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# **Russian Twitter Diplomacy in Indonesia and Malaysia Before and After the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine**

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## ABSTRACT

The digital transformation has redefined the diplomacy landscape, with pivotal events reshaping our perception of the Internet's role in international affairs. The rise of social media platforms has allowed governments to establish direct communication channels with foreign audiences, facilitating real-time interactions and the swift dissemination of information online. Diplomats no longer stand as the sole architects of state narratives. Instead, other social media users shape a state's perceptions and images. This paradigm shift underscores the profound transformation of diplomacy, leading to a substantial overhaul of the public diplomacy agenda. The efficacy of digital public diplomacy hinges on diplomatic actors' adept navigation of this altered landscape. This study analyses tailored communication of digital public diplomacy using Russian digital public diplomacy via Twitter in Indonesia and Malaysia as case studies. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 serves as the backdrop for scrutinising Russian endeavours in digital public diplomacy in times of crisis. This study argues that institutional and audience factors play a significant role in shaping digital public diplomacy conduct. The study underscores the importance of tailored communication in achieving effective digital public diplomacy.

**Keywords:** diplomacy, digital public diplomacy, social media, tailored communication, Twitter diplomacy, Russia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Ukraine

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# 1. Introduction

## Background and Context

Digitalisation has had far-reaching consequences across various domains, including diplomacy. Diplomatic practices have historically evolved in synchronisation with advancements in communication tools, and the introduction of the Internet as a diplomatic medium marked a significant milestone in this trajectory. Over time, transformational events reshaped our perception of the Internet and digital media's influence on diplomatic engagements and the broader sphere of international affairs. As digital technology keeps innovating, it is up to diplomatic practitioners to rise to the occasion and be active players in shaping diplomacy in the digital sphere. In practice, we have seen variations in how diplomatic actors used digital technology to achieve their objectives. Some countries emerged as top-notch proponents of digital diplomacy. Meanwhile, others found themselves grappling with the complexities of navigating online spaces to effectively harness its potential for meaningful engagement on the global stage.

Moreover, the most transformative aspect of the digitalisation of diplomacy is how diplomatic intercourse goes far beyond elite-to-elite meetings in a closed-door and official format. Social media platforms emerged as powerful tools for governments to communicate directly with foreign publics, fostering real-time interactions and information dissemination online. Diplomats are not the sole actors in shaping and projecting state narrative to the public, but other social media users—including news agencies, social media “influencers”, and *bots*—contribute to the narratives, images, and perception of a state. Incorporating social media into diplomatic conduct “humanises” the diplomatic practitioners. Foreign affairs updates are not only delivered from newsrooms or magazines but are easily accessible to every social media user—even those having no previous interests and knowledge in the field. The general public can now see and scrutinise the works of diplomatic actors and interact with them. This multi-player element, accompanied by the speed of the information stream in the social media platform, results in competing narratives in the online sphere, often influencing offline and real-life worlds. This new reality reflects how diplomacy has changed forever, and the public diplomacy agenda has, in turn, been massively transformed along with the innovation of digital technology in communication. Successful digital public diplomacy

through digital media is decided by how well diplomatic actors navigate this new reality to achieve foreign policy objectives.

The effectiveness of digital public diplomacy practice is determined by diplomatic actors' ability to achieve their objectives through the utilisation of digital social media, accomplishing diplomatic engagement with the public regarding digital agenda-setting, digital presence expansion, and digital conversation generation (Bjola & Jiang, 2015). To reach these objectives, digital public diplomatic actors should make their content stand out among many competing online narratives and players. These characteristics are ingrained in the features of tailored communication introduced by Ilan Manor (2019). Tailored communication in digital public diplomacy is how diplomatic actors tailor their social media initiatives to cater to the distinct characteristics of particular online audiences. This adaptation encompasses various aspects such as values, culture, language, history, and political perspectives (Manor, 2019, p. 88). Tailored communication recognises the diverse nature of target audiences and customises messages to resonate with their specific preferences, needs, and cultural backgrounds. Tailored communication involves customising digital public diplomacy **messages, communication formats, and social media platforms**.

While we see variations in diplomatic actors' adoption of technology to public diplomacy conduct, the remaining question is why some diplomatic actors employ more tailored—effective—digital public diplomacy activity over others. Given the intricate digital media landscape, diplomats and researchers strive to comprehend and optimise social media strategies for effective public diplomacy.

This study argues that institutional and audience factors play a significant role in shaping digital public diplomacy conduct, including adopting tailored communication. Institutional factors such as foreign policy objectives, priorities, and practices influence how diplomatic actors can utilise social media and create digital public diplomacy outputs. Meanwhile, the audience factor involves the diplomatic actors' understanding and consideration of the audience's preferences and background, such as language, social and cultural norms, and political views. This leads to the diversification of public diplomacy outputs.

## Research focus

This study examines Russian digital public diplomacy practices on Twitter in Indonesia and Malaysia. Russia has emerged as a notable player in utilising digital media to achieve its foreign policy objectives, displaying its competencies effectively. Many scholars have characterised Russia's uses of the online sphere as aggressive, referring to Russia's use of assertive and confrontational tactics, such as disseminating fake news and manipulating online discourse (Manor & Crilley, 2019; NATO StratCom, 2015). This results in the over-generalization of Russia's way of doing digital public diplomacy. It is necessary to reorient the focus on exploring what makes Russian digital public diplomacy effective. Particularly exploring how institutional and audience factors influence Russia's digital public diplomacy practices in other parts of the world. Russia's foreign policy is not always seen as aggressive and expansive.

This study selects the two cases of Indonesia and Malaysia as these two countries will better help identify audience factors' contribution in influencing the adoption of tailored communication. Indonesia and Malaysia share similar aspects regarding the general favourability from the governments and public towards Russia (Stokes, 2015). Notably, in the context of the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine, it is essential to expand the study to countries outside Russia's immediate sphere of interest, such as Indonesia and Malaysia. The apparent growing trend of the global North-South divides following the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Ekman, 2023) is also reflected in the official stances of Indonesia and Malaysia in response to the crisis. The governments of Indonesia and Malaysia reacted in a similarly "neutral" manner—avoiding calling out Russia for the invasion. The neutral stances of the Indonesian and Malaysian governments received public approval at home, further reflecting the general public's favourability towards Russia. Eventually, this study will contribute to the literature on Russian digital public diplomacy in the Southeast Asian region, which remains understudied.

This study will answer the following questions:

- What are the effects of institutional and audience factors on digital public diplomacy?
- How did Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia employ tailored communication via Twitter?

- How has Russia adjusted its digital public diplomacy via Twitter in Indonesia and Malaysia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine?

## Methodology

This study investigates tailored communication of digital public diplomacy and its explanatory factors using Russian digital public diplomacy via Twitter in Indonesia and Malaysia as case studies. This research adopts a comparative case study approach, which allows for a comprehensive analysis of similarities and differences in digital public diplomacy strategies employed by the Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia, originating from institutional and audience factors. The research aims to provide a broader understanding of Russian digital public diplomacy and its implications by examining these aspects. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is analysed to understand Russian digital public diplomacy efforts amid the crisis period. As the crisis garnered significant global attention, we can gain insights into Russian digital public diplomacy tactics and messaging strategy during a high-stakes geopolitical event when it needed to rally worldwide support.

The primary data source for this study is Twitter posts published by the Russian Embassy in Jakarta and the Russian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur over one year, from August 2021 to August 2022. A total of 1134 Tweets were collected as the primary data. This study involves analysing Russian diplomatic messages, communication formats and overall strategies on Twitter in Indonesia and Malaysia. The secondary data includes government publications, blogs, news, and journal articles.

This research employs mixed-methods data analysis, comprising quantitative statistical and qualitative content analyses. The statistical analysis examines the similarities and differences of Tweets of Russian Embassies using a two-sample t-test of proportion. The statistical analysis measured the similarity of messages and formats, including multimedia, the proportion of different languages used, frequency of mentions and tagging, and engagement with specific topics such as the invasion of Ukraine and embassy activities. The content analysis comprehensively interprets the statistical findings while incorporating secondary data.

## Research objectives

This study aims to contribute to the literature on digital diplomacy by explaining tailored communication as an effective digital public diplomacy practice and the factors contributing to the varying degrees of its adoption by diplomatic actors. This study argues that institutional factors contribute to the uniformity of Russian digital public diplomacy messages and formats on Twitter in Indonesia and Malaysia. Meanwhile, audience factors determine the degree to which Russian Embassies customise messages and formats to suit the target audiences. Shared guidelines and policies of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the institutional level contribute to the similarities observed across embassies in the two countries. However, the institutional factor is found to have a less significant impact in comparison to the way varying audience factors across Indonesia and Malaysia cause differences in Russian digital public diplomacy activities. In Indonesia, where the local audience holds a higher degree of favourability towards Russia, locally tailored content and engagement activities with the local audience on Twitter are higher compared to Malaysia. In the context of Russian digital public diplomacy after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the analysis also confirmed the abovementioned arguments on the effects of institutional and audience factors. Although similarities in overall message and formats on the topic of invasion were found, results indicating variation in tailored communication across embassies are more apparent.

## 2. Literature Review

### Digital Diplomacy

Digital diplomacy has emerged as a field of study due to the impact of digital technologies on international relations. It is predominantly a new type of diplomacy characterised by the use of digital platforms, tools, and channels to conduct diplomatic activities and achieve foreign policy goals. The earlier assessment of how technology can transform international relations dates back to 1997, as Richard H. Solomon (1997), president of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), defined *virtual diplomacy* as the way “political, social, and economic interactions are mediated through electronic means rather than face-to-face communication”. Advancements in technology have led to increased connectivity and digitalisation, which in turn has paved the way for the emergence of diplomatic practices that are becoming increasingly sophisticated. In the past decade,

we have seen new emerging terms such as data diplomacy (Boyd et al., 2019), hybrid diplomacy (Bjola & Manor, 2022), and Artificial Intelligence Diplomacy (Puaschunder, 2019; Bjola, 2020).

### Digital Public Diplomacy

As the advancement of information and communication technology has continuously grown, the way it affects and transforms public diplomacy has received much attention from foreign policy scholars and practitioners. Various terms are often used interchangeably by academics in the field, such as public diplomacy 2.0 (Hallams, 2010), social media diplomacy (Mazumdar, 2021), Facebook diplomacy (Spry, 2018), Twiplomacy (Burnand, 2011), and e-diplomacy (Burnand, 2011). Moreover, Bjola (2015) uses the term digital diplomacy and defines it in a more simplistic way as “the use of social media for diplomatic purposes” (p.4). He explained that diplomatic actors use digital technology to achieve varying goals and realise public diplomacy and nation branding objectives by projecting messages and engaging with the audience (Bjola, 2015).

The advancement of digital communication technology, which allows the rapid exchange of information, transformed the overall works, values, and practices of diplomacy, but more specifically, the works of public diplomacy actors in exercising strategic communication practices. In a more complex manner, Hocking and Melissen (2015) defined digital public diplomacy as using digital platforms and tools to engage with the foreign public and promote a country’s positive image or its policies abroad. Meanwhile, Manor and Huang (2022) offered the term “digitalisation of public diplomacy” with a straightforward definition: “using digital technology to achieve public diplomacy objectives”. The word “digitalisation” emphasises how public diplomacy actors and practices are influenced by adopting digital technology in a long-term continuous process.

With the ever-growing usage of social media and the more interconnected nature of digital global citizens, digital public diplomacy via social media practices has become necessary for all ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) worldwide. Mazumdar (2021) defines social, digital media diplomacy as a new set of public diplomacy practices capacitated by "participatory communications technologies" (p.2). Through social media platforms, diplomatic actors are not the sole actors who create the narratives. They are forced to engage with different and often competing narratives and various groups of audiences. Social media users are becoming active participants in digital public diplomacy practices and contribute to shaping diplomatic messaging

online. This nature of social media transformed public diplomacy conduct, in which user context becomes an increasingly important aspect of strategy formation to achieve public diplomacy objectives successfully.

a. Effective digital public diplomacy: Tailored communication

Although previous literature extensively examines the analysis of digitalised public diplomacy practices, there still needs to be a framework for evaluating the techniques and characteristics of practical social media usage by diplomatic actors. Effectiveness in digital public diplomacy is determined by its ability to achieve public diplomacy goals through digital social media, specifically by accomplishing three crucial aspects of public diplomatic engagement: digital agenda-setting, digital presence expansion, and digital conversation generation (Bjola & Jiang, 2015).

Moreover, Manor (2019) argues that diplomatic actors' ability to shift their focus from a one-size-fits-all approach to a more targeted and personalised approach using digital technology determines the effectiveness of digital public diplomacy strategy. Referring to Manor, "tailored communication" of digital public diplomacy is how diplomatic actors "tailor social media campaigns to the unique attributes of specific digital publics, be in terms of values, culture, language, history, or political views" (Manor, 2019, p. 88). Tailored communication involves not only the customisation of digital public diplomacy (1) **messages** employed but also the (2) **communication formats** and the (3) **social media platforms** used to deliver the messages to the specifically targeted audiences. Tailored communications indicate a higher level of digitalisation and diplomatic actors' more advanced adaptation to digitalised media.

i. Tailored messages

Tailored messages—or tailored public diplomacy messages—meaning that the messages are adjusted and crafted to particularly resonate with the targeted audiences by considering their preferred language, values, beliefs, cultural and historical narratives, worldview, and political views.

For instance, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) launched a Facebook page with an Arab-language profile to specifically target an Arab-speaker audience who might not be proficient in English (Manor, 2019, p. 123). In this case, the Israeli MFA tailored its social media content to make it more accessible to its targeted audience—the Arab-speaking population—so that the messages they conveyed could be better accepted by the recipient. The video blogs of the British Ambassador to the Republic of Kazakhstan speaking in the Kazakh language received the highest positive reaction and became the Embassy’s most successful social media post (Collins & Bekenova, 2017).

