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The Development of Digital Diplomacy in Kazakhstan: Challenges and Perspectives

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Abstract

In the current era of modern technology, digitalization has become an integral part of diplomatic practice, and the use of digital technologies in international relations provides new opportunities. This qualitative research offers a thorough insight into the possible advantages and obstacles of employing digital diplomacy within Kazakhstan's diplomatic efforts. Five interview respondents, each representing different aspects of the diplomatic service, share their insights and experiences on how digital tools can enhance international cooperation and influence international relations, while also highlighting potential risks. Based on interviews, the study identifies several challenges and perspectives of the digital diplomacy development in Kazakhstan. The identified challenges to effective digital diplomacy are the lack of clear criteria for assessing digital literacy and the need for continuous professional development to keep up with evolving technologies. Diverse perspectives create opportunities to improve global information security, make use of digital technologies for international partnerships, and learn from the experiences of other countries. The study identifies a key role for digital technologies in modern diplomacy, pointing to their potential to facilitate real-time cultural exchange, increase collaboration on global issues and provide official information directly to the public, minimizing misinterpretation and the spread of misinformation. The research paper includes secondary and primary data analysis to support the hypotheses and answer the research question, thereby achieving the research objective. The study thus emphasizes the main advantages of digital diplomacy and presents the obstacles that may run parallel to its development in Kazakhstan.

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Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a rapid process of development of modern technologies, which are being introduced into all kinds of human activities. It could be said that almost all the world's populations are connected, and information is free to flow (Darmastuti et al., 2021). Compared to the past, information can be collected, stored, handled, managed and dispatched in a whole new way (Darmastuti et al., 2021). With the high number of internet users across the globe, there is a strong potential for engaging the public to enhance government performance in public diplomacy, particularly digital diplomacy (Darmastuti et al., 2021). Digital diplomacy is a new concept that involves the use of digital technologies to shape a country's foreign policy (Almash, 2017).

According to DataReportal (2024) statistics, there is a process of increasing internet users in Kazakhstan, internet speed has increased, and the use of social media by the people has also increased. With this development, it is easier to promote the process of digitalisation. This suggests that Kazakhstan is striving more and more to develop digitalisation and the use of modern technology in various spheres of life.

Kazakhstan is actively following other countries in its endeavour to introduce digital technologies in various spheres (Almash, 2017). The implementation of the Digital Kazakhstan programme consists of the following key areas: digitalisation of the economy, digital transformation of the state, development of the Silk Road project in a digital format, training of personnel in the field of IT technologies and formation of an innovation ecosystem (Almash, 2017). This article aims to examine the fundamentals of digital diplomacy as well as the application of digital technology in the diplomatic operations of various state organizations, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan (MFA of the RK) and its embassies overseas (Almash, 2017). This facilitates Kazakhstan's diplomatic missions overseas in using contemporary technologies more successfully. As it

has been studied, these state institutions actively maintain websites and social media accounts (LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter)), promoting the culture of Kazakhstan, maintaining good relations with other countries and communicating with all people by keeping them informed.

Since it is important to harness the governmental knowledge in the way it is sufficiently retained, shared and optimized to achieve national interests abroad, digital diplomacy presents a substantial apparatus (Rashica, 2018). Moreover, digital diplomacy serves as a convenient platform for the use of new communication tools that help in listening to specific audiences and influencing influential people on the Internet. Digital diplomacy is also used to maintain constant contact with people online. Among other things, digital diplomacy is needed to establish personal, direct lines of communication for residents traveling abroad, as well as managed channels of communication during emergencies (Rashica, 2018). In this regard, digital diplomacy plays an important role for Kazakhstan. Firstly, there is an opportunity to promote Kazakh culture abroad. In this way, Kazakhstan will rise to a new level in the international arena. In addition, thanks to digital diplomacy, citizens will be more aware of the country's foreign affairs and relations with other countries. Due to transparency, people will trust their country more.

To examine the development of digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan we determine the research question of the study which is "How has digital diplomacy evolved in Kazakhstan, and what are the main challenges and prospects for its further development?" The research hypotheses are the following:

1. Kazakhstan's perspectives in digital diplomacy depend on successful adaptation to new technological trends and the development of relevant skills and infrastructure.

2. Challenges of digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan include the need for protection against digital threats, effective information management and cyber security in the context of global digitalisation.

The qualitative research method is used in this study because the collected data is non-numeric. Additionally, the study employs a qualitative interview design, as primary information was gathered through interviews. The data collection process involves obtaining both primary data (through structured interviews) and secondary data.

The primary data was gathered by conducting qualitative interviews with key stakeholders involved in Kazakhstan's digital diplomacy efforts, both in person and online through Zoom. This involves diplomats, government officials, members of the international (Astana Financial Services Authority, the UN), and professionals in international relations (the MFA of the RK).

Besides primary data, a comprehensive secondary literature review was undertaken to gather secondary data from diverse sources, including organizations' official social media accounts (LinkedIn, X (Twitter), Instagram, Facebook), official websites, academic journals and articles, reports from government agencies, and policy journals.

This study can conclude that there are several challenges in digital diplomacy such as cybersecurity and disinformation challenges. These challenges are substantiated by many cases of cyber-attacks and their consequences. In addition, some gaps in digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan were identified through interviews. For example, the development of targeted training programmes, staff qualifications, strategies to address language barriers and the creation of criteria for assessing the digital literacy of civil servants.

We have addressed the research topic on the evolution of digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan, its primary difficulties, and its future development prospects by verifying the proposed hypotheses. In order to increase its influence globally, Kazakhstan is aggressively

pursuing digitalization and digital diplomacy through the use of contemporary technologies. The MFA of the RK, Kazakhstan's embassies abroad, and other organizations that actively promote the nation's historical significance, tourism potential, and foreign policy objectives through platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and X all contribute to strengthening Kazakhstan's digital diplomacy on a global scale. The national digital diplomacy plan also seeks to use digital capabilities to advance global information security, fight cyberterrorism, and foster international cooperation. Kazakhstan's approach to digital diplomacy seeks to fortify international ties and increase its credibility in the international arena by addressing the issues of the digital era.

Moreover, in order to delve deeper into Kazakhstan's digital diplomacy, we completed an internship at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Communications Department. We learnt how the people who deal directly with the MFA's social media accounts work directly. Our observations are outlined in the Data Analysis section.

This study divided into two parts. First part provides a comprehensive literature review of diplomacy, examining two theories (realism and constructivism), historical developments, and current practices within the field. This part is about the phenomenon of digital diplomacy in general and Kazakhstan. We described challenges and opportunities within the digital diplomacy.

Second part is the most crucial one. It explains the research methodology employed in this study. It details the qualitative research methods, the interview design, and the processes involved in collecting both primary and secondary data.

1 Literature Review

1.1 Digital Diplomacy in Kazakhstan

Digital diplomacy has become one of the fastest and most convenient ways for states to express their official attitude to political processes taking place in the international arena (Allamurodov, 2023). Consequently, countries need to develop this type of digitalisation as the future of diplomacy is behind it. The Republic of Kazakhstan has not left aside from these processes. The former President of the Republic of Kazakhstan stated in a message to the people on January 31, 2017, the significance and imperative nature of advancing digitalization across all domains of endeavour (Almash, 2017). Thus, Kazakhstan is on the path of digital transformation. In this sense, Kazakhstan's digitalization is aided by the use of digital technology (such as websites and social networks) in the operations of MFA of the RK and its embassies abroad. These organizations represent Kazakhstan and have direct ties to international cooperation in fostering cultural exchange and elevating Kazakhstan's profile globally (Almash, 2017).

