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DIGITAL SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY: THE CASES OF GERMANY, ITALY, AND SPAIN IN THE COUNTRIES OF EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract: *The main objective of this article was to examine how Germany, Italy and Spain practice digital public diplomacy in Eastern Partnership and Central Asia countries in 2022, i.e., how they promote their countries through their embassies' Facebook profiles. Three research questions posed by the authors were: 1) Which social networks and applications have embassies of Germany, Italy, and Spain used in the countries of Eastern Partnership and Central Asia to inform and communicate with different audiences?; 2) Which soft power tools were dominantly communicated by the German, Italian, and Spanish embassies on Facebook profiles in countries of Eastern Partnership and Central Asia during 2022 to promote their own countries?; and 3) Are digital diplomacy tools of Germany, Italy, and Spain, that they utilize to promote their own countries and communicate with the public of Eastern Partnership and Central Asia, following their foreign policy focus? The authors have used quantitative content and thematic analysis to answer these questions. The results were presented with the use of descriptive statistics. The authors' findings indicated that digital diplomacy 2.0 is standard practice for Germany and Italy in Eastern Partnership and Central Asia. Less information was available regarding Spain's digital diplomacy efforts. The research's findings further demonstrated that Germany and Italy exhibit greater interest in the Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries compared to Spain, which was concordant with their foreign policy focuses.*

Keywords: *Soft Power, Digital Diplomacy, Germany, Italy, Spain, Eastern Partnership, Central Asia*

INTRODUCTION

In the digitally connected 21 century, communication has transformed beyond measure. Namely, the focus is no longer primarily on information but on the stories with "the most compelling narrative" that "win the day" (Copeland 2013, 1). Due to this transformation, public diplomacy has also transformed, at least regarding the means the state uses to promote itself to other states. There is a consensus among academics and policymakers that ministries of foreign affairs and other foreign services need to transform as well to follow this trend and adopt "digitally-based systems of data creation, transmission, and storage using the internet, social media platforms, computers, and a variety of wireless electronic devices" (Copeland 2013, 1).

The main objective of this research is to find out how EU powers, Germany, Italy, and Spain, practice public diplomacy in Eastern Partnership and Central Asia countries in 2022, i.e., how they communicate with citizens of mentioned countries through Facebook profiles of their embassies.

This research will try to address the following research questions:

RQ1: Which social networks and applications do the embassies of Germany, Italy, and Spain use in countries of Eastern Partnership and Central Asia to inform and communicate with different audiences?

RQ2: Which soft power tools were dominantly communicated by the German, Italian, and Spanish embassies on Facebook profiles in countries of Eastern Partnership and Central Asia during 2022 to promote their own countries?

RQ3: Are digital diplomacy tools of Germany, Italy, and Spain that they utilize to promote their own countries and communicate with the public of Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries following their foreign policy focuses?

We used quantitative content analysis (Holsti 1969; Neuendorf 2002; Riffe et al. 2014) to analyze the posts on embassies' Facebook profiles and thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998), while the results were subsequently presented using descriptive statistics.

THE ROLE OF SOFT POWER AND DIGITAL TOOLS WITHIN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Paul Sharp claims that public diplomacy is "the process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented" (cited in Melissen 2005, 106). One of the roles of public diplomacy in international relations is to brand the country and its' people. This is done by promoting the country through its natural riches, people, culture, art, historical heritage, and sport, and the country's economy and commercial brands. The main aim of public diplomacy is to thoughtfully manage communication with the target audiences in other states, trying to inform them and shape their opinions.

Joseph Nye (2011; 2013), next to the more classical forms of power, such as military and economic power, which he defined as hard power, identified the ideological-cultural form, which he defined as soft power. He further concluded that despite its undeniable importance, policymakers frequently disregard the significance of soft power. Soft power is quite important when a country tries to convince, rather than force, other countries to do something (Nye 2011). The main aim of soft power in diplomacy is to shape opinions and preferences of aimed targets by creating attraction. Opinions of others in this way are shaped by attractiveness and argument rather than force or threats (Nye 1990; Nye 2008). In "international politics, they are the values a country expresses through its culture, internal practices and policies, and how it handles its relations with others" (Car, Kos-Stanišić, and Viduka 2016, 1215).

