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on “Digital diplomacy in Theory and Practice: A Case Study of Azerbaijan”

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## **Abstract**

In today's interconnected world, the internet and digital technologies have fundamentally transformed the way nations communicate and engage with one another. Diplomacy, once conducted solely through formal channels and behind closed doors, has become increasingly public and open, as governments utilize digital platforms to connect with global audiences and advance their national interests. This approach is known as digital diplomacy, and it has emerged as a critical tool for countries seeking to shape their international image, build relationships, and achieve their foreign policy objectives.

Azerbaijan, a country located in the South Caucasus region, has been at the forefront of digital diplomacy efforts in recent years. Azerbaijan's government has recognized the importance of digital communication and has invested heavily in building its online presence. Through a range of digital diplomacy initiatives, including the use of social media, online campaigns, and digital platforms, Azerbaijan has sought to promote its culture, economic potential, and political agenda to a global audience. However, the effectiveness of these efforts is not without challenges, and the country faces several obstacles to leveraging digital diplomacy to its full potential. In spite of Azerbaijan's central role in this digital diplomacy phenomenon, not much by way of research has been conducted into the Azerbaijan's efforts. Thus, this thesis seeks to fill the research gap by addressing ten key research questions vis-à-vis Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy.

Apart from the benefits that Azerbaijan derives from digital diplomacy, there are several challenges which includes: personnel challenges in administering the tools; negative regional perception; problem of audience identification and targeting; generational gap in the use of social media in the foreign policy establishment; keeping pace with a fast paced media environment; the growing phenomenon of fake news from hostile sources; the use of digital tools by non-state actors to challenge state authority; the culture of anonymity in the digital realm; the risk of cyber-attacks and organizational culture and much more.

In countering all these challenges, this research recommends the following solutions to the government of the Azerbaijan: constant training and upskilling of Azerbaijani diplomats and professionals within the foreign policy media circles; audience research in order to convey the right message as well as increased connectivity through social media; developing a rapid response mechanism to combat fake news; direct messages with other languages apart from Azerbaijani and English and raising awareness among targeted audiences about the risk that comes with social media. The findings indicated at the master thesis show that the Azerbaijani government's successful use of

social media during the war played a significant role in shaping global perceptions of the conflict, mobilizing public opinion in support of Azerbaijan, and creating a new digital diplomacy paradigm for the country.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, Second Karabakh War, digital transformation, digital diplomacy, strategy, social media, public diplomacy, foreign policy, digital skills, cyber security.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

AI	Artificial Intelligence
DDI	Digital Diplomacy Index
EU	European Union
EGDI	E-Government Development Index
GIS	Geographical Information System
ICT	Information Communication Technology
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
UN	United Nations
US / USA	United States of America



## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1. Overview**

The technological development and digital transformation – the main influential components of the latest industrial revolutions, has deepened its impact in every single layer of the society, has created, and continues to create conditions for its concentration in a certain way. These changes have resulted in a new sense of diplomacy based on an understanding of civil society, with an inherent government of Azerbaijan of social persuasiveness and a civilian nature. With this new sense of diplomacy, the private sector, business people, academicians, think tanks, media members, and others have all joined in, resulting in a wave of diplomacy that is more civil, transparent and democratic in nature. Without a doubt, these changes have resulted in significant changes in the language, style, and management of diplomacy.

In the 21st century, the field of diplomacy has been able to utilize various tools, including the internet and social media, to communicate messages. This has given rise to the concept of "digital diplomacy," which involves using digital technologies and virtual collaboration to manage change. This type of diplomacy is typically considered a form of public diplomacy and involves the use of social media networks and other digital tools. (Holmes, 2015)

According to the Jamestown Foundation (2020), Azerbaijan is a country that is striving to become a regional digital hub in the Caucasus region and is at the forefront of the evolving shift towards digital diplomacy. The country has been continuously exploring new ways to communicate and achieve its foreign policy objectives, given its exceptional communication infrastructure and willingness to engage with the world as part of its foreign policy goals. Azerbaijan is emerging as a leader in the region in terms of implementing digital diplomacy. Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis has accelerated the process of digital transition in diplomacy to an extraordinary degree.

Another important aspect of Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy effort is the use of e-government portals and websites. These portals serve as a one-stop-shop for information about the country and provide a platform for Azerbaijani officials to communicate with foreign diplomats and stakeholders. Additionally, these portals provide real-time information about the country's political and economic development, making it easier for foreign investors and tourists to stay informed.

Major significant investments in the development of digital infrastructure, including high-speed broadband also supported the government's digital diplomacy efforts. This investment has made it easier for the country to access new technologies and digital platforms and has helped to position Azerbaijan as a leader in the region in terms of technology and innovation.

Through digital diplomacy, the foreign policy of Azerbaijan has given a new approach for the country to interact with other governments and international stakeholders on matters of politics, humanitarian aid, economy and defense. In the first months of 2020, this trend became even more concentrated thanks to the reforms aimed at the use of digital diplomacy tools in the country's foreign policy field. Civil servants working in structures specialized in conducting foreign policy have been given trainings to encourage their ability to use social media, joint cooperation agreements have been concluded with countries that have a leading role in digital diplomacy, and further supportive reforms have been implemented in a number of other directions. The government started to use social media and fulfill its public affairs and strategic communications function through the establishment of a social media presence, namely Twitter Accounts and Facebook Pages. Despite the end of the 44-day Second Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which lasted from September 27 to November 8, 2020, the advantage in the information war, which is still ongoing at the most intense level, is a clear proof of how sound the digital transformation of the country's foreign policy is based on.

## **1.2. Problem Statement and Research Questions**

Digital diplomacy has emerged as an important tool for countries to engage in international relations. While there has been some research on the theoretical and practical aspects of digital diplomacy, there is still a lack of understanding about how countries effectively implement digital diplomacy strategies. Additionally, there is a need to examine the specific case of Azerbaijan, a country that has been active in leveraging digital platforms for its diplomatic efforts.

By leveraging social media, e-government portals, and investments in digital infrastructure, Azerbaijan is positioning itself as a leader in the region in terms of digital transformation development. This thesis seeks to contribute to this literature by combining theoretical and practical aspects of digital diplomacy, and by examining a case study of Azerbaijan. The thesis begins by providing a comprehensive overview of the existing literature on digital diplomacy, including definitions, key concepts, and theoretical frameworks.

Several different approaches were taken in order to collect data on this topic. With social media being such a new concept in the discussion of diplomacy, it was difficult to know where to begin to look for information. However, both primary and secondary sources were able to provide this paper with information.

The primary data for the case study part of this project was gathered through interviews based

on a needs assessment approach. The needs assessment serves as a crucial initial step in the process of developing effective interventions and allocating resources. It is essential to have a thorough understanding of the specific needs of a particular population in order to create targeted solutions that address the most critical issues and service gaps. Various methods, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups, can be utilized to conduct a needs assessment and collect data that identifies the required resources or services. The information obtained from the needs assessment enables the development of solutions that are tailored to the specific needs of the population being served (Watkins, Meiers, & Visser, 2012).

Such methodology enabled to identify the specific needs and challenges involved in the implementation of digital diplomacy strategies global practice and in Azerbaijan. Besides this, it involved evaluating the effectiveness of the country's digital platforms and tools, as well as analyzing the outcomes of its digital diplomacy efforts. Finally, a needs assessment methodology helped to identify the key challenges, such as technical, political, or cultural barriers that may hinder the effective use of digital platforms for diplomatic purposes in implementing digital diplomacy strategy. During the spring of 2023, a total of five face-to-face and online interviews were conducted, with the initial contact being established through email communication. The selection of interviewees was based on their extensive knowledge and expertise in the subject matter, including Azerbaijani foreign policy officials, scholars, and research experts affiliated with Azerbaijani think-tanks and universities. Ethical considerations were taken into account before each interview, ensuring that informed consent was obtained from every interviewee, permitting their inclusion and citation within the research paper.

Secondary data for this paper was sourced from academic literature, which was used to support the theoretical framework and research design parts. The academic literature provided valuable insights and existing knowledge on the subject matter. Additionally, the interviewees themselves, who were experts in the field, recommended books and journals that were referenced in the paper. This integration of academic literature and recommendations from interviewees enhanced the depth and credibility of the research, incorporating both established theories and firsthand expertise. In order to accomplish this, the research seeks to address ten major questions:

1. Please indicate the role of digital diplomacy in promoting Azerbaijan's foreign policy objectives.
2. What are the most effective digital tools and platforms for Azerbaijan to use in its digital diplomacy efforts?

3. What are the main challenges and obstacles faced by Azerbaijan in implementing a comprehensive digital diplomacy approach? How can they be overcome?
4. How does Azerbaijan coordinate its digital diplomacy efforts across different government agencies and with private sector partners?
5. What are the main gaps in Azerbaijan's current digital diplomacy efforts, and how can they be addressed?
6. In your opinion, what policies need to be put in place to ensure the security and privacy of Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy efforts?
7. What impact has digital diplomacy had on Azerbaijan's relations with other countries and international organizations? And how can Azerbaijan improve its online presence and engagement with foreign audiences?
8. What measures should be taken to improve the digital diplomacy skills of diplomats and officials?
9. What are the future prospects for Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy approach, and how can the country maximize its benefits?
10. Which digital diplomacy trends and innovations should Azerbaijan consider adopting in the future to enhance its digital diplomacy efforts?

Below is a general road map of this research:

- Discuss the emergence and role of digital diplomacy in international relations
- Discuss the evolution of Azerbaijan's foreign policy goals and objectives
- Examine the challenges of Azerbaijani government's digital diplomacy approach
- Discuss Azerbaijani government's future digital diplomacy strategies and benefits
- Recommend solutions to challenges associated

Additionally, this study incorporates qualitative analysis of social media activity by Azerbaijani officials, examining their engagement before, during, and after the Second Karabakh War. Reports and internet sources were utilized to complement the analysis. The findings of this analysis reveal that the effective use of social media by the Azerbaijani government during the war played a crucial role in influencing global perceptions of the conflict, mobilizing public opinion in support of Azerbaijan, and establishing a new digital diplomacy paradigm for the country. Consequently, the insights gained from this research have the potential to provide valuable guidance for the development of digital diplomacy practices, not only in Azerbaijan but also in other nations worldwide.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Emergence of Digital Diplomacy**

The origin of digital diplomacy can be traced back to the mid-1990s when governments and international organizations started using email and other online communication tools for diplomatic activities. However, it was not until the early 2000s that the term “digital diplomacy” became more widespread. The emergence of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram in the late 2000s and early 2010s has significantly impacted digital diplomacy. Many governments and international organizations now use these platforms to communicate with foreign audiences, share information, and promote their countries’ interests. According to the High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation (2019), the use of social media in digital diplomacy has become increasingly prevalent. (Bjola & Holmes, 2015) For instance, the U.S. Department of State maintains a dedicated Twitter account, @StateDept, which it uses to disseminate updates on U.S. foreign policy and engage with followers from around the world.

In addition to the Virtual Presence Post initiative, the U.S. Department of State established the Office of eDiplomacy in 2007 to promote the use of digital technologies in diplomacy. (Melissen, 2015). This office has been involved in various digital diplomacy projects, such as the Virtual Student Foreign Service program, which offers American students the opportunity to undertake virtual internships with U.S. embassies and consulates globally

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office introduced a Digital Diplomacy Strategy in 2012 to enhance its diplomatic activities through the utilization of digital technologies such as social media, online videos, and blogs. This strategy also involved setting up a Digital Diplomacy Network to promote the exchange of innovative ideas and best practices. (Melissen, 2015)

In 2015, the Geneva Internet Platform was launched through a partnership between the Swiss government and the United Nations to provide diplomats and policymakers with digital tools and resources and promote dialogue and collaboration on topics related to internet governance and digital policy. Additionally, the Digital Diplomacy Coalition was formed in 2019 to facilitate cooperation and sharing of best practices among individuals and groups engaged in digital diplomacy.

In recent years, digital diplomacy has been influenced by technological advancements such as the utilization of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) for improved data analysis and faster decision-making in diplomatic relations. Some governments and organizations are also exploring the potential use of blockchain technology to enhance the security and transparency of diplomatic communication. Nevertheless, there are challenges and limitations to digital diplomacy,

including the risk of cyber-attacks and hacking, which could compromise confidential diplomatic information and harm relationships between nations. Moreover, there is concern that digital tools and platforms can be misused to spread disinformation or propaganda, potentially exacerbating power disparities between developed and developing nations. (Khan, 2021)

Despite these issues, digital diplomacy will probably play an increasingly significant role in international relations in the future. As more people worldwide gain access to digital technology and platforms, digital diplomacy's potential to foster communication and collaboration between nations will only grow.

## **2.2. Differences between Digital Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy**

International experts have conducted research on digital diplomacy, examining both its theory and practice, and evaluating its impact on the international relations system. Traditionally, diplomacy and international affairs have revolved around interactions between states, with the use of both soft power and forceful measures playing a crucial role in managing these relationships. However, it is important to acknowledge that diplomacy and international affairs have always held greater significance than individual states. According to Hedley Bull, diplomacy is defined as “the conduct of relations between states and other entities with standing in world politics by official agents and through peaceful means”, which requires diplomats to reconsider issues related to governance, order, and the international hierarchy. The combination of diplomacy and information technology has led to the development of new methods of “digital diplomacy”. (Bjola and Manor, 2018)

Digital diplomacy is viewed by some scholars as a modern form of public diplomacy that has evolved in response to the emergence and widespread adoption of social media in the early 2000s. The traditional concept and practice of public diplomacy have undergone significant changes as a result of these new media platforms. According to Hayden (2012), digital diplomacy emerged in response to a new media environment characterized by audience fragmentation, or selective exposure networks. Unlike traditional public diplomacy, which has historically focused on one-way information flow and limited interaction between the sender and receiver, digital diplomacy places greater emphasis on two-way communication (Pamment, 2013).

The use of digital technology in diplomacy has expanded rapidly in recent years, enabling diplomats to engage with foreign publics in new and innovative ways. Digital diplomacy involves utilizing various digital tools, including social media platforms, to advance a country's foreign policy goals and build relationships with foreign publics. This approach differs from traditional diplomacy,

which typically involves direct negotiations between state officials. However, while digital diplomacy has the potential to facilitate more open and transparent communication between states and their publics, it also poses new challenges and risks, such as the spread of disinformation and cyber-attacks. (Bjola 2018)

Public diplomacy and digital diplomacy differ in terms of the level of engagement and interaction with foreign publics. Public diplomacy generally involves one-sided communication where the government sends a message to foreign publics without necessarily expecting feedback. (Gilboa, 2008) Digital diplomacy, on the other hand, enables more interactive communication between the government and foreign publics. Social media platforms, in particular, allow governments to have two-way conversations with individuals and groups, respond to feedback, and address concerns. (Bjola and Manor, 2018)

Higham and Sharman (2019) state that digital diplomacy differs from public diplomacy in two main aspects. Firstly, it utilizes digital technologies to allow governments to engage in real-time with foreign publics. Secondly, digital diplomacy involves a higher degree of interaction and engagement with foreign publics compared to traditional public diplomacy. The authors argue that digital diplomacy is more suitable for the constantly evolving and dynamic nature of social media, and it enables governments to respond quickly to events and changing situations.