The World Bank's comparison of mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in Central Asian countries reveals that digitalization is a prevalent trend across these nations, characterized by an increase in mobile phone usage and internet availability among the population (Ishmukhamedov & Kassenov, 2021). Clearly, from a technical standpoint, there are no major challenges or barriers to digitalization in Kazakhstan, as a significant share of its population enjoys access to the Internet and mobile devices. Kazakhstan's adeptness in adapting to digitalization changes or advancements significantly benefits its digital diplomacy efforts. The country's digital diplomacy is influenced by its national strategy focused on digitalization, effective public service organization, and e-government implementation. Particularly, Kazakhstan stands out in Central Asia for its success in these areas. The UN's "e-Government Knowledge Base" study positions Kazakhstan as a leader in

the region based on the "E-Government Development Indicator" and "E-Participation Indicator". On the "E-Government Development Index," Kazakhstan is ranked 28th out of 193 countries, with a score of 0.8628% (Ishmukhamedov & Kassenov, 2021).

Kazakhstan's efforts, especially in the use of digital tools in diplomacy, can be assessed positively (Tassilova et. al., 2018). Kazakhstan in 2017 was ranked 44th in the world by Digital Diplomacy Review (it was ranked 38th in 2016). MFA produces both qualitative and quantitative data that are used in the review. This survey looks at websites, mobile applications, and social networks and how they are utilized for digital diplomacy activities. It provides a thorough examination of publicly accessible digital diplomacy assets (Tassilova et. al., 2018). Today, all federal ministries, agencies and other government bodies have their own websites. The MFA of the RK creates all conditions for those who want to follow all foreign policy events on social networks, in particular, using Facebook and Twitter (Hudaykulov, 2021). Many embassies of Kazakhstan in foreign countries have their own websites and some have opened accounts on such social networks as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Hudaykulov, 2021).

Digital diplomacy is advancing thanks in large part to social media, particularly Facebook, a development that is particularly noticeable in Kazakhstan, where the network is very popular (Allamurodov, 2023). A review of the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs Facebook page indicates a focused attempt to showcase the nation's historical relevance, tourism potential, cultural heritage, and foreign policy positions (Allamurodov, 2023). Reshared official communications from the MFA, the President's office, and other news portals make up most of the content (Allamurodov, 2023). This analysis emphasizes how diplomatic missions and the ministry strategically use Facebook with the primary goal of improving Kazakhstan's worldwide image (Allamurodov, 2023).

Websites are another tool for promoting digital diplomacy; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs official website covers subjects like international relations, state visits, citizen services, visa requirements, and the citizenship process (Allamurodov, 2023). The website's material primarily focuses on two primary purposes: information sharing on the operations of the MFA, which effectively acts as a platform for extensive exposure, and offering general public services, such as managing grievances and court cases, granting visas to citizens and non-citizens alike, acquiring naturalization, and carrying out inquiries (Allamurodov, 2023). Thus, the lack of interactive features for international audiences on the official website of the MFA significantly limits its role in promoting Kazakhstan's digital diplomacy efforts.

Therefore, Kazakhstan is now on its way to utilising modern technology to develop its influence in the international arena and build diplomatic relations with other countries, as evidenced by its approach to digital diplomacy. Kazakhstan is attempting to promote its culture and values, facilitate communication and engage local and foreign audiences through social media and an active online presence. Although not fully internalised (strengthening digital diplomacy by adding more interactive tools), Kazakhstan's approach can show that digital technologies might be used to promote national interests and diplomatic goals abroad. Among other things, since digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan is still an underdeveloped and unexplored phenomenon, there are some challenges and threats it faces.

1.2 Digital Diplomacy Challenges

According to Ishmukhamedov and Kassenov (2021): "Digitization, the spread of digital technologies, and the politicization of social networks will completely change the mechanisms of the work of the media, political parties, and the opposition" (pp. 3-4). Driven by the proliferation of tools such as social media platforms, media programmes and the vast opportunities offered by the digital landscape, digital diplomacy is evolving rapidly. As

Amonkulova (2023) highlights, public relations influences the image of the state by interacting with people's subconscious minds.

However, integrity and coherence are required for these strategies to be successful. Novikov (2017) underlines the enduring effectiveness of newswire placements in both print media and foreign policy agency websites. He emphasizes their high readability and memorability. Nevertheless, this evolution is not without its hurdles, and there is a need for governments to develop comprehensive strategies to overcome these hurdles. In order to effectively navigate the complexities of modern diplomacy, this dynamic environment requires constant adaptation and innovation. As Amonkulova (2023) states: "The economic base for advertising is not yet developed enough in Central Asia to support the costs of media. Moreover, the potential audience does not want to pay for independent news" (p. 91). Kazakhstan is also on the path of developing digital diplomacy, thereby strengthening international ties and the development of globalization and inevitably facing the challenges associated with the development of digitalisation and the media sphere. It should be noted that these challenges and risks are closely linked to the process of digital transformation, which is shaping the new environment for diplomatic activity, while at the same time increasing cybersecurity vulnerabilities.

The development of digitalisation is always associated with a risk to information security. The Republic of Kazakhstan faces plausible threats and issues related to informatization, along with a reliance on foreign, typically Western, software and hardware Lim (2020). Thus the development of cyber security at the state level. Hacking poses a significant risk in digital diplomacy, with numerous politicians falling victim to cyberattacks that jeopardize their future careers (Rashica, 2018). This activity puts government agencies at risk and puts a lot of political figures in a difficult position.

However, as personal information can also be used in a bad context, many anti-government organizations may be interested in this opportunity for personal purposes. Challenges with hackers at the state level imply weak defences against cyber threats and thus raise the issue of the influence of bloggers in shaping public opinion. Media personalities might increase or decrease the perception of such threats, depending on how they are interpreted. Digital diplomacy is developing rapidly, which means that bloggers and others with an audience on social media can influence how world politics is perceived by the many people who subscribe to their sites. Bloggers, who regularly write and post, actually act as online journalists (Zhanabekova, Barlybayeva, & Myssayeva, 2014). An example of this is the Palestine-Israel situation, which has been the subject of social media promotion and support by world celebrities.

People who are followers of their favourite celebrities can easily be influenced by them, whether it is a political journalist or just a celebrity in any other field. As Tsvetkova et. al. states (2022): "Digitalisation has fragmented international relations and information about current events into millions of competing interpretations, interpretations, and narrative and visual formats" (p. 174). This leads to information framing, where people interpret the information they receive in a way that suits them or from the wrong perspective, which is also one of the key risks. This underlines the importance of understanding how new media formats affect public opinion and different political processes. According to Tsvetkova et. al. (2022): "However, even this stage in the development of digital diplomacy was swept away in 2018-2022 by ratification, or more precisely, by the rapid and uncontrolled access of various actors to artificial intelligence technologies to quickly influence the target audience through effective information campaigns, filtering, synthetic media and dip-fakes (p. 178). Thus, the freedom of the Internet can also be seen as a threat, since the presentation of information and truthfulness is not filtered there, which can mislead a large number of people

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and thus spread misinformation. In the face of these challenges, the future of digital diplomacy represents a mixed picture of opportunities and risks. It requires careful attention and the development of appropriate strategies.

1.3 Digital Diplomacy Perspectives

Kazakhstan's foreign policy and the digitalization of its diplomatic endeavors are linked to the country's larger strategic objectives and the viewpoints of digital diplomacy. The national strategy for 2020–2030 Kazakhstan, which places a strong emphasis on improving global information security, thwarting cyberterrorism, and using digital tools to advance international initiatives, accomplish foreign policy goals, and foster international collaboration, can be analyzed concerning the country's approach to digital diplomacy (On the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030, 2020, pp. 7). This approach is in line with worldwide trends, according to which information is used as a powerful political instrument in 21st-century public diplomacy through the use of digital diplomacy (Shyngyssovaet. al., 2018).

Comparative studies examining Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan's participation in digital diplomacy have been conducted. These studies evaluate the role that these nations' diplomatic services play in digital diplomacy by looking at public diplomacy, media diplomacy, and digital diplomacy in the context of modern international relations. Researchers hope to give a complete picture of digital developments in these countries' diplomacy by grading evaluations of rankings in both national and international rankings and gathering statistical data (Shyngyssova et. al., 2018).

