Virtual Embassy: New Technologies of Representation and Influence (Rethinking the American Experience)[1]

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Abstract

This article analyzes the American experience of creating and operating a virtual embassy in Iran. We consider the issue through the prism of the development of new information technologies and their applicability in the fields of foreign policy and diplomacy. In the Russian expert environment, this topic has not received due attention and reflection, although it could become an independent direction in academic study. Most importantly, the virtual embassy could offer a quick and relatively inexpensive solution to very specific challenges—both on a temporary and permanent basis—in the practical part of current foreign policy.

For Russia, the experience of implementing and managing such a technological unit could be applied in several different areas, united by the impossibility or difficulty of carrying out activities through traditional diplomatic channels in a particular political and geographical area. One of the most suitable locations for the application of such efforts is the polity of Kosovo, where the work of the Russian diplomatic mission is not being carried out for formal reasons that are understandable but lag behind the rapidly changing conditions of international life. As a result, there is a risk that future work in the region will need to start from scratch or even make up lost ground. But this is just one, and the most obvious, example of the need to virtualize a diplomatic mission. The current crisis has revealed the contours of much larger areas that are now inaccessible to Moscow's traditional diplomatic activity but require constant attention and systematic work. An alternative could be a virtual space—as a launching pad for dialogue and then transformed into complementary and reinforcing tools of presence and influence. The successful experience of Russian media abroad speaks for the high potential and good chances of these new directions.

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Introduction

Like everything else in our wonderful age, diplomacy is moving forward, trying at the same time to keep up with the rapid pace of life and remain one of its most conservative areas. Reflection on the relationship between old and new in such a sensitive sphere has been ongoing for a long time [Rossiter, 1956; Seib, 2010], and at the national levels the problem is solved in different ways. Despite the intermittent "funerals" of American, European, Russian, or general diplomacy as such, as analysts [Bordachev, 2023; Cohen, 2013; Sushentsov, 2022], practicing diplomats [Burns, 2019; Kramarenko, 2019], and the domestic and foreign media focusing on foreign policy topics are increasingly saying, the diplomatic industry continues to develop and grow.

At the very end of 2021, world publications notified the reading audience of Barbados' intention to open the first embassy in the metaverse [Bloomberg, 2021; TASS, 2021]. According to the plan, the virtual embassy will eventually be able to perform some of the functions inherent in ordinary diplomatic missions of national states—namely, provide consular services by issuing electronic visas to applicants. The event became quite resonant. Some saw this as a new trend, while others saw it as an informational occasion and a publicity stunt. That said, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade of Barbados signed a formal agreement with Decentraland to create a digital embassy. The Cabinet of Ministers also approved this initiative, assessing it as a unique diplomatic opportunity. Moreover, at the time of the announcement, the local government was in the final stages of negotiations with two additional popular platforms—Somnium Space and SuperWorld.

The initiator and ideological inspiration of the project was Gabriel Abed, the ambassador of Barbados to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (the technological breakthroughs of Abu Dhabi itself immediately come to mind as a logical result of many years of systematic work on the development and implementation of advanced technologies [Melkumyan, 2022]). Abed is also an expert in the fields of cryptocurrency and blockchain and he is confident that technological diplomacy will "extend to cultural diplomacy—in the form of art exchanges in painting, music and culture" [Barbados Today, 2021]. The virtual embassy is associated with ambitious financial and economic expectations of the business community representatives. However, officials are ready to work in a new format but still with traditional partners and in traditional areas, the most obvious of which are culture and tourism.

