How can digital diplomacy reconcile Russia and the West?

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Abstract

Digital diplomacy is a revolutionary diplomatic tool which has fundamentally altered the way politicians negotiate and communicate with citizens and non-state actors. Thanks to digitalization, people are able to keep in touch with the latest local and world news and increasingly become more engaged in their countries' politics. Digital diplomacy allows states to create their national branding, which reflects their stance on current issues and represents their values and beliefs. However, while researchers, experts and politicians acknowledge the benefits of digital diplomacy, its potential in practice is not fully realized. Apart from being a useful tool for communication, digital diplomacy can also be a tool for reconciliation. The world now is desperately looking for deescalation of tension between Russia and the Western world, which is mainly represented by the United States (US) and the European Union (EU). The outbreak of military actions in Ukraine increases the chances of military collision between Russia and the West as both sides find themselves on completely opposite sides of the conflict. However, this does not mean that only coercive methods should be used in such situations. It is possible to revive and maintain Russia-West relations with the use of soft power techniques such as digital diplomacy. Moreover, there is a lack of research which focuses on analysis of digital diplomacy of a particular country and not in general. This paper will attempt to close this research gap and analyze digital policies of three international actors: the US, the EU and Russia, evaluate US and EU digital policies towards Russia and suggest policy recommendations that might help to improve relations between Russia and the West.

Keywords: digital diplomacy, embassy, conflict, reconciliation, Russia, US, EU, security, internet, democracy

1. Introduction

No other type of diplomacy has so many synonyms and terminology debates as digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy is also known as e-diplomacy, cyber diplomacy, net diplomacy, diplomacy 2.0, networked diplomacy, real-time diplomacy, and even 21st-century statecraft[1]. The formal definition of diplomacy is using digital and networked technologies to help carry out diplomatic objectives[2].

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[1] Marcus Holmes, Digital Diplomacy, (Oxford Bibliographies, 2019)

[2] Olubukola S. Adesina, Foreign policy in an era of digital diplomacy, (Cogent Social Sciences, 2017)

Nowadays, it is impossible to deny the importance of digital diplomacy. Social networks, mainly Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, became a platform for everyday discussion of recent events. Thanks to social networking, it is easy to state a country's position and receive a public reaction, as well as the reaction of officials, in response to the statements made by politicians. Digital diplomacy has become a very valuable and comfortable tool with clear goals such as knowledge management, public diplomacy, disaster response, internet freedom, and policy planning[3]. More and more ordinary citizens have started to use technology in everyday life. It is now much easier to inform them about important meetings, updates, resolutions and other essential events in the political world. Political processes became more transparent and accessible for the general public and increased people's participation in politics of their states. Thus, due to the increasing digitalization of society, digital diplomacy is able to influence public opinion to much greater extent than traditional face-to-face diplomacy, as most face-to-face meetings are held behind closed doors, leaving people uninformed about their outcomes. Therefore, digital diplomacy becomes more than just a mere diplomatic tool. At the same time, traditional and digital diplomacy complement one another, and thus digital diplomacy cannot replace traditional diplomacy.

Some states and organizations that already have a significant influence on international politics through their digital diplomacy practices, and there are states that have just started to gain visibility. This article will focus on 3 most influential international actors that shape international relations through online resources: the United States (US), the European Union (EU) and Russia. There is not a lot of academic research that compares their digital policies. Such comparison would be very useful, especially now during the ongoing diplomatic conflict because of events in Ukraine that can quickly escalate to military conflict between Russia on one side and the US and the EU, representing the West, on the other side. More research is needed on description and analysis of Western digital policies towards Russia. This article will attempt to close mentioned research gaps. There is an urgent need to deescalate the situation, which has built up since 2014 and has approached a very perilous line. Digital diplomacy, as a full-fledged diplomatic tool, can help doing this. Despite growing interest in digital diplomacy, few studies to date have evaluated the extent to which politicians realized the potential of digital diplomacy. Therefore, now it is time to attract greater academic interest in this topic. The article will present three cases, analyze the potential of digital diplomacy in each case and give policy recommendations that can help to improve US, EU and Russian digital policies, avoid conflicts, misunderstandings and even expulsions.

2. US digital diplomacy: promotion of democracy and responsible cyber behavior

The US was one of the first countries to realize the potential of modern technology in paving the way for direct and easy dialogue which promotes certain interests and actions between government representatives and citizens. Professor

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[3] Ibid.

of Public Law at Muhammed V University Fatima Roumate describes digital diplomacy as an instrument "that has integrated the monologue of public diplomacy with the most effective, complex, and demanding instrument of dialogue"[4]. The history of American digital diplomacy began in 2002, when Colin Powell established the task force on digital diplomacy. The events of 9/11 demonstrated that a transparent, regular and close dialogue between government and citizens is needed and that citizens must be informed promptly about government decisions. There was an urgent need to separate kindness from evil. This necessity accelerated the establishment of digital communication channels. Another major event in the history of US digital diplomacy happened in 2016, when the US Department of State founded the Global Engagement Center, which aims to support the fight of the US government from what it considers as misinformation and keep Western digital space clean from harmful propaganda. According to the US State Department, such propaganda mainly comes from Russia, Iran and China. Today, the President Biden Administration takes essential steps to promote US interests digitally and responsible cyber behavior. In 2022 The Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy (CDP) was established to address these objectives. This organization has three policy units: International Cyberspace Security, International Information and Communications Policy and Digital Freedom[5]. Apart from developing policies,

CDP aims to set up technical standards that will defend open internet communication from the actions of authoritarian states like China.