Furthermore, China and the USA serve as prime examples of countries utilizing digital diplomacy to advance their interests and shape international discourse (Kukeyeva, 2020). China is aware of how effective digital diplomacy can be in furthering its goals both domestically and internationally (Kukeyeva, 2020). Through individualized profiles on

numerous social media sites, including Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube, Chinese ambassadors and officials actively interact with global audiences (Kukeyeva, 2020). Furthermore, China has created specific websites for each of its embassies across the globe. These websites are directly linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and demonstrate how well digital diplomacy is integrated into China's internal and foreign political activity (Kukeyeva, 2020).

Comparably, the US has long embraced digital diplomacy as a way to support democratic ideals and achieve its foreign policy goals (Kukeyeva, 2020). In order to interact with international audiences and sculpt narratives, the U.S. Department of State has been at the vanguard of employing social media, blogs, video hosting websites, and other digital platforms (Kukeyeva, 2020). Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama launched programs like the Digital Engagement Group to keep an eye on and address content that was making the rounds on social media, helping to shape the world's perception of the United States of America in a positive light (Kukeyeva, 2020).

Another noteworthy country using digital diplomacy to strengthen its soft power and national brand is France (Baktybaeva & Batyrkhan, 2021). Early government website adoption and an active presence on social media sites like Twitter and YouTube have made it easier for information to be shared and for audiences throughout the world to interact with French content (Baktybaeva & Batyrkhan, 2021). France has enhanced its global image and impact by carefully leveraging social media to promote its culture, economic successes, and international projects (Baktybaeva & Batyrkhan, 2021).

Digital diplomacy has developed beyond a passing trend for many countries to successfully further their foreign policy goals (Gadelshiyev, 2018). For example, the Office of eDiplomacy at IRM, which was established by the US Department of State in 2003, is actively engaged in online monitoring and social network influence competition for US

missions abroad (Gadelshiyev, 2018). The Office of Digital Diplomacy is a branch of the Foreign Office that advances the foreign policy agenda of the United Kingdom (Gadelshiyev, 2018).

1.4 Strategies for the Development of Kazakhstan's Digital Diplomacy

Kazakhstan emphasizes international information security and the use of digital tools to accomplish foreign policy goals. Its digital diplomacy is a component of its larger strategic goals. To create ideal conditions for projects like "Digital Kazakhstan", the nation aims to include cutting-edge technologies, market itself as an open jurisdiction for high-tech partnerships, and more (Shyngyssova et. al., 2018). Kazakhstan maintains its multi-vector diplomacy in the face of geopolitical upheavals, interacting with the US, Europe, and other regional powers like China and Russia to maintain a balance in relations while looking into new trade and investment opportunities.

Nonetheless, according to Gadelshiyev (2018), Kazakhstan's governmental organizations lack specialized departments for the promotion or maintenance of digital diplomacy. However, it also seeks to significantly incorporate digital solutions—like tools for digital diplomacy that the foreign policy department can use—into government agencies' daily operations to enhance their efficiency, coordination, and mobility (Gadelshiyev, 2018). The primary cause of the increased focus is the sharp rise in social media usage (Gadelshiyev, 2018).

To summarize, nations all over the world are using digital platforms to further their foreign policy agendas, and digital diplomacy has become a vital instrument in contemporary international relations. Kazakhstan emphasizes international information security and the use of digital means to accomplish diplomatic goals in a way that is consistent with its larger strategic objectives. There is still a need for development in terms of creating specialized departments and completely integrating digital technologies into government processes, even

if Kazakhstan has made strides in adopting digital solutions into its diplomatic endeavors. Prioritizing digital diplomacy and allocating resources for the required infrastructure and knowledge would enable Kazakhstan to expand its international reach and skillfully handle the opportunities and challenges presented by the digital era of diplomacy.

2 Theoretical Framework

The ideas of constructivism and realism can be used to analyze digital diplomacy as a topic for scientific study (Tsvetkova, 2020). Constructivism analyzes the actions and ideals of the target audience and other players in this kind of diplomacy, whereas the theory of realism explains the rationale behind a state's use of digital diplomacy in terms of its national priorities (Tsvetkova, 2020).

Regarding realism, digital diplomacy includes the notion of soft power. Soft power plays a crucial role in a country's strategy to persuade, rather than coerce, other nations into taking certain actions, as noted (Zgurić, 2023). This approach relies on the power of attraction and persuasive argumentation, rather than resorting to compulsion or intimidation, to shape the views of others (Nye, 2011). Consequently, through the use of social media, various websites, apps and other digitalisation tools, countries might attract the attention of and influence other states through the transmission of information. For example, as mentioned above, many embassies and diplomats in Kazakhstan have active accounts on platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. They use these platforms to disseminate information about their country's policies, respond to global events and communicate directly with the public.

According to constructivism, public diplomacy is an expression of different types of diplomatic activities that aim to improve the common norms and understanding between states (Karsliyeva, 2023). This type of diplomacy is seen as a means of creating, sustaining or adjusting a state's international image (Karsliyeva, 2023). Moreover, as Maina (2024) states,

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constructivism emphasizes the significance of norms and perceptions in regulating state action in cyberspace, particularly in the context of digital diplomacy and cyberwarfare.

To sum up, realism in this context helps to rationalise the strategies and interests involved in using digital communication to attain goals, while constructivist theory considers the common norms that influence the formation of political strategies through the digital world. Nowadays, it can be seen that digital diplomacy is used quite often in the political arena, representing an indispensable part of modern international relations, thus being an instrument of international and domestic politics, in many ways acting as a means of public communication. In this part of our research, we have considered theoretical approaches, and the influence of soft power on the use of social media in the political world. The role of digital diplomacy will continue to develop, thus promoting information and communication technologies in the political sphere at the global level.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research method. According to Lamont (2015), qualitative methods are approaches or strategies for gathering and analyzing data that depend on gathering and analyzing non-numerical data. The primary methods of gathering qualitative data that IR scholars have employed are focus groups, interviews, and web-based research (Lamont, 2015). As the primary data of this research is based on interviews, it implements a qualitative method. The primary benefit of conducting interviews is the chance to gain a deeper knowledge of people's perspectives, understandings, perceptions, and feelings (Halperin & Health, 2012). According to Halperin and Health (2012), the objective is to gather trustworthy information and comprehend a person's views rather than unavoidably generalizing as in surveys. As a result, the interview format was selected to promote candid communication and the sharing of participants' experiences in the diplomatic realm.

Additionally, Lamont (2015) addresses in his book the importance of a theoretical framework for analysis, reflexivity (awareness of one's own bias as a researcher) and triangulation (using multiple sources or methods to confirm findings) as strategies for ensuring the validity and reliability of qualitative research findings. The goal of this study is to adhere to these suggested tactics.

The design of this study is a qualitative interview design. Initially, in qualitative research design interview protocol plays a key role. Interviews provide detailed information about the experiences and viewpoints of participants on a particular topic. They are often used in conjunction with other data collection techniques to provide the researcher with a complete set of data for analysis (Turner, 2010).

This research also implies data collection and analysis through interviews and secondary data.

Furthermore, a deductive approach will better explain this research paper, because the research will gather data from both primary and secondary sources. This method involves formulating hypotheses, which are then tested by gathering and evaluating data (Mauldin, R. L., 2020). Collected and analyzed data which we obtained from the interviews to confirm our hypothesis.

3.2 Data Collection

The data collection process involves primary (structured interview) and secondary data collection.

The primary data was collected through using structured expert interviews. According to the United States Office of Personnel Management (2012), in structured interviews, all candidates are asked the same questions in the same order, and interviewers agree on acceptable answers.

The interviews conducted face-to-face and online interviews via Zoom with key stakeholders involved in Kazakhstan's digital diplomacy efforts. This includes diplomats, government officials, international organization employees (Astana Financial Services Authority, United Nations) and experts in the field of international relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perspectives on the evolution of digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan, as well as the challenges and opportunities it presents.

In addition to primary data, secondary data thorough literature review was conducted to gather secondary data from various sources, including official social media accounts of the organizations (LinkedIn, X (Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and their official websites), academic journals and articles, reports from government agencies, policy journals. This review aims to provide a foundation for the study by examining relevant literature on digital diplomacy initiatives, strategies, and challenges in Kazakhstan.