Thus, the list of modern types of diplomacy—humanitarian, scientific, cultural, sports, network, paradiplomacy, twiplomacy, and others [Zonova, 2019]—continues to be expanded. But we would like to refer to an experience that unfolded 10 years before Barbados' initiative, namely, the American project of opening a virtual embassy in Iran at the end of 2011. The world's leading media had widely covered the event [BBC News, 2011; Erdbrink, 2011], but, surprisingly, only briefly. It did not become resonant in comparison with the Barbados "breakthrough" into the metaverse. Perhaps this can be explained simply by the difference in the general technological level at a particular time and public awareness of the emerging opportunities. Ten years of rapid development have created a new audience more prepared to evaluate such implementations. Then, in 2011, the project remained underestimated, although even today its potential remains high, and its relevance is far from exhausted.

Our goal is to analyze that U.S. diplomatic initiative and consider the possibilities of applying the American experience in Russian foreign policy, where its implementation by traditional methods is impossible or extremely difficult. We examine the case of Kosovo, while noting that, in the context of the current crisis, the number of points of application for immersive experiences may increase. Now it potentially includes Ukraine and a number of states that have

taken a course toward distancing themselves from Russia by reducing joint programmes and banning Russian projects, as well as physically closing diplomatic missions on their territory.

The thesis that diplomacy based on information and communication technologies (ICT) "expands rather than replaces the diplomatic representation of international actors" [Spies, 2019, p. 55] multiplies this list. First, at the expense of states where the diplomatic presence can be expanded and supplemented in this way. Second, due to the actors of modern times: transnational corporations and powerful global social media and networks, which today have a significant influence on diplomacy to the point of changing the rules of the game in international relations and interfering in one of the main functions of traditional diplomacy]—managing the constant global interaction of states. All this together makes the chances for the effective use of the American experience in Russian foreign policy high.

Why Virtual Embassy?

This question is the title of the corresponding section on the U.S. Department of State website [U.S. Virtual Embassy Iran, n.d.]. Of course, the unexpected move of the department required explanation. But before presenting and analyzing it, let us turn to the background of the event. In 1979, the U.S. Embassy in Tehran was stormed, and several dozen diplomatic mission employees were captured. The demands made to the White House from the invaders were as follows: to extradite the Iranian Shah, who fled during the revolution and found refuge in the United States, to return Iranian assets, to promise not to interfere in the internal affairs of Iran in the future, and to make an official apology for actions in the past.

In response, Washington broke off diplomatic relations with Tehran, declared an embargo on Iranian oil, and then imposed a complete economic embargo, freezing those Iranian assets to which the U.S. had access. All these actions were accompanied by monstrous steps against each other at different levels, including everyday life: Iranians burned effigies and flags on the streets, openly wishing death to the Americans, while the latter dismissed fellow citizens of Iranian origin from their jobs and attacked their homes. The hostage drama lasted 444 days. Two forceful attempts to rescue American embassy employees became textbook failures, one at the stage of implementation ("Eagle Claw") and the other at the development stage ("Credible Sport"). As a result, the salvation of people took place thanks to negotiations and a conditional ransom of $3 billion [Alekseev, 1999], conditional because the funds were taken from Iran's frozen assets. The outcome of these events was "the loss of all seemingly powerful and unshakable U.S. positions in Iran. Moreover, from the main supporter of American Middle East policy, Iran turned into the main enemy, the centre of a revolution that threatened U.S. allies in the Arabian Peninsula" [Mirsky, 2009, p. 141].

The diplomatic crisis between Washington and Tehran continues to this day. Since 1980, the Swiss Embassy has represented U.S. interests in Iran, and the Pakistani diplomatic mission has represented those of Iran in the United States. In 2006, the U.S. administration created the State Department's Office of Iranian Affairs, which became the central point for all issues related to Iran, including public diplomacy. And finally, in 2011, the attempt to move to virtual interaction in this area took place.

The creation of a virtual embassy is a step, first, in the plane of public diplomacy. The initiative was planned and positioned from this point of view (and application). Its introduction begins with the address: "This is the place for you, the Iranian people..." [U.S. Virtual Embassy Iran, n.d.]. In other words, this was not an attempt to restore diplomatic relations with the state. The establishing content made it clear that the site is not an official diplomatic mission, nor does it describe or represent an actual U.S. embassy accredited to the government of Iran. The

lack of official contacts was precisely why the creators resorted to alternative communication channels.