Corneliu Bjola (2018) also emphasizes that one of the differences between public diplomacy and digital diplomacy is the level of targeting. Public diplomacy typically has a broad target audience, while digital diplomacy allows for more specific messaging and engagement with particular groups or individuals. Moreover, digital diplomacy can be beneficial in reaching audiences that may be challenging to access through traditional public diplomacy channels. This is because digital diplomacy leverages digital technologies such as social media, websites, and mobile apps, which have a wider reach and can facilitate direct communication between governments and their intended audiences.

“Table 1” shows the comparison of traditional public diplomacy to 21st century public diplomacy according to Szöndi and the column about digital diplomacy can be added according to the definitions of the term. Szöndi states that, traditional public diplomacy was primarily focused on information dissemination and aimed at building relationships with elites and opinion leaders. This was often achieved through one-way communication channels, such as international broadcasting and cultural exchanges, and with limited use of technology.

In contrast, 21st-century public diplomacy has shifted towards relationship-building with the mass public and niche groups, achieved through interactive communication channels, including social

media and mobile applications. The role of technology has become central in 21st-century public diplomacy, enabling governments to engage with audiences in real-time and on a more personal level. The level of control in 21st-century public diplomacy has decreased, with governments relying on the audience's engagement and participation to shape the message and outcome.

Aspects	Traditional Public Diplomacy	21st-century Public Diplomacy	Digital Diplomacy
Objectives	Information dissemination	Relationship-building	Relationship-building and digital advocacy
Strategies	Persuasion, managing publics	Building and maintaining relationships, engaging with publics	Exist online and create a digital image
Direction of communication	One-way communication (monologue)	Two-way communication (dialogue)	Two-way communication
Channels	Traditional mass media	Old and new media, often personalized via networks	Generally new media, especially social media
Target audience	Elites and opinion leaders	Mass public and niche groups	Mass public and niche groups, also niche digital audiences
Role of technology	Limited	Central	Central
Level of control	High	Low	Low
Measurement	Output-based	Outcome-based	Outcome-based
Budget	Sponsored by government	Public and private partnership	Public and private partnership

Table 1. Comparison of traditional public diplomacy, 21st century public diplomacy and digital diplomacy

In summary, we can point out that, while digital diplomacy and public diplomacy share similar goals, they differ in their methods and tactics. Digital diplomacy can have positive impacts such as increased reach and engagement, enhanced transparency, and cultural exchange, but also negative impacts such as the digital divide, misinformation, and privacy concerns. While digital diplomacy and public diplomacy share similar goals, they differ in their methods and tactics, and digital diplomacy can have both positive and negative impacts.

### 2.3. Tools of Digital Diplomacy

The tools used in digital diplomacy by diplomats vary depending on the specific context and goals of the diplomatic effort, mainly to communicate with each other and with the general public. Digital diplomacy has distinctive characteristics that are the outcome of its historical evolution, culture, role perceptions and a blend of tasks that have added to it over time. This was seen before, in the nineteenth century, with the impact of the electric telegraph which had a profound impact on social, bureaucratic and political changes in foreign ministries. Using social networks, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram helps to serve the objectives of countries by reaching domestic and international audiences. However, they may differ in techniques compared to what was used before, as stated by Hocking and Melissen (2015).

Digital tools can be used in digital diplomacy to “strengthen the legitimacy of public



diplomacy by creating spaces for dialogue, deliberation, and participation.” For instance, social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are commonly used in digital diplomacy to engage with foreign audiences and promote a country’s image and values. (Moloney, 2018)

Digital ICT, such as track changes, afford negotiators the ability to easily share and visualize information in real-time, which can change the way negotiations unfold. The authors suggest that this technology also changes the balance of power between negotiators, as those with greater access to technology may have an advantage in controlling the narrative of negotiations. They argue that digital ICT has the potential to transform the practice of international negotiations, and that it is important for scholars and practitioners to pay attention to these changes and adapt their strategies accordingly. (Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Drieschova, 2016)

Social networks have become an integral part of our daily lives and do not require any introduction. The most widely used e-tools for foreign ministries worldwide are Twitter and Facebook, which are good examples of integrated platforms that can be linked to one another, driving traffic from one platform to another. Twitter allows users to share their views and opinions on various issues, engage in discussions with others, and identify relevant articles and readings. While Facebook was previously used mainly for personal connections and sharing updates, it is increasingly being used for professional outreach as well. Other platforms such as YouTube, Flickr, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Instagram also play important roles in digital diplomacy. Apart from social media, e-tools such as blogs and wikis are also significant for public diplomacy, with blogs being immensely popular and wikis being primarily used for internal purposes like knowledge management. (Diplo Foundation, 2018)

Online forums and discussion boards are also used in digital diplomacy. These platforms allow for dialogue and exchange of ideas between diplomatic actors and foreign audiences. They provide a space for engagement that is less formal than traditional diplomatic channels.

Furthermore, online mapping tools, such as Google Maps and GIS mapping software, can help diplomats visualize and analyze data related to various issues, such as climate change, public health, and disaster response. They can also be used to identify areas where diplomacy can be applied to address challenges. Websites are also commonly used in digital diplomacy by diplomatic missions and government agencies to provide information about their country and policies, as well as multimedia content such as videos and infographics to engage with audiences (Diplo Foundation, 2018).

Virtual events are another tool used in digital diplomacy for communication and relationship

building, without the need for physical travel. These events can include webinars, video conferences, and virtual roundtables (Bjola and Holmes, 2015). Data analytics is also an important tool used in digital diplomacy, allowing diplomatic actors to understand their target audience and measure the impact of their digital outreach efforts. This information can help diplomats refine their outreach strategies and tailor their messages to specific audiences (Hocking and Thielemann, 2016).

Finally, chatbots and mobile apps are also used in digital diplomacy to provide assistance and information to citizens and foreign audiences. Chatbots are automated conversational agents that can answer questions and provide information, while mobile apps can provide a range of services such as information on visas, travel, and culture.

Overall, the tools used in digital diplomacy are diverse and constantly evolving as technology continues to advance. Diplomatic actors must remain agile and adapt to these changes in order to effectively engage with foreign audiences and advance their country's interests.

## **Chapter 3: Research design**

### **1.3. The Effectiveness of Digital Diplomacy as a Foreign Policy Strategy**

Digital diplomacy has several benefits in conflict resolution and risk management, as well as in agile management. In terms of conflict resolution, digital diplomacy allows for faster and more effective communication between countries and diplomats. It enables real-time discussions and negotiations, which can lead to quicker resolutions and less escalation of conflicts. Digital diplomacy also allows for greater transparency and accountability, as discussions and negotiations can be documented and shared publicly, which can help build trust between countries. (Kozhanov and Shaikhutdinov, 2018)

Digital diplomacy has the potential to aid crisis management by enabling governments to quickly disseminate information and warnings to citizens and officials across different countries, thereby helping to prevent or contain crises. In addition, it can help build trust and enhance cooperation between countries, thereby contributing to effective crisis management. (Bjola and Manor, 2018) The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of digital diplomacy being widely used to share information, coordinate responses, and foster international cooperation in the fight against the virus. It can also play a critical role in preventing and responding to future global health crises by facilitating the rapid exchange of information and promoting cross-border collaboration. (Zhang and Kim 2020)

In terms of agile management, digital diplomacy allows for greater flexibility and responsiveness in foreign policy decision-making. It enables diplomats and officials to stay connected and up-to-date on global events, and to quickly respond to emerging issues or crises. This can help countries to better navigate complex and rapidly changing geopolitical landscapes. (Ruffini and Snow, 2018)

Another key advantage of digital diplomacy is its use of social media platforms, which allow for rapid communication and interaction with citizens of other countries. By leveraging social media, diplomats can engage with audiences in real-time and promote their messages more effectively (Fisher, 2013). Digital technologies are especially beneficial in public diplomacy for tasks such as information gathering and processing, consular activities, and communication during emergency situations (Reshetnikova, 2018).

Besides this, the potential ease with which social media can be accessed and the low cost in comparison to other methods make it an attractive tool for many embassies, as well as other government offices, that are often facing the twin challenges of budget cuts along with demands to

increase engagement. Numerous platforms allow for the use of more dynamic content, such as videos, photos, and links, rather than traditional methods of giving lectures or passing out pamphlets. In addition, social media provide key channels in reaching youth populations, a major goal of current public diplomacy efforts (Reshetnikova, 2018).

International practice shows that competent use of digital diplomacy tools can bring big dividends to those who invest in them. Moreover, digital diplomacy does not always require financial investments. On the contrary, it is often aimed at reducing costs. The human factor—the desire of employees to grow, master new technologies, spend part of their work time on working with the target Internet audience, and on processing electronic data, and creating information and reference materials—is very important (Reshetnikova, 2018).

Digital diplomacy is advantageous because it promotes transparency, which is demanded by the public in the modern world. Social media platforms allow individuals to share their personal lives with the public, leading to a natural desire for transparency from governments. However, diplomacy is known for its confidentiality, making it difficult for diplomats to find a balance between transparency and confidentiality. By utilizing social media, diplomats can personalize their posts and include the public in important conversations, making them feel included. Research has shown that emotionally-charged tweets receive the most attention online. Many For example, President Trump's daily tweets about his meetings have positive effects, creating visual images in the minds of the audience and causing them to pay higher levels of attention. This personalization helps diplomats engage with the public and appear transparent. (Strauß, Kruikemeier, van der Meulen, and van Noort, 2015)

Digital diplomacy not only provides financial benefits but also has environmental advantages. The advancement in telecommunication technology such as Skype, Zoom and Facetime allows remote communication and eliminates the need for foreign representatives to travel to other countries. This reduces transportation costs and is environmentally friendly. Furthermore, digital technology can reduce paper and printing production. The ministry of Japan conducted studies within their country and determined that the use of digital technology can reduce their CO2 emissions by up to 7%. By decreasing the need for physical travel, digital diplomacy causes financial and environmental costs to decline. (Loerincik, Yves. 2006)

It is also important to note that digital diplomacy is a tool in building persuasion and perception and what really matters is how countries design digital diplomacy and create content. With digital diplomacy, what you say to other nations becomes even more crucial since the spread of information

is rather fast. The biggest disadvantage of digital diplomacy is the fact that there is a probability of negative correlation between reaching vast groups and giving them an effective message. Hence, the process needs to be planned carefully. Even a small mistake may lead to consequences that would be hard to recover from (Cooper and Narine, 2016)

#### **1.4. The Risks Associated with Digital Diplomacy in International Relations**

While digital diplomacy offers many benefits, it is important for diplomats and officials to be aware of the risks and take steps to mitigate them. One of the most significant risks associated with digital diplomacy is the potential for cybersecurity breaches. Diplomatic communications are often sensitive and confidential, and a cyber-attack could result in the leakage of classified information or disrupt diplomatic negotiations.

According to Sabrina Sotiriou (2016), those countries that adopted digital diplomacy later than the Anglo-American countries are considered “slower participants”. This term refers to countries that were not as quick to adopt digital diplomacy practices as the early adopters. There is a French saying that translates to “being absent is equal to being wrong”, which suggests that countries that do not participate in digital diplomacy may be at a disadvantage. However, social media management, particularly during crisis situations, requires a flexible and proactive approach because governments are accountable to their citizens who expect to be informed online. In addition, foreign ministries must also contend with the challenging and constantly evolving information ecosystem.

Criticisms of the use of social media in politics have included ineffectiveness and danger. As pointed out by the President of the United States Institute of Peace, who is also a former U.S. Foreign Service officer, information about international crises that once took hours or days to spread is now being transmitted instantly through various media channels including the Internet. While this can be helpful for spreading information quickly, it also presents challenges for policymakers who must manage and respond to these events in real-time. In some cases, the rapid dissemination of information can be more of a burden than a benefit. (Solomon, R. H., 2000)

In other words, digital diplomacy has its risks, which include information leakage, hacking, and the anonymity of Internet users. The Wikileaks incident is an example of information leakage, where hundreds of thousands of diplomatic cables were published, including frank assessments by U.S. diplomats of world leaders, governments, and their host countries. This incident demonstrated the need for greater transparency in diplomatic communication, and highlighted the difficulties of balancing security concerns with the need to maintain open channels of communication. (Manor,

2018)

Hacking is also a risk in digital diplomacy, as demonstrated by the hacking attack on the personal website of the Israeli Minister for Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs. Despite this, the Minister expressed his commitment to continue performing public diplomacy on behalf of Israel, including on the internet. (Permyakova, 2012).

Moreover, there is a risk of diplomatic adversaries, both state and non-state actors, attempting to hack into government systems and retrieve valuable information for their own benefit. This was highlighted by Westcott in 2008. Furthermore, the “culture of anonymity” on the internet means that individuals can easily create false identities or attack others, which poses a challenge for digital diplomacy (Yakovenko, 2012).

The anonymous nature of the internet creates the possibility for individuals to impersonate others or cause trouble, which poses a challenge for digital diplomacy. Surprisingly, even advocates and practitioners of digital diplomacy may make mistakes in their usage. Permyakova (2012) gives an example of a tweet from Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt that was controversial and deemed insensitive by many of his followers before the 2012 World Economic Forum in Davos. The tweet mentioned the World Food Program dinner, which was perceived as inappropriate and politically incorrect, given the issue of global hunger. The quick and critical backlash on Twitter resulted in the hashtag #fail being used to describe the tweet. This incident highlights the importance of crafting messages that are sensitive to diverse audiences in order to avoid mishaps in digital diplomacy.

As a result, it is more than important to note that there is always a potential for misunderstandings and miscommunications due to language barriers and cultural differences. Diplomatic communication often involves subtle nuances and cultural references that may not translate well into other languages. As such, messages can be misinterpreted or even offensive to different audiences, which can damage diplomatic relationships and hinder progress towards mutual goals. This highlights the importance of employing skilled translators and cultural experts in digital diplomacy efforts. One example of miscommunication in digital diplomacy occurred in 2015 when the U.S. Embassy in Cairo tweeted a link to a comedy video that mocked Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The tweet was seen as disrespectful and offensive by many Egyptians, and the U.S. Embassy issued an apology. This incident shows how a seemingly innocent or humorous tweet can have unintended consequences when cultural sensitivities are not taken into account.

Finally, another challenge of digital diplomacy is the need for diplomats and officials to stay up to date with the latest technological developments and social media platforms. New technologies

and social media platforms are constantly emerging, and it can be difficult to determine which ones to use and how to use them effectively. Furthermore, officials must also be aware of the latest privacy policies and regulations in order to ensure that they are protecting sensitive information appropriately.

### **1.5. Measurement tools for global digital diplomacy development**

Global digital diplomacy indexes serve as valuable tools for understanding and improving a country's digital diplomacy efforts in an increasingly connected and digital world. There are several indexes that measure digital diplomacy globally, including:

1. Digital Diplomacy Index (DDI): Created by the Fletcher School at Tufts University, the DDI measures the digital diplomacy efforts of 60 countries using data from diplomatic Twitter accounts.
2. Soft Power 30: This index, created by Portland Communications and the USC Center on Public Diplomacy, measures a country's soft power, including digital diplomacy efforts, based on factors such as culture, education, and diplomacy.
3. Twiplomacy Study: Conducted by public relations firm Burson-Marsteller, the Twiplomacy Study analyzes the Twitter accounts of heads of state and government and foreign ministers to identify digital diplomacy trends.
4. The Digital Government Ranking: This index, created by the United Nations and the International Telecommunication Union, measures a country's digital readiness, including its use of digital technologies in government and diplomacy.
5. The Global Diplomacy Index: Created by the Lowy Institute for International Policy, this index measures a country's diplomatic influence and engagement, including its use of digital tools, based on factors such as the number of embassies and consulates and the number of treaties signed.