Most of the interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants, and transcriptions of the interviews were prepared to facilitate data analysis, ensuring accuracy and completeness in capturing participants' responses. Subsequently, we had approval from the Science and Ethics Committee of the Maqsut Narikbayev University (MNU). Therefore, transcriptions anonymized to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

3.3 Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted with five respondents: staff members from organizations and government agencies, such as Astana Financial Service Authority (AFSA) (19 March), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan (6 April and 17 May), Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK) in Ethiopia (29 March), and United Nations staff member (UN, FAO) (6 April). In total, the interviews were collected between 19 March and 17 May. Each of them had a duration of approximately 30-40 minutes.

The first part of the interview questions investigates the development of digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan, the usage of social media and its importance. The second part looks into challenges, security dilemmas and governance itself within digital diplomacy. The last part explores future perspectives and opportunities for using digital diplomacy. In order to answer the main research question and confirm hypothesises, it was decided to divide the answers into sections such as *Utilising Social Media, The Importance and Advantage of Digital Diplomacy, Security and Governance of Digital Diplomacy, Challenges and Issues, and Assessing and Improving Skills* (Figure 1).

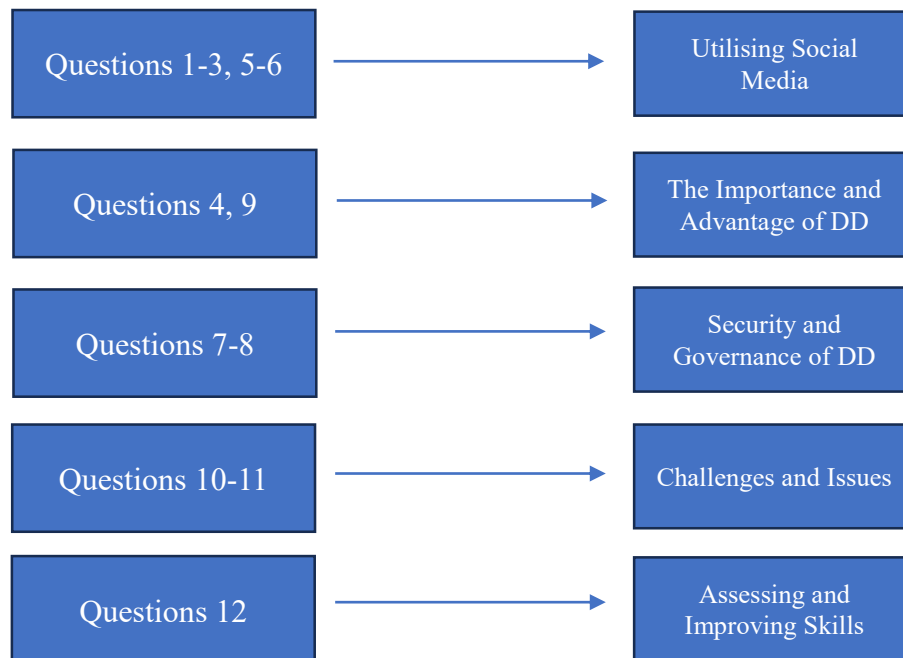Figure 1. Structure of the interview questionnaire

1. **Utilising Social Media**

Based on the information provided by the participants regarding social media and its verification, it can be concluded that indeed institutions put up publications on the mentioned social media (Table 1).

Table 1. Utilizing Social Media

Organisation / Public institution	Social Network Usage	Posting Frequency on social media (personal)	Awareness of Organizational Digital Presence	Utilization of Digital Platforms for Digital Diplomacy	Promotion of Kazakh Culture on social media
AIFC (AFSA)	LinkedIn (mostly). Personal accounts on other social networks (not frequently)	2-3 times a month	Quite aware, of how frequently they use and the information they post	LinkedIn, Instagram (mainly)	Publications during public holidays
MFA of the RK	LinkedIn (often), X, Instagram	Not often, every day (Instagram stories)	Follow the social media accounts of MFA, as well as the country's embassies and diplomatic missions abroad	Official website, Facebook, Instagram, X, Telegram, and personal accounts of diplomats on different social network	Informing about major local and international events that are taking place in Kazakhstan, promoting country's attractive image, and sharing articles, photo and video materials about our cultural and traditional heritage. As the long-term news partner of MFA Astana Times news portal is mentioned
Embassy of the RK in Ethiopia	For work purposes	On busy days - once or twice a week. On free days, more often	Highly aware	Official website, Facebook, Instagram, X,	Publishments on the Embassy's cultural events and in the form of reposts of interesting materials from the RK mass media
UN (FAO)	LinkedIn (often), Instagram (mostly)	Almost every day, only events that have happened or official holiday greetings	Highly aware	LinkedIn, X	In the UN this is not really accepted because there are 193 states. So, more attention is paid to more specific projects

Also based on the analysis of the publications, it was found that some of the topic of

the posts is cultural. That is, notifications about various events, holidays, and general

familiarization with Kazakh culture. In addition to this, there were certainly publications of a diplomatic nature. For instance, visits of state representatives, signing of joint documents, opening of international branches, etc. For deeper analysis, we examined in more detail the social media accounts of the MFA of the RK, AFSA, Embassy of the RK in Ethiopia and FAO in LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, and X for the last 5 months of this year (January to May of 2024), which is presented in Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5.

Table 2. Utilising Social Media (AFSA)

Social Network	Number of Followers	Number of Posts (last 5 months)	Average Number of Posts per Month	Average Number of Likes	Publications Topics on Kazakhstan
LinkedIn	4 381	78	17	30	Facts, analytics and statistics, holding various events, meeting guests, speeches of speakers, congratulations on national holidays (8 March, Nauryz, Unity Day, Victory Day).
Instagram	458	67	15	13	Facts, analytics and statistics, holding various events, meeting guests, speeches of speakers, congratulations on national holidays (8 March, Nauryz, Unity Day, Victory Day).

As was said by the AFSA representative, this organisation uses LinkedIn and mainly Instagram as part of its digital diplomacy. Judging by our analysis, this organisation uses LinkedIn much more actively, there are almost 10 times more followers, 11 more posts and the average number of likes respectively (Table 2). Also, according to the respondent, posts are published on holidays to promote Kazakh culture. Indeed, there are such publications. For example, congratulations on 8 March, Nauryz, Unity Day, and Victory Day. Also, there are posts about facts, analytics and statistics, holding various events, meeting guests, and speeches of speakers that are directly related to Kazakhstan. In addition, it can be noted that the posts on these two platforms are the same, but LinkedIn also has posts about available jobs.

Table 3. Utilising Social Media (MFA of the RK)

Social Network	Number of Followers	Number of Posts (last 5 months)	Average Number of Posts per Month	Average Number of Likes	Publications Topics on Kazakhstan
Instagram	15 100	210	42	101	Congratulations on national holidays, various events (ministerial meetings, conferences, briefings), signing of agreements, bilateral treaties, political news, and visa-free regimes.
Facebook	22 107	199	39	30	Congratulations on national holidays, various events (ministerial meetings, conferences, briefings), signing of agreements, bilateral treaties, political news, visa-free regimes, and reposts from accounts of embassies of the RK abroad.
X	50 800	630	135	20	Congratulations on national holidays, various events (ministerial meetings, conferences, briefings), signing of agreements, bilateral treaties, political news, visa-free regimes, reposts from accounts of embassies of the RK abroad, and congratulations on the Independence Day of different countries.
Telegram	5 751	980	70	0	Congratulations on national holidays, various events (ministerial meetings, conferences, briefings), signing of agreements, bilateral treaties, political news, and visa-free regimes.

Beginning with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, we analysed their Instagram, Facebook, X, Telegram accounts, and official website. According to the first respondent from the MFA, the site provides information on the most important local and international events taking place in Kazakhstan, promotes an attractive image of the country, and exchanges articles, photos and videos about cultural and traditional heritage. Judging by the analysis, all the above is confirmed, all the information on the site is up-to-date, news is fresh, and there is detailed information about contacts, the structure of the MFA, the policy of Kazakhstan, and visas. It is even possible to make an appointment online if you have any questions. There is also a gallery with photos from various events. However, the calendar of events has not been updated since September of 2023.