The development of digital technologies also transformed diplomatic communication, transferring it to digital communication platforms such as social media and social networks.

Therefore, it is argued by some that the availability of new digital platforms has influenced how public diplomacy works (Hayden 2018, 1). Foreign policymakers now face a new challenge - accepting new communication technologies as forms of public action that impact how foreign policy strategies are created and executed internationally. These new ways of diplomatic communication have been dubbed digital diplomacy (Hayden 2018). Some scholars distinguish two levels of said digital diplomacy - in the first place, the one that is conducted by the foreign ministries, and later that is conducted by the embassies stationed all over the globe (Manor and Segev 2015). Scholarly papers that focus on the phenomena that have been dubbed

"digital diplomacy 2.0", namely on the manners in how social networks and social media are being utilized in diplomacy, lead Kos-Stanišić and Car (2021, 118) to conclude that "public diplomacy that utilizes the World Wide Web (www) only, could be considered as the 'digital diplomacy 1.0'". Alas, it must be said that the diplomatic apparatus has not been quick to adopt new digital information and communication platforms. Conventional diplomatic means are still in place, contrary to the soothing effects of digital diplomacy that promote transparency, accountability, and more effective and faster interactions between states.

AN OVERVIEW OF EU POLICY TOWARDS COUNTRIES OF EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND CENTRAL ASIA

The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) represents a foreign policy framework created in 2004, whose goal is to bring the EU closer to neighboring countries and develop partnership relations in priority areas such as economic development, security, migration, and mobility. The EU is aware that all countries covered by the neighborhood policy are not equally interested in all aspects of the relationship, so the focus is on areas where the interests of the EU and neighboring countries coincide. Neighboring countries can have more favorable access to the EU's market, EU programs, and financial support (Easa.europa.eu 2021). The Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) are one of the ENP initiatives[1] to "strengthen and deepen the political and economic relations between the EU, its Member States and the partner countries" and to increase "the stability, prosperity, and resilience of the EU's neighbors" (Easa.europa.eu 2022a).

Central Asian (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) countries are not covered by ENP but are also important for the EU, which aspires to have a stronger partnership with them. The main reason is their geopolitical location "of the bridge" between Asia and Europe, rich with energy resources, the potential of the markets, and the role of Central Asia in regional security (Eeas.europa.eu 2022b). EU has three goals in Central Asia: partnering with Central Asian states and societies for resilience, partnering for prosperity, and supporting regional cooperation in Central Asia (Eeas.europa.eu2022c).

The EU has delegations in all 11 Eastern Partnership and Central Asia countries, but not all EU Member States have embassies in the mentioned countries (Table 1 and Table 2).

[1]ENP regional and multilateral cooperation initiatives include: Eastern Partnership; Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood; New Agenda for the Mediterranean; Union for the Mediterranean; Black Sea Synergy; Northern Dimension; EU Artic Policy; Cross Border Cooperation (CBC) (Easa.europa.eu 2022d).

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Table 1: EU Embassies in Eastern Partnership (Source: Authors' depiction)

Country	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Belarus	Georgia	Moldova	Ukraine
AT	0	1	1	1	1	1
BE	0	1	0	0	1	1
BG	1	1	1	1	1	1
HR	0	1	0	0	0	1
CY	0	0	0	0	0	1
CZ	0	1	1	1	1	1
DK	0	0	0	1	0	1
EE	0	1	1	1	0	1
FI	0	0	0	0	0	1
FR	1	1	1	1	1	1
DE	1	1	1	1	1	1
GR	1	1	0	1	0	1
HU	0	1	1	1	1	1
IE	0	0	0	0	0	1
IT	1	1	1	1	1	1
LV	0	1	1	1	0	1
LT	1	1	0	1	1	1
LU	0	0	0	0	0	0
MT	0	0	0	0	0	0
NL	1	1	1	1	0	1
PL	1	1	1	1	1	1
PT	0	1	0	0	0	1
RO	1	1	1	1	1	1
SK	0	1	1	1	0	1
SI	0	0	0	0	1	1
ES	0	0	0	0	0	1
SE	1	1	1	1	0	1

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Table 2: EU Embassies in Central Asian Countries (Source: Authors' depiction)