Twitter became the most preferred platform for US digital diplomacy: Donald Trump's Twitter account symbolized his presidency. A new concept, "twiplomacy", was even invented to describe regular tweets done by politicians, predominantly from the US. Moreover, the US now actively coordinates its digital diplomacy with the EU. The EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC) was established in June 2021. When Russian troops entered Ukraine, the TTC started to become a powerful transatlantic geotechnological tool. The TTC provided the basis for EU-US cooperation on the unprecedented technology export controls against Russia. Declaration on the Future of the Internet, another initiative co-led by the EU and the US that was signed by 60 countries in 2022, provides a valuable diplomatic tool to advance certain transatlantic objectives for the digital sphere. The declaration's vision for the internet consists of universal internet access, protecting human rights, ensuring fair economic competition, designing secure digital infrastructure, promoting pluralism and freedom of expression, and guaranteeing a multi-stakeholder approach to internet governance[6]. Basically, the declaration states how democratic countries should use the web.

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[4] Fatima Roumate, Artificial Intelligence and Digital Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities (Springer International Publishing, 2021)

[5] Establishment of the Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy, (U.S. Department of State, 2022)

[6] Julian Ringhof, For the EU to bolster foreign and security policy, it must embrace transatlantic digital diplomacy, (The Parliament Magazine, 2022)

Furthermore, on the first of September 2022 the EU opened its office in San Francisco to reinforce its cooperation with the US in digital diplomacy coordinating efforts[7]. Therefore, American digital diplomacy can be described as protective, because it aims to protect American and allied national security and values from evident authoritarian and extremist opponents. American digital diplomacy is also educational, because the US aims to spread democratic values worldwide and thus inform citizens, especially those who oppose their authoritarian governments, that such values will lead to peace, freedom and security. The US wants to establish specific rules for web usage to prevent internet abuse with the propagandistic purposes by states it considers as opponents. The US takes on an ambitious mission of a "protector" of the world and in particular the EU from things its politicians consider evil. For instance, "Russian disinformation propaganda" is considered as one of those "evils".

The battle between the US and Russia in the digital sphere did not start when Russian troops entered Ukraine in 2022. It started way earlier, in 2014, after the reunion of Crimea with Russia. The US digital diplomacy assumes that Russian online activities can harm US national security, damage US interests abroad and spread disinformation and autocratic values that are incompatible with American and allied values. Therefore, the US tries to protect digital information space and create protection from extensive cyber attacks that are highly likely in a real ideological battle between Russia and the US.

For example, Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), established in 2018, became one of the most essential organizations that deal with cybersecurity in the US and alert of possible cyberattacks coming from Russia. The CISA advises how to effectively protect critical objects of infrastructure, for example, power plants, resilient to cyber threats. Cyberattacks can paralyze the work of critical infrastructure and impact the lives of ordinary citizens. The US often coordinates its diplomatic responses with its allies, and the issue of cybersecurity is not an exception. For example, in 2022, two months after the military conflict in Ukraine started, the CISA, FBI, National Security Agency (NSA), Australian Cyber Security Centre (ACSC), Canadian Centre for Cyber Security (CCCS), National Cyber Security Centre New Zealand (NZ NCSC), the United Kingdom's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC-UK) and National Crime Agency (NCA) released a joint cybersecurity advisory regarding Russian state-sponsored and criminal cyber threats to critical infrastructure. The advisory states that the main cyber threat comes from Russian security and intelligence services and gives practical recommendations for operators of critical infrastructure, such as updating operating systems, keeping strong passwords for MFAs and

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[7] EU opens new office in San Francisco to reinforce its digital diplomacy, (European Commission Press release , 2022)

maintaining offline backups of data[8]. Moreover, on 24 February 2022 US President Joe Biden warned that the federal government is prepared to respond to cyberattacks on American companies and infrastructure[9]. White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan warned that a Russian cyberattack on a NATO ally could trigger a collective response[10].

Thus, American digital diplomacy towards Russia believes that it is better to warn of events and consequences so that Russian structures that are in charge of cyberattacks can think before escalating diplomatic conflict to one step further. American digital diplomacy stresses the importance of diplomatic solutions over position of force. The use of a digital communications channel actually helped to avoid misunderstandings and possible escalation of conflict. On 24 February 2022 Ken Dilanian and Courtney Kube released a news report on NBC news which stated that Biden looked at a few options for massive cyberattacks against Russia. The options presented include disrupting the internet across Russia, shutting off power and stopping trains in their tracks[11]. Thankfully, then press-secretary of the White House Jen Psaki tweeted, "This report on cyber options being presented to @POTUS is off base and does not reflect what is actually being discussed in any shape or form." That means a quick reaction thanks to online communication was possible. Otherwise the scale of worsening relations between Russia and the US could be unpredictable. Broadcasts, tweets and other sources can sometimes misinform people, and the task of digital diplomacy is to react quickly to fake information.

