MIGRATION
LETTERS

Diaspora as Digital Diplomatic Agents: 'BOSNET' and Wartime Foreign Affairs

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Abstract

This paper integrates a different perspective into the diaspora literature, by placing it within the frame of digital diasporas and war time engagement in actions and initiatives traditionally considered as diplomatic. We reconstruct how digital diaspora diplomacy developed during a time when the Internet was relatively new and diplomatic tools were limited due to an ongoing conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We examine BOSNET, an online epistemic community of Bosnian diaspora IT pioneers, with a shared set of normative and principled set of beliefs about the independence of their homeland, and collected, shared and spread information about what was going on in their country. We label their work as 'policy innovation' engagement and performativity as 'informal' behaviour, as it was unscripted, uncoded and unregulated by any written conventions or state strategies.

Keywords: *foreign affairs; diaspora diplomacy; digital diaspora; Bosnia and Herzegovina; diaspora-state relations.*

Introduction

Online activism has become an important component of movements for social change, protest, and demonstrations in conflict-prone countries and those with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments. Digital activists are recognised as relevant actors in various political settings and social movements (Jansen, 2010). This has been well documented in terms of the Egyptian Revolution and the Syrian Uprising in a variety of phases of conflict, including the post-revolutionary ones (Khamis, Gold, and Vaughn, 2012). A brief overview demonstrates that social media has continued to add to the importance of digital diaspora activism over the last few decades. For example, throughout the conflict in Syria, contemporarily captured footage was published on YouTube, or smuggled out of the country and spread among diaspora actors in order to show the political violence and the everyday lives of those in the country. A variety of satellite television channels have also used the footage, such as Al Jazeera (Tenove, 2019). Another example which involves diaspora activists was inspired by, and in part, aided by activists in neighbouring and regional countries, who, during the Arab Spring, helped to train local Syrian activists through Skype and held opposition movement meetings in Turkey and Egypt using video conferencing and similar software applications (Khamis, Gold, and Vaughn, 2012). A third example pertains to Turkey,

where an online petition, with the participation of diaspora academics, resulted in a variety of measures being put in force by the Turkish government aimed at curtailing future activism, whether online or offline (Baser, Akgonul, Ozturk, 2017).

All examples clearly show that widespread internet accessibility has made it possible for local and diaspora populations to engage with their countries online for a variety of goals and interests they want to pursue as well as to have access to information, news, and different stakeholders, to exchange opinions and confront different views. Lobbying, negotiations and the pursuit of interests for a variety of goals in the context of social movements in different conflict periods and revolutions in the public space have become commonplace online; effectively taking on transnational dimensions. As a result, states and governments increasingly find themselves drawn into diaspora management policies in relation to online activism, whether trying to curb or encourage such behaviour.

This was not the case twenty or so years ago. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as part of wider conflict in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, represented a different time in terms of online activism, due to the limited availability of the internet. While the news about the conflict were widely accessible to the world including foreign policy actors through the 'CNN effect' (Robinson, 2005), online spaces and activism were accessible only to a restricted number of individuals who were working in IT or similar fields during this period.

A group of Bosnians and Herzegovinians who found themselves outside of its borders at the beginning of the war decided to organise an online platform called "BOSNET" (Bosnian Network abbreviated), purposed with collecting, sharing and spreading information about what was going on in their country. The group, which grew to include several dozens of Bosnians and sympathisers by the mid-1990s, served as a way to inform the community about what was going on during the war and as a catalyst for lobbying efforts through a moderated listserv.[3] Its core members were Bosnian academics, who were abroad in order to complete graduate coursework or particular projects before returning to their home country. Thus, their institutional affiliations made it possible for them to use e-mail as this was a rather limited phenomenon during the early 1990s. BOSNET was housed at the University of Michigan on a server where one of the founders, and one of our interlocutors, was an IT PhD student.