Digital Diplomacy Index is "one of the most ambitious efforts to date to measure the performance of diplomacy in the digital age". (Bjola & Manor, 2018) The index uses multiple indicators and data sources to assess digital diplomacy activities and provides a global ranking of countries. It was developed as a tool to measure the performance of world powers in the emerging field of online international affairs. The index utilizes measurable data on online conversations, specifically data from the diplomatic Twitter accounts of G20 countries, which is refreshed every twenty-four hours.

The primary objective of the index is to provide countries and diplomatic entities with a clear

and consistent picture of the new online environment they face, help them identify the challenges at stake, compare their performance to other actors, and capture trends in online diplomacy as they emerge (Twiplomacy, 2021). Since its methodology and transparency have also been praised by other scholars, the next section that is dedicated to a comparison of leading countries in digital diplomacy field will be analyzed based on this report.

### 1.6. The Use of Digital Diplomacy by Great and Middle Powers

Due to the limited information available on the use of digital diplomacy in Azerbaijan, this section will focus on examining the digital diplomacy strategies of 3 countries that are ranked among the top 10 in the Digital Diplomacy Index 2023 (Table 2). These countries include both traditional great powers like the U.S and France, as well as middle-ranking power such as India. Those countries employ digital diplomacy techniques aggressively to promote their foreign policy objectives globally.

№	Country	Diplomatic Network Reach	Diplomatic Weight	Vocality	Message Efficiency	Global Country Visibility	Format Proficiency	Momentum	Diplomatic Centrality	Language Diversity	Digital Diplomacy Index
1	United States	9.54	10	9.94	8.47	9.17	7.66	9.52	7.92	9.26	9.06
2	India	10	8.49	9.24	9.25	9.26	9.17	10	7.43	10	9.01
3	France	8.89	7.35	9.49	5.86	9.3	9.03	7.72	10	9.26	8.4
4	Mexico	8.97	8.33	8.78	7.68	9.09	8.97	8.61	5.19	8.07	8.12
5	Japan	8.32	8.76	9.17	7.77	10	6.85	7.69	6.21	8.91	8.12
6	Russia	8.11	8.26	10	6.36	9.26	9.92	7.39	5.55	9.58	8.03
7	Canada	8.63	7.56	9.14	6.38	8.69	8.3	6.77	8.3	8.52	7.99
8	Brazil	8.91	7.06	7.53	9.17	9.07	9.1	8.37	5.17	6.12	7.86
9	Türkiye	9.35	7.49	8.12	10	9.1	8.74	8.9	2.63	7.82	7.84
10	Saudi Arabia	9	7.29	8.46	7.42	8.13	9.47	8.4	4.81	7.55	7.71

Table 2. Digital Diplomacy Index 2023

Looking at the table, we can see that India has the highest score on three indicators (Diplomatic Network Reach, Language Diversity, and Digital Diplomacy Index), while the United States, Russia, Japan, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and France each have the highest score on one indicator.

#### 1.6.1. US

The U.S. foreign policy establishment has moved faster and further away from this tradition in recent years than have most of its counterparts abroad. There is resistance to accepting the new digital realities by tradition-bound officials within the diplomatic community. Old habits die slowly.

The United States government was slow in adopting digital resources, including digital communication and information resources. The U.S. State Department only established a central



office to manage its electronic resources in March 1998, which was a delayed step. This slow adoption of digital technology may have put the U.S. at a disadvantage in digital diplomacy compared to countries that adopted these practices earlier. (Dizard, 2001)

The US has implemented several significant digital diplomacy initiatives, such as the utilization of Twitter by former Secretary of State John Kerry and former President Barack Obama to interact with foreign leaders and promote US foreign policy. The Virtual Student Foreign Service program has been created to establish connections between American college students and foreign missions, while the International Information Programs (IIP) bureau has been established to engage with foreign audiences through social media on issues of mutual interest.

In addition, the United States has also made efforts to develop and popularize digital platforms for public diplomacy. This includes initiatives like the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) Network and the Global Engagement Center. (Kumar, 2020) For instance, The Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) Network is a platform created by the US government to support the development of young African leaders through online courses, mentorship opportunities, and networking events.

The US is expanding its digital diplomacy initiatives by using social media and digital platforms to connect with audiences in important regions of the world. For instance, the US Embassy in Beijing is using Weibo to reach out to Chinese citizens and promote American culture and values. The US is also using digital tools to support its public diplomacy efforts in areas such as human rights, democracy, and economic development. The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has introduced several digital initiatives to promote innovation and economic development in developing countries. (Manor, 2019)

Indeed, the US has faced challenges in its digital diplomacy efforts also, including the impact of cyber security breaches on diplomatic communications and criticism over the use of social media for propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Some have proposed a more radical approach to computing foreign policy operations, known as “Tele Diplomacy”, which involves virtual embassies serving as electronic data gathering outposts for decision-making in Washington. However, this approach has been criticized as technocracy run amuck, as machines cannot replicate the essential personal skills and moral precision required for effective diplomacy, as defined by British diplomat Harold Nicolson. (Dizard, 2001)

In 2022, Biden administration has put forward a new strategy for digital diplomacy that includes the creation of a new position, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for Cyberspace and Digital Policy. The nominee for this position is facing a Senate confirmation hearing to take on this important

role. The goal of this new position is to assert U.S. leadership in the development of global standards and best practices for the modern internet. This is part of a broader effort by the administration to promote democratic values and protect national security interests in the digital age.

### **1.6.2. India**

India has adopted a comprehensive approach to digital diplomacy, leveraging social media platforms, digital tools, and online communication channels to engage with audiences both domestically and internationally.

India has been ranked in the top 10 nations in terms of its digital diplomacy performance over the last year by Diplomacy Live, a global research, advocacy, consulting and training platform. India and Mexico are the only two countries from the developing world in this list, and India's high ranking is despite a relatively modest budget for public diplomacy. The Ministry of External Affairs' (MEA) Official Facebook page, with more than 1.2 million followers is second only to that of the U.S. State Department amongst Foreign Ministries, excluding its companion page "Indian Diplomacy" which alone has some 850,000 followers. (Chaudhury, 2016)

India has been actively using digital platforms for diplomacy and engagement with foreign audiences. MEA of India has been at the forefront of India's digital diplomacy efforts, with a strong presence on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. The ME's official Twitter account (@MEAIndia) has over 11 million followers as of April 2023, making it one of the most followed foreign ministries on the platform. The MEA has a unique Mobile App, which has garnered more than 150,000 downloads on Android and iOS platforms, and which is now being revamped to accommodate new technologies (Chaudhury, 2016).

India's Twitter diplomacy has also been recognized globally, with the MEA receiving the "Digital Diplomacy Award" from the Diplomatist magazine in 2019 for its innovative use of social media in diplomacy.

India's digital diplomacy efforts have also extended to virtual summits and conferences. In 2020, India hosted the first-ever virtual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) leaders. The virtual summit brought together leaders from eight countries and was conducted via video-conferencing, showcasing India's ability to conduct high-level diplomatic engagements online.

In addition to digital diplomacy at headquarters, India's Missions and Posts have increasingly embraced the use of social media. With support from MEA, more than 95% of Indian Missions and Posts are now available on Facebook and 60% on Twitter. Their online presence plays a critical

role in many situations of crisis and was instrumental during recent evacuation efforts from Yemen and Libya. and during the earthquake in Nepal in April 2015 (Chaudhury, 2016).

Additionally, India has established strategic partnerships with other countries to enhance its digital diplomacy efforts. For example, in 2018, India and Japan launched a joint initiative called the India-Japan Digital Partnership, which aims to enhance cooperation in areas such as cybersecurity, digital infrastructure, and the digital economy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the growth and importance of digital diplomacy in India's public diplomacy initiatives. India has continued to push forward with its digital diplomacy initiatives after 2020. In addition to the launch of e-RUPI, which aims to promote financial inclusion and digital payments, India has also been using technology to expand its diplomatic reach. For instance, India has been leveraging artificial intelligence and big data to improve its diplomatic efforts, as well as using social media and other digital platforms to engage with citizens and stakeholders. Furthermore, India has been promoting its IT sector through various initiatives such as the Global IT Challenge for Youth with Disabilities. The challenge is designed to promote digital literacy and inclusion, as well as showcase India's technological capabilities. India has also been engaging with other countries on issues related to technology and cybersecurity, and has been working to establish itself as a leader in these fields.

However, there is still a need for India to restructure and improve its approach to digital diplomacy. Especially, given that India has surpassed China as the world's most populous country and is expected to maintain its rapid economic growth, the country's global significance is on the rise, and it may encounter a range of challenges and pressures in the coming year. In this context, India may need to use its digital diplomacy initiatives to effectively communicate its positions, respond to any negative perceptions, and build positive relationships with other nations. India may also need to leverage its tech prowess to address some of the economic and social challenges it faces, such as promoting financial inclusion and digital payments through initiatives like e-RUPI, as mentioned earlier. Additionally, India's upcoming presidencies of the G-20 and SCO could provide opportunities for the country to showcase its digital diplomacy initiatives and assert its leadership in shaping global digital governance and standards.

### **1.6.3. France**

France has been actively engaging in digital diplomacy by using various digital channels and tools to promote its image, defend its interests, and communicate with foreign audiences. The Ministry

of Foreign Affairs has been at the forefront of this effort, leveraging digital technologies to enhance dialogue with civil society, strengthen public service, and support the diplomatic network.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has actively pursued a social media communication policy since 2008-2009, with a presence on various platforms in multiple languages, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. The Ministry of Europe reported in 2019 that in 2017, the websites of French embassies and consulates abroad, which are available in about 15 languages, received over 43 million visits from internet users. Additionally, the social media activity of French diplomatic posts has increased, with 204 posts communicating on Facebook and 149 on Twitter. While they primarily use Twitter and Facebook, they also adapt to local platforms such as Weibo in China. According to a source, the website “France Diplomatie” is one of the Ministry’s main platforms, with nearly 1.5 million monthly visitors, a third of which utilize its flagship service for travelers. It is also noteworthy that the Ministry was among the first French institutions to establish a website in 1995.

Besides this, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs offers different resources and services to assist its diplomatic network in their communication endeavors, which include editorial aid, regular formats for embassy and consulate websites, hosting solutions, phone and online support, and instructional materials. Since 2011, the Ministry has also initiated a social media training program for all recently assigned diplomats stationed overseas.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the French government launched a digital platform called “France Visas” in 2020, which allowed foreigners to apply for visas online. The platform aimed to simplify the visa application process and improve communication between visa applicants and French consular services.

It appears that the French embassy in the United States has expanded its social media presence beyond traditional platforms like Twitter and Facebook, using TikTok to engage with younger audiences and promote French culture and language. As of May 2023, the embassy’s TikTok account has attracted over 100,000 followers. The French government seems to view digital technology as a crucial tool for promoting the country’s cultural and linguistic heritage, particularly as emerging powers assert themselves on the global stage. Additionally, digital technology can be used to support democratic values and freedom of expression.

#### **1.6.4. Türkiye**

The Republic of Türkiye ranks in the top five globally for its number of diplomatic missions with 255 missions in different countries around the world. Considering that there are only 45 leading

world economies and 193 countries in the world, this considerable figure coupled with Türkiye's position in global diplomacy and its success in representing the Turkish flag worldwide are beyond valuable.

Türkiye managed to make extraordinary achievements despite being up against two "black swans", namely the global COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, and was truly appreciated by the United Nations and many powerful countries home to the world's leading organizations for its evacuation operations and ability to supply medical aid and food to regions in need.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry is accelerating its investments in wide-ranging digital diplomacy and projects to develop technology in order to take Türkiye's "humanitarian and entrepreneurial" diplomatic success to an even more ambitious level in 2023 and beyond. Making the best of the hardest times through the art of diplomacy, Türkiye takes policies, strategies and applications to the next level with the Foreign Ministry's "wise and compassionate" diplomatic moves. Going beyond just strengthening Türkiye's diplomatic presence in its neighboring geography, it also focuses on an ever-growing "cooperation" process that spans all the way to Africa, Asia and Latin America.

According to Yücel (2012), digital diplomacy is user centered and Turkish new media users are highly active. Human capital of Türkiye is an important issue when it comes to digital diplomacy and they need to be considered in this process.

One of the first digital diplomacy actions of Türkiye was realized in 2011 when four American journalists who were under custody in Libya were saved by the efforts of Türkiye. Türkiye's Washington Ambassador Namık Tan, first announced the news that journalists were saved on Twitter and then he shared some photos. This is an example of Turkish diplomacy online.

In Türkiye, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is a highly influential political figure, and this is reflected on his online presence. In 2018, he was the third most followed world leader on Twitter, with a significant increase in his number of followers compared to last year. Upon analyzing his social media accounts, it becomes evident that the content primarily consists of photographs of Erdoğan's activities and brief updates on political events. (GI Global, 2018)

In addition to the Turkish account, President Erdogan also maintains accounts in English and Arabic. The creation of the Arabic account immediately after his election as president signifies Turkey's strategic policy of targeting audiences in Middle Eastern and Arab countries. This strategic policy includes the establishment of embassies in Africa and the implementation of activities through

the Office of Public Diplomacy and Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency. It is important to inform the targeted public about these practices using appropriate content. The growing popularity of Turkish television series is closely connected to Turkey's diplomatic efforts. These series are broadcasted in over 100 countries, significantly enhancing Turkey's soft power influence worldwide, extending from the Balkans to Latin America. In the 2015 Soft Power Rankings, Turkey ranked 14th, partially due to the immense popularity of Turkish soap operas. This popularity leads to extensive media coverage, particularly on online platforms. Turkey benefits from this popularity as television series enable the country to enter people's homes and convey its cultural values for extended periods of time. (Müftüler-Baç and Öniş, 2018)

Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs also actively utilizes social media platforms, particularly Twitter, to share messages regarding Turkey's foreign policy objectives and their implementation. His Twitter account has approximately 795,000 followers, and he also maintains a Facebook page followed by nearly 200,000 individuals. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey is recognized for its use of innovative technologies, such as the e-Visa service, which allows for quick and efficient visa processing, winning the first prize in the "e-TR e-Government awards" in 2013. Additionally, the ministry has introduced a Diplomatic Portal to streamline processes and reduce environmental impact. Its objective is to disseminate accurate and timely information to the international community through various online channels, including websites, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. In 2016, the ministry's website received over 4.5 million visitors and provided information about Turkey in 18 different languages. The official Turkish Twitter account of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has 1.25 million followers, ranking second among Foreign Ministries globally, while the official Facebook page is available in both Turkish and English. The ministry's YouTube channel has accumulated almost one million viewers to date. In December 2016, the Minister launched a dedicated website, 15.07.gov.tr, in honor of the Turkish people who demonstrated remarkable resilience during the attempted coup on July 15. The website offers detailed information about the organization behind the terrorist attack, FETO, and includes a library containing books and articles. (Çavusoğlu, 2016)

Besides this, The Digital Diplomacy initiative aims to capitalize on the transformative power of technology in all avenues of foreign policy and increase our efficiency and effectiveness from consular services to public diplomacy, and from digital infrastructure to strategic foresight and analysis.