Furthermore, another preferred language of social media users is the “social media language,” which is informal, relaxed, and far from diplomatic standards of “stiff” language. Anton & Lăcătuș (2022) explained the success story of the Swedish Embassy in Bucharest’s public-centric digital diplomacy via Facebook. Swedish Embassy’s use of informal language with casual, conversational, funny, and sarcastic tones when delivering messages on the topic of traditional diplomacy posts received the highest engagement averages compared to any other content posted (Anton & Lăcătuș, 2022, p. 211). In addition, the Embassy’s content assessed within the 14 months of analysis was all written in either Romanian (52%) or English (43%), showing a higher indication of the Embassy’s tailored messages targeting a particular group of digital audience—Romanian and English speakers.

Moreover, as digital audiences, in general, prefer more visually appealing social media content, the diplomatic message is more attractive when it is packaged in pre-authored texts, including multimedia, such as images, videos, infographics, or GIFs. It creates a more powerful message and offers the impression that the diplomatic actors are not only delivering messages but narrating a story to the targeted audience.

The incorporation of visually pleasing narratives indicates a higher level of digitalisation and more robust use of social media for public diplomacy purposes. Duncombe (2019) argued that image-based social media content as part of the digitalisation of public diplomacy adds a new layer of “emotional complexity” (p.111). In the new era of digitalisation, political actors are now the visual narrators of global politics. They can share the stories from their perspectives with the images shared on social media, targeting global audiences (Crilley et al., 2020). For instance, Manor and

Crilley (2019) found that the Israeli MFA's use of images, in addition to its framing of the conflict with Hamas, makes their messages seem more convincing and increases their legitimacy (p.72).

ii. Tailored formats

By tailoring the formats of online communication, diplomatic actors can better direct the messages to the targeted digital audience and achieve targeted goals. For instance, the incorporation of trending hashtags in social media content will help diplomatic actors reach a broader present-expansion target. At the same time, the use of polling-related content will assist in practising the listening function of public diplomacy to gauge audience opinions. The diplomatic actors can, therefore, understand the needs and wants of the digital public, adjust the content based on the majority's reaction, respond to their comments and queries, and build interactions with the public (Manor, 2019, p. 195). Hence, it will facilitate continuous engagement with the audience. In this way, diplomatic actors are utilising particular social media features to reap their maximum benefits.

However, the way social media provides a platform where diplomats and digital audiences can have real-time interactions is the most transformational aspect of the digitalisation of diplomacy. The ability to make use of social media features to achieve higher engagement with the audience indicates a more effective digital public diplomacy strategy. For instance, the use of the Twitter Q&A format allows diplomats not only to use social media as a medium for one-way communication but also to listen to the aspirations and desires of the targeted audience. It also increases diplomats' reliability as they seem to offer the ordinary public the opportunity to interact while still allowing diplomats to tailor those particular issues they wish to address on their preferred terms (Manor, 2019, p. 94). Hence, it will provide an opportunity to re-adjust the messages and fine-tune public diplomacy narratives to meet the audience's preferences via social media content. This process leads to continuous engagement between diplomatic actors and the targeted digital audience.

The Swedish Embassy in Bucharest case (Anton & Lăcătuș, 2022) also corroborates that the more effective form of digital public diplomacy is indicated by the communication formats chosen by the diplomatic actors. The more the Embassy can engage and converse with the digital audience, the more successful it is in its digital public diplomacy campaign. The Embassy's social media

content, including online polls and challenges, queries, and replies to questions and comments to its followers, were all aimed at promoting more engagement and conversation with its digital audience and forming a sense of community between the Embassy and its followers (Anton & Lăcătuș, 2022, p.213). While this type of dialogic communication between diplomatic actors and the digital public was rarely observed, this communication format (conversation over persuasion) remained to be considered an indicator of the effective practice of digital public diplomacy (Kampf et al., 2015).

### iii. Tailored platform

The next predominant feature of tailored communication of digital public diplomacy will be the preference of the particular social media platform to channel the tailored messages. Although social media platforms are not exclusive to a specific audience, the major social media platforms, namely Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Telegram, each have a unique audience that can be segmented into demographic groups (Permyakova, 2021). For instance, Twitter is regarded as the main social media platform used for political communication (Castanho Silva & Proksch, 2022) and has the highest digital presence of state leaders, journalists, and the academic community in comparison to other platforms (Burson-Marsteller, 2017; Jurkowitz & Gottfried, 2022).

Disseminating messages through social media platforms that the audience prefers will increase the effectiveness of digital diplomacy messaging. Therefore, the MFAs' use of specific social media platforms might be done to convey the messages to the specifically targeted audience. Simply put, tailored communication of digital public diplomacy is about creating favourable messages that resonate with the targeted digital audience, continuously channelled through particular social media platforms to achieve foreign policy objectives.

### iv. Summary of Tailored Communication

Effective digital public diplomacy involves strategically utilising digital communication tools and platforms to achieve diplomatic goals, which is ingrained in the features of tailored communication. Tailored communication considers the diverse nature of target audiences and aims to customise messages to resonate with their specific preferences, needs, and cultural backgrounds.

It is an audience-centric approach, which recognises that different individuals or groups have unique characteristics and communication styles. This approach necessitates diplomats to analyse the demographics, cultural norms, and interests of specific target audiences. By understanding these factors, they can craft messages that are relevant and resonate with the intended recipients.

Cultural sensitivity is a significant aspect of tailored communication. As diplomats engage with individuals from various cultures and backgrounds, it is crucial to adapt messages to respect cultural norms and foster cross-cultural understanding. By doing so, tailored communication enhances trust and credibility and facilitates meaningful connections between diplomats and the target audience. Effective selection of social media platforms and their features helps diplomats refine their communication approaches, make necessary adjustments, and create continuous engagement. It enables diplomats to adapt their strategies based on audience responses, ensuring that their messages remain relevant, compelling, and influential.

#### b. Explaining the Variety in Tailored Communication

As discussed above, tailored communication indicates the more advanced degree of digitalisation adopted and manifested in its activities, hence resulting in a more effective digital public diplomacy strategy. While we have an ample understanding of the characteristics of effective digital public diplomacy and the importance of tailored communication, the questions remain. Why does tailored communication differ across different contexts? Why do certain diplomatic actors practice the more digitalised—therefore, effective—public diplomacy activity over others?

Manor (2019) proposed the explanation that each MFA as a diplomatic institution undergoes its unique digitalisation process, which is influenced by "institutional cultures, government-wide approaches to technology, and external events" (p.93). A higher level of digitalisation entails a higher level of tailored communication of digital diplomatic practices. Manor emphasises that digitalisation should be viewed as a gradual process rather than a binary state, highlighting that diplomats may be moving towards enhanced dialogue and engagement with the audience over time (Manor & Huang, 2022). The introduction of new digital technologies and the need to adapt to changing communications trends are said to prompt processes of digitalisation in the field of diplomacy. There is also the aspect of professional development, where diplomats acquire the skills to optimise technological tools and adapt their digital public diplomacy abilities (Manor &

Huang, 2022). Moreover, geopolitical shifts occurring during times of crisis, conflict or war have historically influenced the adoption of digital technologies in public diplomacy (Manor & Huang, 2022).

Moreover, Spry (2020) offers four factors contributing to the growing complexity of "new" public diplomacy: (1) environmental factor (digitalised media environment); (2) institutional factor (diplomatic norms and traditions, and MFAs policies and practices); (3) audience factor; (4) algorithmic factor. The availability of enabling internal and external factors in their working circumstances are to be the determining factors in the digital public diplomacy strategy practised by diplomatic actors. Spry's four factors categorisation provides a clearer framework for understanding the determinants of varieties in digital public diplomacy practices. Therefore, this study will utilise Spry's categorisation as it allows for a focused and methodical examination of the multifaceted factors driving the diversification of digital public diplomacy strategies embraced by diplomatic actors.

i. Environmental factor

As technological advancement transforms the speed, size and diversity of media, the success of public diplomacy practices relies on how well the diplomatic actors can adapt and adjust to the dynamics of digitalised media. Spry (2020) used the term environmental factors to explain the "digitalised, networked nature of the media and communication in contemporary society" (p.97). The diplomatic actors' ability to shift away from traditional diplomacy's "official" nature and adopt new working methods based on digital-social media norms plays a significant part. For instance, the Swedish Embassy's use of *meme* diplomacy showed its adaptability to the social media "culture", where a "funny picture" can channel diplomatic messages to reach the targeted audience (Mazumdar, 2021, p.8). A higher level of digital literacy among their diplomats allowed the Swedish Embassy to be more adept at implementing sophisticated tailored communication approaches. Additionally, Manor uses the terms "digital natives" and "digital migrants" to differentiate the varying digitalisation levels among diplomats.

## ii. Institutional factor

Moreover, diplomatic practices are long based on the traditional norms and ethics maintained throughout institutional structures and cultures. Therefore, the institutional factors comprised how much constraints and freedom originated from the MFAs' policies, allowing digitalisation and innovation in public diplomacy activities. Bureaucratic attitudes towards "participatory digital culture" and the willingness to embrace technological risks caused the prioritisation of particular digital public diplomacy outputs (Mazumdar, 2021). Meanwhile, restrictions originated from the institutional factors that curbed public diplomacy strategy and practices (Spry, 2020, p. 109). For instance, the Japanese MFA's cautiousness and self-restraint attitude, especially in Asia, caused it to limit the Facebook page content to the neutral-positive cultural diplomacy agenda (Spry, 2020). While each MFA has different foreign policy objectives, priorities, and practices, they influence the degree to which diplomatic actors can utilise social media and create digital public diplomacy outputs.

## iii. Audience factor

The main characteristic of the new public diplomacy is the shift away from public diplomacy practice from information-sharing towards audience-engagement-oriented activities. Hence, Spry argued that the audience factor might be the most important but often the least considered by diplomatic actors. As social media users play an active role in digital media, Spry (2020) argued that considering their habits, preferences, desires, and motivations determines the higher opportunity for public diplomacy outreach (p.96). Put simply, the diplomatic actors' understanding and consideration of the audience's preferences and background—social, cultural, political views, etc.—determines the effectiveness of the public diplomacy outputs. However, the nature and dynamics of the relationship between the sending and receiving states also heavily determine the diplomatic messages to be adopted and significantly impact the approach and level of customisation in communication strategies. For instance, Bjola and Holmes (2015) argued that the digital diplomatic strategy tends to become more cautious, and the messaging becomes less controversial as the relationship between the two parties becomes more estranged. In the case of US digital diplomacy in the Chinese Weibo platform, where the bilateral relationship has been

complex and strained the approach to digital engagement and messaging has often been characterised by caution.

#### iv. Algorithmic factor

Lastly, the next factor to be considered is the potential and confines of the social media algorithm. As social media algorithms "identify and promote content that is more relevant to the user" (Spry, 2020, p.100), they can function both in favour and against digital public diplomacy practices. Diplomatic actors can navigate social media algorithms by persistently creating content relevant and attractive to the targeted audience. The effective use of this advanced technology will allow diplomats to build meaningful connections with the digital audience by conversing on shared interests over an extended period (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Employing an algorithmic communication model, MFAs can fine-tune their digital content and maintain tailored communication messages and strategies. Public diplomacy actors can become the subject who controls and maintains the narratives using code-based diplomacy in social media (Cocking, 2016). It underscores the need for diplomats to understand and navigate these algorithms to maximise the impact of their tailored engagement strategies. This may involve creating tailored content that is more likely to generate engagement or leveraging partnerships with influential individuals to increase visibility.

However, analysing the algorithmic factor in digital public diplomacy is challenging for academics. Algorithms are often proprietary and closely guarded by the platform providers, making it difficult for academics to access the underlying algorithms and obtain detailed information about their functioning. This lack of transparency hinders the ability to conduct comprehensive analyses and understand the specific factors and variables influencing the distribution and visibility of diplomatic content.

#### v. Summary of Explanations

Adopting tailored communication as more advanced digital public diplomacy practices differs among diplomatic actors due to the complexity of four factors. **Environmental factors** encompass the adaptability of diplomatic actors to new digital media dynamics. **Institutional factors**, such as policies and practices, enable or restrict the digitalisation and innovation of diplomats. **Audience**

**factors** emphasise the importance of understanding and engaging with the preferences and motivations of the target audience. **Algorithmic factors** involve the leveraging of social media algorithms to promote relevant content and maintain tailored communication strategies. While Spry's framework allows for better categorisation of diverse elements that affect the adoption of tailored communication, conducting empirical analysis will provide a deeper comprehension of how each of these factors influences tailored digital public diplomacy. A more nuanced comprehension of how these elements interact and influence the adoption of tailored digital public diplomacy may be achieved by comparing digital public diplomacy practices across different diplomatic actors, targeted audiences, and platforms.

This study, however, narrows its focus to institutional and audience factors for two main reasons. First, they are the most appropriate for the research objective of comparing the official use of Russian public digital diplomacy in Indonesia and Malaysia. Concentrating on these factors permits in-depth analysis of constant institutional factors from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and comparing variations in audience factors within Indonesia and Malaysia. Second, this narrowed scope is expected to offer a more refined theoretical contribution by pinpointing the more influential factors of the two being considered in adopting tailored digital public diplomacy.

### c. Russian Digital Diplomacy

#### i. Overview

Russian digital public diplomacy has garnered significant interest among scholars due to its strategic implications, the evolving nature of the digital landscape, and its potential impacts. Scholars have narrated Russian digital public diplomacy as a strategic approach the Russian government employs to shape international public opinion and promote Russia's interests. Moreover, many characterised it as aggressive, highlighting Russia's use of assertive and confrontational tactics, such as disseminating fake news and manipulating online discourse by exerting bots. Russia was accused of using digital media communication to get involved in the internal politics of foreign countries, using disinformation and propaganda in its digital public diplomacy efforts (Crisley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020).

