Editorial: narratives of influence – diplomacy, identity and agency in a fragmented world

Gorazd Justinek

Faculty for Governmental and European Studies,
New University,
Žanova ulica 3, 4000 Kranj, Slovenia
Email: gorazd.justinek@gmail.com

Biographical notes: Gorazd Justinek is Professor of International Relations at the Faculty for Governmental and European Studies, New University, and a former diplomat. His research interests include international business, economic and commercial diplomacy, and the competitiveness of economies. He is the Founder and Editor of the *International Journal of Diplomacy and Economy*.

1 Introduction: diplomacy as distributed agency in the age of fragmented sovereignties

We enter the latter half of the 2020s in a world marked by paradox. On one hand, diplomacy, as both practice and institution, is under strain. The traditional infrastructures of state-to-state communication, alliance formation, and treaty-making are increasingly outpaced by the speed of technological change, the volatility of public opinion, and the scale of transnational crises. On the other hand, we are witnessing an unprecedented expansion of diplomatic actors, instruments, and venues, many of which lie beyond the reach of classical international relations.

This paradox is not new, but it is intensifying. What has changed is the texture of power, the architecture of legitimacy, and the platforms through which influence is exercised. As Joseph Nye (2004) famously argued, the 21st century would be marked not only by hard and soft power, but by the capacity of actors, state and non-state alike, to attract and co-opt rather than merely coerce. In this issue of the *International Journal of Diplomacy and Economy*, the contributors take this insight further by demonstrating how diplomacy now emerges from sectors as diverse as tourism, pop culture, corporate governance, environmental regulation, and even open-source intelligence. These sectors, previously thought peripheral to statecraft, now operate as vital frontlines in the contest over legitimacy, values, and global positioning.

Theoretically, we may think of this evolution in terms of the 'new diplomacy' or 'multi-track diplomacy' literature (Diamond and McDonald, 1996), which has long recognised the importance of non-state actors in conflict resolution and international engagement. What we observe today, however, is a deeper ontological shift: the decentring of sovereignty as the sole locus of diplomatic agency. This aligns with constructivist perspectives in international relations, which argue that diplomacy is not

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merely a tool of power politics, but a performative and discursive practice, one that constructs the identities, interests, and meanings that shape global interaction (Der Derian, 1987; Adler and Pouliot, 2011).

Moreover, the entanglement of diplomacy with digital technologies, cultural production, environmental politics, and algorithmic governance reveals the need to integrate theories from media studies, sociology, and critical political economy. Concepts like 'platform power' (Van Dijck et al., 2018), 'networked diplomacy' (Riordan, 2007), and 'transgovernmentalism' (Slaughter, 2004) help frame diplomacy as an increasingly distributed field, where influence flows through horizontal networks rather than hierarchical commands, and where legitimacy is constantly negotiated across multiple publics.

At the same time, this new distributed diplomacy does not dissolve the role of the state, it reframes it. Governments still matter, but they must now operate within ecosystems of influence shaped by subcultures, brands, corporations, diasporas, and data flows. As scholars like Jan Melissen (2005) and Ali Fisher (2010) have shown, public diplomacy today is not only about broadcasting national interests, but about listening, co-creating narratives, and adapting to hybrid media environments.

This issue of IJDIPE captures this complexity. From the gamification of tourism in Hungary to the export of environmental norms from Slovenia to North Macedonia; from the rise of Thai Boys' Love (BL) media as a vehicle for soft power to the civilianisation of intelligence in the Russia–Ukraine war; from the evolution of HR as a transnational infrastructure of governance to China's historical deployment of artistic networks as informal diplomatic ties, the articles in this volume demonstrate that diplomacy is increasingly defined not by who performs it, but how it is performed, and through what kinds of social imaginaries and institutional mechanisms.

By placing these diverse case studies side by side, this issue does more than reflect on the changing form of diplomacy, it also challenges us to rethink its purpose. What kind of world is being built through these new forms of engagement? Whose values are being advanced, whose identities legitimised, and whose agency recognised?

In an era defined by ecological precarity, algorithmic governance, and social fragmentation, diplomacy may no longer be a tool to manage the international system, but a site where the future of that system is itself contested.