Similarly, the Antalya Diplomacy Forum is designed as an innovative platform to exchange views on global and regional issues and provide solutions to key foreign policy issues. In such a short

time span, the ADF has become a well-known platform for global diplomacy.

Following the first Forum in 18-20 June 2021, the second ADF was held in Antalya on 11-13 March 2022 under the theme of “Recoding Diplomacy”, with a broad participation. Both Forums was inaugurated by His Excellency Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, The President of Türkiye. The Forum hosted a total of 3260 guests from 75 countries including 17 Heads of State and Government, 80 Ministers, 40 high-level representatives of International Organizations, as well as other policy makers, diplomats, business leaders, representatives of think-tanks, academics and university students.

### **1.7. The Evolution of Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy**

Azerbaijan’s foreign policy, a state that regained its independence only thirty-two years ago, has several distinguishing features. For a predominantly Muslim country with a post-Soviet history, yet one that is on the political map of Europe, but has a neighborhood that includes Russia, Iran and Türkiye, effective foreign policy is not just an international relations instrument - it is a survival tool. At the same time, such a geopolitical location provides many opportunities. Located at the crossroads of the major trade and energy routes between East and West and maintaining the secularity of a state with a Muslim heritage, Azerbaijan is a natural bridge between Europe and Asia, the Muslim and Christian worlds and a gateway to energy and transportation corridors for the entire region in which it is located. This makes Azerbaijan one of the most strategic states of the former Soviet Union in terms of both regional and international security. Moreover, when it comes to economic integration, Azerbaijan’s role in the transit of hydrocarbons from the Caspian basin also has to be taken into account. Being a part of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan ultimately is a part of the geopolitical area where regional powers such as Russia, Türkiye and Iran have critical economic and political interests. In addition, this region is a place where such international players as the US and the EU are also engaged in the exercise of their influence. Dr. Frederick Starr believes that due to Azerbaijan's relatively larger economy compared to other countries in the South Caucasus, the engagement of regional and international players will have a distinct impact on Azerbaijan. (Baku Dialogues, 2023) This suggests that Azerbaijan’s economic strength and potential may attract more attention, investment, and influence from various actors in the region and beyond. Indeed, when it comes to foreign policy strategy, such differences in possible impact cannot be overlooked. Hence, there is a clear understanding in Azerbaijan that different approaches of the aforementioned regional and global powers may result in clashes of interests, calling upon Azerbaijan to develop a balanced and pragmatic foreign policy.

### **1.7.1. Azerbaijan's Foreign policy at regional level**

After re-establishing its independence, Azerbaijan found itself in a very complicated geopolitical regional framework. Engaged in the international armed conflict with Armenia, Azerbaijan's fate depended a lot on its larger neighbors, namely Russia, Türkiye and Iran, as well as on the handling of the conflict itself. Foreign policies towards each of these states took their share in shaping the Azerbaijani state in its present form. Today, Azerbaijan's number one strategic partner is undoubtedly Türkiye. Turkish-Azerbaijani relations have thrived since Türkiye recognized newly independent Azerbaijan in 1991, the first state to do so. Türkiye and Azerbaijan are currently linked by projects that span the political, military, economic, cultural and social spheres, while ties between the two peoples are captured by the dictum: "One nation, two states". Energy cooperation in Azerbaijan-Türkiye relations is essential. Two pipelines that deliver oil and gas link Azerbaijan with Türkiye via Georgia. Thus, Türkiye plays an essential role in the transit of hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea towards European markets. Ties in energy cooperation are so close that experts point out that they are moving from classic "low politics" relations to "high politics". (Rzayev, 2011)

The supremacy of energy cooperation in relations with Türkiye can be challenged only by relations in the military field. Türkiye first closed its border with Armenia after the beginning of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, supporting Azerbaijan in establishing a semi-blockade of Armenia. Since then it has assisted Azerbaijan in bolstering its military capacity. Thousands of Azerbaijani military officers and non-commissioned officers have acquired their military training in Türkiye. Being a NATO member, Türkiye assists Azerbaijan in the development of its armed forces to the highest standards promoted by the Alliance, thus creating a favorable atmosphere for Azerbaijan's relations with NATO. At the same time, in virtue of their links to Georgia, both Azerbaijan and Türkiye are interested in developing regional projects and maintaining energy security in the region. It is worth mentioning that Türkiye's interest in becoming a regional energy hub is largely supported by Azerbaijan. Energy projects and close cooperation in developing economy-friendly energy policies are the trademarks of Azerbaijan-Türkiye relations. Azerbaijan also provides Türkiye with a link to Central Asia, to which ethnic Turks are tied both culturally and historically. As Azerbaijan remains a part of the post-Soviet space, it can facilitate such cooperation. In addition, in security issues, Azerbaijan is dedicated to supporting Türkiye in its fight against the PKK, which is one of the highest priorities on the Turkish national security agenda.

Azerbaijan has also worked towards the progressive improvement of relations with its largest neighbor, Russia. Azerbaijan's bilateral relations with Russia presently include a variety of spheres



including close cooperation in economic and military areas. Azerbaijan is Russia's number one trade partner in the South Caucasus and Russia's direct investment in Azerbaijan has grown almost seventeen times with respect to the 1990s. In turn, Russia is Azerbaijan's number one trade partner in the non-oil sector. Military cooperation between the two countries includes not only educational and training activities, but also arms trade and military support. (Pivovarov, 2012) Regional security is another point on the bilateral agenda of these states, in that close cooperation of the countries' security and police forces contributes to the maintenance of a safe regional environment. There is also close cooperation on Caspian Sea basin issues. After Azerbaijan and Russia reached an agreement on their respective sectors of the basin in 2002-03, the barriers to effective partnership in this area were essentially lifted.

Generally, Azerbaijan's foreign policy toward Russia reflects its commitment to developing strategic partnerships spanning across political, economic, social and cultural sphere. Azerbaijan remains in the Commonwealth of Independent States, without however furthering integration in its extended format, not least due to the membership of Armenia in the same organization. Azerbaijan's stance on the integration projects promoted by Russia remains neutral. This is due to the balanced approach that Azerbaijan maintains in its foreign policy and also to Russia's position on the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Azerbaijan's foreign relations with Iran are as complicated as the situation around Iran's nuclear program. Since independence, Azerbaijan's relations with its Islamic neighbor have always suffered from a certain level of tension, unnerving both states, which share much common history and culture. The presence of a large minority (at least 16% of the total population) of ethnic origin Azerbaijanis who live in Iran represents a constant concern for the Iranian regime, which sees Azerbaijan as possible kin-state and fears separatist movements in its northern provinces closest to Azerbaijan. The fact that Azerbaijan has tried to distance itself from such notions seems not to have had a reassuring effect on Iran. At the same time, secular Azerbaijan is very concerned about Iran trying to exercise its influence over the religious sectors of the Azerbaijani population through the expansion of religious teachings among Shia Muslim groups. That kind of behavior is treated with suspicion and considered a "veiled" threat in Azerbaijan. Very close and strategically warm relations between Iran and Armenia also fuel tensions in Azerbaijan-Iran ties. There is a certain level of reciprocity in Iran's attitude, as the regime is very concerned about Azerbaijan's close cooperation with the West, namely the US, the EU, NATO and Israel. Despite all the tensions in bilateral relations with Iran, Azerbaijan has been trying to maintain good neighbor cooperation. It has taken a

constructive approach in talks over delimitation of respective sectors and borderlines on Caspian Sea, has remained neutral over the nuclear file and has provided numerous assurances that Azerbaijan's territory will never be used against Iran, in line with the 2005 non-aggression pact. (Blank, 2005)

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remained the number one topic on Azerbaijan's foreign policy agenda till 2020, the beginning of the Second Karabakh War. The conflict was resolved in 2020 through the Second Karabakh War, which saw Azerbaijan retake control of the territories that were occupied by Armenian forces since the 1990s. The peace agreement signed on November 10, 2020, ended the hostilities and established a framework for the return of displaced persons, the exchange of prisoners of war, and the restoration of infrastructure in the affected areas. While the conflict has been resolved, tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia still exist, and efforts to address the remaining issues are ongoing.

### **1.7.2. Azerbaijan's relations with the international community**

While deeply engaged in regional development and local neighborhood policies, Azerbaijan has also made considerable steps in establishing itself in the international arena. Here Azerbaijan's relations with international players such as the US and Israel and with organizations such as NATO and the EU have played a considerable role. (Iskandarov, 2019) The interests of these actors in the South Caucasus, and particularly in Azerbaijan, have defined Azerbaijan's levels of cooperation and partnership with the "Western world".

Azerbaijan re-established its independence and within months, the US opened an embassy and established diplomatic relations. The US recognized the strategic importance of Azerbaijan, which is located at the crossroads of Russia, Iran, and Türkiye, and is rich in hydrocarbon resources. During the Bush Senior administration, the US initiated energy infrastructure projects, and under the Clinton and Bush Junior administrations, full-scale military and economic cooperation ensued. As cooperation intensified, so did US concerns about regional security and energy. Thus, the US sought to counter Russia's influence over South Caucasian Azerbaijan and potential security threats from Iran. Additionally, the US recognized Azerbaijan's significance as a crucial link in the energy transit route connecting the South Caucasus with Central Asia, bypassing Russia and Iran. (Cohen, 2012)

For Azerbaijan, developing its strategic and political relations with Israel is a key foreign policy priority. On the one hand, the military cooperation that started early in the 1990s and 2020s during the Second Karabakh War conflict, when Israel was one of the major suppliers of arms and military equipment, has already turned into full-scale security-based cooperation. Such cooperation

includes information and data exchange, training of security, intelligence and armed forces and support for the modernization of the armed forces with the supply of battlefield equipment and ammunition. In the context of the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Azerbaijan and Israel renewed their bilateral relations. Israel provided Azerbaijan with military support, including weapons and ammunition, and intelligence information. Azerbaijan also purchased unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) from Israel, which played a significant role in the war. In return, Azerbaijan granted Israel access to its airbases and territory for intelligence gathering and military exercises. The renewed relations between Azerbaijan and Israel also extended to other areas, including economic cooperation and cultural exchanges. Azerbaijan welcomed Israeli companies to invest in its economy and infrastructure projects, while Israel continued to import Azerbaijani oil. On the other hand, the Jewish communities have always had strong ties with Azerbaijan and there has not been a single episode of anti-Semitism in the history of Azerbaijan. Recognizing that, the Israeli Knesset hosted a ceremony marking the Azerbaijan's Republic Day in 2007.

Azerbaijan's political collaboration with Israel offers significant advantages to the country's relationship with the US, particularly through the support of the pro-Israel lobby in Congress. Despite Azerbaijan's recognition of Palestine, Israel understands the country's place in the Muslim world and seeks to maintain a strong relationship. Azerbaijan is also keen on strengthening its partnership and cooperation with Israel, while Israel strategically values its alliance with Azerbaijan in the South Caucasus region.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, NATO's interest in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus region has increased due to the Alliance's engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq, which has led to a greater focus on broader security concerns. Azerbaijan, which has the strongest military force in the region, has become an important partner for NATO in terms of military reform, establishing effective state institutions in the military and security fields, and democratization goals. (Halbach, 2012) Azerbaijan's interest in close cooperation with NATO lies in the development of its armed and security forces, which requires NATO's assistance to modernize and restructure. Azerbaijan aims to reach the Alliance's standards, but its entry into the Non-Aligned Movement in 2011 signifies that it does not see cooperation with NATO as a prelude to joining the Alliance in the future. Instead, Azerbaijan is dedicated to pragmatic and mutually beneficial cooperation with any responsible partner in the field of security without commitments to join any military alliance or organization. Maintaining its balanced approach and military neutrality will remain equally important for Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan's relations with the European Union have been continuously evolving over the

years. After the EU's expansion in 2007, the Union shifted its focus towards the eastern neighborhood, including the South Caucasus, with Azerbaijan being an important political entity in the region. The EU and Azerbaijan have been engaged in cooperation on many fronts, including energy security, economic cooperation, border security, institutional capacity-building, as well as rule of law and democratization issues. Azerbaijan is an active participant in the Eastern Partnership framework, which serves as a regional extension of the European Neighborhood Policy. The country welcomes the EU's interest in regional security but expects greater commitment from the EU in the development of stronger bilateral and regional relations. (Babazadeh, 2020) For instance, EU4Digital is a program launched by the European Union to support the digital transformation of the Eastern Partnership countries, including Azerbaijan. The program aims to extend the benefits of the EU's digital single market to the Eastern Partnership countries, and to help them develop a vibrant digital economy, increase access to digital services, and improve digital skills and literacy. Azerbaijan is committed to developing these areas and to establishing productive cooperation with the EU to implement European standards in the country and bring it closer to the "European space." However, Azerbaijan does not aim for EU membership but rather seeks to establish a strong strategic partnership with the Union.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis**

### **4.1. Factors that Shaped the Use of Azerbaijan's Digital Diplomacy Approach**

Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy approach was shaped by several factors, including the country's strategic location between Europe and Asia, its desire to diversify its economy and reduce reliance on oil, and its need to promote its national identity and culture. The government's efforts to modernize the country's infrastructure and embrace new technologies also played a significant role in the development of its digital diplomacy strategy. Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy initiatives have focused on utilizing social media platforms, creating digital content, and engaging with international audiences to promote the country's interests and values. The country has also leveraged digital technologies to enhance its tourism industry and promote its cultural heritage.

#### **4.1.1. Rapidly developing digital infrastructure**

Azerbaijan is the most sizable country in the South Caucasus, with a population of over 10.26 million. The nation boasts abundant natural resources, particularly oil and natural gas. From 2002 to 2013, Azerbaijan experienced significant economic growth due to increasing oil prices, resulting in the accumulation of substantial foreign exchange reserves and a reduction in foreign debt. However, in August 2022, economic growth slowed to 5.8 percent due to a contraction in the energy sector, while the non-energy sector performed strongly.

Alongside its economic advancement, Azerbaijan has experienced significant and steady poverty reduction, accompanied by a strong increase in wages and the introduction of a well-targeted social benefit system that contributed to the empowerment of the middle class. The poverty rate declined from 49.0 percent in 2001 to 5.9% as of the beginning of 2022. Azerbaijan is an upper-middle-income country in the high human development category. It ranks 91 out of 188 countries in the UNDP Human Development Index, with a score of 0.745. Azerbaijan scored 62.72 points out of 100 on the 2019 Global Competitiveness Report published by the World Economic Forum. This is the highest score in the region due to the country's strong macroeconomic environment rank (10th) characterized by low inflation and favorable public finances.

Over the years, there has been a growing global interest in public administration reforms aimed at improving service provision. This has been largely driven by factors such as increasing consumer demands, financial pressures, global investment competitiveness, and public-sector reform initiatives that have created new opportunities for change. In this context, factors such as the financial status, geographic location, management, and delivery strategies of public services have become critical in

ensuring that citizens receive high-quality public services that meet their expectations. To achieve this, the public sector needs to define its function, strengthen its consumer focus, and develop integrated models for service delivery that are more productive and effective in addressing citizens' needs. Ultimately, the needs of citizens should be at the heart of every decision made in the public sector (PWC 2007).