Russian digital public diplomacy mainly gained significant attention from scholars following momentous events in the 2010s. Some pivotal events, such as the Ukrainian Crisis in 2014—particularly the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the Brexit referendum, and the 2016 US Presidential Election, highlighted the extent of Russia’s digital diplomacy activities and their effects on international relations and security studies. Russia reportedly used social media and online newspapers to broadcast propaganda, fake news and rumours that were directed to trigger emotions and reactions from the audiences during the period of the Ukrainian Crisis in 2014 (NATO StratCom, 2015). Russia used its official digital diplomatic actors to build its version of narratives concerning the events happening in Crimea, accusing the mainstream Western diplomats of lying (Manor, 2019, p.102-103).

Moreover, it is also important to note that Russian examples have highlighted the effective use of digital technology to achieve public diplomacy objectives and foreign policy in general. Manor evaluated one case of effective Russian official use of digital public diplomacy via the Twitter platform in the United Kingdom (UK) (2021a, 2021b). He explained that the Russian Embassy in the UK has successfully tailored its digital public diplomacy to target a certain group of the digital audience, which was the British population orientated towards a populist worldview (2021a). Russian Embassy in the UK created Twitter content that resonates with local British digital audiences, such as the persistent use of the English language, an "abrasive" and satirical tone, humour, funny images (*meme* diplomacy), and the incorporation of famous British figures—author Agatha Christie and detective Hercule Poirot—when framing the salient issues of Brexit and Salisbury poisoning (Manor, 2021b, p. 75–77). In addition, it managed to craft its national brand by successfully attracting high-level user engagement and online virality (Manor, 2021b). The iBrand creates a perception that Russian diplomats are “reachable” to the common public and can converse with the digital society. Russian Embassy in the UK showed exceptional behaviour with high adaptability to become part of the digital society, which was distinct compared to digital diplomacy activities of other foreign missions in the UK.

## ii. Russian Invasion of Ukraine 2022

While Russia’s uses of digital public diplomacy have brought a transformational shift in our understanding of digital diplomacy, it is imperative to further examine Russian digital diplomacy practices in the context of its large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Leading up to February 24th

and onwards, social media platforms have seen information overload on the conflicting narratives surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Audrey, 2022). Given the far-reaching consequences of the crisis on a global scale, it becomes increasingly crucial and significant to evaluate various facets of Russian digital public diplomacy thoroughly.

There is a noticeable increase in social media activities from the Russian government's side following the Ukraine invasion in February 2022. Social media and websites of the official representatives of the Russian Federation, including the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and their appointed spokespersons were extensively increasing their online presence in communicating developments of the events surrounding the invasion. Russian MFA and its network of embassies serve as the official representatives of the Russian government abroad, playing a major role in shaping diplomatic narratives and engaging with foreign governments and international organisations. Therefore, their heightened social media activities from February 2022 onwards portray the Russian official position the most.

Moreover, there has also been a notable increase in the online presence of units and branches affiliated with Russian military operations. The various departments, branches, and units of Russian military presence in Ukraine also saturated the social media landscape with their frequent updates. While the official briefings broadcasted regularly by the Russian Ministry of Defence (MOD), social media updates from Russian military units—such as the Chechen unit and paramilitary Wagner Group—in the frontline gained virality (Krutov & Dobrynin, 2023). Many of them managed to gain millions of engagements from the global online audience.

The latest reports showed that the Russian government used a coordinated campaign via its official Twitter accounts to spread narratives—including disinformation—covering the topic of Ukraine (75% of the total 1157 Tweets between 25 February-3 March 2022) (Thompson & Graham, 2022). Moreover, the Twitter account of the Russian Embassy in the UK exceptionally gained online virality following February 24th as it repeatedly attracted a broad-scale digital audience with a similar diplomacy strategy—the use of memes, cartoons, and user-generated content with satirical and humorous tone—while incorporating highly-controversial content when framing Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Culliford, 2022; Dawson, 2022; Jewish News, 2022). Russia's increased use of coordinated campaigns further confirms that in the crisis, public diplomacy plays an ever-vital

role in garnering public support to legitimise the state's policies and hindering the adversary from doing the same (Manor, 2021a, p. 68). However, Russia's narrative-building attempt via information campaigns is said to become less credible due to its falling reputation, particularly in Western countries, following the series of allegations of Russia's aggressive digital activities (DiResta et al. 2019; US Senate 2020; Mölder and Sazonov 2018 in (Bjola & Jiang, 2015).

### iii. Summary of Russian Digital Diplomacy

The literature on Russian digital public diplomacy highlights several key points regarding Russian digital public diplomacy. There is a lack of sufficient analysis evaluating the effectiveness of the official use of Russian digital public diplomacy. Additionally, the existing literature predominantly focuses on the role of Russian state media as the primary actor in this domain. At the same time, numerous other actors represent different agencies and branches of the government.

It is important to examine how Russia adapted its digital communication strategy following the 2022 invasion, especially given the significant global attention the crises attracted. In its early usage, Russia held an advantage due to the element of surprise and its counterparts' limited understanding of Russia's digital diplomacy strategy. However, the world, particularly the West, has learned from experiences and attempted to counterattack Russian disinformation and propaganda. The coordinated activities of Russian digital diplomacy have been observed during the latest invasion, with the online presence of both official and non-official military representatives becoming more prevalent. Moreover, in terms of official use of digital public diplomacy, the case of the Russian Embassy in the UK stands as a distinct case highlighting potential strategy differences among Russian Embassies. This raises a novel question that has not yet received sufficient attention in the literature: What causes differences in diplomatic practices across embassies under one institution?

Furthermore, there is still much to uncover regarding Russian digital public diplomacy, particularly concerning the specific strategies employed when targeting audiences in other parts of the world. This area remains relatively unexplored, especially in countries that do not perceive Russia as threatening or hostile.

Therefore, for this research, I will investigate the case of Russian digital public diplomacy in Indonesia and Malaysia. Evaluating Russian digital public diplomacy in these countries might provide valuable insights into how Russia engages audiences in Southeast Asia, where it is generally not facing strong opposition from governments and the public. The focus of analysis on institutional factors and audience factors will allow for a more comprehensive examination of similarities and variations of Russia's digital public diplomacy strategy in Indonesia and Malaysia. Finally, it may allow us to bridge the knowledge gap regarding Russia's digital engagement with audiences in Southeast Asia.

#### d. Cases: Indonesia and Malaysia

##### i. Russia-Indonesia and Russia-Malaysia Diplomatic Relationships

The bilateral relationships between Russia and Indonesia and Russia and Malaysia are influenced by numerous factors reflecting Russia's wider foreign policy interests in the Southeast Asia region. These relationships align with Russia's "Turn to the East" vision, which seeks to enhance its engagement with Asian countries.

Historical events and strategic interests have significantly influenced bilateral relationships between Russia-Indonesia and Russia-Malaysia. Russia's official bilateral ties with Indonesia and Malaysia date back to 1950 and 1967, respectively. Particularly, the Soviet Union extended its significant political support to Indonesia in its early years of independence. The relationships experienced a notable decline during the Cold War, when anti-communist insurgencies took place in Indonesia and Malaysia, pushing both countries closer to the United States and its allies. This led to a period of limited diplomatic interactions and reduced bilateral cooperation. Only with the end of the Cold War and the subsequent reconfiguration of global politics did the relationships between Russia and both countries gradually normalise and regain momentum. Strategically, Indonesia and Malaysia hold significant importance for Russia's foreign policy objectives. With its large population and emerging economy, Indonesia plays a crucial role in Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region.

On the other hand, Malaysia possesses strategic geographical positioning and substantial economic potential, making it an important partner for Russia. Although Russia is a less significant trading partner to the two countries compared to the US, China, European Union, Japan, and South Korea,

the trade balances of Russia-Indonesia and Russia-Malaysia have seen relatively persistent flows in the past years (2014-2019) as seen in Figure 1. Despite the invasion of Crimea in 2014, Russia continued to maintain strong and positive relationships with both countries as both Indonesia and Malaysia expressed their concerns and urged both sides to solve the conflict peacefully. Particularly in the defence sector, although the trends have declined due to competition from other players and threats of US sanctions, Russia tops the list of military equipment providers to Indonesia and Malaysia. Moreover, the steady growth of interest from Russian travellers in exploring Southeast Asia has greatly boosted both Indonesian and Malaysian tourism industries (Gibbons, 2022; Koumelis, 2007).

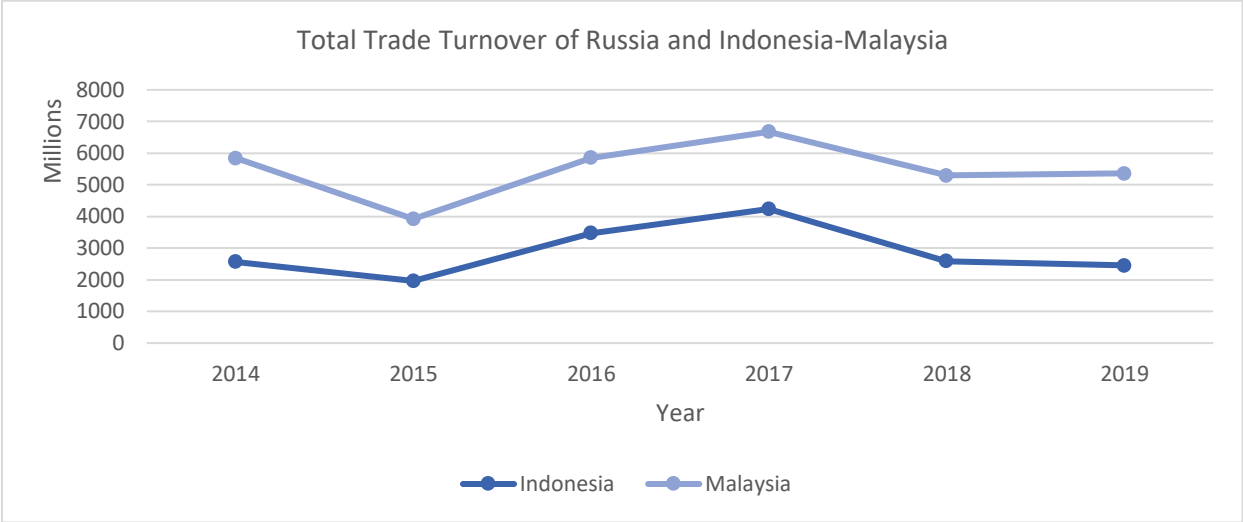


Figure 1. Total Trade Turnover of Russia-Indonesia and Russia-Malaysia (2014-2019 year-on-year comparison). Source: UN Comtrade. Total imports and exports of all Harmonised System (HS) commodities, reported by Russia. (comtrade.un.org) Accessed 20 May 2023.

The relationships between countries also have been strengthened by Russia’s strategic partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Russia increased its commitment to the Association and the region by establishing a diplomatic Mission to ASEAN in 2017 and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation regional office in 2021, based in Jakarta, Indonesia. As one of the ASEAN Dialogue Partners, Russia actively contributed to discussions in ASEAN-led forums on various regional political, economic, and security issues. Russia has also garnered more trust and credibility as it maintained a position of neutrality in the regional disputes and championed itself as the supporter of multipolarity and non-intervention—highly valued by both Indonesia and Malaysia (Gorenburg & Schwartz, 2019., p. 12). Russia has

continuously promoted the narratives of the importance of a multipolar world order based on the balance of power, sovereignty, and acknowledgement of cultural and civilisational diversity as part of its image branding in the region (Huan & Thambipillai, 2022).

Moreover, public opinion in Indonesia and Malaysia towards Russia varied and fluctuated. Following the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 in 2014 in the Donetsk region, controlled by pro-Russian separatist rebels, the protest took place in front of Russian Embassies in Kuala Lumpur, demanding justice for the 43 Malaysian citizens killed on board (Cheney, 2014). Russia was also heavily criticised by Muslim communities in Indonesia and Malaysia due to its direct involvement in the heavy bombardment of Aleppo, Syria, in 2016. Furthermore, the 2020 Yushof-Ishak public opinion survey revealed that Russia was not perceived as having a significant economic or strategic role by Indonesian and Malaysian respondents (Tang et al., 2020). However, a minority of participants did consider that Russia can provide leadership and maintain the rules-based order and international law in the Southeast Asian region (Tang et al., 2020).

#### ii. Russian digital public diplomacy in Indonesia and Malaysia

In the absence of operating representative offices for its state-owned news agencies in Indonesia and Malaysia, Russian Embassies have assumed a prominent role as the main digital public diplomacy actors in both countries. While the Russian Cultural Center in Jakarta and the Russian House in Kuala Lumpur are also operating online, the social media activities of these cultural centres are relatively limited in frequency and topics covered. It sheds light on the significance and responsibility placed on the embassies to effectively communicate and promote Russia's interests, narratives, and policies through digital platforms. However, Russian official use of the digital platform to reach its public diplomacy objectives in Indonesia and Malaysia remains understudied in the literature.

The digital public diplomacy activities of Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia exhibit similarities and differences in terms of the platforms utilised for engagement. Both embassies maintain official websites and have a presence on social media platforms. However, a notable distinction lies in the number and variation of each embassy's social media platform. The Russian Embassy in Indonesia demonstrates a broader approach by utilising Twitter, Facebook, Instagram,

and Telegram as part of its digital public diplomacy strategy. Meanwhile, the Russian Embassy in Malaysia directs its digital public diplomacy efforts primarily on Twitter and Facebook.

These noticeable differences in digital public diplomacy activities between Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia further evoke the necessity to delve deeper into comparing how and what explains strategies adopted by states differ across the countries and regions. Russian embassy activities via the Twitter platform were selected as the main focus to limit the scope of analysis.

Analysing Twitter activities allows us to comprehend how Russian Embassies utilise the platform's rapid information-sharing ability to engage, influence public discourse, and shape opinions in Indonesia and Malaysia. This is particularly relevant given Twitter's user base, which includes influential political figures, leaders, media, and academics from both countries.