The purpose of the virtual embassy in Tehran was to inform and educate Iranian audiences about the United States. The core idea was the possibility of U.S. influence on the content to which Iranian youth have access, thereby indirectly influencing the formation of the opinions of this target audience. Here is the implementation of the "fundamental innovation" of American public diplomacy of the 2000s, with its focus on women and youth well-studied and described by domestic experts [Ponomareva, 2015]. It is not surprising that in addition to the officially stated goal of information and education, the project was intended to solve related tasks in the form of combating disinformation, promoting mutual understanding, and the "long-term objective of supporting grassroots pro-democracy groups" [Fialho, Wallen, 2013, p. 2].

From a technical point of view, the newly created structure united several thematic Internet resources under one umbrella with a joint name "USABehFarsi." Those resources are combined on a specially made website of the same name on the base of the common platform of the U.S. State Department and its several official accounts in various social networks and hosting. USABehFarsi includes communication channels on Facebook,[2] Instagram,[3] Telegram, Twitter,[4] and YouTube.

The basic website of "the virtual embassy in Tehran" consists of sections on visas (without offering consular services), education and culture, U.S.-Iranian relations, the essence and mission of the project, and services to U.S. citizens located in Iran (reduced to providing emergency contact information).

The State Department's foreign policy initiative in the Iranian direction was not always warmly welcomed at home. Closer to the truth: experts have perceived it ambiguously. Some professionals from the field of American public diplomacy also demonstrated their scepticism about it. This is partly due to Iran's quick response and effective countermeasures, which predictably prompted the most popular question: "Is this Virtual Embassy Tehran endeavor worth it—or a waste of U.S. taxpayer dollars?" [Dale, 2011]. On the one hand, critics had to agree that U.S. public diplomacy should not be determined by those who were trying to block American content, which at that time included China, Cuba, and North Korea. On the other hand, they insisted on the fallacy of the increasing transfer of U.S. international broadcasting to digital platforms (with the option of technologically advanced "pull the plug" modes, devaluing the efforts of the American foreign policy department) and the possibility of better use of both budget money and staff-hours.

The Difficulties of "Big Satan"

In addition to the cold shoulder, the implementation of the American initiative naturally encountered other difficulties. Let us start with the external ones, in the form of opposition from Iran, which tried to respond quickly to the initiatives of the "Big Satan"—this is how Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini described the United States in a speech on 5 November 1979 [Buck, 2009, p. 136]. Immediately after the work of the virtual embassy began, Tehran promptly took retaliatory measures and blocked the resource. The country turned out to be ready for the "meeting"

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[2] The activities of the social network are recognized as extremist and prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation; the data is used for research purposes only and is not aimed at endorsing extremist activities.

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[4] The social network is blocked in the Russian Federation by decision of Roskomnadzor.

of the Americans because U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton informed the public about the upcoming opening of a new "embassy" in every sense in October 2011.

The deputy secretary of state on the day the project opened, when the web resource remained functional for several hours, expressed, if not with confidence, at least with hope, that they "have the technical capability to get it back up even if it gets disrupted" [Erdbrink, 2011]. But these calculations were too optimistic. The website, which broadcast through at least three different URLs, was soon blocked. For anyone attempting to visit it from Iranian territory, the system notification read: "Due to cybercrime laws, this website cannot be accessed" [Reuters, 2011].

As for social media, networks, and instant messengers, the local government blocks all the main ones: Medium, Reddit, Snapchat, Telegram, Threads, WhatsApp, YouTube, and those recognized as extremist and prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, according to the scant data available, approximately 75% of Iranians over 18 years of age regularly use at least one social media or networking platform; among Internet users, 64% prefer WhatsApp, 45% use Instagram,[5] and 36% use Telegram [Iran International, 2022]. As we will see below when comparing indicators, these total data on Iranian users do not maintain the same proportions when distributed across communication channels promoted by the U.S. State Department. It is also worth considering a certain percentage of the local population who use the Internet only to search for information and check email.