We argue this externalised epistemic community of IT pioneers, with a shared set of normative and principled beliefs about the independence of the homeland, BiH, and the ways in which it should continue its existence, actively worked on providing information on an online platform supposed to stimulate diplomatic initiatives of community members towards policy influencers, and other relevant stakeholders. Their work, understood as a competence-based policy enterprise, helped homeland actors in their official diplomatic capacity to enhance the quality of their own work in a way that was unexpected and often unsolicited. We label this 'policy innovation' engagement and performativity as 'informal' diplomatic online-based behaviour, as it was unscripted, uncoded, and unregulated by any written conventions or state strategies within specific spaces to shape the discourses and narratives, with the objective of having concrete effects on the outcome. BOSNET's

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[3] The listserv is accessible through Google Groups, but only from early 1994 onwards. It includes over 4,500 posts demonstrating how much activity there was on it. It remained active throughout the conflict in Kosovo, though it was most active throughout the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in an effort to bring peace to the country and to provide support for the wartime Bosnian state through lobbying and organising of different actors. Moreover, it provided information about what was going on in the country and how it was perceived in international media.

diaspora-led digital activism produced a common online sociality, which manifested political opportunities for the newly-recognised country in innovative ways through sustained posts and interaction throughout the war period and beyond.

The focus of the paper is set on understanding the agency of these actors. We are interested in the ways in which they established themselves and actively contributed to the negotiation process and information exchange online, when the internet was in its nascent stages of development. The study engages scholarship into different actors in digital diaspora activism as well as enquiry that informs how state governance was initially informed by the same.

Our research questions are two-fold. Firstly, we are interested in examining the patterns of digital diaspora engagement that existed during wartime. Secondly, we are interested in how the agents navigated the formal and informal boundaries of their involvement in the information exchange (lobbying) process? We bring a new, previously unexamined perspective to research on diaspora engagement in foreign policy and on research on digital diaspora and homeland policies more generally.

In this paper, we take a new approach and integrate a different perspective into the diaspora literature by placing it within the frame of digital diasporas and war time engagement in actions and initiatives traditionally considered as diplomatic. We reconstruct how digital diaspora diplomacy developed during a time when the Internet was relatively new and diplomatic tools were limited due to an ongoing conflict in the focal country. We highlight previously unexplored opportunities to study the organisation, activism, and citizenry among these individuals and how it was addressed in the initial stages of state-building.

The article is based on the analysis of the digital archive of information exchanged within the network as well as its partial archive made available to us by some of the BOSNET members. We interviewed five individuals who were either founders, moderators or active members of the network in order to better contextualise our understanding of the network. We rationalise BOSNET's role as a form of 'systematic engagement' of socially conscious, transnational and territorially externalised actors who exercised their 'disruptive preferences' in helping local government agents boost their evolving policy goals shaped by the ongoing conflict. Unlike other similar initiatives, such as *ZaMir*, founded in Croatia, which were transnational and became engaged in broader, international anti-war and women's movements (Stubbs, 1998), BOSNET remained focused on the exchange of information and aiding diplomatic efforts to end the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the post-conflict period, often supporting government actors as a result. The following section provides an overview of the diaspora digital involvement literature before positioning BOSNET as a pioneering example.

Policy and Structural Dimensions of Diaspora Digital Involvement and Homelands

Diaspora communities have been recognised as important transnational actors involved in their home- and host-countries, in numerous spheres, including development, education, and politics. Diasporas have an 'in-between advantage' to pursue their agenda in unique ways transnationally (Brinkerhoff, 2016). Their claim-making abilities (Adamson and Demetriou, 2007), their understanding of the wider transnational community in which they are embedded and their ability to maintain connection to it as well as organising on its behalf (Sokefeld, 2006), makes them particularly apt for exploring both theoretically and empirically in the context of developing, fragile, and post-conflict settings.