Starting in 2012, the Government of Azerbaijan embarked on a comprehensive set of reforms to modernize and strengthen public service delivery through the adoption of laws and regulations related to civil service, ethical conduct, anti-corruption measures, access to information, and e-government. These reforms were designed to improve institutional arrangements, structures, systems, and the introduction of innovative practices to make them more conducive to citizen engagement.

One of the most successful steps taken in implementing these reforms was the creation of the State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovations under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SAPSSI) in July 2012. SAPSSI was tasked with providing high-quality public services to citizens and promoting innovation in this sphere. Its activities include public service delivery, digitalization, innovation, and social projects. As a central executive body, SAPSSI manages the "ASAN service" centers, which provide one-stop-shop services for citizens. SAPSSI also coordinates the functions of state agency employees at these centers, ensures periodic assessments, integrates databases of state agencies, and accelerates the development of electronic services. During the "Reactive Services" period, which began in 2013 and ended in 2019, Azerbaijan made significant strides in digital transformation. This included the creation of e-government services, payment services, electronic banking services, and the "ASAN service" received numerous international awards and certificates for its high-quality work and achievements in public service delivery. (ASCH, 2019)

In the subsequent "Proactive Services" period from 2019 to 2020, Azerbaijan continued to build on its digital transformation efforts by creating new e-government portals such as "myGov" and the "ASAN Login" Single Sign-On System, and the National Information Exchange System "ASAN Bridge." The country also received a special award from the United Nations for advancing public service through the application of digital government in 2019.

The government of Azerbaijan started to adopt advanced technologies like artificial intelligence, big data, cloud computing, blockchain, and the Internet of Things to improve administrative tasks and boost economic growth. This digital transformation policy has become a new direction for the country's economic growth and social development. (Qasimli, 2020)

Especially, after the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan is focusing on reconstructing the critical infrastructure in the cities and villages that were damaged during the conflict in the newly liberated territories. As a part of this effort, the Azerbaijani government is investing in emerging communication technologies to enhance the efficiency of the region's economy and infrastructure. This innovation policy is considered a key factor in driving socio-economic development in the near future, by combining advanced digital connectivity, sophisticated AI support, and innovative communication technologies. (Muradzade, 2021)

Azerbaijan has been steadily improving its position in the United Nations E-Government Survey. Whereas in 2022 Azerbaijan was ranked 83rd with 0.6937 EGDI (E-Government Development Index) among 193 countries. In the subsections of EGDI Azerbaijan's sub-indices progressed both in Human Capital Index (from 0.77 to 0.79) and Telecommunication Infrastructure Index (from 0.65 to 0.67). Besides this, Azerbaijan is on the 8th place among 16 landlocked developing countries with the highest EGDI values, which indicates 5 steps down from the previous survey results. Within this category, Kazakhstan has the highest EGDI value (0.8628) and remains the only country in the second highest (V3) rating class of the very high EGDI group.

The digital transition policy led by the government of Azerbaijan has a significant impact on the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in the recently liberated territories. The government plans to improve the quality of life and well-being of people in both urban and rural areas through innovative and people-centric technological solutions. To rebuild the war-devastated region, the government invited foreign companies, and Huawei, a Chinese private telecommunications company, played a direct role in planning, building, and managing interoperable infrastructure there. China is one of the main promoters of sustainable digital inclusion globally and invests in advanced technologies such as the AI ecosystem, cloud computing, blockchain, 5G networks, big data, and robotic process automation, contributing to the development of one of the world's most sophisticated digital ecosystems. Azerbaijan's digital transition policy aims to improve the efficiency of the region's economy and infrastructure and boost socio-economic development. (Zhao, Liu and Dai, 2021)

Therefore, the government of Azerbaijan has been demonstrating growing interest in cooperation with China's Huawei. While attending the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2011, such a direct supervision of President Aliyev over the digitalization process helped boost cooperation with China in the field of digital technologies. Indeed, the growing involvement of Huawei in the technological development of the country comes in the context of increasing political and economic ties between Azerbaijan and China over recent years. (Guliyev, 2021)

Moreover, as part of its non-oil-sector development, Azerbaijan utilizes multilateral projects to advance national priorities. Consequently, the government is currently running the Azerbaijan Digital Hub program, inaugurated in 2018, to stimulate the country's socioeconomic development and digital transformation efforts. Along with the implementation of the Azerbaijan Digital Hub program, Azerbaijan is aiming to reduce its reliance on foreign countries such as Russia and Ukraine for internet access; enlarge the capacity of transmission networks; and, ultimately, increase its pivotal role as a regional digital hub in the South Caucasus. (Sultanov, 2022)

Especially, the 2030 Socio-Economic Development Strategy of Azerbaijan is likely to have an impact on the field of digital diplomacy. The strategy sets out the country's long-term development goals and outlines measures to be taken in various areas, including the development of the digital economy, improving e-governance, and enhancing digital infrastructure. As Azerbaijan seeks to develop its digital economy and enhance its digital infrastructure, it is likely to lead to an increased emphasis on digital diplomacy. This could include a greater investment in the use of digital platforms and tools to promote the country's foreign policy goals and engage with international audiences. Additionally, as the government seeks to improve e-governance, digital diplomacy may play a role in facilitating communication and cooperation with other governments and international organizations.

#### **4.1.2. Nagorno-Karabakh conflict**

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has had a profound impact on Azerbaijan's foreign policy and digital diplomacy approach, shaping the country's strategic priorities and emphasizing the importance of effective communication and engagement with the international community.

The conflict has been a major challenge for the country's international image and has created a need for Azerbaijan to communicate its position and perspective to the world. As a result, Azerbaijan has utilized its digital diplomacy efforts to promote its stance on the conflict, as well as to present its cultural heritage, economic potential, and geopolitical position to international audiences.

During the recent escalation of the conflict in 2020, Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy efforts played a significant role in promoting its military operations, conveying the country's perspective on the conflict, and engaging with the international community. Azerbaijan utilized social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, to share information and visuals related to the conflict, often in real-time. This has included efforts to engage with international organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the European Union to raise awareness of the issue and gain support for Azerbaijan's position.



The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has highlighted the importance of digital diplomacy for Azerbaijan's foreign policy and international image. Azerbaijan's use of digital platforms to promote its position on the conflict has helped to enhance the country's international profile and influence. (Paul, and Huseynov, 2020) Azerbaijan's experience in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could serve as a model for other countries looking to leverage digital diplomacy to advance their foreign policy objectives.

The conflict has led to concerns about the spread of disinformation and propaganda, which has become a significant security issue in the digital age. Azerbaijan has responded to this challenge by developing a comprehensive strategy to combat disinformation and propaganda, which includes efforts to promote media literacy, increase public awareness, and establish partnerships with international organizations. In addition, Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy approach has been used to showcase the country's cultural heritage, particularly the rich history and traditions of the Karabakh region. This has helped Azerbaijan to emphasize its historical claims to the disputed territory and promote its cultural identity on the global stage.

Digital diplomacy efforts during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were successful in generating support from Western audiences. The government's use of social media and online influencers helped to "humanize" the conflict and portray Azerbaijan as the victim of aggression by Armenia. (Walker, 2020) It had helped to raise awareness about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and gain support from audiences around the world. On the other hand, some international media actors criticized the government's use of social media for spreading disinformation and propaganda, mentioning that Azerbaijan faced challenges in balancing its digital diplomacy efforts with its commitments to human rights and democracy.

#### **4.2. Promoting the foreign policy objectives via digital diplomacy**

In several interviews given to AZERTAC on different timelines the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Elmar Mammadyarov, emphasized that the opportunities of "digital diplomacy", which has become a new term in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and our diplomatic missions, are actively used. In addition, he noted that contacts with foreign audiences are established and the truths of the country are conveyed by using social network opportunities. (Xalq qəzeti, 2018)

Dr. Azer Babayev, Associate Professor of ADA University in Political Science, acknowledges that technology is a rapidly evolving force that has an impact on various aspects of life, including

foreign policy and international relations. He believes that technology plays a crucial role in communication, messaging, and coordination. However, he highlights that diplomacy is ultimately about gaining knowledge, especially about other states, and that diplomacy has an important role to play in influencing public diplomacy. He views the development of technology as an important and influential development in recent decades.

According to Khazar Ibrahim, Ambassador of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the United States, classic diplomacy and digital diplomacy are becoming increasingly intertwined in Azerbaijan and around the world. Especially, in the digital era, virtual space is essential for conducting effective diplomacy, and Azerbaijan recognizes the importance of utilizing digital platforms for this purpose. While traditional media may be biased, digital space offers a more democratic platform for expressing opinions and presenting facts. As a result, Azerbaijan is committed to maximizing the effectiveness of its digital diplomacy efforts. He mentions that Azerbaijan has a well-coordinated and focused digital strategy with certain distinct approaches. Khazar Ibrahim highlights the positive impact of digital diplomacy on Azerbaijan's relations with other countries and international organizations. He cites an example of the aftermath of an earthquake in Türkiye, where Azerbaijanis' digital activities had a significant positive impact not only at the government level but also among the general public. This instance demonstrates the power of digital diplomacy in fostering positive relationships and creating a lasting impact beyond traditional diplomatic channels.

Dr. Vasif Huseynov, a Senior Fellow at the Center of Analysis of International Relations (AIR Center), notes that the increasing importance of digital diplomacy in the field of international relations, not only for the global community as a whole but for Azerbaijan also. He cites a recent press conference held in Azerbaijan in February, where Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov discussed the use of digital diplomacy to pursue negotiations with Armenia. Bayramov explained that both sides are facing challenges in their peace negotiations, and defined digital diplomacy as “conducting online negotiations”, exchanging proposals about the peace treaty and discussing the challenges and opportunities in the peace process. This approach has enabled both sides to communicate more frequently and accelerate the negotiation process. As a result, policymakers and diplomats in Azerbaijan have started paying more attention to the potential of digital diplomacy in their foreign policy. and are therefore attempting to conduct online negotiations to clarify key issues and exchange proposals. Dr. Vasif Huseynov also emphasizes the potential of digital diplomacy in facilitating conflict resolution and suggests that policymakers and diplomats should explore its capabilities further. The use of digital diplomacy has the potential to accelerate negotiations, enable

frequent communication, and help both sides to negotiate in real time. Consequently, digital diplomacy can assist the Azerbaijani government in achieving its foreign policy objectives.

Vice-Rector for External, Government and Student Affairs at ADA University, Dr. Fariz Ismailzade highlights that, in today's world, where young people rely heavily on digital sources of information, digital diplomacy has become an essential aspect of overall diplomacy for countries to promote their messages, foreign policy priorities, as well as historical and cultural information. Azerbaijan recognizes the significance of digital diplomacy and has been using various digital tools, such as websites, social media activities, and video clips, to promote its foreign policy objectives and messages. Hence, digital diplomacy has become a crucial pillar of Azerbaijan's diplomatic activities.

Dr. Lala Jumayeva, Assistant Professor of ADA University in Political Science, praises Azerbaijan's foreign policy, stating that it is well-designed and well-implemented. She believes that digital diplomacy plays a crucial role in promoting Azerbaijan's foreign policy, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where traditional diplomatic methods were no longer feasible. Dr. Lala Jumayeva acknowledges that communication is a significant component of diplomacy, and it may have been challenging for diplomats to conduct everything through digital platforms. However, she commends Azerbaijan's successful management of the situation, despite the difficulties. She also notes the increase in popularity of Ministries of Foreign Affairs and diplomats on various digital platforms, emphasizing the continued importance of digital diplomacy in promoting Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Furthermore, she mentions that the Azerbaijani community and society were actively involved in promoting the country's foreign policy goals on social media during the Second Karabakh War, demonstrating the potential for digital diplomacy to engage a broad range of actors and stakeholders and be a potent tool for advancing a country's interests and values. Indeed, in today's fast-paced and constantly changing world, the ability to be adaptable and flexible is critical, and the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs demonstrated this during the challenging situations.

#### **4.2.1. Traditional vs. New Media: Balanced approach**

The media landscape in Azerbaijan is dominated by a system that is reminiscent of the Soviet era, with limited conditions for the development of independent media in the country. Media outlets lack long-term strategies due to the lack of competition and low material revenues, particularly in the print press, where advertising partners have ceased to operate. The advertising market has been impacted by the deterioration of the political situation, resulting in newspapers ceasing to publish. Another issue is the lack of transparency regarding media entrepreneurs, with no information available

about media owners. Azerbaijan's press has gone through different phases, with the introduction of television in 1956 while the country was still part of the USSR. Today, there are several television channels in the country, both public and private, with national and regional coverage.

The widespread use of the internet in Azerbaijan has opened up new opportunities for digital media and marketing. According to the data given by Internet World Stats, with approximately 8.32 million individuals using the internet as of January 2022, representing over 81 percent of the country's population, social media and other digital services have become more prevalent in the country. While blogs and civic journalism initially helped to pave the way for the development of social media marketing in Azerbaijan, the increased use of social networks and other digital services has become more commonplace in recent years, following global trends.

News websites and traditional media outlets in Azerbaijan often lose to social networking news in terms of speed, but in many cases, it is revealed that most of the news which rapidly circulate on social networks have no real basis, and blogs that use social networks as the source of news fall into a net of misinformation. Despite the fact that social networks have the opportunity to quickly reach a wider audience, media outlets are safeguarding their credibility. Thus, if any information shared on a social network refers to news by a media agency, then its reliability is higher. Government interference with Internet content is observed by some users, although not all seem affected.

The digital media landscape in Azerbaijan includes a variety of outlets, including Radio Liberty, Meydan TV, Marja.az, Oxu.az, and 1news.az, which cover different topics and have varying political affiliations. Bizim Yol has the largest social media presence with 1.8 million Facebook followers. Mikroskop Media aims to produce quality and professional content through formats such as infographics, videos, and explanatory articles. (Minbaniyeva, 2015)

Social media serves as a platform for individuals to express their thoughts and advocate for social and political causes. Facebook is the most widely used social network in Azerbaijan, catering to both urban and rural populations of varying ages and political affiliations. Instagram is also popular, albeit with a slightly smaller user base. In contrast, Twitter has a smaller following, with a primarily urban and younger demographic, including politicians and prominent activists. As the traditional media in Azerbaijan is not independent, discussions on social media, especially Facebook, have become the primary means of communication. Various organizations, such as the government, businesses, and the state, have also started using social media platforms, with Facebook becoming a significant source of news production and dissemination. As the number of users on social media continues to increase, its impact on the flow of information also grows. Data published in

DataReportal's latest report indicates that Facebook had 1.60 million, Instagram 4.05 million and Twitter 212.0 thousand users in Azerbaijan in early 2022. Besides this, for the professional LinkedIn's advertising resources indicate that LinkedIn had 550.0 thousand "members", which are the target audience is mostly the professionals of business world. Today, people are looking for information in social media and not in traditional media. People having access and trying to understand what is going on, what are the strategies, where are the priorities.