2 Digital natives and domestic tourism: gamification as soft power

The issue opens with the article 'New ways in tourism: factors influencing the domestic travel decision of generation Z and the correlations of gamification' by Pacsi, Illés, Papp-Váry, Szabó, Huseynov, Shukla, Syed, and Isgandarov. This collaborative and cross-institutional study examines the intersection of youth identity, digital technology, and domestic tourism in Hungary. Focusing on Generation Z, a demographic born into digital culture, the authors apply Marczewski's HEXAD framework to analyse how gamified travel applications affect decision-making patterns and user motivation.

The paper reveals that for Gen Z, travel is not only about exploration, but about interactive experiences that affirm identity, offer status, and satisfy psychological drives. In this context, gamification becomes a tool of domestic soft power, shaping internal tourism flows while promoting national economic goals. This kind of 'quiet diplomacy', built on behavioural nudges and digital interaction, has the potential to inform broader

strategies in tourism management and regional development policy. It also raises essential questions about the ethical design of engagement mechanisms and their unintended sociopolitical consequences.

3 HR roles as an emerging infrastructure of influence

In 'The evolution of human resource roles in business: a systematic literature review from origins to the present', Shukla and Singh present a meticulously structured literature review that chronicles the transformation of human resource management over nearly four decades. Their work captures how HR roles have evolved from traditional administrative functions to become strategic, international, and deeply embedded in broader governance frameworks.

By drawing on a range of empirical models, from Ulrich's Strategic Partner to recent discourse around Employee Experience Designers, the authors emphasise the increasingly diplomatic functions of HR professionals. No longer limited to workforce administration, HR now operates as a key node in aligning global organisational behaviour with local cultural and legal expectations.

This expanded conception of HR not only reflects the globalisation of business practices but also positions HR professionals as mediators of organisational legitimacy and soft power. HR departments are, in effect, frontline diplomatic missions of corporate identity, negotiating diversity, internal values, and transnational strategy.

4 Diplomacy through environmental values: the Slovenian case

In her article 'The influence of Slovenian economic diplomacy and companies on changing environmental values in North Macedonia', Breda Mulec explores how Slovenian firms operating in North Macedonia act as vectors of environmental norms and corporate responsibility. Through a blend of document analysis and structured interviews with diplomats and business leaders, Mulec traces how Slovenia's high environmental standards are exported through business activities, whether or not the host country legally requires such standards.

This piece is a compelling example of how diplomacy today often occurs through commercial channels. Slovenian companies are not merely economic actors; they are emissaries of a value system rooted in sustainable development, EU alignment, and long-term environmental responsibility. Mulec's findings suggest that when diplomacy is anchored in ethical practice and not merely transactional exchange, it can play a transformative role in fostering social and regulatory change abroad.

5 Soft power from below: Boylywood and the making of Thai cultural diplomacy

In one of the most fascinating contributions of this issue, Bunyavejchewin, Tungkeunkunt, and Nugprachaya analyse the meteoric rise of Thailand's BL (Boys' Love) media industry, dubbed 'Boylywood', in their article 'Boylywood's soft power and

Thai public diplomacy'. Through a comprehensive analysis grounded in d'Hooghe's public diplomacy model, the authors demonstrate how Thailand's Foreign Ministry gradually embraced this once-marginal genre as a soft power asset.

What is particularly striking is the bottom-up nature of this shift: initially fuelled by fan cultures and social media, Boylywood became a high-performing cultural export with significant economic and symbolic returns. Only later did the state institutionalise it within formal diplomatic strategy.

This hybridisation of state and non-state influence offers a model of 'network diplomacy', where cultural relevance and economic viability drive public policy. The article encourages policymakers to take seriously the informal currents of influence that shape regional perception and global standing, especially in the age of TikTok and transnational fandoms.

6 Cultural memory and diplomacy in 20th-century China

Kakade et al., in their paper 'Cultural diplomacy and informal artistic relations in China in the 20th century: a global perspective', shift our attention to a more historical context, yet one that remains highly relevant today. The authors apply network theory and relational models to examine how China built cultural bridges through informal artistic exchanges, especially during periods of restricted formal diplomacy.

The paper underscores that cultural diplomacy has always been both intentional and emergent. By exploring the strategies used to forge trust, recognition, and artistic collaboration, the authors illuminate a foundational aspect of Chinese foreign relations that still echoes in its Belt and Road-era policies. This retrospective lens enriches our understanding of how today's cultural and soft power projects are anchored in decades of relational infrastructure and mutual symbolic investment.