Multidisciplinary scholarship has focused on examining the different roles that diasporas play in and for their homelands. For example, the examination of conflict-generated diaspora has gained increasing attention, with a focus on peacebuilding (Lyons, 2006; Hall, 2016; Koinova, 2011; Van Hear, 2011; Baser, 2017; Hasić, 2018), transitional justice (Young and Park, 2009; Hoogenboom and Quinn, 2011; Koinova and Karabegović, 2017, Karabegović, 2018) and post-conflict reconstruction (Smith and Stares, 2006; Brinkerhoff, 2008). Moreover, diaspora influence throughout the conflict process has been studied and its potential at different stages examined more broadly (Shain, 2002; Lyons, 2006; Demmers, 2007; Orjuela, 2008; Van Hear and Cohen, 2017). There has been growing examination of diaspora engagement policies (Gamlen, 2014; Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler, 2019) and scrutinisation of the ways that homeland authorities attempt to control their diaspora populations (Hasić, 2016; Koinova and Tsourapas, 2018), with a particular look also at longitudinal dimensions (Mencutek and Baser, 2018).

Online spaces provide diasporas an outlet to perform their diasporic identity (Bernal 2006) and to find community, particularly if they do not necessarily feel that they belong within the community in which they have settled (Christensen, 2011). Kumar (2018) has demonstrated that the Internet provides avenues to bridge different diaspora identity politics and to connect online and offline activities in innovative ways. Brinkerhoff (2009) has examined the importance of diasporas organising online in an effort to maintain their identities and to promote policy change in their homelands, in particular, around questions of socioeconomic development. Andersson (2019) provided an overview of the literature regarding digital diasporas, highlighting the importance of new media in creating links between diaspora populations using information and communications technology. Her narrative review, while comprehensive in nature, does not detail the use of diaspora digital initiatives in diplomacy. Westcott (2008), on the other hand, elaborated on interconnections between diasporas and digital diplomacy as an enabler for diaspora communities to make a difference as well as their home countries reaching out to them. Equally, Bjola and Holmes (2015) argued that the wider use of digital diplomacy has helped states and governments to disseminate information to their populations in diaspora.

However, there has been fairly limited focus of scholars on diasporas' online engagement and state governance during conflict and the Bosnian case is no exception. Hockenos (2003) has demonstrated how pertinent diasporas from the former Yugoslavia were in the beginning stages of the country's breakup helping to finance campaigns and supporting nationalism campaigns. Stubbs (2004) chronicled how an online transnational anti-war community in former Yugoslavia, including diaspora members, has struggled in finding a common voice and purpose. Bosnia and Herzegovina was in a particularly dire situation due to the conflict that ensued and continued amidst what should have been democratic transition. As a result, its foreign and domestic policies developed as part of a fine balance between different political actors and institutions (Hasić and Karabegović, 2019). The newly established government sought international recognition, while trying to stabilise domestic affairs. Diplomatic and foreign policy capacities were underdeveloped at this stage. Sokol (2019) has noted that, the Bosnian state developed a diplomatic network, at first, based on ad hoc laws and strategies. Subsequently, a more cohesive foreign policy was forged, in large part through digital diaspora agents, who participated with diplomats in forwarding BiH's policy concerns during the war. The country's relationship to its diaspora population mimicked this process, thus frustrating diaspora actors on the one hand, while giving them ample room to attempt to manage their relationship to the state themselves (Karabegović and Hasić, 2019).

Online transnational activism of the Bosnian diaspora in the post-conflict period has been moderately discussed in academic scholarship. For instance, Kent (2006) observed that the diaspora contributed to developing the Bosnian World Diaspora Network, a formalised international network established in 2001, created after the dispersal of those fleeing from the 1992 - 95 conflict. The Internet has allowed the diaspora to establish an organised network (The BiH World Diaspora Network). Smaller groups of national diaspora leaders meet more regularly and there are communications between individual local groups at the transnational level, for example, the BH Community UK (Victoria) group has been in contact with local Scandinavian groups. Al-Ali, Black and Koser (2001) examined the role of exiled communities of Bosnian intellectuals in the UK and the Netherlands, regarding their efforts to contribute to the reconstruction process. The authors stressed diasporas' continuous engagement in reporting, journalism and other forms of public communications, especially those who had continued working for Bosnian newspapers, radio and TV, giving important momentum in promoting ideas of tolerance, a multi-ethnic Bosnia, democracy and freedom of speech in BiH.