While the existing literature suggests the contributing role of environmental and algorithmic factors in shaping digital public diplomacy, this study will focus on institutional and audience factors. These two factors best suit the research objective of comparing the official use of Russian public digital diplomacy in Indonesia and Malaysia. Moreover, this study faces limitations in finding evidence for the environmental and algorithmic factors shaping Russian Embassies' Twitter usage in Indonesia and Malaysia. Meanwhile, we find that the institutional and audience factors are the most likely to answer the research objective and conduct an in-depth comparative analysis of tailored digital public diplomacy in Indonesia and Malaysia.

This study assumes that institutional factors contribute to the similarities in Russian digital public diplomacy activities. Shared guidelines, resources, and strategies issued by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs may contribute to the similarities observed in Russian use of social media platforms such as Twitter. On the other hand, varying audience factors across Indonesia and Malaysia are predicted to cause different Russian digital public diplomacy activities in each country. For instance, although existing surveys have indicated that public opinion towards Russia exhibits similar patterns in Indonesia and Malaysia, Indonesians tend to hold a higher degree of favourability towards Russia than Malaysians (Stokes, 2015). This suggests the existing different audience factors might play a bigger role over others in causing the variations in Russian digital public diplomacy in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Hypotheses about general Russian digital public diplomacy practices in Indonesia and Malaysia

H1: Overall message content and formats will be similar in Indonesia and Malaysia due to shared institutional guidelines and policies issued by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

H2: In Indonesia, where the local audience holds a higher degree of favourability towards Russia, locally tailored content and engagement activity with local audiences will be higher compared to Malaysia.

iii. Perceptions of the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine in Indonesia and Malaysia

While Western countries have manifested a similarly outraged response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the same has not been true in other parts of the world, including Indonesia and Malaysia. Following the invasion in February 2022, the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia both issued official statements expressing their concern over the development of the conflict while avoiding explicitly calling out Russia as the aggressor. While this stance was criticised abroad, it received sufficient approval at home. A survey conducted by ISEAS-Yushof Ishak Institute<sup>1</sup> revealed that although the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 caused concern to Indonesians and Malaysians due to the rising energy and food prices, many of them (51,2% and 39,5% of participants from each country respectively) approved their governments' response to the invasion. In addition, a recent opinion poll (Figure 2) shows that the Indonesian and Malaysian public have rather positive opinions of Russia following the invasion (positive net opinion of 15% and 9%, respectively) (Kafura, 2022). Meanwhile, abundant pro-Russian narratives surrounding the invasion were observed in both Indonesian and Malaysian public discourses in social media (Dharmaputra, 2022; Loh & Mustaffa, 2022; Al-Jazeera, 2022). Noticeable patterns of narratives commonly shared by online public discourse in both countries include anti-Americanism, NATO expansionism, Ukraine as a proxy, Muslim solidarity, President Putin's leadership, and the government's tradition of non-interference.

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents represented five affiliation categories: (1) academia, think-tankers and researchers; (2) business or finance representatives; (3) civil society, NGO or media representatives; (4) government officials; and (5) regional or international organisations personnel (ISEAS-Yushof Ishak Institute: *The State of Southeast Asia 2023*)

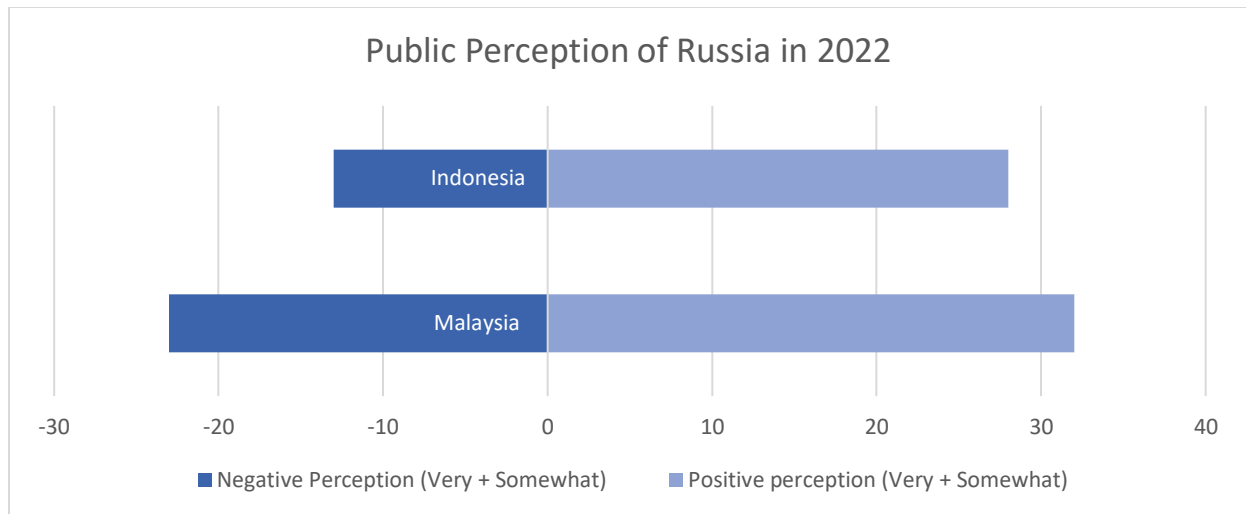


Figure 2. Perception of Indonesian and Malaysian Publics about Russia. Source: 2022 Democracy Perception Index, Chicago Council on Global Affairs

We argue that this suggests the presence of shared narratives in Indonesia and Malaysia, which also align with those frequently employed by Russian communication efforts worldwide. It aligns with the existing findings that highlight the coordinated use of digital public diplomacy by Russia during the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, it also indicates the presence of specific themes that were uniquely present in Indonesia and Malaysia, hinting different audience factors might have shaped Russia’s digital public diplomacy outputs during the invasion of Ukraine.

#### Hypotheses about Russian digital public diplomacy practices in response to the Invasion of Ukraine

H3: Overall message content and formats used about the invasion of Ukraine will be similar in Indonesia and Malaysia due to institutional coordination by Russian MFA over nationwide security concerns.

H4: In Indonesia, where the local audience holds a higher degree of positive opinion of Russia following the invasion, locally tailored content and engagement activity with local audiences after February 2022 will be higher compared to Malaysia.

### 3. Data & Methods

#### Research design

This research investigates tailored communication of digital public diplomacy and its explanatory factors using Russian digital public diplomacy via Twitter in Indonesia and Malaysia as case studies. This research adopts a comparative case study approach, which allows for a comprehensive analysis of similarities and differences in digital public diplomacy strategies employed by the Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia. The focus is primarily on the institutional and audience factors, which are deemed to have the most direct impact on tailored communication in digital public diplomacy. Environmental and algorithmic factors, while relevant, were not included in this study due to their relatively indirect influence on the customisation of diplomatic messages. By examining these aspects, the research aims to provide a broader understanding of Russian digital public diplomacy, particularly in the understudied Southeast Asia region.

This research employs mixed-methods data analysis, comprising quantitative statistical and qualitative content analyses. The statistical analysis examines the similarities and differences of Tweets of Russian Embassies using a two-sample t-test of proportion. The statistical analysis measured the similarity of messages and formats used, including the incorporation of multimedia, the proportion of different languages used, frequency of mentions and tagging, and engagement with specific topics such as the invasion of Ukraine and embassy activities. The content analysis comprehensively interprets the statistical findings using the secondary data.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is also analysed to understand Russian digital public diplomacy efforts amid the crisis. As the crisis garnered significant global attention, we can gain insights into Russian digital public diplomacy tactics and messaging strategy during a high-stakes geopolitical event when it needs to rally worldwide support.

#### Data collection

The primary data source for this study is Twitter posts published by the Russian Embassy in Jakarta and the Russian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur over one year, from August 2021 to August 2022. A total of 1134 Tweets were collected manually and via the website AllMyTweets.net. Data was

manually collected by accessing the respective embassies' official Twitter accounts. Additionally, to ensure comprehensive data collection, the website AllMyTweets.net was utilised to retrieve any Tweets that might have been missed during the manual collection process. This combination of manual collection and AllMyTweets.net helped to minimise the possibility of data omission. Secondary data from official documents, news articles, media coverage, and academic literature will also be utilised.

The primary data collection occurred from November to December 2022. During this period, the Tweets were systematically retrieved and recorded in a secure database, preserving the original timestamps and other associated metadata (e.g., multimedia and engagement rate). The inclusion criteria for data collection focused on Tweets directly posted by the Russian Embassy accounts and excluded re-Tweets to limit the focus on original content.

Russia channelled its digital public diplomacy activities in Indonesia and Malaysia through several social media platforms. The Russian Embassy in Jakarta operates on Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and Instagram, while the Russian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur operates on Facebook and Twitter. However, the choice to focus on the Twitter platform in the context of Russian digital public diplomacy in Indonesia and Malaysia was driven by several key factors. First, Twitter's real-time nature and fast-paced communication align well with tailored digital public diplomacy dynamics, where timely messaging and immediate engagement with the targeted audience may be assessed. The study focuses on a specific period from August 2021 to August 2022. This period allows for examining Twitter content both before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which started in February 2022. By comparing the activities and messaging on Twitter before and after the invasion, the study aims to gain insights into any shifts in Russian digital public diplomacy strategies in response to the crisis.

Several key measurements will be employed to measure Russian digital public diplomacy's effectiveness and explanatory factors in Indonesia and Malaysia, aligning with the research objectives and hypotheses. These measurements will be conducted based on categorising topics identified within the Twitter posts.

## Operationalising message content and format

The categorisation of Tweets involved several stages to determine the appropriate category for each Tweet based on language, topics, features, and other relevant factors. Firstly, the language of each Tweet was identified and used as a primary criterion for categorisation, assigning it to one of the language categories such as Russian, English, Indonesian, or Malay. Secondly, specific features within the content, such as hashtags used, mentions, tagging, and multimedia elements, were observed. Lastly, particular topics discussed in the Tweets were analysed and sorted. Tweets were sorted by date and grouped into two periods: six months prior (August 2021-February 2022) and six months after (February-August 2022) the invasion of Ukraine.

Each Tweet was carefully examined, and a judgment for categorisation was made based on the predominant language and thematic issues to assign it to the most fitting category. In cases where Tweets exhibited characteristics that could potentially align with multiple categories of topics, further examination was conducted to determine the most suitable category based on the overall context of the Tweet. The second layer of categorisation was conducted to screen all Tweets that explicitly mentioned Ukraine, or related keywords, to identify Russian messaging strategies during the invasion throughout the whole period of analysis. This systematic categorisation process ensured that each Tweet was appropriately placed under one category over another, considering the language, formats, and other relevant factors present in the content. Additional data on the number of followings and followers and engagement rates were also observed and sorted. To test the hypothesis, we assessed the statistical significance of several observed differences and similarities across embassies through a series of calculations performed using a two-sample t-test of proportions.

## *Operationalising variables for H1 testing similarities in message content and format, overall*

The similarity of overall messages and formats employed by Russian diplomats on Twitter in Indonesia and Malaysia will be examined by measuring the consistency and similarity in the messaging strategies across the Tweets. The content analysis will identify common themes and recurring narratives the Russian Embassies utilise. The categories of MFA Briefings, Presidential Updates, MOD Briefings, Russian Foreign Relationships, Russian in International Order, Russian Domestic Politics, Russian History, Russian Society and Culture will be utilised to categorise and

analyse the content. In addition to analysing the consistency and similarity in the messaging strategies, commonly shared hashtags will be examined. It helps identify common Twitter formats used by the Russian Embassies to promote particular topics and trends. Specifically, the hashtags #Russia, #Putin, #Lavrov, and #Zakharova, which the Russian Embassies frequently utilise, will be analysed to assess the similarity in using Twitter formats.

#### *Operationalising variables for H2 testing differences in locally tailored message content and engagement, overall*

The level of locally tailored content and engagement activities with the local audience in Indonesia and Malaysia will be measured. This measurement will involve analysing the Tweets to identify instances where the Russian Embassies customise their messages to address the specific interests and preferences of the respective local audiences, based on the uses of particular topics, languages, multimedia incorporated, and engagement rates of the Tweets. The categories of the Russia-Indonesia Relationship, Russia-Malaysia Relationship, Embassy Activities in Indonesia, and Embassy Activities in Malaysia will be used to categorise and analyse the content. We chose to compare these particular categories as the topics are the most helpful to identify the degree to which embassies tailor their diplomatic messages to the local audience. Moreover, the Tweets were also categorised based on the languages, into Russian, English, Indonesian, Malay, mix English-Malay categorisation. This aims to examine how the embassies adapt their messaging to suit the linguistic preferences and cultural context of the target audience in each country. All Tweets incorporating any type of multimedia, such as images and video will be added to the categorisation. Additionally, engagement activities, such as responding to comments, mentioning/tagging, and re-Tweeting local elites (political actors, public figures, media personalities, etc.) will be examined to gauge the level of interaction with the local audience. Comparing the frequency and nature of locally tailored content and engagement activities between Indonesia and Malaysia within these categories will provide insights into the influence of audience favourability on digital public diplomacy efforts.

#### *Operationalising variables for H3 testing similarities in Ukraine-related message content and format*

The similarity of messages and formats used in content about the invasion of Ukraine will be measured. This aims to assess whether there is consistency in the communication strategies

employed by the Russian Embassies in addressing the sensitive issue of the invasion across both countries. The category of Ukraine will be used to label and analyse all the Tweets which contain the words “Ukraine”, and related topics such as “Crimea”, “Donbas”, “Lugansk”, “Mariupol”, and “Bucha”. This analysis will shed light on the extent of institution-level coordination over nationwide security concerns in shaping Russian communication strategies in Indonesia and Malaysia in times of crisis. Also, common themes shared across embassies when narrating the invasion will be identified.