#### **4.2.2. The most used digital diplomacy tools**

According to Dr. Fariz Ismailzade, the effectiveness of digital tools and platforms depends on the intended audience. For example, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are more effective in reaching younger audiences, while scientific websites and Wikipedia may be more effective for researchers. Politicians often have limited time and may prefer shorter articles and messages, making Twitter and Wikipedia important tools. Azerbaijan is making an effort to use all available tools to reach their intended audiences.

Twitter is considered to be the most important digital platform for diplomatic engagement, not only for Azerbaijan but also for many other countries, states Khazar Ibrahim. Some nations even provide training for their ambassadors and diplomats on how to use Twitter effectively. In the United States, political candidates and high-ranking officials extensively use Twitter as a means of communication. He believes that Twitter is unequivocally the number one digital platform for diplomatic engagement.

In 2020, the whole world was covered in quarantine, the decrease in mobility in the political arena increased the demand for "Twiplomacy". During the pandemic, the activity of most world leaders on Twitter has increased. "Twiplomacy.com" website reports that the list of 50 world leaders with the largest number of followers is headed by Donald Trump's blocked account with 88 million followers. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in second place with 63 million, and Pope Francis is in third place with 50 million. (Twiplomacy, 2021) Azerbaijan also actively participated in the 2020 "Twitter Marathon" of the leaders. Ilham Aliyev's accounts on social networks, especially his Twitter account, were quite active during the Second Karabakh War. So, on the "Facebook" and "Instagram" accounts of the President of Azerbaijan, contents made from tweets, with the username @azpresident and the "Twitter" logo added, were usually shared. This indicated that "Twitter" was selected as the main form of communication. In the Azerbaijani society, this change was adopted very quickly and became a trend. As a result of this, Ilham Aliyev's official Twitter account ranked 30th in the list of

50 world leaders in terms of activity, 33rd in terms of followers, and 29th in terms of influence. (Twiplomacy, 2020) Twiplomacy study also shared that currently an online influence is no longer about how many followers a leader has or how many tweets the leader puts out – it’s about how engaged that follower base is, and how likely they are to interact with a leader’s message.

The internet now has as much strategic importance as other media in Azerbaijan. According to a report by the State Statistical Committee of Azerbaijan, the number of internet users in Azerbaijan increased by 11.3% in 2020 compared to the previous year, reaching a total of 5.7 million users. Additionally, the number of mobile internet users increased by 17.2% in the same period, reaching a total of 9.2 million users. Social media penetration is lower with only 42% of the internet user population, but over 600,000 people joined social media from 2020 to 2021. (DataReportal, 2021) These increases can be attributed to a number of factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the 44-day war with Armenia.

Azerbaijan’s digital diplomacy has played an important role in promoting the country’s position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, particularly during the 2020 war. Azerbaijan's effective use of social media and digital platforms helped to counter Armenian propaganda and raise awareness of the country’s position on the issue. (Valiyev, A., 2020) The use of Twitter as a tool for digital diplomacy during the 44-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 was prominent among both sides, especially leaders. President Ilham Aliyev had two official Twitter accounts, one in Azerbaijani and the other in English and Russian, where he frequently posted public announcements of military achievements and interviews with international media outlets. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, on the other hand, used his personal Twitter account to post messages in English, Russian, French, German, and Italian, which were often linked to other sources such as videos, articles, and interviews. Both leaders used Twitter as a tool for digital diplomacy to gain support from global audiences and vindicate their positions internationally during the war. In Table 1. below we can see the statistics of most retweeted tweets during this period. Thus, the tweets shared by Ilham Aliyev on the Azerbaijani-speaking Twitter account was retweeted 396,926 times. The tweets on his personal profile aimed at the international audience were retweeted 78,826 times.

<b>№</b>	<b>Twitter username</b>	<b>RT count</b>
1	Azpresident	396926
2	Tcsavunma	95251
3	Ceyhunasirov	86669
4	operativ_mm	84449
5	Presidentaz	78826
6	Hikmethajiyev	69298

7	artak_beglaryan	62805
8	Nikolpashinyan	61472
9	Shstepanyan	50366
10	anca_dc	44889

Table 3. The statistics of most retweeted Twitter accounts during the Second Karabakh War

In addition, the government of Azerbaijan managed to successfully use the traditional media tool. So that, President Ilham Aliyev was interviewed by roughly 30 foreign media outlets during the 44-day war. Meantime, nearly 140 tweets were posted on the head of state’s Twitter account, out of which, 44 contained latest updates from the front. Shortly after the war, President Ilham Aliyev held a four-hour briefing with around 50 representatives of foreign media. This means that unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan was spreading reliable information.

In parallel to the bloody war in the occupied lands, an information war was being waged in the virtual world, where the main participants were social network users. Table 3. shows a list of the most used hashtags added to tweets during and after the war. Apparently the most used hashtags were #karabakhisazerbaijan, #azerbaijan, #stoparmenianaggression, #prayforanja and #stoparmenianterrorism.

№	10 most used hashtags	Hashtag list	
1		Karabakhisazerbaijan	801116
2		Azerbaijan	700774
3		Artsakh	580209
4		Stoparmenianaggression	561978
5		Stoparmenianterrorism	553812
6		Armenia	514639
7		Recognizeartsakh	470404
8		Prayforanja	461672
9		Azerbaijan	295564
10		Stopazerbajaniaggression	271694

Table 4. List of 10 most used hashtags

Despite being generally passive in their participation, Azerbaijani diplomatic missions play a significant role in digital diplomacy, particularly on Twitter. Out of 73 diplomatic missions of Azerbaijan located in foreign countries in 2016, only 57 had Twitter pages. The first three Twitter accounts with the most followers were the United States (34,400), Pakistan (18,400), and the Consulate General in Los Angeles (17,200), while the number of Twitter followers for other

representative offices was less than 10,000. Only 26 of the 73 monitored diplomatic missions had more than 5,000 Twitter followers. Increasing the number of Twitter followers is considered an efficiency parameter for reaching the target audience with the right information.

The most active Twitter account in the diplomatic corps is the embassy in the Republic of Pakistan @AzEmbPak. More than 31,600 tweets have been shared since the page opened in 2016. As shown in “Figure 1”, in terms of cumulative twitter activity, Azerbaijan Embassy to Pakistan was observed to be fourth in comparative diplomatic standing, however, the overwhelmingly large number of tweets (16119 tweets) is attributed to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in late 2020. Azerbaijan Embassy actively utilized its account for narrativization while also highlighting its good relations with Pakistan. (G5iO., January 2023)

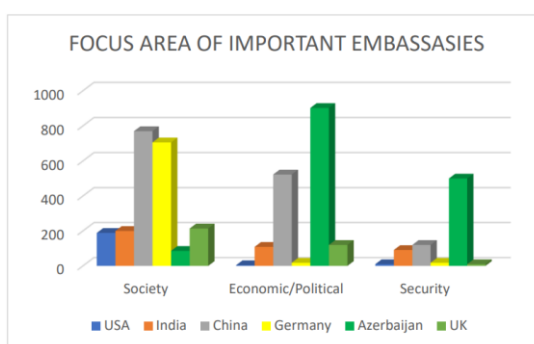


Figure 1. Focus area of important embassies in Pakistan

The second most active account is the embassy in US @azembassyus. More than 24,400 tweets have been shared since the page opened in February 2012. On this page, the achievements of Azerbaijan in various fields and the real situation of our country, as well as the relations between the two countries are shared, and articles published in the US press are highlighted. In the last month, every moment of Azerbaijani athletes at the Olympics has been widely publicized. Observations show that a Twitter account with an average of 80-110 tweets per month has a broad and political audience. This page is read and followed by politicians, diplomats, representatives of academic and media circles, as well as other embassies and missions. It should be noted that the ambassador’s Twitter page @hazar\_khazar (Khazar Ibrahim) is also active. It is observed that the ambassador and other diplomats of the embassy actively participate in digital diplomacy in the United States.

Another mission located in the United States, the consulate general in Los Angeles @azconsulatela, is among the most active users of the Twitter virtual platform for the promotion of Azerbaijani truths. A twitter account with a fairly serious and wide audience has an average of 80-90 posts per month. The account, which was registered in May 2012, has more than 14,600 tweets so far.



The Twitter account of the embassy in Iran @AzEmbIran has been active since May 2016. About 22.300 tweets were posted in a short period of time. The information is dominated by the relations between the two countries, as well as the sharing of tourism opportunities of Azerbaijan. We should note that the embassy also has a page on the Telegram network, which is more popular in Iran, and there are more shares there. This is the only diplomatic mission among the diplomatic corps of Azerbaijan that is represented on the Telegram network. Information about promoting tourism opportunities of the embassy shows its results in the number of Iranian tourists who have recently increased in Azerbaijan. If we look at the number of visas provided through the ASAN Visa system operating at the airports operating in the country during the years 2016-2022, Iran is in the first place among the top five countries with the number of 441,617 e-visas. Saudi Arabia (285,725), Pakistan (188,823), India (185,175) and the United Arab Emirates (175,689) are in the next ranks. (EGDC annual report, 2022)

The embassy in Switzerland @AzembassyBern is in the top four. About more than 21 500 tweets have been shared on Twitter, which was launched in November 2014. Azerbaijan's achievements, meetings and receptions of the country's leadership at the international level, information about our country in the media prevail among the shared information. According to observations, an average of 60-80 tweets are shared or reposted per month.

In the fifth place is the embassy in Geneva @AzmissionGeneva. More than 19,400 tweets have been shared since the page opened in July 2013. @AzEmbQatar (17.500 tweets), @azconsulateLA (14.600 tweets), @AzAmbassadeFR (11.900 tweets), @AzerbaijaninUK (9678 tweets) and AzEmbGermany (7858 tweets) are ranked in the top ten in order. In France, where the Armenian diaspora is strong, counter-propaganda works are also carried out using the opportunities of virtual space. @AzerbaijaninUK mainly shares Azerbaijan's achievements, meetings and receptions of the country's leadership at the international level.

Despite the generally passive participation of diplomatic representations of Azerbaijan in foreign countries, the President of the Republic Ilham Aliyev, the Foreign Policy Advisor to the President Hikmet Hajiyev and Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov's activity deserves praise. On the other hand, Dr. Vasif Huseynov, observed that recently Azerbaijani policymakers started to be engaged in communication with foreign counterparts on Twitter, posting congratulatory messages, expressing condolences, and making statements on various issues. Especially, in Azerbaijan-Iran tensions over the last few months we have seen the frequent use of Twitter by Azerbaijani diplomats and also spokesperson of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to make some

statements, to make some declarations, and to also to respond to such declarations of other sides. Once again it emphasizes that, such form of communication is visible and transparent to both Azerbaijani citizens and outsiders. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that confidential communication and secure digital platforms remain necessary in digital diplomacy and cannot be replaced by visible forms of diplomacy on social media or other platforms.

### 4.2.3. A coordinating body in realms of Azerbaijan’s digital diplomacy

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation works as the front line for the reputation and prosperity of the government of Azerbaijan to the globe. The Ministry and its embassies are the implementing institutions with regards to Azerbaijan’s digital strategies for the sake of diplomacy and promoting Azerbaijan’s foreign policy. (Elmar Mammadyarov, 2017) It has an official website (<https://www.mfa.gov.az/en>) (Figure 2), which is accessible to the public where they can explore the facts about the role of the Ministry, strategies, overall information on Azerbaijan and its foreign policy positions, Armenia’s Aggression against Azerbaijan, as well as services available to the public.

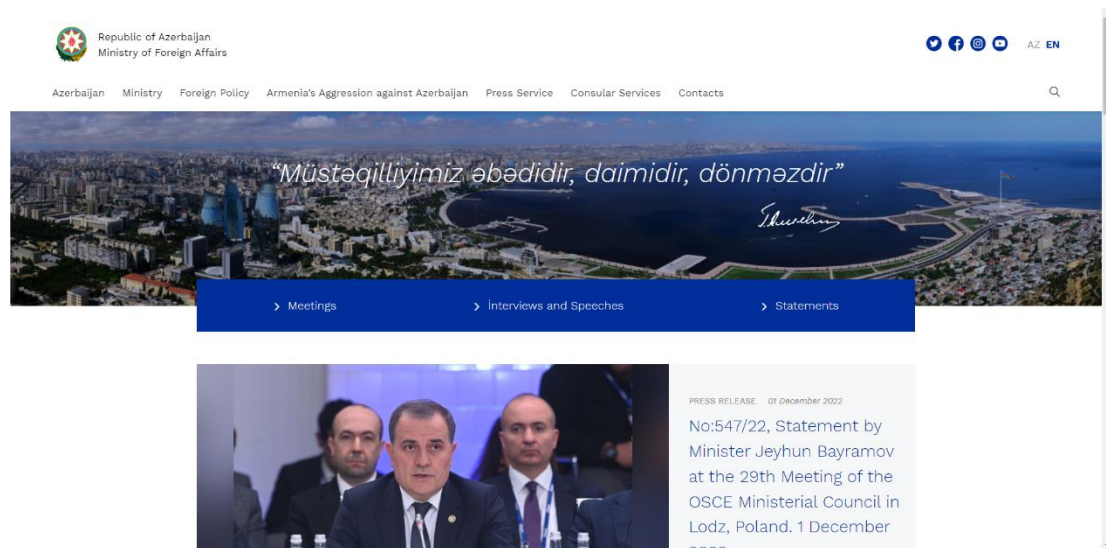


Figure 2. Official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan

The primary goals for the Ministry’s use of digital tools are as follows: provide domestic and international audiences with a platform to seek information about Azerbaijani missions abroad, contacts, project countries latest achievements, show case ongoing projects and activities, news, etc. This is in addition to the fact that Azerbaijani missions/embassies have their own social media accounts on Twitter and Instagram. I think that it would be more in line with international standards if statistical information such as the number and location of diplomatic missions abroad were

presented in an interactive visual form on the official portal. The embassy platforms are meant to also provide speedy consular services to Azerbaijani citizens home and abroad as well as serve as a point of contact in times of emergencies. Also, it is a way to reach out to the public and convey messages about Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

Dr. Lala Jumayeva, also emphasizes that it is essential for the MFA to maintain an up-to-date website that contains all the necessary information. In addition, the MFA should have active social media accounts, such as Twitter and Facebook, to provide reliable and valid information for anyone seeking information about Azerbaijan's foreign policy.

When it comes to MFA's coordination approach, according to Khazar Ibrahim, is achieved through an interagency approach. Diplomats, embassies, and agencies communicate with each other to ensure effective coordination. While there may be some platforms that are used by diplomatic actors in the context of specific issues, he stresses that having everyone together in one place could be difficult and risky from a security point of view. Therefore, the interagency approach is considered the simplest and safest way to ensure coordination in the field of digital diplomacy in Azerbaijan.

#### **4.3. Benefits of digital diplomacy for Azerbaijan**

The impact of digital diplomacy on Azerbaijan's international relations has been significant, particularly in the realm of public diplomacy, states Dr. Azer Babayev. Digital diplomacy has provided an easy and fast way to get Azerbaijan's message across to foreign audiences, especially during events like the Second Karabakh War. Social media platforms have played an important role in this, as they have become a battlefield for information battles. The growing importance of this field is due to the fact that everyone with access to the Internet can participate in this process. The challenge is to make digital resources available both physically and financially, so that everyone can participate.