Country	Kyrgyzstan	Kazakhstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
AT	1	0	0	0	0
BE	1	0	0	0	0
BG	1	0	0	0	1
HR	1	0	0	0	0
CY	0	0	0	0	0
CZ	1	0	0	0	1
DK	0	0	0	0	0
EE	1	0	0	0	0
FI	1	0	0	0	0
FR	1	1	1	1	1
DE	1	1	1	1	1
GR	1	0	0	0	0
HU	1	0	0	0	1
IE	0	0	0	0	0
IT	1	1 (in Uzbekistan)	0	0	1
LV	1	0	0	0	1
LT	1	0	0	0	0
LU	0	0	0	0	0
MT	0	0	0	0	0
NL	1	0	0	0	0
PL	1	0	0	0	1
PT	1	0	0	0	0
RO	1	0	0	1	1
SK	0	0	0	0	0
SI	1	0	0	0	0
ES	1	0	0	0	0
SE	1	0	0	0	0

GERMAN, ITALIAN, AND SPANISH POLICIES TOWARDS THE COUNTRIES OF EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND CENTRAL ASIA

After their independence, Germany has forged official diplomatic relations with Eastern Partnership Countries (EPC) and has embassies in all mentioned countries. However, since the early 2000s, Berlin's relationship with those countries has been lukewarm. Some even define German foreign policy toward the EPC as passive (Meckel et al. 2012; Schiffers 2021). Of course, there are reasons for it. Namely, Berlin wanted to cooperate more closely with the EPC in the economic sector, but in a way not to upset Moscow.

Furthermore, Germany's position was that Eastern Partnership is not an instrument of future EU enlargement. This was especially true after Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU when Germany felt the so-called enlargement fatigue (Gotkowska 2010, 1-2). Nevertheless, Berlin saw some ways of cooperation, like signing free trade agreements between the EU and EPC (Gotkowska 2010, 2-3).

A new policy for Eastern Partnership was announced after the Russian incursion into Ukraine in 2014 and the change of German government in 2021 (Schiffers 2021). However, this came to an end after Russian aggression. Despite many warnings from its eastern partners, Berlin believed it could contain Moscow diplomatically. This has inevitably led to a lack of trust in Germany among its eastern partners and other EU countries. Although German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has announced a change in German foreign and security policy (Zeitenwende), some eastern partners express concerns that Berlin and Moscow may reach a mutual understanding reminiscent of past occurrences (Schmelter 2023). On the other hand, it could be argued that Germany has a longstanding interest in the Central Asian region due to its abundant crude oil and gas reserves. Furthermore, the region poses security concerns for Europe due to terrorism threats and its proximity to Russia (Auswärtiges Amt 2010, 3).

In 2022, Berlin and the five Central Asian countries celebrated 30 years of diplomatic relations. Germany maintains embassies in all of the Central Asian countries. Additionally, it is the third largest trading partner in the region, following Russia and China (Auswärtiges Amt 2010, 5). It comes as no surprise that Berlin originally spearheaded the Strategy for a New Partnership between the EU and Central Asia in 2007, during its presidency of the EU (Auswärtiges Amt 2010, 3). As anticipated, Germany actively engages in the region by supporting various initiatives such as education, human rights, the rule of law, intercultural dialogue, security cooperation, good governance, environmental protection, and democratization (Auswärtiges Amt 2010).

Central Asia has assumed an even greater significance in Germany's foreign policy following the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Germany seeks to loosen Russia's grip and minimize its regional influence. In October 2022, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Annalena Baerbock, visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where she affirmed Berlin's support for the Central Asian countries confronting not only Russian power but also China. She pledged closer cooperation, particularly in the energy sector, while simultaneously aiming to isolate Moscow due to its actions in Ukraine (Williamson 2022). This was evident in the increased energy cooperation between Berlin and Astana in 2022, driven by Germany's energy constraints (Özkan 2022).