#### *Operationalising variables for H4 testing differences in Ukraine-related locally tailored message content and engagement*

The locally tailored message content and engagement related to Ukraine following the Russian invasion of Ukraine will be measured. This measurement will analyse the Tweets after February 2022 to identify any changes in messaging strategies or engagement activities in response to the shifting sentiment among the local audience. The comparison will be focused on Tweets about Ukraine and the invasion which were also part of the category Embassy activities. This aimed to focus only on the Tweets, which particularly display how embassies address and narrate the situation in Ukraine online and simultaneously carry out its offline diplomatic functions.

#### *Limitations*

Firstly, further research could benefit from incorporating interviews with Russian diplomats to gain insights into the objectives and reasoning behind selecting specific digital public diplomacy activities. Interviews with diplomats would provide a more in-depth understanding of the internal factors of diplomats’ working circumstances, particularly on the managerial level guiding Russia’s digital public diplomacy efforts in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Secondly, due to Twitter’s policy, it is impossible to delve deeper into the propagation route of the messages. This means that the study cannot explore the details of how the Tweets are spread, particularly the number of re-Tweet layers. Consequently, this limits the engagement rate analysis and the presence-expansion rate of the Embassy’s digital public diplomacy outputs.

## 4. Statistical Analysis

This chapter examines the findings from the data using multiple measurements, including the similarity of messages and formats used, including the incorporation of multimedia, the proportion of different languages used, frequency of mentions and tagging, and engagement with specific topics such as the invasion of Ukraine and embassy activities. By examining these results, we gain insights into how the Russian Embassies tailor their communication strategies, both in messages and formats, to the local contexts and test the extent to which the hypotheses are supported.

Tests of H1: Overall message content and formats will be similar in Indonesia and Malaysia due to shared institutional guidelines and policies of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Similar visual elements and formatting on Twitter's front pages

Assessing the similarity of communication formats employed by the Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia, we conducted a visual analysis of the Twitter front pages of both embassies (Figure 3). The front pages of the embassy profiles serve as the first impression for visitors and provide insights into the overall layout, and visual elements used in their digital public diplomacy efforts.

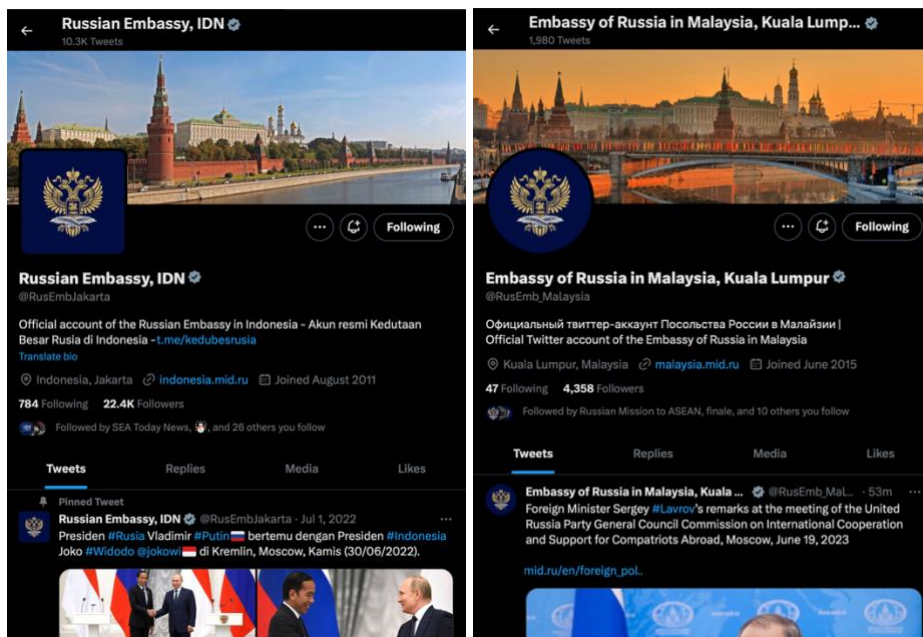


Figure 3. Front pages of Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia Twitter account (left to right)

Upon examination, it was observed that both embassy profiles exhibited a similar format to Twitter. Firstly, the Twitter accounts of the Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia share a common visual theme. Both accounts feature a display picture displaying the Russian national coat of arms. Additionally, the home pictures on both accounts displayed an image of the Kremlin, the official residence of the Russian president. Secondly, the profiles of both accounts include links to their respective official websites, providing users with access to official information and resources. Lastly, the locations of the capital city and country are also clearly indicated on both accounts, establishing their diplomatic presence in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur.

However, in addition to their similarities, noticeable differences are observed in the profiles of Russian Embassies Twitter accounts. First, their introduction messages vary, with the Russian Embassy in Jakarta using both English and Indonesian, while the Embassy in Kuala Lumpur uses a combination of English and Russian. Second, it is noticeable from their establishment dates that the Russian Embassy in Jakarta has been active on Twitter longer than the Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. Thirdly, based on the total number of Tweets posted, the Embassy in Jakarta tended to post Twitter content more frequently than its counterpart in Kuala Lumpur,

#### Similar usage of trending hashtags

To evaluate the similarity of formats used by the Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia, we analysed the trending hashtags incorporated in their Twitter posts (Figure 4). A comprehensive examination of the collected data revealed a notable consistency in the use of trending hashtags across both embassies. Specifically, we identified hashtags #Russia, #Putin, #Lavrov, and #Zakharova in their Tweets.

	#Russia	#Putin	#Lavrov	#Zakharova
Tweets with #, INA	147	126	50	27
Tweets with #, MAL	29	46	45	10
Total Tweets, INA	831	831	831	831
Total Tweets, MAL	303	303	303	303
% Tweets with %, INA	17.69%	15.16%	6.02%	3.25%
% Tweets with %, MAL	9.57%	15.18%	14.85%	3.30%
Difference of proportions	0.0812	-0.0002	-0.0883	-0.0005

z statistics	3.341	-0.008	-4.752	-0.043
z  > 1.96?	yes	no	yes	no

Figure 4. Two-sample t-test of proportion of trending hashtags included in Tweets

These hashtags represent key Russian politics, diplomacy, and leadership figures, namely President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova.

Comparing the percentage of Tweets containing selected hashtags, we found references to #Putin and #Zakharova to be statistically similar across embassies. Hashtags for Putin occurred in 15.2% of Tweets in both countries (difference = .0002; z = -.009). References to #Zakharova also occurred in Tweets at statistically similar rates, 3.25% in Indonesia and 3.30% in Malaysia (difference = -.0005; z = -.043). By contrast, Tweets referring to #Russia occurred at statistically different rates, 17.7% in Indonesia but only 9.6% in Malaysia (difference = .081; z = 3.34). The rates for #Lavrov occurred with much higher frequency in Malaysia (14.9%) than in Indonesia (6.0%) (difference = -.088; z = -4.75).

#### Similar usage of multimedia

The study also compares the incorporation of multimedia by the Russian Embassies. Analyzing the Russian Embassies' Twitter posts in Indonesia and Malaysia revealed a strong emphasis on multimedia content.

	Multimedia
Tweets with multimedia, INA	732
Tweets with multimedia, MAL	267
Total Tweets, INA	831
Total Tweets, MAL	303
% Tweets with multimedia, INA	88.09%
% Tweets with multimedia, MAL	88.12%
Difference of proportions	-0.0003
z statistics	-0.015
z  > 1.96?	no

Figure 5. Two-sample t-test of proportion of multimedia usage

As seen in Figure 5, when comparing the number of Tweets containing multimedia, it was observed that both embassies had statistically remarkably similar rates, at 88.1% in both countries (difference = -0.0003; z = -0.015).

#### Similar overall message content

Furthermore, we identified recurring themes from the Twitter posts of both embassies, which were then arranged into various categorisation as showed in Figure 6.

	MFA Briefings	Presidential updates	MOD Briefings	Foreign relationships	Russia in international order	Russian domestic politics	Russian history	Russian society and culture
Tweets in INA	81	67	15	61	21	17	34	101
Tweets in MAL	17	61	12	93	18	24	11	61
Total Tweets, INA	831	831	831	831	831	831	831	831
Total Tweets, MAL	303	303	303	303	303	303	303	303
% Tweets, INA	9.70%	8.06%	1.81%	7.34%	2.53%	2.05%	4.09%	12.15%
% Tweets, MAL	5.60%	20.13%	3.96%	30.69%	5.94%	7.92%	3.63%	20.13%
Difference of proportions	0.041	-0.121	-0.022	-0.234	-0.034	-0.059	0.005	-0.080
z statistic	2.194	-5.683	-2.107	-10.158	-2.791	-4.690	0.352	-3.397
z  > 1.96?	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes

Figure 6. Two-sample t-test of proportion of topics addressed in Tweets

In Indonesia and Malaysia, Russian Embassies posted Tweets on a wide range of topics, from foreign policy to social and cultural issues. However, a deeper analysis of the data reveals variations in the distribution of Tweets within the same categories across the embassies. While the overall messaging themes remain similar, there are differences in the proportion of Tweets allocated to specific categories in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Tweets on topic of the "MFA briefings" occurred at higher rate in Indonesia (9.7%) in comparison to Malaysia (5.60%) (difference = .041; z = 2.19). Meanwhile, in Malaysia, the percentages of Tweets related to "Presidential updates" (z = -5.683), "MOD briefings" (z = -2.107), "Russian

foreign relationships" (-10.158), "Russia in international order" (-2.791), "Russian society and culture" (-3.397), were all significantly higher in Malaysia than in Indonesia. However, the only topic that appeared to be statistically similar across both embassies is "Russian history", with 4.09% in Indonesia and 3.63% in Malaysia (difference = .005;  $z = .352$ ).

The findings of the statistical analysis for Hypothesis 1 yielded mixed results. Contrary to the prediction, there is less uniformity in overall message content and format than predicted. The utilisation of multimedia elements appears similar across embassies, while the adoption of hashtags varies considerably. Additionally, the frequency of topics covered in messages mostly differs between the two countries.

Tests of H2: In Indonesia, where the local audience holds a higher degree of favourability towards Russia, locally tailored content and engagement activity with the local audience are higher compared to in Malaysia.

#### Locally tailored content using language

An essential aspect of the analysis involved examining the proportion of languages used by the Russian Embassies in their Twitter posts. The aim was to understand how Russia tailored their messages to the targeted audience in Indonesia and Malaysia while also considering using English as a common foreign language for broader reach.

	Local language (Indonesian or Malaysian)	English	Russian
Tweets in INA	310	539	8
Tweets in MAL	5	271	21
Total Tweets, INA	831	831	831
Total Tweets, MAL	303	303	303
% Tweets, INA	37.30%	64.86%	0.96%
% Tweets, MAL	1.65%	89.44%	6.93%
Difference in proportions	0.357	-0.246	-0.060
z statistics	11.86	-8.11	-5.63
z  > 1.96?	yes	yes	yes

Figure 7. Two-sample t-test of proportion of languages used in Tweets

The findings revealed significant disparities and statistically different rates in the language distribution (Figure 7). The use of local language was significantly higher in Indonesia (37.30%) in contrast to Malaysia (1.65%) (difference = .357;  $z = 11.86$ ). Consequently, Tweets posted in

other languages—English and Russian, was considerably higher in Malaysia. In Indonesia, Tweets posted in Russian occurred at roughly 1%, while in Malaysia the number is notably high at 6.93% (difference = .060;  $z = -5.63$ ). Moreover, it is important to note that English was the dominant language used by Russian Embassies in their Twitter posts, 64.86% in Indonesia and significantly higher rate of 89.44% in Malaysia (difference = .060;  $z = -8.11$ ).

#### Locally tailored content in Indonesia and Malaysia

The findings showed noteworthy differences across embassies regarding Tweeting topics of bilateral relationships between Russia and Indonesia/Malaysia, and of Russian embassy activities in both countries.

	Bilateral relationship	Embassy activities
Tweets in INA	81	165
Tweets in MAL	8	26
Total Tweets, INA	831	831
Total Tweets, MAL	303	303
% Tweets, INA	9.75%	19.86%
% Tweets, MAL	2.64%	8.58%
Difference in proportions	0.071	0.113
z statistics	3.938	4.489
$ z  > 1.96?$	yes	yes

Figure 8. Two-sample t-test of proportion of content on “Bilateral relationships” and “Embassies activities” categories

Comparing the percentage of Tweets on these two topics, we found that the rates are statistically different across embassies (Figure 8). Tweets under “Bilateral relationship” occurred at 9.75% in Indonesia, while only 2.64% in Malaysia. Similarly, Tweets on the topic of “Embassy activities” occurred with much higher frequency in Indonesia (19.86%) than in Malaysia (8.58%).

## Engagement with local audience through mentioning and tagging

We analysed the degree of engagement from Russian Embassies by examining the frequency of Tweets mentioning Twitter accounts of local elites in Indonesia and Malaysia. The findings showed staggering differences across the two embassies (Figure 9).

	Mention local accounts
Tweets in INA	86
Tweets in MAL	0
Total Tweets, INA	831
Total Tweets, MAL	303
% Tweets with mentions, INA	10.34%
% Tweets with mentions, MAL	0.00%
Difference in proportions	0.103
z statistics	5.82
$ z  > 1.96?$	yes

Figure 9. Two-sample t-test of proportions of Tweets mentioning local accounts

The Russian embassy in Indonesia engage with local accounts in approximately 10.34% of their Tweets. In contrast, the Russian embassy in Malaysia did not use the mention feature at any rate in their Tweets to engage with local audience ( $z = 5.82$ ). In Indonesia, the Embassy mentioned local figures namely Indonesian political figures and institutions, media agencies, and influential figures from academia.

Tests of H3: Overall message content and formats related to Ukraine following the invasion will be similar in Indonesia and Malaysia due to institutional level coordination over nation-wide security concerns.

Similar Ukraine-related message content and formats

This section will describe the findings of similarities in the Russian Embassies' use of Tweets narrating the invasion of Ukraine in Indonesia and Malaysia. In addition to analysing the overall

proportion of Tweets dedicated to this theme, we also examined the use of trending hashtags associated with the invasion.