While the activities of the Bosnian diaspora in mitigating the humanitarian crisis during the war are relatively well documented, little is known about the online engagement of diaspora in terms of state negotiations, lobbying and diplomatic engagement during the conflict. In the post-conflict period, research focused on the Bosnian diaspora's proclivity to organise translocally across the globe in an effort to maintain strong connections to their communities back home (Halilovich, 2013). In addition, more recent efforts have focused on mapping the population and its potential for organising in terms of investment and engagement with the homeland (Halilovich et al., 2018).

Through BOSNET, Bosnian digital diaspora diplomacy activities were conducted online in the early 1990s. BOSNET offers a novel approach to understanding how diasporas were involved in crafting foreign affairs and state building of a newly formed country in the midst of an armed conflict. Its members were working within the IT sector and were trained and highly skilled professionals. We see their digital activism in this period as a contingent phenomenon, organised through an *epistemic community* (cf. Haas, 2009). Moreover, they were intellectuals who had, for the most part, emigrated prior to war for professional reasons, but had retained strong contacts to their home country and were, thus, better positioned to influence policy than those who became refugees.

As digital diaspora activists, they stepped outside of their professional spheres of interest and engaged politically to carry out an effective function of political lobbying and pursuing the interests of their own country after the break-up of Yugoslavia. Their unique position of having been abroad and established networks prior to the breakup of Yugoslavia resulted in online engagement that was civic and included members of all ethnic groups, while the political situation in BiH was dominated by ethno-national discourses. Our interviewees noted that ethnonationalist dominated postings were not allowed and that BOSNET members supported BiH's state-building efforts during wartime. Their alliance to the state they had left and which disintegrated, Yugoslavia, was redirected towards a new state, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was not yet fully formed in a political sense and thus, unable to engage with this population in a wider capacity.[4] Other forms of the Bosnian diaspora's digital activities included the exchange of information and negotiations, as well as other diplomatic initiatives. These created a pluralism of relations in addition to official diplomatic strategies for the

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[4] This sentiment was echoed throughout the interviews as a guiding idea behind BOSNET.

country, which have been somewhat overlooked. The following section examines these issues in more detail.

Connecting Diasporas and Diplomacy Digitally: The Case of BOSNET

As aforementioned, BOSNET originally started as a listserv in an effort to inform Bosnians-Herzegovinians, who were abroad at the time and had access to the internet or someone who did, about what was going on in the country and to aid efforts at helping refugees, who had started arriving in other countries. Their agency within eventful sequences of time and interactions was aimed at influencing the existing political structures. This included both their particular expertise in maintaining the network as it grew as well as certain members' ability to gain information, which was at times difficult to acquire more widely as the country was at war. Members verified and referenced sources where they could obtain information, reflecting democratic self-organisation online.

The online network was developed through weak connections with one another based on previous professional and personal connections in BiH. These included various professional networks of Yugoslav scientists originating from BiH and living abroad. In other words, all members were embedded in heterogeneous social networks (prior to online networking being widespread) as they all had access to e-mails in the early 1990s and knew of each other through their specific professional and personal contacts. The organisation had limited influence and capacity due to the lack of resources, yet it maximised these through sustained activism, engagement, and growth. The goal of BOSNET was not social, but rather, to promote BiH as a sovereign state. There was no conflict reported within the network or among its members.