The second participant from the MFA mentioned various platforms on the internet for promoting digital diplomacy. Judging by our analysis (Table 3) we can say that the topics of publications in social networks are the same, but different formats. For example, Instagram has more videos because of its Stories and Highlights features. There are also more photos from various events, as the Carousel (album) function allows it. Thanks to it, it makes the post more readable without burdening the reader's eye. In contrast to other participants, the second respondent from the MFA mentioned a Telegram channel where identical posts are uploaded, but the text is shorter and the photos are fewer. It also publishes posts about minor political news related to Kazakhstan that are not uploaded on other social networks. That is why there has been such a big number of posts on Telegram for five months.

Posts in the analysed social networks are written in three languages: Kazakh, Russian and English. As it might be seen, there have been quite a lot of posts on Twitter for five months since news is published separately in three languages.

Topics of publications on Kazakhstan include congratulations on national holidays, various events (ministerial meetings, conferences, briefings), signing of agreements, bilateral

treaties, political news, and visa-free regimes. Besides, reposts about various cultural events posted by Kazakhstan's embassies abroad are published on Facebook, and Twitter, the MFA of the RK congratulates countries on their Independence Day

Moreover, while interning at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Department of Communications we would like to note some observations. Firstly, publications in almost all MFA social networks are uploaded at the moment of events. For example, the Foreign Ministers of China, Wang Yi, and Russia, Sergey Lavrov, came to the Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A post about this event was created and published right at the time of the meeting of the ministers of the Republic of Kazakhstan, China and Russia. For this purpose, the videos were spliced together, the music was overlaid, and the photos were well-edited. In addition, we tried our hand as mobilographers. We learnt how videos are shot to publish posts about guest arrivals and events. This is very important, as it demonstrates the efficiency, timeliness and responsibility of government agencies.

In addition, it was mentioned that different messengers as WhatsApp play a very important role and facilitate communication between diplomats. For example, while in the past diplomats and embassy staff did not communicate with each other immediately and through third parties, there are now several ways

Table 4. Utilising Social Media (Embassy of the RK in Ethiopia)

Social Network	Number of Followers	Number of Posts (last 5 months)	Average Number of Posts per Month	Average Number of Likes	Publications Topics on Kazakhstan
Instagram	612	26	5	2	Meetings with representatives of the African Union or other guests from the Ethiopian government, events, information about online Kazakh language lessons, notification about the World Nomad Games, new composition of the government of Kazakhstan,

Social Network	Number of Followers	Number of Posts (last 5 months)	Average Number of Posts per Month	Average Number of Likes	Publications Topics on Kazakhstan
Facebook	1 400	82	16	3	signing of treaties, information about habits in Kazakhstan, meetings of the President of Kazakhstan with representatives of other states, congratulations on national holidays (Unity Day), information about scholarships and grants for students of Kazakhstan, post about the 130th anniversary of Ilyas Zhansugurov, news of Kazakhstan (oil production and production of oil and gas). Meetings with representatives of the African Union or other guests from the Ethiopian government, events, information about online Kazakh language lessons, notification about the World Nomad Games, new composition of the government of Kazakhstan, signing of treaties, information about habits in Kazakhstan, meetings of the President of Kazakhstan with representatives of other states, congratulations on national holidays (Nauryz, Unity Day), information about scholarships and grants for students of Kazakhstan, post about the 130th anniversary of Ilyas Zhansugurov, news of Kazakhstan (oil production and production of oil and gas), excerpts from Kazakh concerts, posts about cinema and exhibitions of Kazakh culture.

Social Network	Number of Followers	Number of Posts (last 5 months)	Average Number of Posts per Month	Average Number of Likes	Publications Topics on Kazakhstan
[X](#)	295	47	8	0,1	Meetings with representatives of the African Union or other guests from the Ethiopian government, events, information about online Kazakh language lessons, notification about the World Nomad Games, new composition of the government of Kazakhstan, signing of treaties, information about habits in Kazakhstan, meetings of the President of Kazakhstan with representatives of other states, congratulations on national holidays (Unity Day), information about scholarships and grants for students of Kazakhstan, post about the 130th anniversary of Ilyas Zhansugurov, news of Kazakhstan (oil production and production of oil and gas).

The representative of the Kazakh Embassy in Ethiopia, on the other hand, said that the embassy uses Facebook, Instagram, and X. According to our analysis, Facebook is the most popular, with all indicators being higher compared to the other platforms (Table 4). Instagram and Twitter are virtually undeveloped, with no posts on Instagram in March, although it is an important month for Kazakhstan because of Nauryz. Regarding the topics of the posts, the respondent's words were confirmed. Indeed, there are publications about cultural events of the embassy, reposts of interesting materials from the media of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as news related to the culture, traditions and education of Kazakhstan. Besides, the posts on these platforms are also almost the same. Regarding the official website of the embassy, the information is not updated there as the calendar of events does not show dates after November. Also, official documents have not been updated since 2021. The website has

detailed information on embassy contacts and has a section on *Holidays and weekends in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2023*. However, it is already 2024, so there have been no updates since December. In addition, there is information about obtaining a visa to Kazakhstan for foreigners, but due to the irrelevance of previous information, the visa data may seem outdated.

Table 5. Utilising Social Media (FAO)

Social Network	Number of Followers	Number of Posts (last 5 months)	Average Number of Posts per Month	Average Number of Likes	Publications Topics on Kazakhstan
LinkedIn	1 396 986	480	66	192	-
X	694 944	464	61	134	-

The third participant, the FAO representative, indicated LinkedIn and X of his organisation in the interview. We analysed them and it turned out that for all items LinkedIn is leading in activity (Table 5). Also, as stated by the respondent, there is no publication about Kazakhstan on these pages, as it is a global large-scale organisation.

Thus, having analysed the above social networks over the last five months of 2024 and studied the sites, we can say that utilising social media, its deifferent platforms is useful for the development of digital diplomacy, as quite a large number of people are involved, people put likes, comment, make reposts. Thanks to social media publications, citizens are aware of events happening in Kazakhstan, and foreigners learn more about Kazakh culture. Undoubtedly, there are some gaps in the activity and management of social networks, especially at the embassies of Kazakhstan in Ethiopia.

2.   The Importance and Advantage of Digital Diplomacy

In order to find out the advantages and significance of Kazakhstan's digital diplomacy, several questions were asked throughout the interview. All of the respondents answered by focusing on their field.

Therefore, the advantage of digital diplomacy, as the first interviewee underscores, has revolutionized traditional diplomatic paradigms by significantly enhancing organizational transparency, accountability, stakeholder engagement, and dissemination of the information. This transformative shift is exemplified by the utilization of digital platforms to disseminate timely updates, communicate organizational initiatives, and engage with diverse audiences globally. Moreover, he highlights how digital diplomacy has become a characteristic of modern diplomatic practice, shaping stakeholder expectations and signaling organizational credibility through active engagement on social media platforms and other digital channels.

As the last interviewee mentioned, previously seen as a conservative field, diplomacy has become more flexible, active, and engaging due to social networks. Digital platforms allow the ministry to visually show how negotiations are conducted, prepared, and concluded, providing a more relatable and informative perspective. This visualization helps the public understand the intricacies and results of diplomatic efforts in a more accessible and engaging manner. However, it is important to note that not all information provided during these interviews could be independently verified and confirmed, because all the above information is in private access, so they are not available.

This sentiment resonates with the second respondent, who emphasizes the pivotal role of digital diplomacy in promoting national interests and fostering international cooperation through real-time communication and information dissemination. The interviewee elaborates on how digital platforms serve as invaluable tools for diplomats to engage with foreign audiences, share insights into national policies, and address global challenges collaboratively.

Also, the fifth interviewee adds that by leveraging social networks, the ministry can reach a larger audience than traditional channels allow, targeting every inhabitant of the planet with internet access. This broad reach helps to inform the global audience about Kazakhstan's external relations and national initiatives.