Virtual private networks (VPN) remain the primary circumvention tool for Iranians. The American Internet project is among the beneficiaries of these counter-technologies. At the same time, it does not enjoy any exceptional popularity among the local population. Iranians are objectively more concerned with practical things related to the Internet, such as e-commerce and other ways to make money in cyberspace; the percentage of participants in such transactions is constantly growing. However, the virtual US embassy already exists in their digital reality, slowly or quickly, good or bad, but networks united under its auspices are developing. Anyone interested in American issues can access the resource. During the year of its existence, the basic web resource of the U.S. Virtual Embassy in Tehran received about two million views by the Iranian audience: these figures were cited by the State Department press secretary as part of summing up the first anniversary of the project [The Times of India, 2012].

As for internal difficulties, the project was predictably not free from miscalculations on the part of the developers. So, difficulties appeared at the very start—in the name. It was identical to the traditional titles and the usual format of physically existing missions in different countries: the American Embassy in Moscow, the Russian Embassy in Washington, and so on. This was done deliberately, with a reference to the hostage drama in Tehran in 1979. However, according to an anonymous source in the U.S. foreign policy department [Fialho, Wallen, 2013], the choice of name did not have the effect that the State Department had hoped for. Perhaps because in the 30 years since the incident, a generation of Iranians had grown up who do not feel any emotional connection with those events and poorly correlate the grandiose diplomatic scandal ("the Second Revolution" in the famous formulation of A. Khomeini) and the subsequent diplomatic crisis in Iran-American relations.

But the bet on the wide coverage of social networks, in general, justified itself. In specific numbers, separate (across various communication channels) USABehFarsi audiences for July 2023 are measured and look like this (Table 1).

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[5] The activities of the social network are recognized as extremist and prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation; the data is used for research purposes only and is not aimed at endorsing extremist activities.

Table 1. USABehFarsi Social Networks in Iran

Name	Est. Date	Followers	Content
Facebook[6]	2010	689,000	–
Instagram[7]	2013	682,000	3,658 posts
Telegram	2015	9,836	4,068 posts
Twitter[8]	2011	752,300	9,000 tweets
YouTube	2011	11,800	1,300 videos

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Unfortunately, we do not have data on the total number of publications (posts) in the first network. Presumably for ensuring the safety of its subscribers, the social network's page contains a minimum of information about itself and hides the names of users who visit it and subscribe to content, leaving only their subscriptions publicly available, and there are five of them: President J. Biden, First Lady J. Biden, Vice President K. Harris, the White House and the U.S. State Department. It is also known that the account on this network was created earlier than all others within the framework of the Iranian direction of the Americans' work, including the virtual embassy in Tehran project itself; it had been renamed three times by new tasks and strategy.

USABehFarsi YouTube and Telegram channels are significantly behind the others in terms of the number of people interested in their content. This is especially true for Telegram, where the channel's operation is maintained at a low level: the last message is dated 7 January 2022, and the system issues a warning about the possible imminent loss of ownership rights to this channel due to the absence of any dynamics in it for a long time. It is worth noting the technical side of the YouTube channel: for the most part, these videos are in English with subtitles in Persian.

The linguistic aspect is important and deserves special attention when comprehending and applying the improved American experience. Despite the titanic efforts of the Americans to translate huge amounts of information and their emphasis on it (even in the name of the media umbrella), the project's language reveals its errors and shortcomings. The focus exclusively on the Persian language significantly narrows the target audience. It seems that the "classical" approach of Americans to promoting their interests through teaching (primarily English) would be more productive. Adding Arabic (taking into account that English and Arabic are mandatory foreign languages for study in Iranian schools) would increase popularity in the target country and in the Middle East as a whole.