Interviews with BOSNET members revealed there was only internal efficiency imposed rather than output legitimacy. Network members instead worked together instinctually as there were no meetings or prior arrangements with one another before posts were sent out. There was no leadership of the listserv, no prominently advertised membership, and no need to 'show off' results. There were no senior members with more rights than other, but rather, simple and precise rules of engagement (including mechanisms for resolving crises), which reflected a shared vision about the work they were doing. 'Leadership' was oriented inward towards the members rather than articulating particular interests openly. Its members were interested in creating connections amongst each other and the wider public, thereby multiplying the effects of the information shared within the network, including outreach and lobbying efforts in the name of BiH during the conflict. They were not interested in political gain for themselves, but rather, felt genuine concern about what was going on in their homeland. Members were all interested in similar things and thus, there was no need to mobilise each other.

One of the network's founding members explained how there were individuals within the network who were in Europe or the US and would learn about events from others in the network who were in Australia. This included information, such as the number of casualties, or about particular diplomatic developments. The network's transnational character is, thus, quite evident. Several interviewees, including Bosnian diplomats and active users of BOSNET, reiterated that the network members were not focused on interacting with external actors, except for a few who openly asked for help in lobbying for peace or for different initiatives. By gathering and disseminating information about what was going in BiH, members could generate meaningful answers from individuals who had high stakes in politics, whether in BiH or elsewhere. Interviewees noted one

such email exchange within the network eventually led to Francis Boyle being proposed as the representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the legal case against Serbia before the International Court of Justice.[5] Interviewees also noted that there were American politicians' staffers and policy individuals, who joined BOSNET, as a way of staying up to date with what was happening in BiH. This provided the diaspora members with potential leverage to further their causes.

Based on the analysis of BOSNET's digital archive, we label their initiatives and actions as the elemental 'e-inclusion' of the Bosnian diaspora – as a policy project building effort with transformative effects in the BiH foreign and diplomatic scheme. This knowledge-based community of Bosnian diaspora members used their various competitive advantages to boost diplomatic performance and other lobbying, thus creating political opportunities for developing BiH foreign affairs interests.[6] Their actions rested on the assumption that quality enhancement of the relationship between the disadvantaged local diplomatic and the externalized epistemic community[7] of well-connected citizens would enable multiple linkages between feasible policy actions and intended policy outcomes.

Non-traditional Diplomatic Agents Engaging Online

While the Internet has led to the proliferation all aspects of diplomatic practice, as demonstrated in business (Weber, 2011), social relations (Couldry, 2012) and state policies (Mergel, 2013), in the case of BOSNET, building alternative networks to exchange information led digital diaspora activists to reach new audiences and actors, who would help in lobbying for the Bosnian state. Members of BOSNET operated within a set of normative and value-based choices. They occupied 'preference roles' rather than 'position roles.' Digital diplomatic initiatives by the Bosnian diaspora were both disruptive and evolutive in relation to existing policy practices of the time, thus making them groundbreaking for this time period.

Our analysis shows that the organisation of digital diaspora agents was heterarchical and entrepreneurial in character – stemming from contacts, information, and network structures. This becomes quite evident in the way that members of the BOSNET network included and excluded the posts, which they would send out to the subscribers. Its members straddled both the epistemic community of the diaspora and those who were official representatives of the Bosnian government, such as Lamija Tanović, a physics professor who was appointed to be BiH's Ambassador in Denmark during the war as a result of already being there as part of an academic exchange with the University of Copenhagen. Such a structure helped to promote informal initiatives, whilst we acknowledge it could also undermine or support strategies carried out by official government agents.

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[5] Later, Boyle would become a BOSNET member and post to the listserv regularly. These posts are accessible via google groups.

[6] The term 'political opportunity' is conceptualised as spaces that allow for activist agency and at the same time, do not imply structural determinism. According to Meyer and Minkoff (2004: 135), we need to be able to see opportunities even if there are possibilities but no mobilisation (like missed opportunities), activists see the opportunities but do not mobilise, or when social actors do not use the optimal strategy.

[7] An epistemic community can be defined as 'a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area (Haas, 1992: 3).' The term 'epistemic communities' has also been identified as being an analytical unit gathering together individuals, who safeguard the adherent and dominant worldview through institutionalisation (Haas, 1992). Even though the expertise of BOSNET members was not part of foreign policy or official lobbying efforts, their activism was recognised and positively disrupted the chain of events in their favour as well that of the budding Bosnian government and diplomatic network.

