states represent one of the most effective connections for promoting and defending national interests on the international stage. In a multipolar world, small states can now act in parallel with large, powerful states across all dimensions through digital diplomacy.

The Case Of Kosovo

The Republic of Kosovo declared independence in 2008, becoming a new state on the international stage. Its long and arduous journey, marked by injustice, was finally crowned with the recognition of its sovereignty and independence under all appropriate conditions. As a small country with limited capacity, Kosovo has consistently faced challenges across many aspects of international affairs, particularly due to the influence of major powers that oppose its statehood, such as Russia.

Kosovo's independence and international support have brought stability to the region. The geopolitical and geostrategic influence of the United States and the European Union has strengthened, enabled, and stabilised Kosovo for the future, helping build a stable and tolerant state [7]. Many countries have supported the Republic of Kosovo and continue to do so, particularly EU member states and governments from around the world.

Special emphasis must be placed on the United States of America, which has been – and continues to be – the main driving force and supporter of Kosovo in all national and international aspects.

Kosovo is a clear example of a small and partially recognised state in the international system that faces significant diplomatic challenges. The lack of recognition by some powerful countries and its absence from the United Nations have limited its opportunities in traditional diplomacy [8]. Kosovo struggles to effectively wield soft power due to barriers stemming from its international image, which is often associated with negative connotations. This image has been shaped by external factors such as Serbian and Russian lobbying and biased international reports, as well as internal factors, such as economic stagnation and corruption scandals [9]. As a small country, Kosovo has consistently faced significant diplomatic and international challenges in representing itself and promoting its interests and strategies globally. The lack of international recognition remains a constant and costly challenge.

By relying solely on traditional methods, Kosovo has often been unable to achieve its clearly defined goals, particularly the expansion of international recognition and the improvement of its global image, due to its limited diplomatic and institutional capacities. Since declaring independence in 2008, the Republic of Kosovo has faced significant obstacles in the international sphere, including partial recognition, opposition from specific states, disputes over its independence, limited membership in international organisations, and strong opposition from countries such as Serbia, Russia, and China. The latter two countries, in particular, possess significant global power and influence, which has created substantial barriers for Kosovo.

In light of these challenges, digital diplomacy has emerged as a practical and beneficial alternative for the State of Kosovo. This approach is less costly, more straightforward, more transparent, and more effective for lobbying, improving the country's international image, communicating with the global public, and promoting Kosovo's goals and interests worldwide.

Nevertheless, Kosovo has developed an active digital presence through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and key political figures, using social media platforms to promote its strategic interests, engage with its diaspora, and mobilise

international support [10]. Through social networks, Kosovo promotes its strategic goals, communicates directly with its diaspora communities worldwide, and strengthens their connections and engagement. Digital platforms and public diplomacy serve as practical tools for informing and mobilising the diaspora, thereby reinforcing international support.

Digital diplomacy in Kosovo has also functioned as a bridge between the country and its diaspora. The Albanian diaspora, powerful and influential in countries such as the United States, Germany, Switzerland, and various EU member states, has continuously lobbied in support of Kosovo and its international standing.

Through digital diplomacy, Kosovo builds soft power by telling its story and shaping its national identity, while taking into account its historical background and painful past; this includes promoting Kosovo as a country with a unique history of resistance, centuries of suffering, experiences of genocide and occupation, and the continuous struggle of its people for freedom and independence.

In 2022, through the European Digital Diplomacy Exchange (EDDE) project, Kosovo advanced its digital diplomacy capacities. "The project is a result of cooperation between the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Embassy in Ljubljana, and the Centre for European Perspective." [11]

As part of this initiative, training was provided to government communicators from various institutions in the Republic of Kosovo. The primary focus and goals of the project included: message development, narrative building, storytelling techniques, identifying disinformation, and using social media analysis and digital platforms. This helped Kosovo implement digital diplomacy more strategically and effectively.

All of these tools, when used in the appropriate context and through digital diplomacy, include digital content such as videos, audio recordings, photos, stories, cultural heritage imagery, and messages of peace and love. These elements serve as methods for creating national identity, building a positive international image, attracting global attention, and shaping international public opinion.

Through these means, Kosovo exercises soft power and digital diplomacy relying on attraction, storytelling, and values, rather than political or economic pressure or any form of coercion.