The concept of twiplomacy was mentioned before. It means using Twitter for the continuation of diplomatic dialogue. Twiplomacy is a special part of digital diplomacy between the US and Russia. For example, in 2014 a sort of "hashtag battle" happened between Russia and the US when both countries used #UnitedForUkraine hashtag, although each state used to convey opposing arguments. For example, on 25 April 2014 then-representative of the US State Department, Jen Psaki, tweeted the following: "The world stands #UnitedforUkraine. Let's hope that the #Kremlin & @mfa_russia will live by the promise of a hashtag". Russian MFA replied extensively by posting its own version of the events and also used #Unitedfor Ukraine hashtag in multiple tweets. Examples include the following "#Lavrov: Moscow to block distortion of Geneva accords on #Ukraine http://voiceofrussia.com/news/2014_04_25/Moscow-to-block-distortion-of-Geneva-accords-on-Ukraine-Lavrov-4867/... #UnitedForUkraine"; "#Russia urges US to make Kiev stop army operation in southeast of http://en.itar-

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[8] Russian State-Sponsored and Criminal Cyber Threats to Critical Infrastructure, (Media.Defense.gov, 2022)

[9] Biden says 'we are prepared to respond' if Russia launches cyberattack against US, (USA Today, 2022)

[10] US warns a Russian cyberattack could trigger a NATO response, (Telecoms, 2022)

[11] Ken Dilanian & Courtney Kube, Biden has been presented with options for massive cyberattacks against Russia (NBC News, 2022)

tass.com/russia/729498 #UnitedForUkraine @RusEmbUSA". Russian MFA also mocked the American hashtag #RussiaIsolated, by posting images of Russian diplomats interacting with their foreign colleagues[12]. The Russian government made more humorous posts about the US, the prominent examples being suspicion of Russian involvement in the 2016 presidential elections, the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) looking for Russian speakers, and accusations of Trump being a Russian puppet. Although these "hashtag battles" and memes seem humorous and defuse the situation, they symbolize a non-stopping political and ideological battle between two countries, deep mistrust in each other and the inability to find a joint position on fundamental problems[13]. Inability to do this resulted in the events of 2022, when American social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook vowed to remove pro-Russian hashtags, channels and other sources of pro-Kremlin narrative. In response, the Russian government declared Instagram and Facebook as extremist organizations.

The problem with US digital diplomacy towards Russia is that it is not as popular as traditional face-to-face meetings and also coercive methods that the US uses to influence Russia, such as sanctions and expulsion of Russian diplomats. It is clear that coercive methods only escalate the conflict further and make Russian authorities more uncompromising, because they can use weighty arguments about sanctions and expulsion of diplomats and unwillingness of the US to maintain constructive dialogue and do a step forward in the regulation of peace. With every new sanction, the power of Russian president Vladimir Putin becomes more consolidated, as he feels entitled to defend the Russian economy, buyers, customers and other stakeholders. Therefore, it is important to develop policies that involve soft power, thus showing readiness to interact with Russia without threats and in a normal, calm atmosphere. Digital diplomacy lost its popularity after the departure of former US ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul, who actively tweeted, posted and blogged on LiveJournal from his personal accounts[14]. From that moment, most digital diplomatic activities are now in standard Twitter and Facebook accounts representing official US government bodies.

Hashtag diplomacy on Twitter occasionally gains popularity and is used by State Department representatives to show their support for Ukraine. The most popular hashtag is #StandwithUkraine. Although it is a suitable method for stating an official position on conflict in Ukraine, shaping public opinion, and countering propagandistic narrative, more is needed to solve current disagreements. There needs to be a crisis management mechanism through social media based on carefully

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[12] Ishaan Tharoor, Russia hijacks U.S. State Department's Ukraine hashtag (The Washington Post, 2014)
[13] Brennan Weiss & David Choi, 11 times official Russian government accounts have trolled the US and UK on Twitter, (The Insider, 2018)

[14] Will Wright, America's Digital Diplomacy in Russia After Michael McFaul, (GlobalVoices, 2015)

constructed language. Jay Newton-Small, chief executive officer and co-founder of MemoryWell, expressed an opinion that "diplomacy requires politesse and subtly, the two words that are incompatible with Twitter"[15]. Examples given above support the argument that Twitter can be used to mock and offend counterparts. Twiplomacy and hashtag diplomacy, which is an integral part of twiplomacy, can be used for humorous purposes, but not too much and not to offend a counterpart. They would even have greater potential if they would be used more to propose actual suggestions, give polite commentaries and have active conversations between embassies and other actors in international affairs.