BOSNET members often reacted to the news they were directly receiving from one another about what was going on in Bosnia and Herzegovina and adjusting the ways in which they would act as a result. The practical limits of operating such a network with little resources available from the state did not exist for them, since they did not set any particular goals that they wanted to achieve. The network's moderators mitigated the effects of potential infiltrators into the network and thus, created policy 'tunneling'. These efforts were all with the uniform goal of forwarding 'state-building' efforts amidst conflict. It is interesting to note that, it remains unclear whether political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war were aware and supportive of the organisational development of BOSNET, or whether they were instrumentalising their actions in the process of crafting diplomatic goals.

Interviews with both diplomatic actors in this period as well as founding BOSNET members revealed that there was no tacit support by state actors to help in developing BOSNET further. Rather, individuals would forward information they felt pertinent and that might help their own agendas, whilst also reporting on ongoing developments over the BOSNET network. However, this did not amount to official communication. Nonetheless, through the engagement of wartime diplomats in the BOSNET network, this initial diaspora online community had a unique connection to homeland actors, which was only strengthened over time, even though the majority of individuals did not know each other personally.

Conclusions

In this article, we have bridged the gap between two literatures: digital diaspora and digital diplomacy. In particular, we have examined an online community formed in parallel and in tandem with state wartime strategies called *BOSNET*. We have detailed how this network was formed and sustained as an online diaspora community, including its lobbying efforts and offline activism. We have uncovered the patterns of digital diaspora engagement that existed in the wartime. Secondly, we have elicited how diaspora agents navigated formal and informal boundaries of their involvement in the information exchange (lobbying) process with the homeland at war. Most available studies on digital diaspora involvement have reflected on diaspora engagement online in terms of their identity, claim-making abilities and in times of peace. We, on the other hand, have explored diaspora engagement that extends beyond their own position and statuses (identities), to include non-traditional involvement in diplomatic spheres within state building during wartime. By examining Bosnian digital diaspora diplomacy since its inception, we have brought a new, previously unexamined perspective to research on diaspora engagement in foreign policy, particularly during wartime as well as the study of diaspora and homeland policies more generally.

In the very early stages of Internet development and before its mainstreaming, an epistemic transnational community of Bosnian diasporans created an online platform as an operational online news and information sharing system to report on the ongoing Bosnian conflict and to lobby for various initiatives that would mitigate the negative consequences. They acted as an external hub that transmitted reliable, relevant information to those who could engage in traditional diplomatic work and thus, enhance their leverage. We labelled their work on BOSNET as 'policy innovation' engagement and performativity as 'informal' behavior, in that it was unscripted, uncoded, and unregulated by any written conventions or state strategies within specific spaces to shape the discourses and narratives, and to have concrete effects on the outcome. Their actions produced a common digital (online) sociality, which thus, manifested political opportunities for the homeland

in innovative ways. Moreover, this brought forward further opportunities for diaspora governance that could be taken advantage of in the post-conflict period.

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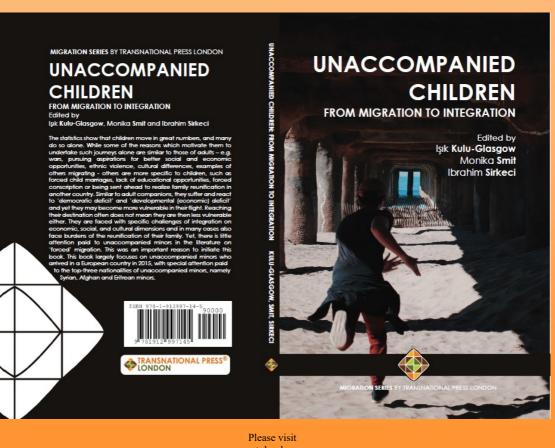
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