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Throughout the years, Italy's foreign policy towards post-Soviet countries has evolved within the framework of bilateral relations and in the context of the Eastern Partnership. Italy warmly embraced the initiative's inception in 2009 and has since supported almost all EU initiatives within the project. As a Mediterranean country, Italy's focus has traditionally centered on its Southern neighborhood rather than the Eastern region. Its relationship with Eastern neighbors has been subordinated to its strategic partnership with Russia, which holds strategic significance for both parties (Mikhelidze 2017, 1-2). Economic cooperation between the two countries has consistently been substantial, particularly within the energy sector, even amid the EU's sanctions against Russia in 2016. When the conflict arose between the Ukrainian government and the separatists in the Donbas region, most Italian media aligned themselves with the Russian narrative. The Gentiloni cabinet, led by Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, declared that Russia remained a strategic partner but did not recognize the legitimacy of the Crimean referendum. Italy supported Russia's removal from the G8 and joined the anti-Russian sanctions regime. Italy maintained a dialogue with Russia while remaining committed to the West's policy regarding the Ukraine crisis (Mikhelidze 2017, 3-5).

The growing momentum in relations with Central Asia has been demonstrated multiple times, including at the Italy-Central Asia Conference held in Rome in December 2018. This conference shed light on Italian engagement's economic and political dimensions in the region (Nova.news 2019). Available data indicate a significant increase in Italy's trade with the Central Asian region over the past few years (Uzbekistaninatlia.org 2018; Esteri.it 2019). The combination of a focus on Central Asia and support for Chinese infrastructure initiatives has underscored Rome's growing orientation towards the East in its foreign policy, with Central Asia assuming a pivotal role. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that Central Asia is increasingly becoming a strategic battleground for major powers, notably between Moscow and Beijing (RT.com 2019). Therefore, "acting as a strong supporter of China's policies in Central Asia could prove risky in the mid-long term" (RT.com 2019). One feared that it could undermine Italy's relations with Russia, to which it presented the fifth largest trading partner in 2018 (RT.com 2019).

Regarding its relations with Russia, Italy has condemned the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and joined EU efforts to challenge Russia through sanctions. In the meantime, however, Italy has often sought to balance EU responses with its national interests toward Russia. This was especially apparent during Mario Draghi's government, which took a firm stance against Russia's aggression towards Ukraine in 2022 and actively supported EU sanctions (European University Institute 2022). This policy remained consistent even after Georgia Meloni assumed the role of prime minister.

The common perception is that Spain is not very interested in EaP projects and countries because it focuses on the Southern Neighborhood. According to de Borja Lasheras (2015), realism is "the main factor shaping Spain's approach to the Eastern Partnership Project" (de Borja Lasheras 2015). After the Vilnius Summit in 2013, Spain opted not to provoke Russia further and avoid giving the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries false hopes regarding imminent EU enlargement. According to Madrid, the EaP framework holds value for relations with the six partner countries and driving reforms within them. However, following Ukraine 2014 crisis, particularly in 2022, Spain has demonstrated increased commitment to fostering closer EU relations with the EaP. The Spanish policy towards the EaP can be summarized by Spanish Prime

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Minister Pedro Sanchez, who stated: "We believe in the constructive value of the Eastern Partnership for the region" (Lamoncloa.gob.es 2021). Spain neglected Central Asia until recently. Alonso (2011) assessed the Spanish foreign policy towards Central Asia from 2000-2011 as very shy and sparse, focused exclusively on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and cooperation in security and energy. De Pedro (2012) concluded: "Central Asia will continue to hold a place on the Spanish foreign agenda, even though a dramatic increase in Spain's economic and political presence in Kazakhstan and the rest of the region is not foreseeable" (p. 4). In 2018 Spain had increasingly turned to the Asia-Pacific region. According to the Strategic Vision for Spain in Asia 2018-2022, its priority is the countries of East Asia. Despite not being a priority, the countries of Central Asia (and South Asia) are encompassed within the framework of Spain's foreign policy, with an increasingly proactive approach (Exteriores.gob.es 2022f). Even in the Spanish Foreign Action Strategy (Gobierno de Espana 2021, 103) for 2021-2024, it is acknowledged that Spain's presence is limited in the region and is considered a minor destination in terms of investment and trade. However, the strategy also highlights that Spain should aspire to play a more significant role in the economic development of Central Asia" (Gobierno de Espana 2021, 103).