3. EU digital diplomacy: thorough, but vague policymaking

Digital diplomacy of the European Union, unlike American, is based on comprehensive legislation and policy making. Numerous policies, the primary examples being the Data Governance Act, the Digital Services Act and the EU Cybersecurity Strategy, were accepted by the EU to govern cyberspace. The EU builds its digital diplomacy on careful planning, taking into account the benefits and opportunities of the digital world, as well as the challenges that it may pose for EU external policies. At the same time, many aspects of EU digital diplomacy are the same as America's. For example, European digital diplomacy aims to secure the EU global role in the digital world and to protect its strategic interests. The EU wants to be on one level with the US. The EU, like the US, recognizes the sensitivity of online data to cyberattacks as a topic that needs solutions and puts great emphasis on protection from hacking in its digital diplomacy. At the same time, while the US is focused more on being a "global policeman" in the digital world, the EU focuses more on protection of its own cyberspace. In 2017, the EU launched the EU Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox. It is a joint EU diplomatic response to malicious cyber activities and is a part of the EU's digital diplomacy aimed at stabilizing international relations and neutralizing potential aggressors[16]. In 2021, the EU adopted Europe's Digital Decade, which highlighted digital targets for 2030. The main goals are improving the population's digital skills, having 20 million ICT specialists, using 5G on all EU territory, full digitalization of key public services and digitalization of IDs[17]. Freedom of choice, safety and security, support of democracy are put at the heart of this strategy. EU digital diplomacy has a human-centric approach to digital technologies and coordinates efforts with the UN, G7, the OSCE, the WTO and other international organizations. If the US prefers to address digital challenges individually, then the EU stresses the importance of collective action. However, like the US, the EU identifies strong Chinese and Russian influence on cyberspace and technology and wants to stand against it in

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[15] Jay Newton-Small, Diplomacy in the Age of Twitter, (TIME, 2013)

[16] George Lekatis, The Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox, (Cyber-Diplomacy-Toolbox.com, n.d.)

[17] Nils Berglund, EU Cyber Diplomacy Initiative, (EU Cyber Direct, n.d.)

alliance with like-minded countries. The EU coordinates efforts in the already mentioned EU-US TTC, which enhances cooperation in digital regulation, works on investments in connectivity and builds joint protection mechanisms. The EU also funds the EU Cyber Direct, an initiative which supports EU cyber diplomacy and contributes to rule-based order in cyberspace through policy analysis, policy making and engagement with various stakeholders ranging from the civil sector to governments.

Before 2022, there were no clear digital policies that regulated Russia-EU relations. Now, due to the outbreak of military conflict in Ukraine, the issue of how to deal with Russia has become central to today's EU policy making, and digital diplomacy plays an important role. The European approach in digital diplomacy towards Russia is similar to the American approach. The EU is concerned that misinformation and propaganda that supports Russian authorities will be spread out on EU territories. The EU believes, for example, that the Russian government abuses digital technologies to achieve these objectives. However, there is little evidence that there is a specific EU digital diplomacy method that is only directed at Russia. There are a lot of policies in the sphere of the digital world, however, they are more oriented towards countering threats from all over the world rather than just Russia and its closest allies in the imaginary EU cyberspace. The EU prefers to use more coercive methods when it comes to Russia. For example, in

2020 the EU imposed first ever cyber sanctions on Russian individuals because of the NotPetya cyber attack in June 2017. NotPetya affected Ukrainian financial, energetic and government institutions. Thus, European digital diplomacy as a soft power instrument suffers from some considerable problems, because sanctions are not diplomatic methods. They are coercive instruments that usually force the state to change its practices. Bendiek & Schulze (2021) criticize cyber sanctions by calling them merely political symbolic actions that will not stop attacks from abroad[18].

Would travel ban and blocking of assets really stop cyberattacks? Most likely not. So far, the EU is yet to attempt to realize the potential of digital diplomacy. Catriona Heinl from University College Dublin believes that the military conflict in Ukraine "raises questions about effectiveness of peacetime diplomatic instruments – such as cyber confidence and trust building measures[19]," thus defending this lack of action. Dr Eneken Tikk from Cyber Policy Institute echoes this view. He argues that "the Russo-Ukrainian war is not a viable litmus test for the effectiveness of cyber diplomacy tools such as confidence building measures," because they are primarily intended "to prevent unintended escalation"[20]. However, the absence of interest in finding peaceful conflict resolution methods is concerning. The EU probably needs to show the Russian government that its policy towards Russia does not only

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[18] Annegret Bendiek & Mathias Schulze, Attribution: A Major Challenge for EU Cyber Sanctions, (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2021)

[19] Is War in Ukraine the End of Cyber Diplomacy?, (Directions Cyber Digital Europe, 2022)
[20] Ibid.