The findings revealed that both the Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia shared a sizeable portion of their Tweets in narrating the invasion of Ukraine and its ongoing development throughout the analysed period (Figure 10). Russian Embassies in both countries also used relevant hashtags surrounding the invasion, although in similarly low proportion at 1.81% in Indonesia and 2.31% in Malaysia (difference -.005;  $z = -.546$ ).

	Tweets related to the invasion	Hashtags related to the invasion
Tweets in INA	176	15
Tweets in MAL	36	7
Total Tweets, INA	831	831
Total Tweets, MAL	303	303
% Tweets and #, INA	21.18%	1.81%
% Tweets and #, MAL	11.88%	2.31%
Difference of proportions	0.093	-0.005
z statistics	3.554	-0.546
z  > 1.96?	yes	no

Figure 10. Two-sample t-test of proportions of Tweets and hashtags related to the Ukraine invasion

However, comparing the proportion of Tweets on the topic of invasion across embassies, it was evident that the percentage of Tweets dedicated to this particular topic is statistically different in both countries. The Russian embassy in Indonesia had a higher percentage, with 21.18% of their Tweets dedicated to the invasion and related topic, while the Russian embassy in Malaysia had a lower proportion of 11.88% (difference = 0.093;  $z = 3.55$ ).

Tests of H4: In Indonesia, where the local audience hold a higher degree of positive opinion of Russia following the invasion, locally tailored content, and engagement activities with local audience after February 2022 are higher compared to in Malaysia.

Generated engagement rate of Tweets related to the invasion

Moreover, from the total of Tweets on the topic of invasion (February 2022-August 2023 period), generated engagement rates of Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia are statistically different. The findings revealed different degrees of engagement rates from digital audiences in all four types, namely likes, re-Tweets, quote Tweets and comments, as seen in Figure 11. Data shows that engagement of all types is much higher in Indonesia in contrast to in Malaysia.

This finding further adds to the previous surveys that the audience in Indonesia had a higher degree of favourability towards Russia following the invasion of Ukraine.

	Likes	Re-Tweets	Quote Tweets	Comments
Average count, INA	77.59195402	17.04022989	2.109195402	33.32183908
Average count, MAL	4.216216216	0.756756757	0.189189189	7.243243243
Difference of Averages	73.37573781	16.28347313	1.920006213	26.07859584
Total Tweets, INA	176	176	176	176
Total Tweets, MAL	36	36	36	36
Sample Var, INA	1043765.486	50660.194	786.491	195178.781
Sample Var, MAL	615.576	20.580	1.698	1839.935
T value	0.951	0.959	0.904	0.766
v numerator	3.83167E+19	2.12639E+14	12352902	4.69E+16
v denominator	2.18952E+17	1.22E+12	70585	2.68E+14
v degrees of freedom	175.001	175.000	175.008	175.152
t-statistic: $t_{1-\alpha/2, v}$	1.974	1.974	1.974	1.974
$ T  > t_{1-\alpha/2, v}$	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Figure 11. Two-sample t-test of proportion of engagement rates related to the Ukraine Invasion

Embassy activities Tweets related to the Ukraine Invasion

For focusing primarily on the Tweets acquiring more locally tailored content and engagement activities, we limit the analysis for the Tweets on the topic of the invasion, which belongs to the category “Embassy activities”.

	Embassy activities on topic of the invasion
Tweets in INA	52
Tweets in MAL	8
Total Tweets, INA	831
Total Tweets, MAL	303
% Tweets, INA	6.26%
% Tweets, MAL	2.64%
Difference of proportions	0.036
z statistic	2.408
z  > 1.96?	yes

Figure 12. Two-sample t-tests of proportions of Tweets related to the invasion in the “Embassy activities” category

The data showed that the Russian embassy in Indonesia had more activities (online and/or offline) related to the topic of invasion in comparison to its counterpart in Malaysia. As seen in Figure 12, the proportion was statistically different, as it occurred at 6.26% in Indonesia, while only 2.64% in Malaysia (difference = .036; z = 2.408).

Engagement with the local audience related to the Ukraine Invasion

A further examination of the data revealed differences in how the two embassies tailored their communication when narrating the invasion. Figures 13 and 14 contrast the two embassies' use of three key strategies for tailoring communication when narrating the invasion. One, the embassy in Indonesia engaged influential local figures and personalities, including major news channels, namely @suaradotcom, @CNNIndonesia, @KompasTV and @BBCIndonesia, both offline and through the Twitter platform. Two, the embassy in Indonesia responded to adverse narratives about the invasion by providing counter-narratives in a timely manner. An example of this is the



statistical analyses revealed several differences in messages and formats posted by the two embassies.

## 5. Content Analysis

The content analysis will offer a more comprehensive interpretation of statistical findings, incorporating samples of particular Tweets. In this chapter, we delve into the extent to which the digital diplomacy strategies and practices of Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia are similar and different, drawing upon the findings from our statistical analysis. The finding showed some similarities across embassies in terms of messaging and formats of communication used, which suggest it is part of the broader public diplomacy strategy of Russia worldwide. Russian Embassies' digital public diplomacy practices differ in Indonesia and Malaysia in the extent to which they use tailored communication to fit the liking of the local audience of each country. We found that the Russian embassy in Indonesia showed more tailored communication over the period analysed. Observation of the period after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further confirmed the way Russia projected similar and coordinated narratives in times of crisis to the global audience, yet differences in the digital public diplomacy practice were identified, highlighting tailored communication in the two countries.

As we progress in this chapter, we delve deeper into the primary and secondary data to provide context and reasoning behind the observed trends, shedding further light on the complexities of Russian digital public diplomacy in the diverse socio-political contexts of Indonesia and Malaysia. This chapter will be structured to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the research findings, organised around four key sections: (1) similarity of overall message and formats, (2) locally tailored content and engagement activities, (3) similarity of messages and formats regarding the invasion of Ukraine, and (4) locally tailored content and engagement activities following the invasion of Ukraine. Within each section, we will present in-depth analyses and discussions, supported by selected samples of Tweets, to better illustrate and contextualise the observed patterns and variations.

There are four key findings of this study. First, the audience factor in Indonesia is confirmed to have a determinant role in shaping Russian digital public diplomacy practices. We found compelling support for Hypotheses 2 and 4. In Indonesia, the Russian embassy employed a more

tailored communication strategy through Twitter by utilising more locally tailored messages and formats of engagement, aligning with the local audience's preferences and sentiments.

Second, findings showed some similarities across embassies in terms of messaging, narrative, and formats of communication which Russia also projected in other places or on the broader scale of the international setting. Additionally, looking at the data, we confirm the existing literature that Russian digital public diplomacy practices conducted by embassies are mainly still limited to a one-way communication format, which limits direct engagement with the general audience. The language they used also similarly remains to be the formal, traditional diplomatic standard. However, our analysis also revealed results that do not provide sufficient support for Hypotheses 1 and 3. We expected to observe the similarity in messaging across embassies on the overall message and formats of communication used. Nevertheless, statistical calculations identified notable differences in messages and formats shared on Twitter, which have a noteworthy influence on the overall digital public diplomacy strategy and engagement level of the embassies.

Third, focusing on the context of the Russian invasion that started in February 2022, general findings on the observation of Tweets further confirmed the hypotheses. Later in this chapter, we will present several examples of different tailored formats and engagement between the two embassies.

Fourth, we found minimum findings that show that embassies adjust the formats and messages they use to fit the preferences of the digital audience in a more sophisticated way, such as the use of more engaging Twitter features as polls. We also did not find multimedia usage in the form of GIFs and memes, which are often used on Twitter and generate more engagement (Hutchinson, 2016). However, the findings reveal the adept incorporation of other digital social media platforms, namely YouTube and Telegram—which started to be incorporated only following the invasion by the Russian Embassy in Indonesia. Such findings did not exist in Malaysia. These differences may have resulted from the different competencies and familiarities of diplomatic actors with the digital environment, but this and other environmental factors are beyond the scope of this study. This finding may imply the need for future studies to explore the environmental factors at play in these two countries.

These findings highlight the dynamic nature of digital diplomacy and how the context of each country influences the approach of Russian Embassies in their public outreach via Twitter. Factors beyond institutional guidelines, such as the geopolitical landscape and audience perception of receiving countries, appear to play a significant role in shaping their tailored digital public diplomacy strategies.

Through our analysis and interpretation of the findings, we aim to contribute to the broader understanding of how nations utilise social media platforms like Twitter to engage with international audiences, tailor their messaging, and adapt their strategies in response to significant global events. The implications of this research hold relevance not only for Russia's diplomatic efforts but also for the broader landscape of digital public diplomacy in the evolving digital age.

### Similarity of Overall Message and Formats

#### *Similar messages*

Some similarities were observed in messages overall. The identification of commonly shared topics across embassies demonstrated a partial alignment in their messaging themes, which reflect a collective vision and strategic communication strategy. This was especially true of the topic of “Russian history”, whose frequency was statistically similar in both Indonesia and Malaysia.

The emphasis of this topic aligned with Russia's known experience to use history as part of its memory diplomacy. The Tweets on the topic of “Russian history” mainly used hashtags #OTD (On This Day), narrating the lasting superiority of the Russian civilisation, particularly its role in broader global security. This attempt to shape the perspectives of the global audience by providing a Russian version of history was previously studied by scholars in the field of public diplomacy. Existing literature discusses how various actors, namely Russian academics, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and news agencies such as RT, conduct Russian historical memory diplomacy abroad, particularly to gain justification for its policy (Becker, 2020, p. 303). This finding extends the study that Russian Embassies as the official representative also play a role in advancing Russian objective in disseminating its historical narrative abroad.

Comparing a sample of Tweets (Figures 15 and 16) from the two embassies under the “Russian history” category, we found similarity in the way particular historical events were selected to

portray Russian historical significance and military achievement. In particular, the ideas shared in these Tweets resonate with the narrative projected by Russia to the broader international community in the context of legitimizing its policy at the present. The two narratives are (1) undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty and identity as a nation; (2) portrayal of Russia’s role as the dominant adversary against Nazi Germany during the Second World War (WWII), liberating countries previously held under occupation. The same narratives were also present in the essay of President Putin, which was published in July 2021 (Kremlin, 2021) and is repeatedly used by the Russian government following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, targeting both domestic and international audiences (Hill & Stent, 2022).



Figure 15

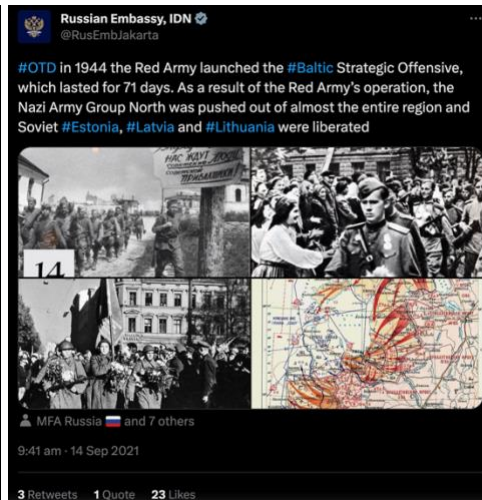


Figure 16.

Moreover, we found noticeable similarities in the themes of messages from Tweets under the category “Russia in international order”, as seen in Figures 17 and 18. By presenting itself as a proponent of the multilateral world order, Russia reinforces its image as a responsible global player, standing against perceived unilateral actions and dominance by powerful Western countries, primarily the United States (US). This narrative aligns with the broader geopolitical strategy of projecting Russia as an alternative and influential force in international affairs, especially in the regions where anti-Western sentiments and distrust of US policy may be prevalent. This is especially true in Southeast Asia, where countries see sovereignty as the utmost crucial element of the nation’s national interests (Huan & Thambipillai, 2022).



Figure 17.

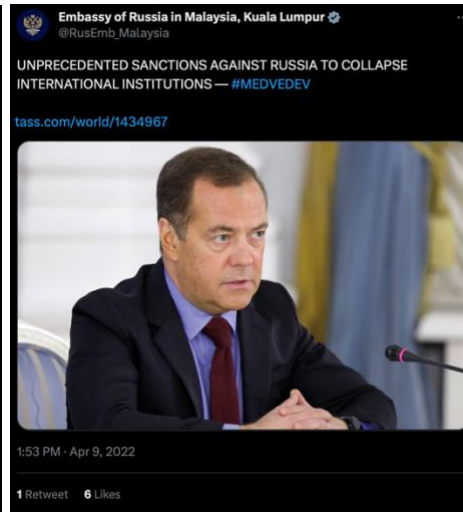


Figure 18.

Lastly, the observation of content across embassies reveals a notable pattern of shared messages on the “Islam” topic, including those talking about Russian Muslim society and history and their relationship with the broader Muslim world. This is especially evident in the increased number of Tweets related to Islam during the month of Ramadhan in 2022 (April-May). This approach might be aimed to foster a sense of cultural affinity and to create favourable perceptions of Russia as a country that values and protects its religious heritage and traditions. Thereby, Russia demonstrates the narrative of its solidarity with Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, leveraging the perception of a shared Muslim identity. In its public diplomacy efforts, Russia has projected similar messages, particularly towards Arabic countries (Galeeva, 2023). This narrative serves as a means for Russia to advance its foreign policy interests, establishing common ground with Muslim-majority nations. Moreover, the narrative also aligns with Russia’s emphasis on preserving traditional and conservative values, which often serves as a counter-narrative to the universal values championed by the West (Manor, 2021a). This positioning allows Russia to assert itself as a defender of traditional values in contrast to the perceived cultural imperialism of the West (Manor, 2021a).