Additionally, the third interviewee highlights the transformative potential of digital platforms in amplifying cultural diplomacy efforts, enabling diplomats to showcase their country's heritage and values on a global stage. By utilizing online resources such as social media, websites, and multimedia content, diplomats can effectively convey cultural narratives, promote cross-cultural understanding, and strengthen people-to-people connections across borders.

Furthermore, the recognition of digital diplomacy as a vital component of modern diplomatic practice is echoed by the fourth respondent, who emphasizes its role in shaping contemporary diplomatic discourse and advancing national interests amidst a rapidly evolving global landscape. He emphasizes the strategic importance of digital diplomacy in enhancing soft power projection, influencing public opinion, and shaping international narratives to align with national priorities and objectives.

3. **Security and Governance of Digital Diplomacy**

Regarding this subtopic, several opinions were given by international political experts during the interviews.

According to the first interviewee, the cyberattack is the first enemy of digital diplomacy. It is cyber security that should receive some funding. One factor is improving cybersecurity. According to the Ministry of Digital Development, Innovation, and Aerospace of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan was ranked 31st in the Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI) in 2022, being ahead of such countries as China, Denmark, Croatia, Slovakia, Israel, and Switzerland (MDD, IAI of the RK, 2022, p. 3). Moreover, the Global

Cybersecurity Index consists of 193 International Telecommunication Union Member States and the State of Palestine (International Telecommunications Union publications, 2024). Because of that, Kazakhstan's ranking 31st out of 193 member states is admirable.

Hence, there are two main cybersecurity types, which should be pointed out. First explained on a reputational level and a national level. As he explained, some "ill-minded" people may create fake accounts on social media on behalf of diplomats and spread false information. Some accounts of diplomats were hacked by scammers. On behalf of the representatives of the international organization, overall, 28.4% of Kazakhstan residents, which are 19 million citizens, are hacked through social networks (MDD, IAI of the RK, 2022, p. 5). These examples are given for the reputation level of cybersecurity when international organization employees have trouble using personal accounts on social media. In this regard, Rashica (2018) highlights that hacking is one of the primary dangers of digital diplomacy, given the number of politicians who have suffered from hacking and the potential damage to their future careers.

On the other hand, the first interviewee added that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and embassies also have official websites, which are the main sources of official information available to the public. These websites are fully controlled by a technical team, and they do have the capacity to prevent hacking attempts by cybercriminals and "ill-minded" individuals. While. the fifth interviewee adds that when using social networks, access as an admin is limited to only 2-3 people who pass a special check, as these resources are considered strategic and publish important state information. They maintain direct contacts with the administrations of these social networks to recover control in case of hacking. When changing the employee responsible for social media management, they immediately update all passwords.

Also, the second interviewee answered that there are a lot of cyber-attacks regularly, and all the secrets and confidential things are stored there. According to mass media and news portals, approximately 47,7 million cyberattacks on public authorities and 2,9 million cyberattacks on private companies (Belyaev, X., X., 2024). Additionally, governmental sectors got the most cyberattacks this year (2024), about 62%, which shows the risks to the nation. This explains cybersecurity on a national level. Therefore, national and international organizations might lose confidential information, which could destroy reputation and affect the country itself (IFAC, 2023).

As for the question of how organizations ensure security and privacy for their personal and official social network accounts, the answers were almost the same. The first interviewee answered that they have strict organizational policies dictating who can speak on behalf of the organization and what materials can be posted. A predefined track group of individuals can represent the organization, and a corporate communications team oversees published materials to prevent sensitive or personal information leaks. The second interviewee added that they rely on the technical support teams of social media platforms for security. They control their official websites to prevent hacking attempts and ensure ethical behavior among diplomats, who refrain from disseminating citizens' shared information. The third interviewee explained that they use individual security passwords for government platforms and social media. There are no legal restrictions on their digital platforms, as the information they publish relates to embassy work. And the fourth interviewee claims in a way that each organization has its cyber defense system. The emphasis is on cybersecurity and adherence to the basic normative rules of etiquette and ethics. Giving an example of an official Outlook messenger: the United Nations (UN) in Kazakhstan has its cyber security system. Outlook has an option to complain about suspicious emails, which is a very good feature. It claims that every organization uses Outlook.

Conversely, according to the CNN news portal, the United States Cyber Safety Review Board discovered that Microsoft's insufficient security safeguards allowed Chinese hackers to enter its network and access the email accounts of senior US officials, including Secretary of Commerce Antony Blinken. The review faulted Microsoft for failing to appropriately protect a vital cryptographic key, allowing hackers to counterfeit credentials and gain illegal access. The breach exposed over 60,000 State Department emails and occurred before high-profile diplomatic missions to China. While China denies involvement, Microsoft has promised to improve its security policies in reaction to the event (Lyngaas, S., 2024). As a result, even though a fourth interviewee mentioned the United Nations cybersecurity system in Outlook Messenger, there are scandalous cyberattacks from many sides attempting to obtain vital information.

Additionally, explaining potential hazards and cyber threats may encounter some regulatory and legal restrictions from the government's perspective. As a result, in the responses to the eighth question regarding regulatory or legal barriers to the effective use of digital platforms for diplomatic purposes, it's evident that all entities emphasize the absence of significant legal impediments. The first respondent highlights the organization's self-regulatory approach, stating that they face no limitations on communication as long as it aligns with their mandate and common sense. The next interviewee underscores the importance of ethical conduct but asserts that there are no explicit legal barriers to digital platform usage for diplomatic objectives. Similarly, the third respondent indicates a lack of legal restrictions, particularly because the information disseminated pertains to embassy functions.

On the contrary, the fifth interviewee also noted that while there are no legal restrictions for publishing general information, any information of limited official nature must be vetted for compliance before being posted. This ensures that the dissemination of

sensitive information is avoided, although it may affect the efficiency of communication given that the MFA is considered one of the most closed agencies. They strive to share publicly known information within these constraints.

Moreover, the fourth interviewee emphasizes adherence to etiquette and ethical norms rather than legal constraints, stressing the importance of cybersecurity and responsible communication. Collectively, these responses suggest a consensus that, while ethical guidelines and cybersecurity measures are crucial, there are no substantial regulatory or legal barriers inhibiting the effective utilization of digital platforms for diplomatic endeavors.

4. Challenges and Issues

Based on the information received from the respondents about the gaps in digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan and the assessment of the level of digital literacy of civil servants, the following aspects can be highlighted. Respondent number three answered that there is a need for a clear training course in digital diplomacy skills both for the current staff of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as in the international departments of the universities of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Respondent number four, answering question eleven, emphasized that the staff of the MFA of the RK has a very high level of training in digital literacy. According to the information provided on 11 September 2018 on the official information resource of the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan (primeminister.kz), as part of implementing the State programme "Digital Kazakhstan", courses were held for all citizens of Kazakhstan aimed at improving the level of digital literacy (Accessed 2024, 10 May). However, according to public information from an official source in the MFA, we did not find any confirming information that staff regularly receive digital literacy training, except that this information is internal and not disclosed. They are indeed professionally proficient in the necessary skills, thus asserting

that they are trained and qualified personnel. According to Forbes.kz (2022, 18 August), the level of digital literacy among Kazakhstanis between the ages of 6 and 74 will have risen to 87 per cent (Accessed 2024, 10 May).

Moreover, respondent number three expresses the problem that there are no official criteria for assessing digital literacy among Kazakhstani officials. Failing to know how to use social media, the internet and various digital technologies can lead to many negative consequences and disputes (Rashica, 2018, p. 85). Filling potential gaps in the effective use of digital diplomacy can be an obstacle. As digital diplomacy makes communication between the state and the people fast and constant, it should be realized that civil servants need to focus on public interests and concerns, using digital diplomacy as a tool for direct interaction with the public.