THE USE OF SOFT POWER AND DIGITAL DIPLOMACY OF GERMANY, ITALY, AND SPAIN

According to the Soft Power 30 Report 2019, Germany ranked third globally, following France and the United Kingdom (Portland 2023). In the aftermath of World War II, Germany faced the burden of its Nazi past, prompting Berlin to adopt soft power as a fundamental approach to its foreign policy. However, numerous developments today challenge Germany's soft power (Thu Thuy 2021). The German Federal Foreign Office (FFO) extensively utilizes social media platforms for communication. Their official webpage states that FFO maintains an active presence on four major social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

Additionally, a link on their webpage directs visitors to the social media accounts of all German missions abroad, encouraging them to stay updated with the latest news (Auswaertiges-amt.de 2023a). Almost all German missions abroad have multiple social media accounts, and even specific members of some Missions, such as ambassadors, have their own (Auswaertiges-amt.de 2023a). German Missions abroad have more than 300 social media channels. The rationale behind it is, as they claim, to "help shape Germany's image abroad". According to the FFO today, it is "impossible to imagine the world of diplomacy without such media, which are important channels for communicating information about Germany, shedding light on foreign policy issues and getting into direct contact with the public in host countries" (Auswaertiges-amt.de 2023b). To aid it in that task FFO also utilizes The Regional German Information Centers to provide "up-to-date and fact-based information on Germany and Germany's foreign policy in key regions" (Auswaertiges-amt.de 2023b).

According to the Soft Power 30 Report, Italy occupied 11th place in 2019 (Portland, 2023). In January 2022 Italian foreign minister launched a new internal structure, the Directorate for Culture and Public Diplomacy, with the purpose "of rendering Italian soft power a tool that can be used for constructing influence and global consensus on themes that they consider to be priorities" (Ellwood 2022). Officially, Italy has been named 2021 Country of the Year by the

prestigious magazine The Economist (2021) thanks to its current political leadership, resilience in the pandemic, and sporting and creative cultural successes in 2021. For 2020 Italy was ranked ninth in the National Brands Index, and "despite the fact it was not included in the five leading countries, its attractiveness for foreigners is undeniable" (Tabarintseva-Romanova 2021).

Generally, Italy enjoys an excellent global image due to being a cultural superpower: it is the country of history, art, civilization, beauty, and perfectly crafted things. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation launched a new social media campaign in 2016, utilizing the hashtag #Italiain. The objective of this campaign was to depict the various diplomatic activities of Italy worldwide using images, videos, and infographics. The primary platforms for this campaign were Twitter and the MFA's Facebook profile (Di Martino 2016). As per the official webpage of the Italian Foreign Ministry, they actively engage with four major social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

Until the end of the 20th century, Spain had to deal with the legacy of Franco's rule, so in the 1980s, an international campaign was launched to create a "New Spain" image that would attract tourists, investors, and foreign governments. Using soft power resources, Spain tries to enhance public diplomacy by parallel practicing cultural diplomacy, national branding, and national reputation. Instituto Cervantes promotes the Spanish language and culture, and Marca Españaare is the most successful tool of Spanish public diplomacy (Priego Moreno 2011, 49-52). The Instituto Cervantes is in 45 countries worldwide (Cervantes.es 2022), but it is not currently established in the Eastern Partnership countries or Central Asia. Spain has considered itself a significant player in soft power for the past 35 years (Rodríguez-Jiménez 2019). However, according to the Soft Power 30 Report (Portland 2023), Spain ranked 13th in 2019. The Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) emphasizes the importance of digital communication as a key tool in diplomatic work, not only for the ministry itself but also for Spanish Diplomatic Missions, which had more than 300 profiles in 2022 (Exteriores.gov.es 2022d). In terms of public communication, the MFA utilizes four social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, as stated on their main webpage (Exteriores.gov.es 2022b).

THE ANALYSIS OF GERMAN, ITALIAN, AND SPANISH EMBASSIES FACEBOOK PROFILES IN THE COUNTRIES OF EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND CENTRAL ASIA

In order to conduct a comparative analysis of the research data, the research focus was exclusively directed toward the content published on embassies' Facebook pages. Facebook is a widely used and free online social network, boasting almost three billion users in 2021, making it the largest social network globally (Britannica.com 2023). Regarding RQ1, the following conclusion was drawn: Although Germany officially maintains a presence on four different social networks, when it comes to communicating with audiences in the countries of Eastern Partnership and Central Asia, Facebook is predominantly utilized, while YouTube is not used at all (see Table 3).