7 OSINT and the civilianisation of modern warfare

The issue closes with Ila Joshi's bold and timely article 'Open-source intelligence (OSINT) and international humanitarian law: exploring the scope and limitations of civilian participation in the Russia–Ukraine war'. Joshi confronts the legal and ethical ambiguity surrounding civilians who use digital tools, maps, social media, encrypted messaging to participate in, document, or influence the trajectory of military conflict.

In the Russia–Ukraine context, OSINT has blurred the classical distinction between combatant and non-combatant. Civilians not only collect and disseminate intelligence, but often become active agents in warfare, risking their protection under international humanitarian law. Joshi's paper calls for a fundamental rethinking of how modern warfare is regulated, and who is considered a legitimate actor within it.

This study challenges scholars and policymakers to engage with the digital battlefield not as an anomaly, but as a defining reality of 21st-century conflict, and to confront the uncomfortable convergence of activism, surveillance, and militarisation.

8 Conclusion: diplomacy reimagined – towards a cartography of influence

The articles featured in this issue of IJDIPE collectively demonstrate that diplomacy is no longer confined to high-level negotiations, embassies, or foreign ministries. Instead, it is unfolding across new terrains, marketplaces, media platforms, corporate cultures, digital forums, environmental supply chains, and civilian networks. What unites these disparate arenas is not a shared institutional form, but a common function: the management of visibility, legitimacy, and relational power across borders and between actors of unequal scale.

This expanded view of diplomacy, sometimes described in the literature as networked or distributed diplomacy, invites us to rethink its core characteristics. No longer rooted exclusively in state sovereignty or elite agency, diplomacy today is polycentric and often informal. It is performed not only through formal communiqués or summits, but through music videos, sustainability benchmarks, employee engagement strategies, real-time mapping of conflict zones, and algorithmically optimised tourism apps.

One of the clearest patterns emerging from this issue is the hybridisation of roles: tourists behave as brand ambassadors, HR departments act as cultural brokers, civilians become intelligence gatherers, artists create informal alliances, and media industries carry the diplomatic aspirations of the state. These transformations reflect broader shifts in global governance where sovereignty is increasingly negotiated through norms, narratives, and networks rather than hard borders or military alliances.

Theoretically, these dynamics suggest that we are living in a post-Westphalian moment, not because the state has disappeared, but because it is increasingly required to act through non-state proxies, symbolic instruments, and hybrid publics. This demands new diplomatic literacies: narrative intelligence, media fluency, ethical foresight, and a deep awareness of how identity and perception are shaped in real time.

Each article in this issue offers a window into this evolving field. We have seen:

- how Gen Z tourists in Hungary respond to gamified policy tools in ways that reveal broader patterns of socio-psychological engagement with state initiatives;
- how HR departments, once considered purely internal entities, now perform external diplomatic functions within global supply chains;
- how Slovenian firms export environmental values and sustainability norms to neighbouring non-EU states, indirectly shaping policy agendas;
- how the Thai BL genre, emerging from subcultural spaces, became a vehicle for formal cultural diplomacy and nation branding;
- how artistic exchange in China's 20th-century diplomacy laid foundations for current soft power strategies that rely on long-term trust-building rather than immediate transactional gain;
- and how OSINT platforms, used by civilians in wartime, are eroding traditional legal boundaries and calling for new frameworks of international humanitarian law.

What these contributions ultimately underscore is that diplomacy is no longer defined by institutional affiliation, but by relational function. It is about who can translate symbols, build narratives, gain trust, shape perception, and mobilise publics, whether they are citizens or soldiers, entrepreneurs or entertainers.

As global challenges grow in complexity, from climate instability and digital authoritarianism to forced migration and epistemic polarisation, diplomacy must become more than a tool of reactive crisis management. It must evolve into a proactive practice of sense-making, bridge-building, and coalition formation across difference. It must be capable not only of representing interests, but of cultivating shared imaginaries that allow collective futures to be envisioned and enacted.

In curating this issue, we are reminded that diplomacy, at its best, is a human technology of connection. As it stretches into new territories and takes on new forms, the task before us is not to police its boundaries, but to understand its mutations, ethically, analytically, and strategically.

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