Furthermore, in response to question ten, respondent number four highlighted the importance of following trends, thereby gaining an audience and creating an open dialogue. Thus highlighting the problem of lack of creativity. In world politics, policymakers look at the successful experience of other countries, thus these countries create a certain trend, a model that adapts to their culture and society. Respondent number two emphasises that restrictions on the use of social media in some countries are also an obstacle to development. The July 2009 riots in Urumqi were the catalyst for the banning of social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as many internal microblogging services (Qin, Strömberg, & Wu, 2017).

In terms of challenges, respondents highlight the lack of language skills. Some countries have several official languages in addition to English - these include French, Arabic, Spanish and other commonly spoken languages. To communicate at an official level, English is sufficient. However, if a diplomat wants to interact with local communities in different parts of the world who speak, for example, Urdu, Filipino, Bahasa, and Portuguese,

it takes additional time and resources are required to understand and absorb, thus creating the problem of the language barrier. The interviewee expressed hope that the further development of artificial intelligence would help to solve this problem.

Respondent number five observed that the public is not particularly interested in the accounts of government agencies, including those of the MFA, in response to question ten. The main reason is the lack of entertainment content and the predominance of official information. This diminishes the audience's interest because many people prefer content that is more entertaining and less formal. After analyzing the social networks of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we observed that the content primarily comprises official data, and the account has minimal audience engagement. Therefore, we have verified the information gathered.

Respondent number two to question eleven replied that Kazakh diplomats, as everyone else in the twenty-first century, are quite familiar with social media as they use it in their daily lives. However, the respondent noted that new trending technologies require relevant skills. For instance, data analytics, data science and artificial intelligence. This motivates diplomats to constantly upgrade their skills and adapt to the new reality. The interviewee explains that he has decided to devote the next two years to research in the field of artificial intelligence and international relations. At the same time, the respondent is studying for a Master's degree at a prestigious institution dedicated to training diplomats and other professionals in the field of international relations. The interviewee will also be able to retain his diplomatic position and remain in the MFA.

Respondent number three answers to the eleventh question that at the moment it is not possible to objectively assess the level of digital literacy among civil servants, as there are no officially approved criteria for digital literacy, no assessment methods, and no certification. Since digital diplomacy makes communication between the state and the people fast and

constant, it should be understood that civil servants need to focus on public interests and issues using digital diplomacy as a tool for direct interaction with the population. Respondent number four emphasizes the importance of continuing to develop in working with social media and improving digital diplomacy.

In response to question eleven, respondent number five indicated that the level of digital literacy of civil servants in Kazakhstan is average. Digital literacy includes the ability to navigate and interact effectively on social networks and the Internet as a whole. Civil servants often encounter limitations on their social media posts, leading to a decrease in their online engagement. Despite this, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides regular training for employees, including workshops and courses on social media behavior and the use of hashtags to increase reach. Therefore, it must be understood that literacy only improves with the flexibility of a civil servant's online behavior. Training sessions are held overseas periodically, and different seminars and courses are organized monthly. According to the respondent, this information is confidential, so we could not locate it in the public domain.

The importance of developing targeted training programmes, the need for professional development, the elimination of problems related to language barriers and the creation of criteria for assessing the digital literacy of civil servants can be summarized in the answers to questions 10-11.

5. Perspectives and Improving Skills

Based on our interview responses regarding the perspectives for using digital technologies to engage with foreign audiences and promote intercultural dialogue, our respondents highlight the importance of digitalisation in the development of diplomacy, identifying digital technologies as a modern tool for effective interaction between countries and peoples, enhancing and facilitating the process of cultural exchange.

Interviewee number two noted that the most valuable thing in the diplomatic service is to build bridges between countries and peoples, both on an official and personal level. Moreover, now digital technologies are the most effective tools. The respondent believes that the introduction of artificial intelligence into everyday work will provide even more sophisticated tools to promote our country, contribute to its economic development and better protect national interests on the world stage. As an indicator of their importance, digital technologies are currently being applied and developed in all areas of society (Balashov, 2022, p. 39).

Respondent number two gave several examples of what digital technology can do and where it can be used. First, in terms of global outreach and bridging, digital technologies blur boundaries, allowing people from different backgrounds in different parts of the world to build, connect and maintain relationships. Digital technologies also facilitate real-time cultural exchange. The first example leads to the second, enhanced collaboration, helping to solve global problems together and to work with different organizations, countries and so on.

Respondent number three cited the main benefit of being able to deliver official information to the public first-hand without having to interpret it through the media, thus avoiding framing and minimising misinterpretation and avoiding the spread of misinformation. It was also noted that digital technologies allow information about cultural events, creativity, art and other important discoveries to spread more quickly. There is a national interest in the rapid dissemination of information about various events or situations (Rashica, 2018, p. 81).

Respondent number four noted that it is a question of speed, citing the example of a blogger from Kyrgyzstan who through his videos has done much more than the Ministry of Tourism of the Kyrgyz Republic has done in 30 years through his videos. The interviewee linked this to the fact that any country is publicized not only by the public sector but also by

ordinary citizens in general. This statement cannot be confirmed due to the lack of the necessary data and the lack of comparative analysis, but after having carried out the analysis, we have found another example. According to information published on the website 24.kg (2022), a commendation from the Minister of Culture of Kyrgyzstan was awarded to the most positive Russian YouTube blogger Larisa Bulina, who filmed content that promoted tourism and interest in the country. This can be bloggers and any influencers. That is, the foreign audience does not only look at the state platforms.

The answer to question twelve from the fifth respondent emphasizes quick access to information and the creation of a bonding effect. Live video and other interactive tools allow people from different countries to feel like they are actively taking part in events, improving how they perceive and engage with information. Proper translation and adaptation of content to local conditions help to effectively communicate official information, minimizing the possibility of misinterpretation.

Respondent number four emphasises the importance of further development in using social media and improving digital diplomacy. The data obtained through interviews also shows the significant role of media personalities such as bloggers in shaping perceptions and influencing the country's recognisability among foreign audiences.

4 Findings

Based on the information provided by the interview participants and the literature review both hypotheses were confirmed. Therefore, digitalization has become an integral part of international relations and digital technology is an effective tool in the world of diplomacy. Encouraging and creating the right conditions for digital diplomacy. These results underline the need for the state to adapt quickly, as the digital world is developing at an incredible speed and thus offers many new opportunities.

Regarding the second hypothesis, highlighting the multifaceted challenges of digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan, these challenges encompass cyber threats, information management, social media influence, and governance considerations. The imperative need for robust cyber defences is underscored, especially given the country's reliance on foreign technology. Social media and bloggers exert significant influence, complicating diplomacy efforts and necessitating strategies to counter misinformation. The fragmentation of international relations adds further complexity, emphasizing the importance of accurate information interpretation. Insights from experts' stress cybersecurity measures and governance, while minimal legal barriers underscore the need for comprehensive strategies to navigate digital diplomacy effectively.

By confirming the hypotheses presented, we have managed to answer the research question about the evolvement of digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan, its main challenges and prospects for its further development. Thus, using modern technologies, Kazakhstan is actively developing digitalisation and digital diplomacy to enhance its influence on the world stage. Kazakhstan's digital diplomacy is strengthened at the global level by the MFA, Kazakhstan's embassies abroad and other organisations that actively promote the country's historical significance, tourism potential and foreign policy goals through platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and X. In addition, the national digital diplomacy plan aims to promote international cooperation, combat cyberterrorism and enhance global information security through digital tools. In general, Kazakhstan's approach to digital diplomacy aims to cope with the challenges of the digital age to enhance its credibility in the international arena and strengthen international relations.

Conclusion

This thesis explains the evolution of digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan which reflects the nation's commitment to leveraging modern technologies for international engagement

and policy shaping. As highlighted in this research paper, Kazakhstan's efforts, outlined in the Digital Kazakhstan programme, demonstrate a strategic approach to digitalization across various sectors, including diplomacy. The qualitative research methodology employed in this study, utilizing interviews with key stakeholders and a comprehensive literature review, provides valuable insights into Kazakhstan's digital diplomacy landscape. The qualitative method was conducted through face-to-face interviews and online Zoom meetings with international political experts and people, who have experiences in the field of diplomacy to gain a deeper understanding of exploring digital diplomacy evolution in Kazakhstan, best practices in the world to be used, also main external threats and future perspectives. As a consequence of this study, the research questions were answered partially successfully. Some of the interviewees could not answer several questions, but it did not shape the thesis results.