demonstrate suspicion and consider sanctions. Now, during the ongoing conflict between Russia and the West, it is the right time to test a non-coercive diplomatic method. Moreover, the problem with EU digital diplomacy is that it does not take into account the needs and concerns of countries that are not like-minded. Russia is a primary example. The EU and its allies prefer to create "Western" digital space. However, this does not solve the issue of misunderstandings between the EU and Russia and also will make the internet more fragmented. While the EU wants to ban Russian sources of information, Russia adopts a mirror response: now webspace splits into two different worlds. If these separate worlds exist, then European leadership in digital advancement would be contested by Russia and China, which are likely to create a joint cyber world. Moreover, Europe will find it harder to spread out its democratic messages for people in countries that Europe considers authoritarian. Divisions can also explain the absences of specific digital diplomacy towards Russia among member states. For example, they might feel that the issue is exaggerated or they might be reluctant to share their own findings in order to protect national defense capabilities and classified information. Also, according to Bendiek & Schulze (2021), attribution is also a challenge for an already weak digital diplomacy towards the Kremlin, because again member states act individually[21]. The necessity to protect the sovereignty of each member state

dissolves the illusion of having a common EU cyberspace, because in reality each European country has its own cyberspace and acts based on its historical relations with Russia. The EU also does not have that much control over social networks, because most popular ones are owned by the US, and simply cannot ban or make changes in what is allowed to be commented about Russia.

4. Russian digital diplomacy: sense of humor, history, traditional family values

Russian digital diplomacy is clear and well thought out. The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept states the necessity to develop effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad, strengthen the role of Russian media in the international information environment and counter threats to sovereignty and security[22]. These beliefs led to the forming of a narrative that is opposed to the Western one. Anatoly Torkunov, a rector of MGIMO University in Moscow, supports this argument by saying that Russian digital diplomacy gives alternative views to dominant Western views and helps people to develop unbiased opinions[23].

Besides from TV broadcasting channels like Russia Today and RIA Novosti, Russia actively uses Facebook and Twitter to justify its actions and create a specific image of a country. Russian twiplomacy is even more consistent and

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[21] Annegret Bendiek & Mathias Schulze, Attribution: A Major Challenge for EU Cyber Sanctions, (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2021)

[22] THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, (Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2013)

[23] Russia's digital diplomacy gives alternative point of view — MGIMO rector, (TASS, 2022)

direct than US twiplomacy. Suppose US digital diplomacy has only one central theme - promoting democratic values worldwide. In that case, the Russian one has three: historical events, traditional family values, and laughing at Western leaders.

Russian authorities believe that they are fighting an ideological war with the West, which propagates, according to them, sodomy, immoral and hypocritical values. With the start of full-scale military activities in Ukraine, the call to defend traditional Russian values became even louder. The long-time ally of Russian president Vladimir Putin and the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, even called for holy war against Western satanism, which in his opinion consists of promoting atheism and gay marriages[24]. He wrote this message in a popular app called Telegram. Indeed, the latest focus of Russian digital diplomacy has been protecting traditional family values, which assume that biological and heterosexual men and women marry and have more than two kids. Thus, the anti-LGBT narrative became one of the pillars of Russian twiplomacy. The topics of feminism, being childfree and other movements that Russian government describes as non-traditional family values are not yet included in Russian digital information strategy, however, LGBT became the main target:

1. Twitter pro-Kremlin users referred to the LGBT community as "others," "different," "minorities," and "deviant."

2. The central theme was denying the existence of the LGBT community.

3. There is an assumption that LGBT communities were connected to the "West".

4. Some of the tweets presented insults toward LGBT individuals[25].

These are the main aspects of neo-conservative Russian state narrative. In 2020, Vladimir Putin mocked the rainbow flag outside of the US embassy in Moscow, a video of which was published in Twitter by ex-US ambassador John Sullivan. Putin said that US embassy employees showed "a certain something about the people who work there"[26]. Thus, he confirmed that the Russian state considers LGBT members as mentally ill, "exceptional" and "stupid". Russian digital diplomacy is similar to American one in the way that Russian authorities also want to tell the world what are the right values and what are not.

Historical narrative also became central to Russian digital diplomacy. This theme is mostly used by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), which is a large part of World War Two, is the most popular historical theme used by the Russian twiplomacy. The Russian MFA wants to regularly remind Western countries

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[24] Cameron Manley, Bertrand Hauger & Emma Albright, War in Ukraine, Day 246: Putin Says World Facing "Most Dangerous Decade" Since WWII, (WorldCrunch, 2022)

[25] Daria Dergacheva, 'State narrative' construction on Twitter. A case study around news stories on LGBT issues in Russia, (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2021)

[26] Agence France Presse, Vladimir Putin Mocks Rainbow Flag Outside US Embassy In Moscow, (NDTV, 2020)

of the Soviet key role in defeating Nazism. If ordinary Twitter users zoom in even more, they will notice that a lot of such posts also mention Ukraine. For example, in February 2021 Russian MFA tweeted the following: "In February 1943, Ukrainian nationalists headed by Stepan Bandera launched a campaign to annihilate the #Polish population in Western #Ukraine. During the 1943-1944 'Volhynia massacres' more than 100K people, including women, children & the elderly, were brutally killed". A few months before that, in October 2020, Russian MFA also mentioned Ukraine: "76 years ago the #RedArmy - millions of Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians, Kazakhs & other peoples of the #USSR - completely liberated Soviet #Ukraine from the Nazi aggressors & occupants as well as from regular forces of the collaborators #WeRemember"[27].