Demand for Virtual Embassy Experience

Despite the general low interest in monitoring the American project, some states became involved in the discussion around it. It primarily happened on the background of individual complications of each of them in this or that foreign policy direction. One of the cases is the closure

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of Canadian embassies in Syria and Iran in 2012. Then, a virtual presence (precisely because of the already existing working experience) as an option was voiced immediately after the usual decision to jointly use embassies (of Great Britain in this case) to represent interests in the country while curtailing official contacts and connections [Howard, 2012].

"Dip sharing" (diplomatic sharing) has ceased to be the only possible solution to stay in the country. Moreover, digital embassies, following the example of the American one, provided an opportunity not only to be present but also to act: to increase influence, exert pressure, and so on. The actual effect achieved directly depended on the actions and could be the opposite of what was expected. The Canadians very thoughtfully approached this issue and, in general, while highly appreciating the American idea, they mercilessly criticized its execution. The main complaint was, in fact, the same as in the media space before—in the run-up to, and during, the coverage of the start of the project. Then, some analysts and journalists called the initiative propaganda [Rad, 2011], rightly noting that translations of multi-page press releases and historical essays do not contribute to the formation of lively intercultural interaction and open communication; diplomatic work is not only about speaking, but also about listening. However, this is a typical "American problem," about which much has been written before in the context of quite ordinary, non-virtual diplomatic missions.

Let us go back to the Canadians and their understanding of the U.S. experience. They found the website on the State Department platform to be overly static, devoid of dynamics, and not adapted to it, in principle. The Canadians intended to strengthen their hypothetical virtual diplomatic missions with online training on cybersecurity for the audience of the target country and its security at the places, to provide options for applying for visas and asylum, as well as information about the possibility of obtaining an education in Canada.

In theory, Canadians argued for greater freedom to communicate with the foreign public "without having each tweet edited by the Minister" [Howard, 2012]. The Foreign Office, they said, must now (2012), not 10 years later, embrace social media and digital technologies. The strategy needed to aim at a specific work result instead of monitoring its diplomats and protecting itself from their random mistakes. Ideally, they saw a massive diplomatic corps with the technical knowledge to conduct effective social media work.

A year after the Canadians, Israel also announced the opening of its virtual embassy in the Gulf states, "akin to the U.S. State Department's websites for communicating with Iranians and Syrians" [Haaretz, 2013]. It was an utterly simplified version of the American virtuality in the form of a Foreign Office Twitter[9] account with a focus on the monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Tel Aviv started calling the initiative a "Twitter[10] Embassy" under the name of "Israel in the GCC."[11]

Another year later, the Israelis "established" a digital dialogue with Iran. In terms of theory, there was a natural appeal to the American experience, and a direct analogy—Iran—contributed to this. It must be said that Israeli diplomats approached it far less critically than their Canadian colleagues. They positively assessed the variety of communication channels in Persian, considering this to be the key to broad coverage of the target audience. Content-wise, the virtual embassy in Tehran reminded them of a regular embassy in terms of introducing foreign audiences to the culture and values of the United States. They called contacts between the U.S. government and the people of Iran directly, bypassing the Iranian government—a distinctive feature of the project [Digital Diplomacy, 2014].

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[9] The social network is blocked in the Russian Federation by decision of Roskomnadzor.

[10] The social network is blocked in the Russian Federation by decision of Roskomnadzor.