The Republic of Kosovo has adopted the Digital Diplomacy Strategy to improve its online presence. This strategy's goal is for digital platforms and the internet to recognise Kosovo as an independent and sovereign state, and to develop high-quality multimedia content to counter negative or disappointing perceptions. The main projects included in this strategy are: "Digital Kosovo, Balkans, KosovoDiaspora, InstaKosovo, AppCamp, and Wiki Academy" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo). Kosovo's strategy has been ranked among the best in the world. The Turkish magazine *Yeni Diploması* ranked Kosovo's digital diplomacy strategy fourth globally, after the United Kingdom, the United States, and Israel. In this context, Kosovo's diplomacy can be seen as having made substantial progress, notably by expanding its international engagement and influence and securing the support of numerous states.

Public diplomacy, intertwined with digital diplomacy as one of its key components, along with the role of social media, has transformed the way diplomats, governments, states, and organisations interact with the international public to pursue their interests and goals [12]. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo has adopted various digital strategies, including the use of hashtags such as #DigitalKosovo and #KosovoInUN to attract international attention and promote state issues [13]. Through digital and social platforms, clear and accurate information is provided quickly and often used to expose misinformation and misinterpretation of certain situations.

Campaigns such as #KosovoDeservesVisaFree and #KosovoWantsPeace have been used to exert pressure on international institutions, particularly the European Union, in the context of the EU's visa liberalisation efforts [14]. These campaigns and actions represent a new form of digital diplomacy, which involves both citizens and institutions of Kosovo. Through these efforts, Kosovo's institutions and citizens have mobilised to influence the international arena and public opinion via digital platforms.

Key political and diplomatic figures in Kosovo, including the Prime Minister and President, are active and maintain profiles on digital and social platforms, using them as tools for communication and digital transmission. Additionally, these methods increase audience reach and influence

international public opinion by disseminating information and goals worldwide.

Kosovo, through digital diplomacy, has enhanced its influence and engagement on the international stage with a global audience. Furthermore, it has secured support from a diverse range of countries. However, considerable challenges remain, including the costs of digitalisation and training, digital limitations in certain areas, and inadequate equipment and staff training, among other issues. All of these require continuous time and strategy, but so far, positive results have been achieved in this regard.

Through digital diplomacy, Kosovo expresses and promotes its goals and interests in line with its capabilities and capacities. Kosovo primarily uses digital diplomacy to challenge and overcome isolation and to build international support, despite challenges and obstacles related to infrastructure, concrete development, and international recognition.

CONCLUSIONS

Digital diplomacy is a subset of public diplomacy and derives from soft power. It represents a new form of diplomacy that aligns with technological developments and current needs. This method of diplomacy originates with many scholars and the United States of America itself, which is considered the alpha and omega of global developments and initiatives, especially in the modern technological world.

Digital diplomacy is used and developed by large and powerful states. However, small states also utilise it despite certain limitations. Digital diplomacy offers clear benefits, including ease of use and low cost. Another key advantage is that small states can effectively employ it even when they lack the capacity and means to advance through traditional diplomatic channels.

Digital diplomacy is a potent instrument and method for small states like Kosovo. It enables them to compensate for and recover from the limitations and penalties imposed by traditional diplomacy and by the powers and capacities they do not possess. Digital diplomacy enables such compensations by opening avenues to build a dignified and strong international profile and representation.

The case analysis of Kosovo clearly shows that through the strategic and adequate use of digital

platforms, social networks, and digital diplomacy in general, a new country with limited recognition and significant challenges, notably lacking military and economic power, can develop new methods and tools for representation, affirmation, and protection of its interests both nationally and internationally. Concrete examples from Kosovo, such as the communication of state recognition via Twitter, campaigns for UNESCO membership, promotion of cultural heritage, and sporting achievements, clearly demonstrate the strategic role that technology can play in a state's foreign policy and international presence with limited resources.

However, this approach, along with its methods and strategies, requires continuous improvement in technical capacities, content development,

preparation, promotion, and inter-institutional cooperation. Digital diplomacy cannot fully replace traditional diplomacy. Still, it serves as an essential method, strategy, and complement in the age of information technologies, aimed at achieving adequate results on the international stage.

This paper examines Kosovo's digital diplomacy and seeks to provide valuable insights for scholars and practitioners of international relations, encouraging further research in this critical and timely field, which is closely connected to technological developments and to states' interests. Moreover, the study of Kosovo's digital diplomacy provides policymakers and diplomats with knowledge and strategies for practical applications.

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