Table 3: Social Media - Germany (Source: Authors' depiction)

Country	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube
Armenia	1	1	0	0
Azerbaijan	1	1	0	0
Belarus	1	0	0	0
Georgia	1	0	0	0
Moldova	1	0	0	0
Ukraine	1	1	1	0
Kazakhstan	1	1	1	0
Kyrgyzstan	1	0	1	0
Tajikistan	1	1	1	0
Turkmenistan	NA	NA	NA	NA
Uzbekistan	1	1	1	0
TOTAL	**10**	**6**	**5**	**0**

Italy, similarly, employs four distinct social networks to engage with the audiences mentioned above. Italian Embassies primarily utilize Facebook and Twitter equally, whereas YouTube remains the least utilized social network (Table 4).

Table 4: Social Media - Italy (Source: Authors' depiction)

Country	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube
Armenia	1	1	0	1
Azerbaijan	1	1	1	0
Belarus	1	1	0	1
Georgia	1	1	1	1
Moldova	1	1	0	0
Ukraine	1	1	1	0
Kazakhstan	1	1	1	0
Kyrgyzstan	NA	NA	0	0
Tajikistan	1 (shared with Uzbekistan)	1	0	0
Turkmenistan	NA	NA	NA	NA
Uzbekistan	1	1	0	0
TOTAL	**8**	**9**	**4**	**3**

The Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) utilizes four social media platforms for public communication. However, the embassies in Ukraine and Kazakhstan specifically use Facebook and Twitter for their communication efforts (Exteriores.gov.es 2022e). It should be noted that a Twitter account for the embassy in Ukraine does not exist (Twitter.com 2022), and the Facebook profile associated with the MFA site in Kazakhstan does not have any posts (Exteriores.gob.es 2022e).

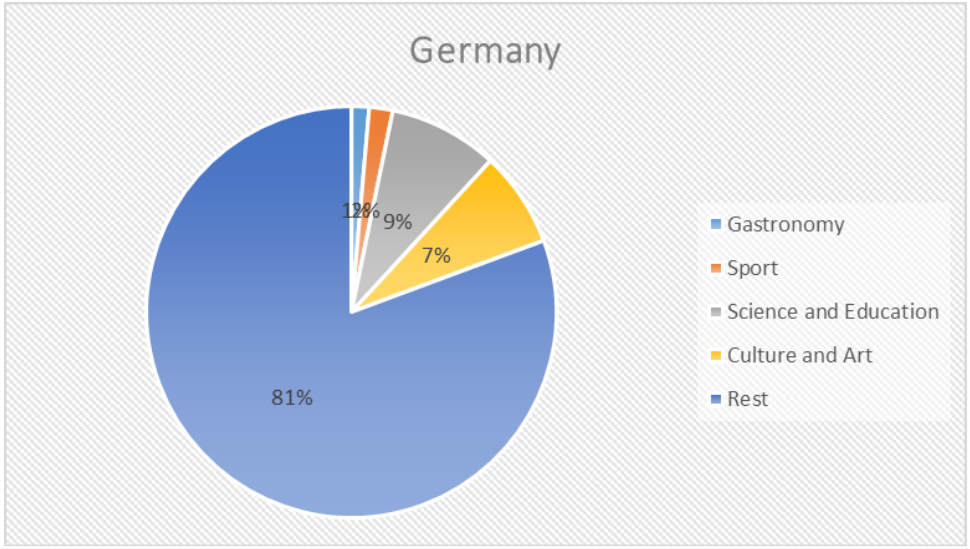
Concerning RQ2, the following conclusion was reached: through thematic analysis of all Facebook posts published by the embassies of Germany, Italy, and Spain, which were associated with soft power, we categorized them into four clusters (science and education, culture and art, gastronomy, and sport), while the remaining posts were classified as a residual category. Table 5 shows that German embassies demonstrated an active presence on social media, in line with their digital diplomacy strategy.