[11] The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, also known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

In practice, the digital dialogue between Tel Aviv and Tehran did take place, but in an original manner that undoubtedly deserves consideration in the context of the exchange of similar experiences. Israel resorted to digital diplomacy in March 2014 after the discovery of weapons allegedly of Iranian origin on one of the hijacked ships. Tel Aviv used its digital channels to disseminate images of weapons packed in Iranian cement sacks [Eglash, 2014] which Israel said proved their Iranian origin. Israel considered this the beginning of a digital dialogue with the enemy. The information campaign lasted a week, during which the Israelis circulated images of weapons and messages about the possible impact on civilians. The country's prime minister was involved in the campaign. But the efforts were in vain: other countries responded weakly and reluctantly to Israel's postings. That was the case until Tehran stepped into the dialogue to refute the accusations. However, Iran unconventionally conducted its defence. Instead of tweeting a denial as usual, Iran quickly flooded its digital feeds with humorous tweets asking how far a person would be willing to go to get their hands on top-notch Iranian cement—the answer was that Bibi (Binyamin Netanyahu) traveled 8,000 km to do this [Digital Diplomacy, 2014].

Series of witty posts followed from both sides and were considered to represent direct communication between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel. It was noted that, although "these tweets are by no means examples of diplomatic relations between the two countries, they are an example of their virtual relations" [Digital Diplomacy, 2014]. In principle, if this kind of dialogue sooner or later leads to understanding and acceptance, then the potential of digital diplomacy will be truly realized.

To summarize, we note that the rightly criticized, not always effective, often annoying for its pressure tactics, and peremptory American experience has become a clear illustration for diplomatic service professionals of the fact that "it is virtual embassies that should become the basis of the strategy of foreign states in the field of digital diplomacy" [Howard, 2012].

Nothing Stays the Same (Persian Proverb)

Russia currently has no official relations with the partially recognized "Republic of Kosovo." But this should not mean an automatic refusal of any work with a problematic region under close control of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) [Arlyapova, Ponomareva, Proroković, 2022]. Behind the dry numbers and statements—about the pro-western orientation of Pristina, about its anti-Russian rhetoric, about the Serbophilia of Moscow, and so on—there are always people on both sides. A dialogue between them can be started and continued. This does not mean automatic recognition or agreement with the current policy; it is enough to turn again to the American-Iranian experience or look, for example, at the development of traditionally formatted relations between Belgrade and the monarchies of the Persian Gulf and even Turkey. The immediate recognition of the newly emerged states in the Western Balkans, especially in terms of the issue of common faith, became practically the credo of their policy in the region, but did not prevent the building of bilateral interaction with Serbia.

On the other hand, many negative aspects of the American experience require a thorough overview and analysis. Shortcomings include more than the foreign policy "mentoring" in address to the states that are unsuitable for the role of political interns. This ultimately damages the process of building relationships. The dominating American-centric approach—in the format of content, organizing feedback, and so forth—often irritates the U.S.' target audience. It is everywhere, starting with Hillary Clinton's welcoming video message: "This is a platform for us to communicate with each other—openly and without fear—about the United States, about our policies, our culture, and the American people..." [The Times of India, 2012]. An external

observer may react sharply to such excessive self-talking, which the Canadian perception and reading of the project clearly showed, despite their steadfast friendliness to the United States.

Let communication on the Russian platforms be as live as possible. Virtual exchange technologies could support and add value. They have already become widespread in the diplomatic practice of some countries. This is especially true for Russians and Kosovars, who, based on reciprocity, do not have conditions for physical exchange in the form of travel, student internships, work trips, other types of meetings, or live communication. The practice of those who introduce technology into their work (in particular, from the experience of the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta) has shown that "virtual exchange is changing the how and who of exchange and may well prove itself to be a viable extension of public diplomacy and a new means of building and exerting soft power in foreign affairs" [Helland, 2018].

Of course, the answer to the question increasingly asked on the most respectable platforms for diplomats—"do we need embassies anymore?" (in the traditional sense and shape) [Oliver, 2016]—will be affirmative. Today, as the American experience of introducing and operating new technologies shows, a person, a professional diplomat, remains the core of the system. We are talking about building alternative (in the complete absence of others) or additional (in the presence of basic) channels of communication and interaction.