By posting these kinds of posts, Russia tackles three issues. Firstly, Russia wants to use history to justify its actions in Ukraine. Russia believes that there are remains of Nazism in its neighboring country. Unlike the West, which ignores this problem, Russia fights with it and so protects the world from the rise of neo-Nazism. According to its authorities, Russia is carrying out a humanitarian mission and possesses this right as a successor of the USSR. Maybe, these posts also wanted to justify the invasion of Ukraine that would happen a few months later, as such extensive military activities need careful planning and this process certainly does not take one week. Russian authorities wanted to prepare their foreign audience for this event so that Russian actions would not be surprising. Second, there is a need to explain why the demand for reparations, that comes for example from Poland, is unjustified. Russia wants to remind such countries who liberated them. Thirdly, there is a problem with the revision of historical events. This revision often portrays the USSR as an evil and aggressive state that actually was friendly with Nazi Germany and just won the war for domination. There is an urgent need to defend from such statements and promote historical truth by using channels where many people would instantly access information without territorial boundaries. Using historical events in digital diplomacy is a powerful tool, as most tweets include carefully selected images to cause supportive emotion.

Digital diplomacy scholar Ilan Manor from Ben Gurion University of the Negev called the love of Russian diplomats to refer back to history as "Russia's nostalgic selfie."[28] Russia uses nostalgic feelings not only to describe the great past but also the present. The COVID-19 pandemic further proved this point. Russia relied heavily on historical events during promotion of its COVID vaccine Sputnik V. Actually, the promotion of Sputnik V became vital for Russian twiplomacy. Firstly, the name of the vaccine is Sputnik, which means "satellite." This makes a direct reference to former dominance of the USSR and the launch of the Soviet satellite "Sputnik-1"into orbit in 1957.

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[27] Ilan Manor, Russia's Digital Diplomacy: The good, the bad and the satirical, (RUSSLAND-ANALYSEN, 2021)

[28] Ilan Manor, The Selfie as Perpetual Nostalgia: Analyzing Russia's Selfie Diplomacy in 2020, (Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 2022)

"Sputnik-1" became the first ever man-made satellite that was launched into space, and therefore reference to this truly historic event highlights the importance of Russian scientific developments for the world. The point is to prove that Russia is not worse than the West and contests Western domination. The figure of the first man in space, Russian-born Soviet pilot Yuri Gagarin, is often used by Russian digital channels to strengthen the image of Russia and portray Russia as a worthy successor of Soviet achievements. Russia therefore should be associated with historical breakthroughs. The fact that Sputnik V was the first ever COVID vaccine that was officially registered shows Russia's strive to be first in scientific developments and to create an inseparable link between the modern Russian Federation and the USSR. A separate Twitter account was set up to promote Sputnik V. The account not only boasted the vaccine's efficacy, or the number of countries that used the vaccine, but also offered the vaccine to the nations of Europe struggling to cope with the pandemic[29]. These three themes became central in the Sputnik V twitter account. Twitter account managers portray Russia as a savior from evil disease that, like war, takes a lot of lives. This message may appeal for other countries, because it is in everyone's interest to fight evil disease. The secret connection between Sputnik V and Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War also becomes more evident. Therefore the Russian national selfie is therefore a collection of all achievements and triumphs throughout Russian history.

The role of humor is also very significant in Russian digital diplomacy and especially twiplomacy. Ilan Manor conducted an investigation where he found out that out of 39 sample tweets, 35 had humorous elements and that disparagement humor (putdowns, satire and sarcasm) was the most frequently used[30]. *Humor* is a very popular soft power technique used by Russia. Russian embassies frequently tweet humorous viral messages intended to fight off criticism, challenge the claims of Russia's opponents, and turn accusations of propaganda into a joke. For example, when a famous gas attack on Russian spy Sergey Skripal happened in 2018 in Salisbury, the Russian MFA tweeted its own humorous message suggesting that Agatha Christie's detective Poirot should investigate the Salisbury gas attack. Traditionally, western governments and media outlets are highly critical of Russian investigations into the murder or disappearance of political activists, journalists and dissidents. The Russian Embassy's tweet depicted the UK's Salisbury investigation in a similar light, suggesting that the UK was conducting a secret investigation, the validity of which should be questioned. Like Agatha Christie, the UK government had promoted a fictional narrative blaming Russia for the attack[31]. Pro-Russian users posted some more tweets that were dedicated to the Salisbury incident: examples include jokes about Salisbury

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Ilan Manor, The Russians are Laughing! The Russians are Laughing! How Russian Diplomats Employ Humor in Online Public Diplomacy, (Global Society, 2020)

[31] Ilan Manor, When diplomats laugh: the role of humour in digital diplomacy, (International Affairs, 2018)

Cathedral that suspected Russian citizens Alexander Petrov and Ruslan Boshirov allegedly visited and also about the mysterious death of Skripal's cat and guinea pigs.