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Table 5: Facebook Pages for 2022 Germany (Source: Authors' depiction)

Country	Gastronomy	Sport	Science and Education	Culture and Art	N
Armenia	0	2	19	11	112
Azerbaijan	4	8	17	23	167
Belarus	5	8	3	16	289
Georgia	4	8	30	37	383
Moldova	0	1	13	7	127
Ukraine	12	0	21	14	469
Kazakhstan	3	9	19	18	224
Kyrgyzstan	3	5	19	18	260
Tajikistan	2	0	4	10	59
Turkmenistan	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Uzbekistan	0	3	59	24	281
TOTAL	**33**	**44**	**204**	**178**	**2371**

The cluster of science and education emerged as Germany's most extensively utilized soft power resource, followed by culture and art as the second largest. The representation of the remaining two soft power resources, gastronomy, and sport, was notably lower. The proportions of these soft power resources are visually depicted in Graph 1.



N=2371

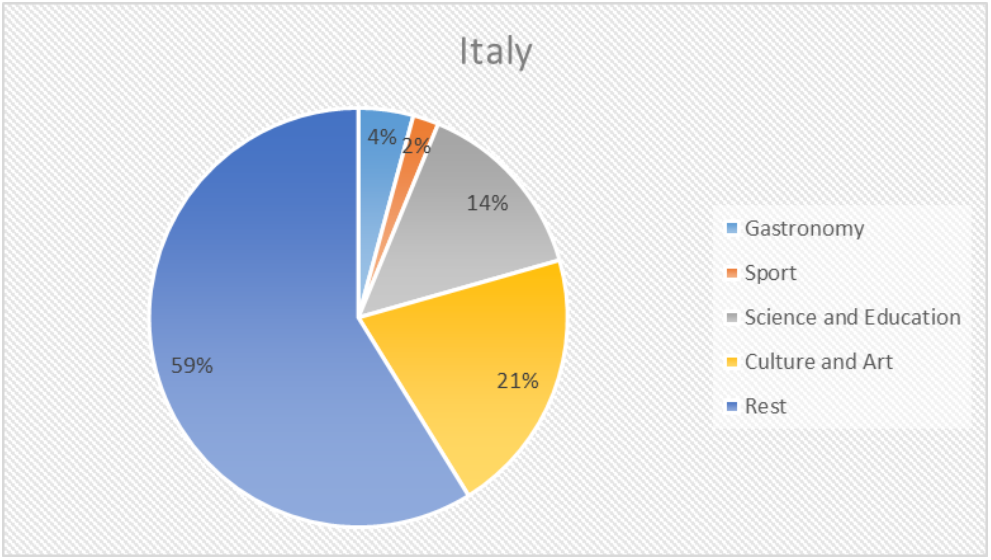
Graph 1: Soft Power Resources of Germany (Source: Authors' depiction)

Italian embassies were also active on social media, as evidenced by the information presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Facebook Pages for 2022 Italy (Source: Authors' depiction)

Country	Gastronomy	Sport	Science and Education	Culture and Art	N
Armenia	1	0	2	9	21
Azerbaijan	0	0	2	3	19
Belarus	0	0	3	3	145
Georgia	11	8	47	61	180
Moldova	10	3	21	21	136
Ukraine	0	0	6	7	90
Kazakhstan	6	2	13	3	115
Kyrgyzstan	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Tajikistan and Uzbekistan	4	2	14	19	68
Turkmenistan	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
TOTAL	**32**	**15**	**108**	**155**	**753**

Italy's most utilized soft power resource is the culture and arts category, with science and education as the second largest. The representation of the other soft power resources, namely gastronomy and sport, was comparatively lower. The percentages illustrating the distribution of these soft power resources are displayed in Graph 2.