As for Kosovo, until 22 October 2021 there were two employees of the Russian Federation Liaison Office in Pristina. Diplomats accredited to the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) were officially listed as employees of the Russian Embassy in Serbia. In the fall of 2021, Kosovo president Vjosa Osmani reported that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the self-proclaimed republic "issued a decree on the undesirability of these citizens staying in the country" [Khvostik, 2021]. The explanation for this kind of action was harsh; it was considered a violation of national security and the constitutional order. At the same time, Osmani especially noted that "all structures of Kosovo are committed to a decisive fight against the harmful influence of the Russian Federation and its satellites in the region, which seek to undermine the achievements of Kosovo, as well as the United States, NATO and the European Union," and therefore Pristina intends to continue close cooperation with the American and European allies "to prevent an attempt to make Kosovo and our region a victim of the destabilizing ambitions of the Russian Federation" [Ibid.].

The response of the Russian Embassy in Serbia was consistent with the principles of domestic foreign policy regarding the self-proclaimed polity. Since Moscow does not recognize the "independence" of Kosovo, Pristina's decisions have no legal force. Nevertheless, defining the expulsion of Russian diplomats as a provocation could not help Moscow resolve the situation, and the diplomats were forced to leave.

However, neither the aggressive rhetoric of the Pristina authorities nor Moscow's commitment to the provisions of United Nations Resolution 1244 should become an obstacle to the country's representation and promotion of its influence in the rapidly changing political realities and with given new technological capabilities. In this context, the American experience of creating a virtual embassy in Iran is a revealing and instructive example. In the case of Kosovo, the Russian party should focus not on establishing contacts with government institutions that take an openly unfriendly position but on contacts with the local population—both the Serbian minority (1.46% of the population) and the Albanian majority (92.9% of the population) Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023]). The virtual platform should become a place for presenting Russia specifically to them. Therefore, it is crucial to produce interesting and educational content for the "little man"[12] in the Balkans. This is labour-intensive but interesting and highly rewarding work.

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[12] With a reference to one of the major themes of Russian literature.

However, pitfalls along the way to justifying and designing a virtual embassy in Kosovo or any other part of the world lie in wait for domestic developers and designers, not only and even not so much on the path of choosing the informational and visual content of the platform. In the current crisis, the possibility of using global platforms and modern technologies by Russian or affiliated authorities may become problematic due to the threat of blocking and sanctions in the digital industry. When entering the field of digital diplomacy today, one has to realize and consider accompanying financial and political risks.

Among the five leading resources—Facebook,[13] Instagram,[14] Telegram, Twitter,[15] and YouTube—only Telegram (possibly just for now) is unlikely to block Russian projects. In addition, despite the dynamic development of this network, it cannot compete with the capabilities of the American virtual platforms and YouTube. Regardless of the specific virtual embassy project, Moscow faces the task of creating and promoting its platforms: in the modern digital world, the importance of state and non-state actors is determined, among other things, by their online presence. Practical steps toward the digital independence of the country will require not only political will but also significant time, intellectual, technological, and financial costs. Therefore, until effective digital tools appear (work on this can be done in close cooperation with the Belarusian IT complex, which has a reputation as one of the leading in the field [Zavarin, 2018]), Russia can use a parallel import scheme and bring in substitution products. However, the actual technical capabilities and limitations can only be justified by IT specialists if a political decision is made to create Russian virtual embassies.

In conclusion, we would highlight once again that the status of a virtual embassy is rather auxiliary, and it is very far from claims to leading and, even more so, replacing positions in the diplomacy field. But let us not forget that it is no less far from the first discussions and implementations (such as the opening of Sweden's embassy in the virtual world of Second Life in 2007, which the general public had dismissed). Today, with all the complaints and shortcomings this is an already established experience, ready, after comprehensive analysis and necessary correction, for use on any basis (interaction with state and non-state actors, for example) by anyone, including Russian official diplomacy.

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