Another famous example is when former US president Barack Obama was called a "lame duck" by the Russian embassy in the UK in response to expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats because of alleged intervention into US 2016 presidential elections. The tweet looked abrasive, but at the same time it carried an important political message. Firstly, the message was that Obama was due to leave the White House and therefore his decisions did not have any significance, and second that Obama should leave and not come back. Humor used by political figures is not simply for entertainment, but also to convey specific political messages. Another tweet made by the Russian embassy demonstrated the stupidity of accusations against Russia. The tweet showed a picture of a newspaper header which said "How to spy on a spouse with 750GBP of mobile adverts" and a caption "judging by media reports, this guy could have spent just several thousands bucks more and swayed a US presidential election instead. Dream big!"[32]. Indeed, using humor is a good diplomatic technique, because such responses do not sound aggressive or threatening and they simultaneously represent official state positions. They are easy to understand for an average Twitter user and tweets can immediately be reposted in other Twitter accounts or shared on other social media platforms.

Humor became spread out outside Twitter as well. In 2022, the Russian embassy in Spain posted a video titled "This is Russia". The 53-seconds long video explained why it is worth moving to Russia in a humorous way. For example, the video shows that the Russian economy is the one that "can withstand thousands of sanctions" and it's time to move to Russia now because "winter is coming"[33]. Many Youtube users noticed in the comment section that creators of this video used trolling to laugh at current unfriendly EU policies against Russia. Basically, Russia laughed at ridiculous and careless EU sanctions and highlighted that they do not have any significance. The argument sounds appealing in the background of desperate search for alternatives to cheap and abundant Russian gas, soaring gas prices, shutting down industries and having a risk of being left without metal for production of airplanes. Russia is a country that sells cheap gas, fertilizers, metals, chemicals and has a central heating system. Thus, Russia highlights the inability to cancel out its importance in the global economy despite attempts made by the collective West.

On the other hand, the EU and the US have not realized yet the potential of humor in digital diplomacy. They prefer to threaten Russia, which is why they tend to lose the information war. Because of different approaches to digital

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[32] Ilan Manor, The Russians are Laughing! The Russians are Laughing! How Russian Diplomats Employ Humor in Online Public Diplomacy, (Global Society, 2020)

[33] NowThis News, Russian Embassy in Spain Releases Bizarre Tourism Video (Youtube, 2022)

diplomacy, Russia and the West need help to find common language. Russian digital diplomacy is very well thought out, has a target audience, specific platforms where to conduct it and also includes sharp and direct responses.

5. Steps for reconciliation: policy recommendations

Very little research on how digital diplomacy can help Russia and the West is available. However, there are some good suggestions. For example, Andre Barrinha from University of Coimbra (2018) suggests that the West, particularly the EU, should make Russia part of the overall digital diplomacy approach. Russia needs to be approached from three angles: as a cyber-crime hub, as a regional neighbor and as an influential emerging power[34]. This approach can help to design different kinds of answers from deterrence to cooperation and to combine soft power with hard power.

Another very important point that Barrinha includes is that conflicts would eventually fade away, and Russia will always be a close and the biggest neighbor of the EU and therefore cannot be ignored completely. If the EU would be willing to keep current joint initiatives with Russia or create new areas for cooperation, this would significantly contribute to reconciliation. The Russian government

needs to see clear signs of willingness to cooperate in areas where it is possible to do so. Barrinha (2018) also warns the EU that before imposing any sanctions on Russia, including those in the digital sphere, the alliance should first analyze their short and long term impact because of close ties with Russia[35]. Moreover, an advice for the EU is to develop special digital diplomacy towards Russia that would consider all possible scenarios and would not undermine the sovereignty of EU member states.

Next, another recommendation specifically for the US and the EU is to change the tone of communication in social networking platforms. Diplomats should know that unlike statements in verbal communication, whatever they write online would be circulated around, screenshotted and become the subject of attention. Russian officials can interpret any wrongfully chosen word or statement or anything that has an ambiguous meaning as a threat and willingness to continue escalation. Therefore, Western diplomats need to choose careful language and review their posts at least once, because unlike verbal messages, online posts can be circulated in multiple social networks or screenshotted. Because of easy sharing, any post can stay in cyberspace for a long time even if the original one was deleted. The authorship of any online post can be easily proven. Therefore, it may be useful to hire assistants for review of what will be posted. It would be even better to introduce digital diplomacy etiquette, which can be a guide for those who tend to often write online. Western

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[34] Andre Barrinha, Virtual Neighbors: Russia and the EU in Cyberspace, (Insight Turkey, 2018)

[35] Ibid.

diplomats should avoid a mistake made by Polish former foreign minister Radoslaw Sikorski, who wrote in Twitter "thank you, USA" after explosions at Nord Stream pipelines. Although the tweet was deleted, it caused outrage, increasing polemic, unnecessary speculations around a serious incident that can be classified as terrorism and made Russian officials think that the US was behind the explosions.