We can conclude that the Digital Kazakhstan program, focusing on digitizing economic sectors, transitioning to a digital state, implementing the digital Silk Road, developing human capital, and fostering an innovation ecosystem, underscores Kazakhstan's commitment to digital advancement. Efforts by institutions as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Kazakhstan embassies to leverage digital platforms for cultural promotion, international relations, and public engagement contribute significantly to Kazakhstan's digitalization agenda.

Nevertheless, challenges such as cybersecurity threats and disinformation pose significant risks to digital diplomacy. Identified gaps in Kazakhstan's digital diplomacy include the need for targeted training programs, addressing language barriers, and assessing the digital literacy of civil servants. Despite these challenges, the prospects for Kazakhstan's digital diplomacy are promising, with opportunities for enhancing global information security, utilizing digital tools for international cooperation, and learning from the experiences of other nations like China, the US, and France.

For further research in this area, we can suggest looking at the experiences of other countries by conducting a comparative analysis, which can focus on a particular experience or compare the development of digital diplomacy between several countries, thus identifying the necessary aspects that have influenced the improvement or deterioration of the situation. Strategies, tactics, practices and outcomes can be presented in a comparative analysis.

Studies can analyze in more detail areas of cyber security and propose strategies to improve and strengthen security in the digital space, assessing the risks and threats to the development of digital diplomacy. It could also examine Kazakhstan's foreign policy goals and the impact of digitalisation on its international image through data correlation or other methods of data collection.

In conclusion, it should be said that despite the major challenges and issues of the development of digital diplomacy in the country, Kazakhstan has to prioritize the development of necessary infrastructure and knowledge while allocating resources accordingly. Moving forward, successful adaptation to technological trends and effective management of digital threats will be essential for Kazakhstan to realize its digital diplomacy objectives and strengthen its global influence.

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Appendix A. Informed consent form

International School of Economics, Maqsut Narikbayev University

The Development of Digital Diplomacy in Kazakhstan: Challenges and Perspectives.

Researchers:

Ozganbay Zhansaya "Student Researcher"

Amrina Alua "Student Researcher"

Bekbauova Aisulu "Student Researcher"

Dear _____

At the moment, we are conducting research on the development of digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan: Challenges and perspectives. We have contacted you due to your affiliation with diplomacy, representation of Kazakhstan abroad and closely related aspects to digital diplomacy. We like to invite you to take part in our research and would like to meet you for a brief in-person expert interview. Alternatively, we can also meet online (e.g., using Zoom). During our in-person/online meeting, we plan to ask you questions related to your expertise professional experiences and viewpoints related to developing and adopting digital diplomacy. By participating in our study, you will be making a valuable contribution to the development of knowledge in the new field of digital diplomacy. Moreover, this study offers a platform to highlight and draw attention to issues and the future of digital diplomacy within Kazakhstan. In addition, we will ensure that you have access to the results of the study. The topic of digital diplomacy is new and understudied in Kazakhstan. Our interview meeting is expected to take no more than 40 minutes. Please note that there is no compensation for participating in this research, and your participation is completely voluntary. We have attached a catalogue of sample questions we like to ask during our meeting. You have the right to skip or refuse to answer any of these questions. At the same time, we can elaborate on questions you find

relevant to add and discuss. This discussion can be beneficial to you and to us, providing valuable insights for the study, the results of which you can then use in your work. You can withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. To withdraw, simply inform Alua via email at a_amrina@kazguu.kz, contact number +7 701 957-00-33. During our meeting, we will not make any videos but take voice recordings with the permission of our respondents. In the case of refusal, instead one of our team members will take detailed notes, which we will share with you after the interview for approval and any additional comments. We will collect any personal or biographical information, but it will be optional. Furthermore, we will remove all information that could directly or indirectly identify you in our research (if there is a refusal). All information captured during the interviews will be directly anonymized. Interview-generated information will be stored and cited in formats such as "Interview, stakeholder name (institution), position, location, date", e.g., "Interview, United Nation in Kazakhstan, Director of … Department, Astana, February 28, 2024". Please be assured that participating in this study poses no risk to you. We have put in place comprehensive measures to ensure your privacy and the confidentiality of the information you provide.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Science and Ethics Committee of the International School of Economics, Maqsut Narikbayev University.

If you have any questions, you can contact the researcher, Zhansaya Ozganbay, via email, at z_ozganbay@kazguu.kz.

If you have any complaints about this study, you can contact the Chair of the Science and Ethics Committee of the International School of Economics via email (l_sartakova@kazguu.kz)

Thank you for reading this information.

Consent Form

I have read all of the above and

❏ I agree to take part in the study

❏ I do not want to take part in the study

Signature _____

Appendix B. Recruiting materials

Hello,

We are Amrina Alua, Ozganbay Zhansaya, and Bekbauova Aisulu. We are students at Maqsut Narikbayev University in the School of International Economics. We have contacted you due to your affiliation with diplomacy, representation of Kazakhstan abroad and closely related aspects to digital diplomacy. Your candidature is suitable for us as you have the necessary data to answer our interview questions.

This research is being done as part of our Bachelor's degree diploma project and our supervisor's name is Saginbekova Kamshat, a teaching professor at our university. The focus of the research is to thoroughly examine the ongoing efforts and experiences of Kazakhstan in adopting digital diplomacy as a strategic approach in its foreign relations, we will analyze the evolution of digital diplomacy in Kazakhstan, and explore the challenges and prospects for future growth. This research aims to provide insights into Kazakhstan's implementation of digital diplomacy, the challenges it faces, and the future outlook for this public diplomacy tool.

If you agree to volunteer you will be asked to pass our interview, which consists of 10 questions both in English and Russian. Before that you should sign the form of consent. ⌞SEP⌟Your participation will involve one session for the interview with all of us or only one of us (it depends on what option you prefer). Our interview will last approximately 40 minutes. If you are not able to meet us alive, it is possible to arrange an online meeting or you have an opportunity to answer our questions in written form and send us the document.

Your participation in our research will greatly contribute to advancing knowledge in the realm of digital diplomacy. Additionally, our study serves as a platform to raise awareness of previously overlooked data security issues. Furthermore, we guarantee access to the study's findings, which could prove advantageous to your endeavours by offering valuable insights and data for future projects or initiatives.

We want to reassure you that no personal information will be collected or recorded during this meeting. Instead, we will be taking thorough notes, which we'll later share with you for your review and any further adjustments you may want to make.

The research has been reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of our Maqsut Narikbauev University.

If you are interested in more information about the study or our project, please reply to this email or call +77019570033.

Thank you for considering our request.

Best regards,
Amrina Alua

Appendix C. Interview questions

- Full name (optional)

- Email (obligatorily)

- Phone number (optional)

- What position do you currently hold? (optional)

- How many years have you worked in this field? (optional)

1. Do you use a social network?

2. How often do you publish posts on social media?

3. How aware are you of your organisation's official social network or apps?

4. What does digital diplomacy mean for you and your organisation?

5. What platforms, websites, social media (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Telegram, YouTube etc), apps or digital channels does your organisation (or you) use to promote digital diplomacy?

6. Do you (or your organization) publish posts on social media related to Kazakh culture? For example, promoting various events or cultural familiarity.

7. How does your organisation ensure the security and privacy of information when using digital channels (social media, apps, TV channels)?

8. Are there any regulatory or legal barriers to your organisation's effective use of digital platforms for diplomatic purposes?

9. How has digitalisation changed traditional approaches to diplomacy in Kazakhstan?

10. In what key areas are there currently gaps in digital diplomacy efforts in Kazakhstan, and what factors contribute to these gaps?

11. How do you assess the level of digital literacy of civil servants in Kazakhstan, and what measures are being taken to address potential skills gaps?

12. What potential benefits do you see in using digital technologies to engage with foreign audiences and promote intercultural dialogue?