Furthermore, Dr. Azer Babayev suggests that in the era of digital technologies, speed and timely response are crucial for effective digital diplomacy. It is important to be prepared for the fast-paced nature of social media, where everything can be reported instantly, and there is no privacy. Diplomatic activities require the ability to anticipate possible future events or developments, which can be challenging. Therefore, there should be always room for improvement in digital diplomacy approach of countries such as Azerbaijan.

Dr. Lala Jumayeva believes that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy efforts in order to establish relations with other countries and international organizations were positively impacted because of the necessity to rely on virtual communication methods such as

phone calls and Zoom meetings. While this was not necessarily initiated by Azerbaijan, government officials and diplomats were able to adapt well to the situation. She suggests that Azerbaijan is a relatively young country with a population of around 10 million, and this number is constantly increasing. And she highlights the importance of building a strong diaspora abroad to represent the country's culture and foreign policy. There is a need for Azerbaijan to improve its online presence and engagement with foreign audiences by having a strong diaspora present in important events and concerns of interest. Furthermore, she points out the strong Armenian diaspora and recommends that the Azerbaijani government invests in building a strong diaspora to compete in the global arena.

Dr. Azer Babayev suggests that digital diplomacy has the potential to bridge the gap between Azerbaijan and the international community, particularly in dispelling misconceptions and addressing biases. By leveraging digital tools, Azerbaijan can actively shape the narrative surrounding key issues and promote a more accurate understanding of its perspective. The interviewee also underscores the significance of digital literacy and education to empower citizens in participating in digital diplomacy activities and engaging in constructive dialogue. By highlighting the role of digital diplomacy in promoting cultural exchange and people-to-people connections, he mentions that through digital platforms, Azerbaijan shares its rich cultural heritage, traditions, and values, fostering mutual understanding and strengthening relationships with other nations. He emphasizes the importance of cultural diplomacy in shaping positive perceptions of Azerbaijan and building enduring international partnerships.

Overall, these experts recognize the transformative power of digital diplomacy in Azerbaijan, enabling the country to effectively communicate its messages, address misconceptions, build trust, and establish meaningful connections with the global community. They stress the need for continuous improvement, strategic planning, and active engagement to maximize the benefits of digital diplomacy in advancing Azerbaijan's foreign policy objectives.

#### **4.4. Challenges of digital diplomacy for Azerbaijan**

On November 11, 2020, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies declared the end of internet access restrictions implemented since the beginning of the 44-day war starting September 27. According to the Open Observatory of Network Interference, an open-source project that monitors Internet censorship all over the world, many social media platforms were not accessible in Azerbaijan from September to November 2020. The same had been done before during the conflict escalation in 2016. While such measures might have made sense in the context of war,

some other restrictions on the internet are not uncommon. It is thus no wonder then that the government was keen on controlling this rapidly growing source of information. Such control has also had other benefits since the beginning of the pandemic and during the 44-day war. The government leveraged social media and internet access to avoid panic or unwanted attention to specific events. Azerbaijan's success in the war was due in part to its effective use of social media, particularly Twitter, as a tool for diplomacy and information dissemination.

As mentioned above, the war in Karabakh was accompanied by an intensive dissemination of disinformation. Social networks in Armenia were the main source of dissemination of fake information. Unlike Azerbaijan, where practically all social networks were blocked during the war, only TikTok was partially blocked in Armenia. The rapid spread of fake news began to shake the international media. In order to prevent this, the relevant institutions of the government of Azerbaijan especially the Ministry of Defense started sharing informational posts on social networks about fake news that had been deciphered in order to protect against cyber-attacks.

Dr. Vasif Huseynov, emphasized that in the context of digital diplomacy, policymakers and diplomats most of the time prioritize the security and resilience of any digital tools and platforms used in online negotiations. Cyber-attacks pose a significant risk to the confidentiality of discussions and documents, which is particularly concerning given the increasing frequency of online negotiations. Thus, policymakers must be careful in selecting secure tools and platforms.

Khazar Ibrahim also acknowledges the crucial importance of cybersecurity in digital diplomacy, but he believes that no country, including Azerbaijan, can ensure complete cybersecurity. Ibrahim cites an interview with Elon Musk, in which Musk revealed that before he took over Twitter, direct messages on the platform were accessible by the government. This example illustrates that complete privacy cannot be guaranteed completely. Despite this limitation, the Azerbaijani government strives to use hardware and software to enhance security and privacy to the extent possible. Therefore, while cybersecurity is essential, it is important to acknowledge its limitations in digital diplomacy.

According to Dr. Fariz Ismailzade, the main challenges facing digital diplomacy in Azerbaijan are related to skills and cybersecurity. Firstly, Azerbaijanis lack the necessary skills to effectively produce short articles or work with foreign media. Secondly, cybersecurity threats have increased in recent years, particularly from neighboring countries, and the government has sought the assistance of Israeli and Western experts to provide training in this area.

Dr. Azer Bayramov, Azerbaijan faces various challenges and obstacles in implementing new

technologies and innovations. He mentions that financial problems may arise, but the more significant challenges are cultural habits and a conservative mindset that may hinder the willingness to learn and adapt to new realities. Proper training and knowledge acquisition are crucial, and this includes upskilling employees and IT experts in the foreign ministry and embassies. It is essential to appreciate the value and importance of new technologies, which can produce a powerful effect for the future.

On the contrary, according to the opinion of Dr. Lala Jumayeva, it is important to note that Azerbaijan, despite having a budget for its foreign policy, faces challenges in opening embassies abroad due to limited human and financial resources. Nevertheless, implementing a good digital diplomacy approach should not be difficult for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, there may be certain regulations and rules that limit what can be shared on embassy websites or social media accounts. One major challenge faced by Azerbaijani embassies is the shortage of staff, which can impact their ability to keep information up to date and respond to queries in a timely manner. Communication officers are likely present, but all diplomats and officials should possess the skills necessary to implement digital diplomacy, including creating good content and tailoring information for their target audience. Language skills are also crucial, as sharing information in multiple languages can better reach a wider audience. For instance, the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Morocco uses its official Facebook profile to disseminate information in several languages, such as Azerbaijani, Arabic, French, and English, to cater to the diverse language needs of Morocco's population.

In the realm of digital diplomacy, an issue that may arise is the inappropriate or thoughtless use of digital tools by diplomats, who may act without proper consultation with their ministry. Such behavior may be driven by emotions and can pose a challenge, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs may not have full control over social media activities of its diplomats and policymakers. The consequences of such behavior states Dr. Vasif Huseynov, can be negative, as posts and statements made on social media may be perceived by the public as the official position of the government, given that the diplomats represent the government. Thus, diplomats must be careful to avoid any potentially damaging effects that their statements may have on the Azerbaijani government. Open discussions about the problems in such cases can be held to promote better understanding and awareness.

Khazar Ibrahim believes that one of the biggest challenges in digital diplomacy is finding a balance between quantity and quality. In order to effectively promote the truth and realities of Azerbaijan in the region, a large number of people need to be engaged in the effort, but it is also important to have individuals with strong intellectual power and language skills. Ibrahim emphasizes that this effort should not be limited to diplomats, but should also involve young people who are often

more creative and can enhance the impact of the strategy. To this end, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs has launched a volunteer campaign to engage young students with digital tools, which Ibrahim believes has been very helpful.

In the view of Dr. Fariz Ismailzade, another significant challenge facing Azerbaijan's use of digital diplomacy is the lack of experience among Azerbaijani people in using these platforms. For instance, many Azerbaijanis are unfamiliar with the process of editing Wikipedia, including adding historical sources or data, and may face challenges with blocked pages. Additionally, Twitter is not a popular platform among young people, which limits its effectiveness as a tool for digital diplomacy. Furthermore, Azerbaijanis struggle with data analytics and targeting their messages accordingly on social media. To overcome these challenges, Azerbaijan needs to develop its capacity for effective short messaging, short interviews, and short articles that are informed by data analytics.

#### **4.5. Future perspectives of the sustainable national digital diplomacy**

A key priority for ensuring a sustainable future in digital diplomacy is to implement effective cybersecurity measures. The Azerbaijani government has taken significant measures to enhance cybersecurity, including the establishment of a new center in partnership with Israeli experts, mentions Dr. Vasif Huseynov. Due to the constantly evolving nature of cybersecurity threats, Azerbaijan has established a Cybersecurity Training Center in collaboration with Technion University in Israel to ensure that its specialists are equipped to combat such threats. This center will release highly qualified specialists and coach to the Azerbaijani market in the next 3 years. These efforts are aimed at strengthening the security and privacy of the country, especially its digital diplomacy initiatives.

Dr. Azer Babayev argues that in order to improve digital diplomacy, two main measures should be taken. Firstly, there should be adequate technological infrastructure and resources in place to support the digital activities of diplomats and government officials. Secondly, it is crucial to provide regular training to staff to ensure they are up-to-date with the latest skills and knowledge. Additionally, there needs to be a cultural shift towards appreciating the positive aspects of digital diplomacy. Diplomats and government officials should also actively learn from their rivals and competitors, and adopt a comprehensive approach to address the challenges and opportunities presented by digital diplomacy.

Indeed, having digital skills is important in digital diplomacy for all actors, including diplomats, government officials, and other stakeholders. In addition to cybersecurity measures, Dr. Fariz Ismailzade emphasizes that it is essential for those engaged in digital diplomacy to possess the

necessary technical skills to navigate and effectively utilize digital tools and platforms. This includes knowledge of social media platforms, online communication, data analysis, and other digital tools that can help support diplomatic efforts. Without digital skills, actors may struggle to effectively communicate and engage with international audiences, which can hinder the success of their digital diplomacy efforts. In order to enhance the digital diplomacy skills of diplomats and other officials, it is suggested that training programs should be organized. Especially, the ADA University has been organizing such programs and events for diplomats to improve their skills and knowledge about various issues on the agenda. For instance, the Advanced Foreign Service Program (AFSP) was created to provide civil servants and Foreign Service officers with the necessary skills and training to meet the country's needs. The program offers a curriculum that allows officers to choose their fields of study to develop their management and diplomatic leadership skills. The AFSP also focuses on interagency collaboration skills. The program limits class sizes to ensure maximum interaction and personalized attention. It is intended for civil servants and Foreign Service officers working in international affairs. The program offers the opportunity for participants to update their skills in international relations and other relevant fields of study by learning from distinguished professors and trainers from prestigious universities, international organizations, and think tanks around the world. Additionally, they benefit from guest speakers from government agencies and ADA University faculty.

Diplomats need to be trained in digital policy using examples of both successful and unsuccessful implementations, states Dr. Lala Jumayeva. Although young diplomats from ADA are performing well, restrictions apply to their digital diplomacy activities. Certainly, the communication department should offer training on the dos and don'ts of digital diplomacy and set up a framework for handling crises. Diplomats must adhere to rules and avoid being emotional in their actions. Besides these, she mentioned that the experience is crucial in improving digital diplomacy skills

Furthermore, Dr. Fariz Ismailzade stressed that, miscommunication between parties is a major challenge in digital diplomacy, which is attributed to differences in internal guidelines and frameworks. Despite some efforts to address this issue, there is no single governmental body responsible for coordination. However, the office of the President, particularly Hikmat Hajiyev, is actively working on improving coordination, and initiatives by the Haydar Aliyev foundation and other stakeholders, such as media monitoring centers, aim to facilitate coordination. Despite the fact that Hikmat Hajiyev frequently meets with journalists, press officers, and governmental spokespersons to improve coordination, Dr. Fariz Ismailzade reports that miscommunication still



occurs.

Dr. Lala Jumayeva suggests that having more diplomats who are multilingual and proficient in sharing valid news on social media platforms such as Twitter would be very beneficial. And she is sure that if a successful digital diplomacy approach emerges elsewhere, Azerbaijan will adopt it.

Khazar Ibrahim believes that there are no significant gaps in digital diplomacy efforts, but there is a need to continuously adjust to the changing digital landscape. As the world evolves and new digital tools emerge, it is important to stay updated and attuned to the latest technologies to ensure success. Therefore, the focus should be on adjusting to the changing digital tools in diplomacy to ensure effectiveness in promoting the interests of Azerbaijan. The necessity for diplomats to acquire new skills and update their knowledge varies depending on their individual abilities and talents. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is always prepared to assist and support diplomats who require upskilling or reskilling.

Besides, Khazar Ibrahim mentions that the future prospects of Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy are not solely determined by Azerbaijan or any other country, but rather by the challenges and opportunities presented by changing technologies. As the former spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he recalls a time when digital tools were not as developed as they are today, and there were different perspectives. He emphasizes the importance of staying up-to-date with trends and values in order to adapt to future changes in technology. Thus, learning, studying, and evaluating the value of digital tools is crucial for the success of Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy strategy. In a rapidly changing world, it is difficult to definitively identify a specific technology as the best option. Instead, it is important to look at successful examples from other countries, engage in international cooperation, and remain open to learning from new developments.

Regarding the future possible digital diplomacy strategy, Dr. Lala Jumayeva suggests that before implementing a strategy, it is important to evaluate the current level of Azerbaijani diplomacy in terms of digital presence. If the percentage of digital diplomacy is low, then there may not be a need for a strategy. By emphasizing the significance of the digital world in representing a country and sharing information, she argues that the digital diplomacy strategy should be implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and coordinated with diplomats. Besides Dr. Lala Jumayeva also suggests that there should be professional training for communication departments and diplomats to effectively implement it.

Dr. Fariz Ismailzade predicts that Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy approach will undergo significant changes in the next 10 years. He notes that there will be a focus on artificial intelligence,

data analytics, and big data, and expects the use of machine learning and business analytics to increase. There is a need to keep up with these changes, a sufficient budget will be needed to effectively utilize such new technologies. Furthermore, he suggests that Azerbaijan should collaborate with Western companies and specialists to enhance its digital diplomacy efforts. Specifically, Azerbaijan needs to learn how to conduct media monitoring, develop effective responses to foreign media pieces, and utilize available data from social media. To achieve this, Azerbaijan should work with companies that offer these services.

On the contrary, Dr. Azer Babayev argues that, it is difficult to predict the future trends and innovations of digital diplomacy. However, he notes that the current revolution in technology, such as AI and access to unlimited information through the internet, is significant and may have strategic advantages for countries. Azerbaijan should anticipate and adapt to these technological changes in order to improve their digital diplomacy efforts. Additionally, he mentions the potential risks and challenges that come with such advancements, such as the possibility of machines outsmarting humans. Especially, the potential impact of the newly emerging 5th Industrial Revolution on communication, governance, and leadership. He suggests that this development will overshadow everything else in terms of digital internet and will affect important aspects of human affairs.

## **Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion**

### **5.1. Recommendations**

The statements from various experts and officials indicate that Azerbaijan recognizes the importance of digital diplomacy in promoting its foreign policy objectives. They emphasize the role of digital diplomacy in enhancing communication, messaging, and coordination with foreign audiences, especially in the current digital era. The success of Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Second Karabakh War highlights its potential to engage a broad range of actors and stakeholders and be a potent tool for advancing a country's interests and values. The use of digital diplomacy has also been successful in facilitating conflict resolution and accelerating negotiations, which could assist Azerbaijan in achieving its foreign policy objectives. Therefore, Azerbaijan has a well-coordinated and focused digital strategy with certain distinct approaches to maximize the effectiveness of its digital diplomacy efforts. The continued attention and exploration of the capabilities of digital diplomacy by policymakers and diplomats in Azerbaijan are essential to further promote the country's foreign policy goals.