Another recommendation for the US and the EU diplomats is to directly engage with Russian users on social networks, mainly Twitter and Facebook. It is not difficult to ask Russian users questions that now matter the most. Maybe, Western diplomats could suggest something and ask Russians if they agree or disagree. Russian civil society needs to be more engaged in creating solutions, in particular, opposition movements. Social media exists to eliminate national boundaries, and digital diplomacy was invented to narrow the gap between officials and commoners. MFAs and other state institutions should practice dialogue, engage and listen to what ordinary people say, as any decision done by such institutions imminently impacts citizens. Actual conversations and not just likes and reposts are measures of effectiveness of digital diplomacy. Therefore, digital platforms should be used to propose concrete solutions and monitor overall mood and reaction of people from particular nationalities. Traditional face-to-face meetings between Western representatives and Russians are almost absent right now, and thus it is time for digital diplomacy

to step up. Sanctions and logistical issues that come from sanctions do not bother online communication.

Further recommendation would be to create initiatives that would contribute to regaining trust between Russia and the West in the field of digital diplomacy. For example, Gady & Austin (2010), in their paper, focus on potential areas of cooperation between Russia and the US and recommend establishing a cyber crime emergency response, in the framework of which Russia and the US would jointly promote a global framework of 24/7 points of contact and capacity building in law enforcement and cyber investigation[36]. Apart from that, it is recommended to establish a hotline between two countries where the two countries can communicate and inform in real-time about cyberattacks that have already happened or that are going to happen. Prevention of cyberattacks is an integral part of digital diplomacy. Gady & Austin (2010) recommend coordinating joint actions in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and propose the idea of a binding multilateral agreement on Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) to promote internationally an "ecosystem" of trusted identities. The ITU is the most suitable organization for these purposes because it is responsible for practical actions in the field of cybersecurity[37]. A binding multilateral agreement on PKI will help reduce the "attribution problem" and the vulnerabilities of critical infrastructure in both countries. It should be noted as well that the problem of attribution is

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[36] Franz-Stefan Gady & Greg Austin, Russia, The United States, And Cyber Diplomacy, (EastWest Institute, 2010)

[37] Ibid.

indeed a serious issue in the EU because member states want to deal with cyberattacks individually. Therefore, proposed ways of Russia-US cooperation can serve as an example for the EU or concerned member states and call the organization to find ways that can help increase transparency and understanding with Russia.

It is still possible, however, that many pro-Kremlin online channels might oppose potential cooperation with the West and spread discrediting information about the EU and the US. In this case, as a part of reconciliation strategy, a combination of two actions suggested by Dr. Prof. Corneliu Bjola from University of Oxford can be used. Bjola (2019) proposed debunking and disrupting as some strategies to counter clearly false information. Debunking means that MFAs should have access to truthful information and use digital diplomacy as a real-time diplomacy instrument to defend their positions[38]. Debunking strategy can prevent false statements from going viral. Fact-checking is a very important part of diplomacy, because any controversial statement can escalate an already fragile situation, and there is a need to build relations from the start. Disrupting is another tactic which is meant to filter unwanted information online. According to Bjola (2019), disrupting would imply the mapping of the network of followers of the opponent, the tracing of the particular patterns by which disinformation is propagated throughout the network, and identifying of the gatekeepers in the network who can facilitate or obstruct the

dissemination of disinformation[39]. Israeli MFA is using this tactic to counter anti-semitism. Disrupting strategy would be effective, because then those spreading false news would have to build a new pattern by which they disseminate information. This takes away time and is costly. One important thing that Western MFAs should consider is that they need to separate false information from constructive criticism of MFA's work or its policies. To make this process smoother and democratic, a special team can be hired to analyze information patterns. Overall, the reconciliation strategy should take into account all barriers that may impede "reboot" of Russia-West relations.

6. Conclusion

Restoring relations is a time-consuming and painstaking process. It requires strong political will. Understandably, at this moment it is vital to stop the conflict in Ukraine. However, early or late relations between Western representatives and Russia would have to be restored, not only because of the close neighborhood, but also because of numerous economic and cultural links. Russia and the West have a great past in common, as in the past the USSR, of which Russia was a part, and Western forces fought together against the greatest evil of all times. Digital diplomacy is a relatively modern tool that is yet to show its full potential, despite acknowledgements done by politicians that it is a very important tool.

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[38] Corneliu Bjola, THE "DARK SIDE" OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY, (CPD network, 2019)

[39] Ibid.

Western and Russian digital policies have common features, such as the protection of national strategic interests and the promotion of certain values. Although, it is clear that there are disagreements on views regarding the world order. These disagreements result not only in mistrust and difficult relations with each other, but also in open accusations and threats which could have an impact on world stability. Western and Russian politicians should recognize their key role in maintaining peaceful stability and attempt to use digital diplomacy not as an instrument of information warfare, espionage or trolling, but as a real diplomatic tool that offers non-coercive solutions to existing conflicts. Digital diplomacy should create the atmosphere of trust, respect and willingness to cooperate. Every conflict has a diplomatic solution.

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