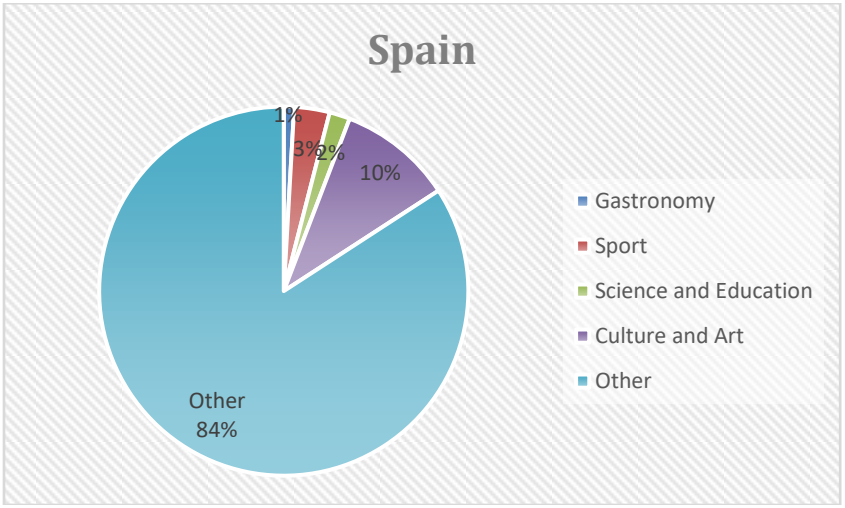
N=753

Graph 2: Soft Power Resources of Italy (Source: Authors' depiction)

It was discovered that the Spanish embassy in Ukraine published 185 posts on their Facebook profile in 2022, while the Spanish embassy in Astana, according to the MEA official website, has no posts. As a result, the Facebook profile for the Embassy of Spain in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Republic of Tajikistan was created with 34 posts. Initially, only four clusters were assigned, but in the case of the Spanish embassy's Facebook profile in Ukraine, a new cluster named "aid to Ukraine" with 18 posts was considered (Table 7). However, this cluster was not utilized in comparison to other countries.

Table 7: Facebook Pages for 2022 Spain (Source: Authors' depiction)

Country	Gastronomy	Sport	Science and Education	Culture and Art	N
Ukraine	0	5	0	9	167
Kazakhstan	2	2	4	13	34
TOTAL	**2**	**7**	**4**	**22**	**201**



N=219

Graph 3: Soft Power Resources of Spain (Source: Authors' depiction)

Concerning RQ3, it has been observed that among the three countries analyzed, Germany displays the highest level of interest in EPC (Eastern Partnership Countries) and Central Asian countries. This assessment is based on the presence of German embassies in all 11 of the mentioned countries. Additionally, Germany demonstrates a high level of engagement on Facebook when interacting with these countries, aligning its digital diplomacy instruments with its foreign policy objectives.

While Italy's foreign policy primarily focuses on southern neighborhood countries, it also significantly focuses on EPC and Central Asian countries. Notably, Italy establishes strong economic relations with Russia, influencing its stance towards China as the primary player in East Asia and shaping its policy within the framework of the EU Eastern neighborhood. The research further suggests Italy's engagement within the analyzed region, as it has embassies in nine of the mentioned countries. Italy actively promotes its foreign policy priorities through digital diplomacy, particularly on Facebook, to a significant extent.

In contrast to Italy, which successfully incorporates both the southern and eastern dimensions of its neighborhood policy, Spain has not demonstrated the same ability or willingness to do so. Based on our findings, Spain appears to have shown passivity towards the EPC and Central Asian countries. This observation is further supported by the fact that Spain only has two embassies in the mentioned countries, with only one exhibiting relatively active engagement on Facebook.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this research was to examine the digital public diplomacy practices of Germany, Spain, and Italy in the countries of the Eastern Partnership and Central Asia in the year 2022, specifically focusing on how they promote their countries through their embassies' Facebook profiles. Analyzing embassies' Facebook profiles in the selected countries of the EPC and Central Asia involved quantitative content analysis, thematic analysis, and descriptive statistics. Our findings indicate that digital public diplomacy 2.0 is standard practice for Germany and Italy in Eastern Partnership and Central Asia countries. However, less information was available regarding Spain's digital public diplomacy efforts. Facebook and Twitter are the primary communication platforms utilized by these countries to engage with the public.

Moreover, the collected data reveals that culture and art were the most frequently employed clusters representing soft power resources in promoting their countries, followed by science and education. In contrast, gastronomy and sport had a lower representation. Additionally, the data demonstrates that Germany and Italy exhibit greater interest in the EPC and Central Asia than Spain, as evident from their foreign policies, number of embassies, concrete partnerships, and digital public diplomacy efforts.

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