



DIGITAL DIPLOMACY AS A NEW ARENA OF SOFT POWER: THE PERCEPTUAL COMPETITION OF KOSOVO AND ALBANIA IN THE BALKANS

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- How have Kosovo and Albania, as resource-constrained Balkan states, used digital diplomacy to shape international perceptions and build legitimacy
- To what extent can digital diplomacy substitute traditional diplomatic tools, and how does it affect power imbalances for small states. What structural limits define its effectiveness
- To what extent do the digital narratives promoted by Kosovo and Albania align with their actual political and economic conditions
- In a competitive Balkan environment, how do Kosovo and Albania's digital soft power strategies influence the long-term struggle for digital cultural influence among the European Union, Russia, China, and Türkiye

Problem Definition and Importance

Over the past decade, digital diplomacy has emerged as a key tool for small states to express themselves in the international system, gain legitimacy, and secure visibility. The digital transformation of global political communication has created a new arena that supports traditional diplomacy and offers opportunities for states with limited financial capacity. Although they cannot compete with major powers in economic or military terms, Balkan states such as Kosovo and Albania use digital platforms to communicate directly

with international audiences and strengthen their national identities. The central question is whether small states can convert their presence in this digital arena into an effective soft power strategy.

Kosovo and Albania work to build legitimacy and trust in the international system. Kosovo still seeks wider recognition after its 2008 independence. Albania works to meet European Union standards in areas such as democratic reform, anti-corruption measures, and economic governance. Both states have lim-

ited diplomatic reach and cannot rely only on traditional diplomacy. Digital diplomacy gives them an alternative space to shape international perceptions, support recognition and credibility, and use communication capacity when material power is limited.

The historical, cultural, and geopolitical context of the Balkans highlights the significance of digital diplomacy. The region remains shaped by ethnic divisions, competition among external powers, and ongoing influence struggles involving the European Union, Russia, China, and Türkiye since the end of the Cold War. In this competitive setting, digital diplomacy functions not only as a communication strategy but also as a tool for identity formation and regional influence. The digital activities of Kosovo and Albania reflect efforts to narrate their own stories, redefine their identities, and secure a lasting position on the international agenda.

Therefore, the core importance of this study lies in examining how digital diplomacy creates an uneven playing field for small states and the constraints that shape this process. As seen in the cases of Kosovo and Albania, digital diplomacy can help overcome material limitations through digital tools and innovation. However, when not supported by substantive structural reforms, it risks remaining a surface-level performance rather than producing meaningful legitimacy. Digital diplomacy thus operates not only as a communication instrument but also as a strategic arena that requires rethinking development, governance, and national identity in the digital era.

Kosovo and Albania's pursuit of strategic soft power in the context of digital diplomacy

In the digital age, diplomacy extends beyond formal state-to-state relations. It now operates across multiple levels, including public opinion, civil society networks, and individual actors. This shift creates openings for small states with limited economic and military capacity to build visibility and legitimacy. Kosovo and Albania illustrate this emerging model in the Balkans. They seek to transform limited resources into strategic soft power through digital diplomacy. Both states use social media, online campaigns, and digital branding initiatives to present their national narratives directly to global audiences and reduce reliance on traditional diplomatic channels.

For Kosovo, digital diplomacy is a central tool in its pursuit of international recognition. Although over 100 countries recognized Kosovo following its 2008 declaration of independence, it has not yet achieved full membership in key international organizations. The country therefore seeks to enhance its visibility among global actors and institutionalize its digital presence through platforms such as “Digital Kosovo.” In contrast, Albania aims to strengthen its identity as a “Balkan country belonging to Europe” in the digital sphere by projecting reform, transparency, and innovation during its EU integration process. Initiatives like “AlbaniTech” and “Invest in Albania” connect the country’s economic potential with international investors while highlighting its youth

and dynamism. For both states, digital diplomacy functions not only as a foreign policy tool but also as a mechanism for constructing identity and legitimacy.