#### *Similar format of Tweets*

Similar use of Twitter features, such as visualization in profile pictures, similar trending hashtags and consistent incorporation of multimedia, confirmed the hypothesis suggesting the underlying institutional factor guiding the concerted Russian digital public diplomacy agenda. The visual features representing the Russian governmental and cultural icons on the Twitter front pages of

both embassies indicate a strategic approach to presenting a unified image of Russia to their respective audiences in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Both embassies' deliberate usage of trending hashtags aligns their messaging with broader online narratives about Russia, actively shaping narratives on Twitter. This consistent practice enhances the visibility and reach of their digital diplomacy efforts, effectively expanding the public diplomacy objective of advocating the core themes and narratives of the Russian government. The extensive utilisation of multimedia in both countries indicates a cohesive strategy to engage the audience with visually captivating content. This widespread adoption aligns with current trends in social media communication and highlights the embassies' understanding of the significance of capturing user attention and driving engagement. By leveraging visual elements, the embassies catered to the preferences of the modern social media audience, establishing a more appealing online presence. This demonstrates their dedication to enhancing digital public diplomacy efforts and effectively conveying their messages to a broader audience.

However, it was observed that more interactive Twitter features, such as polls or live video streaming, were not utilised by the Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia. Additionally, the use of "informal" multimedia content, such as memes or GIFs, was also absent from their social media strategy. This indicates that the Russian Embassies in both countries did not adapt their communication formats to cater to the preferences and expectations of the digital audience. Instead, they maintained a more traditional approach, adhering to diplomatic etiquette and norms in their online interactions. The absence of these interactive and informal elements in the social media content of the Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia further supports the notion that the Russian embassy in the UK, which has strategically employed tailored communication through Twitter using *memes*, humour, and satire (Manor, 2021b), was a unique case.

### *Locally Tailored Content and Engagement Activities*

#### *Tailored language*

The contrasting proportions of languages used to deliver the messages between the two embassies highlight the main distinction in their approach to tailoring communication for the local audience in Indonesia and Malaysia. The Russian embassy in Indonesia demonstrated immense effort to engage with the local audience by utilising a higher proportion (37.30%) of Tweets in the

Indonesian language. This indicates a noteworthy commitment to delivering more tailored content that resonates with the Indonesian population. On the contrary, the Russian embassy in Malaysia had very minimal usage of the Malay language in their Tweets, with only 1.65%. While the practical reasons behind this approach may vary, this can further shed light on understanding the composition of the targeted audience and broader strategic communication objectives of Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Moreover, it is also important to note that English remained the dominant language used by both embassies in their Twitter posts. This indicates recognition of English as a widely understood language and a means to engage with a broader international audience.

#### *Tailored messages*

Moreover, this study compares the proportions of Tweets across embassies under two categories of “Embassy activities” and “Bilateral relationship” to observe the degree to which Russia tailor diplomatic messages to a targeted audience in a country. The issues addressed within both categories include those most relevant to the local audience, namely bilateral cooperation, and high-level meetings of leaders from the three countries. Moreover, the higher proportion of Tweets under the Embassy activities category reflects the higher attempt from the embassy to engage with the local audience more actively. In both categories, the Russian embassy in Indonesia leads with a higher proportion (19.86% and 9.75% respectively). In contrast, the proportion of the two categories in Malaysia was only 8.58% and 2.64%.

The two categories were the first and third most Tweeted topics of the Russian Embassy in Indonesia, which significantly reflect their more focused approach and messaging priority on Russia-Indonesia. Meanwhile, looking at the contrasting proportion in Malaysia for the abovementioned categories, we found that the highest proportion of Tweets is for the “Foreign relationship” category (30.69%), followed by “Presidential updates” and “Russian society and culture”. This in turn explains why smaller attention was left to more tailored messages under the categories of “Russia-Malaysia bilateral relationship” and “Embassies activities”. Instead, a deliberate focus on promoting and discussing broader diplomatic ties and partnerships with other countries was given a substantial portion of the embassy’s communication efforts in Malaysia.

### *Tailored formats and engagement*

Dissimilarities between Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia are further noticed in how they exploit available features of Twitter to gain higher and broader engagement, such as mentions and tags. Overall, the data showed that the Russian Embassy in Indonesia utilised mentions and tags features extensively compared to its counterpart in Malaysia. However, as we put particular focus on data of mentions feature which particularly engage local elites in Indonesia and Malaysia, the gap was enormous. The Russian Embassy in Malaysia did not use any mentions and tags with local figures altogether during the assessed period, reflecting their low engagement endeavour on Twitter. By contrast, the Russian Embassy in Indonesia demonstrated a proactive approach by using mentions to engage with accounts of local influential personalities in approximately 10.34% of their Tweets. This manner indicates a deliberate effort from the Russian embassy in Indonesia to display a higher commitment to foster relationships and increase visibility within the Indonesian Twitter community.

One of the examples worth further analysis is Tweet mentioning the official Twitter account @jokowi of Joko Widodo, the President of the Republic of Indonesia and tagging the account of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia (@Kemlu\_RI) in the context of congratulating the 77<sup>th</sup> Independence Day of Indonesia in August 2022 (Figure 19). Two implications are reflecting the significance of this Tweet. First, the incorporation of the image featuring President Vladimir Putin and President Joko Widodo shaking hands symbolises a tangible moment of interaction and cooperation between the leaders of Russia and Indonesia. It serves as a visual representation of the diplomatic ties and positive relations between the two countries, highlighting the significance of the occasion and the embassy's support for Indonesia's independence and national celebrations. Second, mentioning and tagging official accounts of Indonesia's two most influential governmental and foreign policy figures proved to be effective in generating high engagement rates from the audience. The Tweet garnered high engagement with positive sentiment indicated by the number of likes (total of 348) from the audience as seen in Figure 19. The embassy might penetrate the existing followers and supporters of these accounts, increasing the visibility and reach of their Tweets. This approach not only facilitated broader exposure but also expedited potential interactions and discussions with a wider audience already engaged with Indonesia's political landscape.



Figure 19. Tweet of the Russian Embassy in Indonesia mentioning President Joko Widodo's and tagging the Indonesian Foreign Ministry's Twitter accounts

### *Similarity of Messages and Formats Regarding the Invasion of Ukraine*

#### *Similar messages related to the Invasion of Ukraine*

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, embassies' Tweets showed an increase in proportion dedicated to narrating developments of the crisis overall, and from the battlefield in particular. This finding highlights Russia's concerted attempt to address the respective local audiences, particularly to inform, shape perceptions, and provide their perspectives on the ongoing crisis. The trend also supports the existing literature suggesting that there was a coordinated approach by Russia to shape the opinion of the global public related to the invasion.

Comparing the activities of Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia after the invasion also connects this study to the broader literature of diplomacy under crisis and uncertain conditions. During the early outbreak of the invasion, the online flow of information was flooded with factual and fictional stories. It was in the interest of Russia—and other countries involved—to play an active part and disseminate its “own reality” of the event and win the narrative.

Similar messages across embassies were found on how Ukraine was situated in space and related to Russia's conceptualization of international order. Comparing narratives of Ukraine across embassies, we found similarity in how Ukraine's role as a sovereign country was projected as very minimum. Russian Embassies used the term “proxy war” and “Western patronage”, referring to

the ongoing military conflict, not between Russia and Ukraine, but between Russia and the US-led Western countries (Figures 20 and 21).



Figure 20.

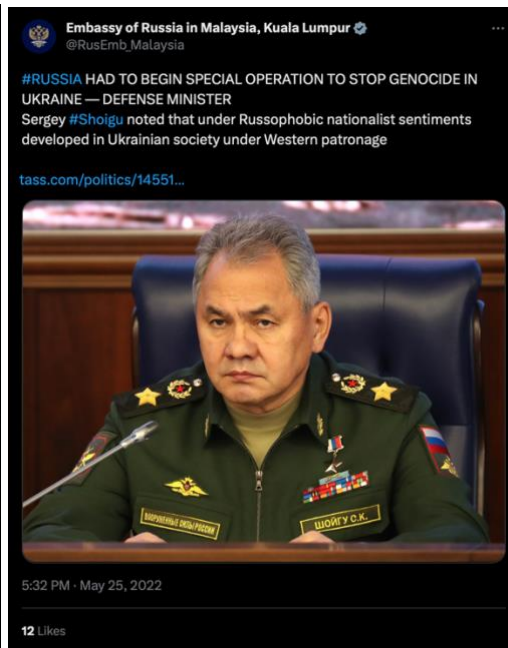


Figure 21.

By emphasizing the notion of a "proxy war" and "Western patronage", Russian Embassies seek to downplay Ukraine's agency and autonomy in the crisis. Instead, the messaging highlights the conflict as a product of external influences, positioning Russia as the defender of its security interests against perceived Western interference. This portrayal aligns with Russia's broader public diplomacy efforts to present itself as a victim of geopolitical rivalries and to challenge the narrative of Ukraine as an independent nation with its decision-making capacity. The consistent messaging across embassies underscores Russia's cohesive efforts to shape the narrative around Ukraine and to advance its strategic interests in the international arena.

Furthermore, a similar perspective about the invasion and the Russia-Ukraine relationship is widely shared in the Indonesian and Malaysian online discourse (Dharmaputra, 2022; Loh & Mustafa, 2022). This finding may help to explain the underlying factor behind the minimum support towards Ukraine from the online public in these two countries during the first months of the invasion. Deliberate efforts from Russian Embassies to disseminate this narrative might contribute to shaping the perception of public opinion in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Similar formats and engagement related to the Invasion of Ukraine

The comparison of formats and engagement of Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia regarding the topic of the invasion of Ukraine reveals a shared effort to intensify their presence on the Twitter platform. Despite adopting different approaches, both Russian ambassadors demonstrated an increased online presence during this period. Russian Ambassador for Indonesia, Lyudmila Vorobieva, actively engaged with the audience by sharing a diverse range of offline and online activities related to her efforts in providing the Russian perspective on the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. This approach allowed her to establish a more personal and interactive presence on Twitter, fostering dialogue and communication with the public. On the other hand, the increased online presence of the Russian Ambassador for Malaysia, Naiyl Latypov, was primarily limited to sharing a written article about Ukraine, which was reposted on Twitter. While this approach may have provided comprehensive insights through a more formal medium, it may have lacked the same level of direct engagement and personal connection as the approach taken by the Russian Ambassador for Indonesia. These observations also touch upon the distinct engagement strategies in the time of crisis employed by the Russian Embassies in the two countries, which will be explored in the final analysis below.

Both embassies deliberately used hashtags to effectively address the invasion and amplify their messages. Apart from the general hashtag #Ukraine, which broadly identified the topic, they also employed specific hashtags like #Donetsk, #Lugansk, #Donbas, #Mariupol, and #Bucha to target specific aspects of the crisis related to locations and events. Using these hashtags, the embassies tapped into existing conversations and trends on Twitter, making their Tweets more discoverable and facilitating connections with digital audiences. This approach not only broadened the reach of their messages but also enabled them to participate in ongoing discussions, contributing to the shaping of narratives surrounding the invasion of Ukraine on the platform.

## *Locally Tailored Content and Engagement Activities Following the Invasion of Ukraine*

### *Tailored messages related to the invasion and its generated engagement rates*

The overall proportion of Tweets related to the invasion is higher in Indonesia compared to Malaysia, and these messages have also garnered significant engagement rates from the local audience. This trend might be attributed to the embassy's flexibility in topics and formats employed, which appears to be influenced by the receptiveness and acceptance of the audience towards such content. The higher engagement on Twitter in Indonesia might result from the embassy's willingness to adapt its communication style to resonate better with the Indonesian audience, leading to a more active and receptive response. This is particularly apparent in the different approaches in narrating the sub-topic of Bucha, which is explained in a more detailed manner in the next section.

### *Tailored formats and engagement with local audiences related to the Invasion of Ukraine*

In this section, we further elaborate on the observation of the ways Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia differ when practising tailored engagement with local audiences following the invasion of Ukraine. Due to the limited findings of tailored engagement on the side of the Russian embassy in Malaysia, we mainly focus on explaining the tailored engagement of the embassy in Indonesia. This section focuses on three main points of explanation, which revolve around tailored engagement activities of the Russian Embassy in Indonesia targeting three groups of elite audiences namely news agencies, well-known political figures, and the major religious community in Indonesia. Additionally, we choose the circumstance surrounding the liberation of Bucha in April 2023 to comprehensively compare the different approaches embassies used when narrating the event critical to Russia's international image and reputation.

From the observation of how the Russian Embassy in Indonesia narrated—and counter-narrating—the liberation of Bucha, we identified three main strategies they used. The three namely (1) providing time-sensitive and specially designed responses; (2) using Twitter mentions feature to engage with Indonesian major news agencies; (3) using the Indonesian language. In contrast, none of these strategies was used by the Russian Embassy in Malaysia when delivering the topic surrounding Bucha. Therefore, this finding significantly confirms the predicted different formats and engagement embassies use in the two countries.

In Indonesia, the Russian Embassy's first counter-narrative about the development of the event happening in Bucha came on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022, immediately after the official statement from the Russian Ministry of Défense (MOD) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was published on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. The Russian counter-narrative came after the Russian government received heavy criticism and war crime accusations from Western countries, condemning the Russian army for brutally treating civilians in the town of Bucha during its occupation (Al Jazeera, 2022). Moreover, this accusation towards Russia also attracted the attention of major international organisations (IO) and non-governmental organisations (NGO) such as the United Nations (UN) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) which called for an investigation to take place. This view was also shared by the Indonesian government, which stated its full support to the UN Secretary-General to conduct an independent investigation to inspect any possibilities for war crimes in Ukraine (Fauzia, 2022).