Certainly, there are challenges associated with the use of digital diplomacy in Azerbaijan and the development of a sustainable framework. Some of these challenges include:

1. **Limited Access and Connectivity:** While internet access restrictions have been lifted after the Second Karabakh War, there may still be limitations in terms of access and connectivity, especially in rural areas or remote regions. Unequal access to digital infrastructure can hinder the effectiveness of digital diplomacy initiatives.
2. **Technological Infrastructure:** Developing a sustainable framework for digital diplomacy requires a robust technological infrastructure.
3. **Digital Divide:** The digital divide refers to the gap between those who have access to and can effectively use digital technologies and those who do not.
4. **Capacity Building:** Building the necessary skills and capacities among diplomats, government officials, and the wider population is essential for effective digital diplomacy.
5. **Cultural and Linguistic Considerations:** Digital diplomacy efforts should take into account cultural nuances and language diversity.
6. **Data Privacy and Security:** Protecting the privacy of individuals' data and ensuring cybersecurity are crucial considerations in digital diplomacy.
7. **Policy and Regulatory Frameworks:** Developing comprehensive policies and regulatory frameworks that govern the use of digital diplomacy is essential.

8. Long-term Sustainability: Digital diplomacy initiatives should be developed with long-term sustainability in mind.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach, involving government institutions, civil society, academia, and the private sector. Collaborative efforts can help overcome barriers and pave the way for a sustainable and impactful digital diplomacy framework in Azerbaijan. Since the research has already addressed the challenges associated with the Azerbaijan's use of digital diplomacy by conducting the needs assessment with several experts of the field, the following recommendations will help to address the identified challenges:

### **1. Improve digital infrastructure to foster a culture of innovation**

Invest in improving digital infrastructure, including broadband connectivity and reliable networks, to ensure equal access and connectivity across the country. Collaborate with telecommunications companies and international partners to expand coverage and improve internet speeds. Azerbaijan can foster a culture of innovation by encouraging its workforce to embrace new technologies and digital tools. This can help overcome cultural habits and a conservative mindset that may hinder the willingness to learn and adapt to new realities. And it is only possible with the research of the current benchmarks and selection of the relevant innovation or useful tools for application, mentions Dr. Azer Babayev. Besides this, Khazar Ibrahim recommends also putting diplomats particularly young officials in the driving seat, because of the fast learning abilities and creativity.

### **2. Digital Literacy and Capacity Building initiatives**

If anyone can benefit from digitalization, it is the diplomat. Tasks such as the search for information, negotiation, the design of alliances and communication and cooperation with third parties, will become easier. However, new challenges will emerge, because it is clear that digitalization has enhanced the availability of information but has also complicated its processing and analysis. Dr. Fariz Ismailzade recommends the need for Azerbaijani Diplomats to undergo frequent training in order to get acquainted with the latest digital tools. The government of Azerbaijan can invest in training programs for its diplomats and officials to improve their digital skills. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs can work with universities and institutions to provide specialized courses and training sessions for diplomats and officials to learn about digital diplomacy, social media strategy, content creation, and cybersecurity. Because new skills such as data analytics, visual reasoning, and adaptive thinking would be particularly valuable for reading patterns of online behavior, projecting messages effectively, and reacting successfully to online events in real time. Besides this, upskilling the workforce and IT experts in the foreign ministry and embassies can help overcome the challenges

related to skills and cybersecurity.

### **3. Enhance Internal Communication and Coordination**

Azerbaijan can strengthen internal communication and coordination to ensure that diplomats and officials act in accordance with the government's digital diplomacy strategy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs can establish clear guidelines and protocols for social media activities, and provide regular training and guidance to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of these guidelines. The Ministry can also establish an internal communication platform to facilitate collaboration and information sharing among diplomats and officials. In particular, new developments such as digital diplomacy tends to trigger calls for a strategic framework. Although a forward-looking vision is important, the over-formalization of a vision can be counter-productive, as it could create rigid structures that might not allow for the flexibility needed to adapt to new technologies. The most effective digital diplomacies rely on guidelines as a softer way to manage efforts in this field. There is a thin line between the diplomacy and social media cultures when it comes to the tolerance of failure. Unlike social media failure is not acceptable in diplomacy. Therefore, being prepared for failure or ability to predict the challenges that may be expected is a big responsibility in this case. In order to not experience such situations Dr. Vasif Huseynov recommends learning to manage and assess the possible risks. For example, the UK produced a set of social media guidelines for diplomats. In the context of digital diplomacy, understanding the audience and tailoring the message to the platform is especially important, as mentions Dr. Lala Jumayeva and Dr. Fariz Ismailzade. Digital diplomacy refers to the use of digital tools and platforms to engage with foreign audiences and advance a country's foreign policy objectives. Different digital platforms have different strengths and weaknesses, and are used by different audiences for different purposes. For example, Twitter can be effective for reaching a wide audience and engaging in real-time conversations, while blogs and podcasts can be more effective for in-depth analysis and storytelling. In addition to understanding the audience and platform, digital diplomacy also requires a strategic approach that takes into account the broader goals and objectives of a country's foreign policy. This can include engaging with key stakeholders, building relationships with foreign governments and civil society organizations, and advancing specific policy priorities.

### **4. From Tactics to Strategy**

According to Dr. Vasif Huseynov, a well-defined strategy is crucial for successful digital diplomacy. Azerbaijan can take inspiration from Turkey's digital diplomacy strategy as a case study.

Turkey has developed a clear digital diplomacy strategy that outlines its objectives, target

audience, and key messages. The strategy focuses on promoting Turkey's culture, history, and economic potential, as well as engaging with international stakeholders on various issues. It identifies priority regions and countries for diplomatic outreach and tailors its digital diplomacy efforts accordingly.

Turkey's digital diplomacy strategy also defines the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders, including diplomats, officials, and communication officers. This ensures coordination and consistency across all digital diplomacy initiatives. The strategy incorporates a comprehensive range of digital tools and platforms, including social media, websites, and mobile applications, to effectively reach and engage target audiences.

By studying Turkey's digital diplomacy strategy, Azerbaijan can gain insights into developing its own strategy. Azerbaijan can define its specific objectives, identify target audiences, and articulate key messages that align with its diplomatic priorities. The strategy can also outline the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders involved in digital diplomacy efforts.

Implementing a well-crafted digital diplomacy strategy allows Azerbaijan to enhance its online presence, effectively communicate its messages, and achieve its diplomatic goals. It provides a framework for evaluating the impact of digital diplomacy initiatives and enables strategic adjustments as needed to ensure the desired outcomes are achieved.

## **5. Data Privacy and Security Measures**

To safeguard sensitive information, it is imperative for Azerbaijan to establish robust data protection protocols and cybersecurity frameworks. By prioritizing data privacy and security, Azerbaijan can instill trust among stakeholders and ensure the protection of confidential information. This includes implementing encryption protocols, secure data storage practices, and stringent access controls. Collaborating with international experts enhances Azerbaijan's capabilities in addressing emerging cyber threats and vulnerabilities.

Dr. Azer Babayev emphasizes the value of partnerships in this domain. Engaging with Israeli and Western experts allows Azerbaijan to tap into their expertise and gain insights into cutting-edge cybersecurity technologies and practices. By staying abreast of the latest advancements, Azerbaijan can proactively mitigate risks and bolster its resilience against cyber threats in the context of digital diplomacy.

## **6. Foster Public-Private Partnerships**

To strengthen digital diplomacy in Azerbaijan, it is crucial to foster collaboration between government institutions, academia, and the private sector. This collaboration allows for the utilization

of diverse expertise and resources to enhance digital diplomacy initiatives. Engaging technology companies and digital platforms can provide valuable support in terms of both technical assistance and knowledge sharing. By leveraging these partnerships, Azerbaijan can expand its international presence, establish new embassies, and allocate a larger budget for foreign policy endeavors.

A significant benefit of public-private partnerships is the ability to address the challenges posed by limited human and financial resources in the realm of digital diplomacy. Through collaboration, Azerbaijan can access additional resources that enable the recruitment of skilled staff and diplomats. Moreover, investing in advanced technology and infrastructure becomes more feasible, leading to improved digital diplomacy capabilities.

Dr. Lala Jumayeva highlights the significance of cultivating a strong and engaged diaspora community within the global ecosystem. Public-private partnerships can provide opportunities to foster connections and collaboration with diaspora communities, leveraging their networks, knowledge, and influence to support Azerbaijan's digital diplomacy efforts. By nurturing these partnerships, Azerbaijan can enhance its diplomatic presence, expand its influence, and effectively engage with international audiences in the digital realm.

## **7. International and Regional Collaboration**

Enhancing digital diplomacy in Azerbaijan can be achieved through fostering partnerships and information sharing with countries that have demonstrated successful practices. Drawing inspiration from Türkiye's digital diplomacy initiatives holds significant promise for Azerbaijan. Türkiye has gained recognition for its effective strategies, approaches, and tactics in digital diplomacy, providing valuable insights for Azerbaijan. The cultural and historical connections between countries contribute to the relevance and relatability of Türkiye's practices, particularly in terms of engaging international audiences. Moreover, the geographic proximity of the two countries offers opportunities for Azerbaijan to learn from Türkiye's experiences in engaging neighboring regions and utilizing digital platforms for regional cooperation and economic partnerships. By addressing shared challenges such as misinformation and diaspora engagement, Azerbaijan can leverage Türkiye's experiences to enhance its digital diplomacy efforts. Collaboration and knowledge sharing between the two countries can further strengthen Azerbaijan's position as a regional leader in digital diplomacy.

Azerbaijan can also take inspiration from Israel and Russia in the realm of digital diplomacy. Both countries have demonstrated effective practices and strategies in utilizing digital platforms for diplomatic purposes. For example, Israel has been recognized for its strong digital diplomacy efforts, leveraging technology and social media platforms to effectively engage with global audiences and

promote its national interests. They have implemented innovative approaches such as creating dedicated social media channels for diplomats, utilizing digital storytelling, and leveraging technology for crisis communication. Azerbaijan can study Israel's practices to gain insights into effective strategies for engaging international audiences and promoting its own interests.

Russia is another country that has invested significantly in digital diplomacy. They have established a strong online presence through platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, which they use to disseminate their viewpoints, engage with international audiences, and shape public opinion. Russia has also utilized sophisticated information warfare techniques, including the use of bots and coordinated online campaigns. Azerbaijan can learn from Russia's approach to digital diplomacy and adapt relevant strategies to effectively communicate its messages and engage with global audiences.

## **8. Continuous Evaluation and Adaptation**

Regularly assess the impact and effectiveness of digital diplomacy initiatives through monitoring and evaluation processes. Adapt strategies based on feedback and evolving technological advancements to ensure long-term sustainability and relevance. To support continuous evaluation and adaptation in digital diplomacy, it's important to follow a systematic approach. This involves several tools and methods, such as analytics tools for gathering data on website traffic and user behavior, surveys and feedback forms to collect stakeholder feedback, social media listening tools for monitoring conversations and sentiment analysis, studying case studies and best practices, conducting A/B testing and experimentation, engaging in stakeholder interviews and focus groups, and scheduling regular strategy review meetings. By employing these tools and methods, organizations can gather insights, measure effectiveness, and make informed adaptations to optimize their digital diplomacy initiatives over time.

## **5.2. Conclusions**

Digital diplomacy refers to the use of digital technologies and platforms by governments and diplomats to conduct diplomatic activities. Its impact on globalization can be understood through various dimensions. First of all, digital platforms facilitate real-time and widespread communication, enabling governments and diplomats to engage with global audiences instantaneously. This leads to the exchange of information and ideas on a global scale, shaping local perceptions and influencing decision-making processes.

Secondly, digital platform also provides opportunities for governments to engage directly with



individuals worldwide, transcending geographic boundaries. Social media and online platforms allow diplomats to communicate their country's values, policies, and culture, fostering understanding and building relationships with people from different parts of the world. During times of crisis, digital diplomacy enables swift and effective response and coordination among nations. Governments can utilize digital channels to share real-time information, coordinate relief efforts, and provide assistance, thereby deepening global cooperation and collaboration.

Finally, digital platforms play a crucial role in economic diplomacy and trade promotion. Governments can leverage digital tools to attract foreign investments, showcase their industries, and facilitate cross-border trade. E-commerce platforms provide opportunities for businesses, including small and medium-sized enterprises, to participate in global markets and contribute to economic growth.

This research was focused on digital diplomacy and its use to conduct Azerbaijan's foreign policy, the benefits of approaching the digital tools, and explored the challenges needed to be overcome. The research also conducted a survey on the evolution of Azerbaijan's foreign policy, examining its regional and international dimensions. Additionally, the study provided a comprehensive background definition of digital diplomacy and public diplomacy, highlighting the distinctions between these two concepts.

The results and conclusions of the research were derived from the in-depth personal interviews that were conducted with five participants that were made up of experts of international relations and the most active official representative of the Republic of Azerbaijan abroad in digital diplomacy sphere. It was clear from the interviews that Azerbaijan is increasingly utilizing digital diplomacy through myriad of digital strategies and digital tools function differently in country case. The opportunity exists for Azerbaijan government entities and embassies to make use of these tools the promotion of cultural, social, political, and economic interests. Twitter platform is mainly used for sharing political announcements by top leaders or policy tactics and events in Azerbaijan. This mode of usage has intensified because the Second Karabakh War was primarily fueled through social media and it offered the Azerbaijani leadership a powerful tool for international reputation and engagement with citizens. Since then, the leadership of the country has been proactive by using social media as a platform to send governance messages to the public in order to promote transparency and accountability for any action taken by the leaders.

The research findings indicate that digital diplomacy in Azerbaijan is confronted with various obstacles, including issues related to inadequate access and connectivity, the need for technological

infrastructure advancement, bridging the digital divide, enhancing capacity building, addressing cultural and linguistic factors, ensuring data privacy and security, establishing effective policy and regulatory frameworks, and ensuring long-term sustainability. Briefly, the research made the following recommendations to address identified challenges:

1. Improve digital infrastructure to foster a culture of innovation
2. Focus on digital literacy and capacity building initiatives for diplomats and officials
3. Enhance internal communication and coordination within the government's digital diplomacy strategy
4. Develop a well-defined digital diplomacy strategy, taking inspiration from successful cases like Turkey
5. Prioritize data privacy and security measures to protect sensitive information
6. Foster public-private partnerships to leverage expertise and resources in digital diplomacy
7. Seek international and regional collaboration, drawing inspiration from successful practices in countries like Turkey, Israel, and Russia
8. Emphasize continuous evaluation and adaptation of digital diplomacy initiatives for long-term sustainability and relevance.

In conclusion, it is important to note that, in the digital diplomacy sphere, experts believe that there is great potential for using digital tools to improve communication and engagement with audiences around the world. As the world becomes more interconnected, digital diplomacy offers an opportunity for governments to connect with citizens and stakeholders in a more direct and effective way. By embracing and exploring the digital diplomacy sphere, by learning the digital tools that underpin and shape digital diplomacy in more depth and by implementing the recommendations outlined in this research, Azerbaijan can enhance its engagement and reputation on the international stage and achieve its foreign policy objectives in digital era.

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## Findings

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