However, digital diplomacy cannot fully replace traditional diplomatic mechanisms. The experiences of Kosovo and Albania demonstrate that digital tools can significantly influence public opinion, yet conventional diplomatic channels remain decisive in state-to-state negotiations. Digital diplomacy enhances the capacity of small states to project their voices globally; however, the digital infrastructure, media technologies, and algorithmic control wielded by major powers create an uneven competitive environment. In this sense, digital diplomacy functions not as a “leveler” for small states but as a “compensatory” instrument. Consequently, the success of Kosovo and Albania in the digital arena depends not only on technical capabilities but also on the development of strategic narratives and sustainable content strategies.

At this stage, the gap between the digital image and the actual structural conditions emerges as a critical area of debate. Both countries project a modern, reform-oriented, and pro-European image on social media, yet structural challenges—such as high youth unemployment, migration, corruption, and weak institutions—are largely absent from this discourse. This discrepancy risks rendering the digital image superficial. While digital diplomacy can generate a positive international impression in the short term, its long-term credibility depends on

domestic political reforms and concrete economic progress. Without such support, digital diplomacy remains limited to producing “virtual soft power.”

Finally, within the context of geopolitical competition in the Balkans, digital diplomacy forms part of the regional contest for “digital hegemony.” Actors such as the European Union, Russia, China, and Türkiye maintain cultural and ideological influence in the region through digital platforms. The EU projects its normative power via digital governance and ethical messaging, while Russia and China seek to shape public opinion through information manipulation and media control. Türkiye, in turn, develops a regional “soft power network” by leveraging historical, cultural, and religious ties through digital diplomacy. In this multi-level competitive environment, the digital diplomacy practices of Kosovo and Albania influence not only their own legitimacy but also the emergence of a regional digital cultural center. Thus, digital diplomacy has become more than a communication strategy for these states; it serves as a strategic instrument that reshapes regional power relations.

Conclusion and Discussion: The Issue of Sustainability in Small States' Digital Diplomacy

The cases of Kosovo and Albania clearly demonstrate how digital diplomacy has become a significant domain of soft power for small states. Despite limited economic and diplomatic capacity, both countries have succeeded in gaining international recognition through digital channels, engaging

global audiences directly, and shaping their own narratives. Digital diplomacy provides an opportunity to overcome the constraints of traditional diplomatic tools, advancing Kosovo's pursuit of recognition and Albania's European identity aspirations. However, this increased reliance on digital diplomacy also introduces new responsibilities, particularly regarding the sustainability of these strategies.

Although digital diplomacy can enhance a country's image in the short term, this image remains fragile without support from domestic political and economic reforms. A major limitation of Kosovo's and Albania's digital strategies is that their content often appears superficial, focusing on election campaigns rather than structural transformation. Consequently, unless digital diplomacy is institutionalized within a coherent long-term foreign policy framework, it will produce only temporary impressions. To achieve genuine soft power impact, digital communication strategies must be fully integrated with economic development, education, cultural diplomacy, and governance reforms.

In the highly competitive multilateral context of the Balkans, digital diplomacy has become a crucial factor in shaping regional power dynamics. The digital diplomacy efforts of actors such as the European Union,

Russia, China, and Türkiye influence the regional flow of information and impact regional value systems. Within this environment, Kosovo and Albania should design their digital diplomacy strategies around national interests as well as regional stability and cooperation. Both countries need to adopt a proactive rather than defensive approach in the digital sphere, especially given risks such as disinformation, cybersecurity threats, and media manipulation. Developing joint digital diplomacy platforms and information-sharing mechanisms could enhance regional resilience.

In conclusion, digital diplomacy is not merely a promotional tool for Kosovo and Albania but a strategic arena where national identity, cultural narratives, and international legitimacy are being shaped. Its effective use relies on three key conditions: first, institutional planning of digital diplomacy activities within a sustainable political framework; second, alignment between the digital image and local structural realities; and third, regional cooperation through shared digital platforms. If Kosovo and Albania can convert their digital soft power from a temporary perception-building exercise into enduring diplomatic capital, they have the potential to become influential actors in developing a new model of digital diplomacy, both in the Balkans and globally.

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