In the following days after issuing the official statement, the Russian Embassy in Indonesia posted a total of 17 Tweets in the Twitter thread feature<sup>3</sup>, to further explain the chronology of Bucha's liberation from the perspective of Russia. Moreover, as part of Ambassador Lyudmila Vorobieva's regularly arranged briefings with the local news agencies, she interviewed with VIVA News where she addressed the issue of Bucha, while also talking about Russia's official perspective of the Russia-Ukraine relationship more generally. The Embassy posted a Tweet incorporating the screenshot of the video interview with VIVA News, a YouTube link to watch the video, and mentions the official account of VIVA News @VIVAcoid. Furthermore, the Tweet, the video, and the image attached to the Tweet (as seen in Figure 14.) were written in the Indonesian language or accompanied by an Indonesian subtitle. Additionally, we assume that the incorporation of the Russian word "Ura" (*Ура*)—which means "Hooray" in English—was done intentionally to attract a local audience, as the word received massive popularity in Indonesia following the invasion of Ukraine (Santoso, 2022). We deem this series of engagement strategies on countering the narrative on Bucha reflect the purposefully employed tailored communication by the Russian Embassy in Indonesia. Aside from generating engagement from the Twitter audience, the video interview gained a high engagement rate of (+251k views, +6k likes, and +2k comments) on the YouTube platform.

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<sup>3</sup> A thread on Twitter is a series of connected Tweets from one account.



Figure 22.

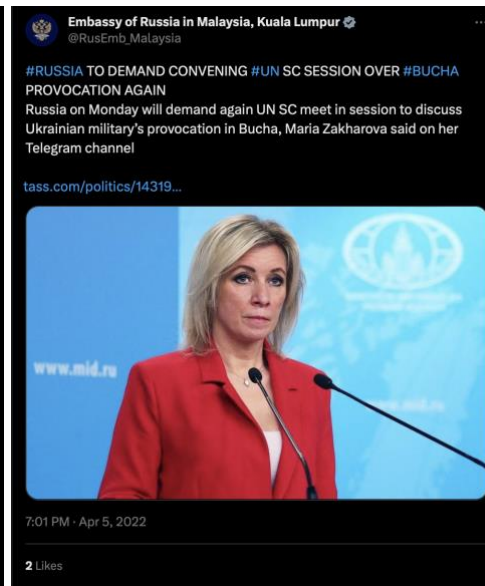


Figure 23.

The limited engagement and presence of the Russian Embassy in Malaysia regarding Russia's official statement on Bucha is noteworthy, as seen from the Tweet in Figure 23. Despite the first Tweet being posted soon after the official statement from the Russian Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), it merely copied information sourced from the Russian News Agency TASS, presenting it in English. This lack of originality and engagement with the audience may explain why the Tweet generated very few interactions in contrast to the more active approach seen in the Russian Embassy in Indonesia (Figure 22). The disparity in the level of engagement between the two embassies highlights the importance of tailoring communication strategies to suit the preferences and expectations of the respective audiences, especially when addressing sensitive or critical topics.

In another example of engagement, Figure 24 highlights a Tweet from the Russian Embassy in Indonesia that displayed its collaboration with a prominent Indonesian political figure Fadli Zon<sup>4</sup>, to discuss Russian military activity in Ukraine. The Tweet presented an interview conducted by Russian Ambassador for Indonesia, Lyudmila Vorobieva, where they offered the Russian official viewpoints on the crisis and her personal experience of having Ukrainian background. While the Tweet itself did not generate an exceptional engagement rate, the interview video, with a YouTube

<sup>4</sup> Fadli Zon is an Indonesian politician serving as a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) until 2024.

link attached to the Tweet, received a significant reaction from the local audience (approximately +23k views, +1k likes, and +300 comments). This indicates that the content of the interview resonated with the Indonesian audience and sparked considerable interest and discussion. This example highlights the power of collaboration with influential local figures and multimedia content's impact in generating higher engagement and reach in digital diplomacy efforts.



Figure 24. Sample Tweet of Russian Embassy in Indonesia on engagement with local politician related to invasion

One more example of the Russian embassy's tailored communication strategy on Twitter in Indonesia, showed how they engaged with the largest local Islamic community, Nahdlatul Ulama, to discuss the Russia-Ukraine relationship and military conflict. Figure 25 illustrates a Tweet from the embassy, highlighting a meeting between Russian Ambassador Lyudmila Vorobieva and the leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama. The Tweet received substantial engagement, particularly many likes, indicating significant interest from the Indonesian audience on this topic. Notably, this visit took place just one day after the Ukrainian Ambassador to Indonesia Vasyl Hamianin also met with Nahdlatul Ulama leadership (Koswaraputra & Tisnadibrata, 2022), underscoring the embassy's responsiveness and ability to promptly engage with influential local stakeholders on critical geopolitical matters. By proactively engaging with a key religious and social organisation

in Indonesia, the Russian embassy demonstrated its commitment to reaching out to the broader Muslim majority population and understanding the importance of timely and relevant diplomatic interactions. This strategic approach not only fosters a sense of cultural affinity but also underscores the embassy's efforts to build relationships and promote dialogue on issues of mutual interest, thereby strengthening Russia's diplomatic presence and engagement in Indonesia.

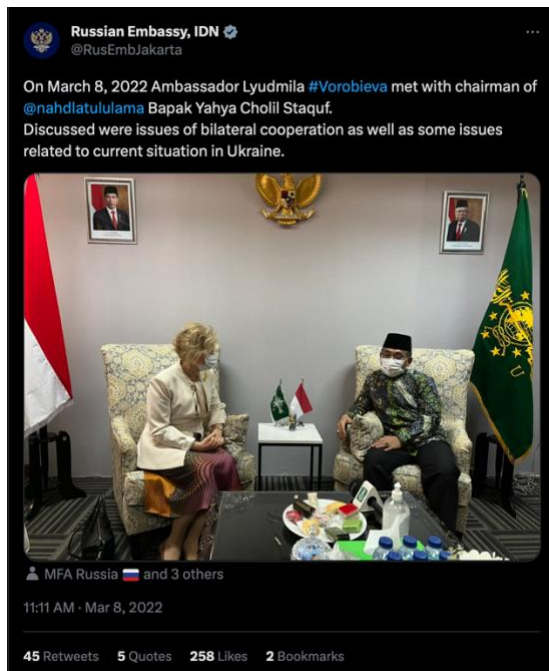


Figure 25. Sample Tweet of the Russian Embassy in Indonesia on engagement with the local religious community related to the invasion

## 6. Discussion

### Summary of results

The statistical and content analyses of the findings provide valuable insights into the hypotheses tested in this study. Hypothesis 1 posited that overall message and formats would demonstrate similarity in both Indonesia and Malaysia, owing to shared institutional guidelines and policies of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, the results revealed unexpected variations, indicating that institutional factors alone may not fully account for the differences observed in digital public diplomacy practices between the two countries. This suggests that other contextual factors might also play a role in shaping communication strategies.

Hypothesis 2 predicted a correlation between local audience favourability towards Russia and the adoption of tailored communication strategies. As anticipated, the study found that in Indonesia, where the local audience held a higher degree of favourability towards Russia, the Russian embassy employed more locally tailored content and engagement activities than Malaysia. This highlights the importance of considering the preferences and perceptions of the target audience when formulating digital public diplomacy approaches.

Hypothesis 3 predicted the similarity of messages and formats used in content related to the invasion of Ukraine. It was hypothesised that there would be a coordinated approach across embassies in both Indonesia and Malaysia due to institutional-level coordination over nationwide security concerns. However, the results only partially supported this hypothesis, as some differences in messaging and formats were identified. This suggests that while institutional-level coordination may influence communication on certain topics, other factors also come into play, leading to variations in approach.

Lastly, as expected in Hypothesis 4, the study found that in Indonesia, where the local audience held a higher degree of positive opinion of Russia following the invasion, the Russian embassy increased its use of locally tailored content and engagement activities with the local audience after February 2022, in comparison to in Malaysia. This finding underscores the significance of public sentiment in shaping digital public diplomacy practices in response to evolving geopolitical events.

In conclusion, the statistical and content analyses of the hypotheses provide a nuanced understanding of the digital public diplomacy practices of Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia via Twitter. The results demonstrate the complex interplay of institutional guidelines, local audience favourability, security concerns, and post-invasion sentiments in shaping tailored communication strategies. As digital diplomacy continues to evolve, these findings offer valuable implications for diplomats, policymakers, and scholars, providing insights into crafting effective and contextually relevant digital public diplomacy approaches in a rapidly changing global landscape.

### Newly incorporated platform: Digital media environment familiarity

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that more tailored communication by Russian Embassies on Twitter signifies not only a heightened understanding of audience preferences but also a greater competency in effectively utilising Twitter features and the digital media environment in general. By tailoring their messaging and formats to resonate with the specific interests and preferences of their local audiences in Indonesia and Malaysia, the Russian Embassies demonstrate a level of diplomatic expertise that allows them to navigate the complexities of digital public diplomacy with nimbleness. It underscores the diplomatic actors' adeptness in utilising Twitter's features and capitalizing on the opportunities the digital media environment offers. By strategically leveraging and increasing multimedia elements, hashtags, mentions, and other interactive tools, the embassies effectively enhance audience engagement and amplify their messages on the platform. This finding confirms the need of exploring the environmental factors that shape the digital public diplomacy practices of Russian Embassies on Twitter.

It raises questions about the factors that contribute to the higher digital technology knowledge of diplomatic actors and the extent to which institutional-level guidelines shape social media competencies of diplomatic actors. For instance, if the Russian MFA provides specific institutional-wide training for operating social media. Analysing this aspect may provide deeper explanation on similarities and variations in digital public diplomacy activities adopted by Russian MFA and diplomats.

Another noteworthy finding in this study is the limited direct and continuous engagement with the public by Russian Embassies on Twitter. Even in Indonesia, where the embassy engages with its audience more, the focus remains on interacting with elites such as political actors, news agencies, and influencers. This finding aligns with existing research highlighting Twitter's particularity as a platform primarily used for online elite-to-elite interactions. The study reinforces the notion that diplomatic actors on Twitter tend to prioritise engagement with influential stakeholders rather than fostering sustained and direct interactions with the general public.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian Embassy in Indonesia introduced the Telegram platform as part of its digital public diplomacy practices. This adoption of Telegram may indicate

a shift in their approach to digital diplomacy. Telegram, being an online messaging application with unique features like channels and groups, offers effective means to disseminate information to specific target audiences, particularly during critical times when the need of shaping Russia's global image is paramount.

Considering the potential limitations of Twitter, the embassy's decision to embrace Telegram as an alternative platform to engage with the Indonesian audience is noteworthy. Telegram enables more direct communication and provides end-to-end encryption, which could be appealing when dealing with sensitive or politically charged topics. Especially as the Russian state news agency social media accounts had confronted several restrictions and censorship from Twitter and Facebook while attempting to disseminate updates following February 2022 (Milmo, 2022). Meanwhile, Telegram offers more freedom for the Russian Embassy in Indonesia to disseminate updates and information to the local audiences.

This transformation in the embassy's communication practices also influenced their use of the Twitter platform. The inclusion of links to Telegram posts in their Tweets raises questions about whether Telegram might fulfil engagement needs beyond Twitter's capabilities or even replace certain activities previously shared on Twitter. Such a shift could potentially lead to a reduction in the frequency of Tweets from the embassy. However, any noticeable trend in this regard was not apparent during the analysed period.

The incorporation of Telegram also prompts the question of whether the differences in digital diplomacy strategies between the embassies are attributed to varying levels of familiarity with social digital media among diplomatic actors or if they stem from restrictions or prioritization at the institutional level. As this study does not explore other possible factors, such as environmental and algorithmic influences, future research must delve into these aspects.

Due to the limitations inherent in our study, we acknowledge the need for further research in this direction. Understanding the interplay between diplomatic actors, institutional guidelines, and the digital media environment is essential to comprehend the intricacies of tailored digital public diplomacy. Examining these aspects in future studies would enrich the academic discourse and offer a more holistic understanding of the evolving landscape of digital diplomacy.

## Limitations of the study

Furthermore, this study recognises further limitations in assessing tailored communication in digital public diplomacy and suggests potential directions for future research. These include investigating multi-platform comparisons, examining digital networking among diplomatic actors, conducting in-depth analyses of audience engagement, and incorporating interviews with diplomatic actors for comprehensive analysis. Addressing these aspects would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities and dynamics of tailored communication in the realm of digital diplomacy.

First, a comparative analysis of digital public diplomacy activities across various platforms may offer broader insights into the way the embassy tailors its communication strategy. This approach aims to discern whether the messages significantly differ across platforms or if embassies perceive all social media platforms and their audiences as homogenous. This leads to a duplication method across various channels. By investigating these possibilities, a more comprehensive understanding can be gained regarding the rationale behind the observed differences in digital public diplomacy practices. Additionally, such analysis might shed light on whether the differences in message tailoring can be attributed to the embassy's adeptness in navigating different digital social media environments and algorithms.

Second, as the study excludes Tweets that are in the form of re-Tweets to limit the focus of analysis primarily on content originally created by the embassies, this, in turn, overlooks potential digital networking and collaboration between Russian Embassies and other diplomatic entities on the Twitter platform. Exploring the interactions and information exchanges among Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia and their counterparts worldwide could offer a more comprehensive understanding of digital public diplomacy practices within the broader diplomatic community.

Moreover, a deeper analysis of audience engagement may be important in comprehending the effectiveness of tailored digital public diplomacy strategies. Specifically, delving into the sentiment of responses received by the embassies can provide valuable insights into the impact of their communication efforts. Understanding the audience's reactions, opinions, and perceptions is crucial in evaluating the resonance of diplomatic messages and the extent to which they align with the intended objectives.

Incorporating interviews with the diplomatic actors responsible for managing the Russian Embassies' Twitter accounts will enhance the analysis for future study. The study will achieve a more comprehensive analysis of tailored communication in digital diplomacy by understanding the strategies and considerations involved. In particular, this would provide insights into the decision-making process and operationalisation behind the content's creation and dissemination of Russian digital public diplomacy on Twitter.

Addressing these limitations will broaden and deepen our understanding of the complexities of tailored digital public diplomacy. Future studies can advance scholarly insights and inform practical strategies for diplomatic practitioners seeking to optimise engagement with diverse international audiences through digital social media platforms.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has addressed central research questions about the effects of institutional and audience factors on digital public diplomacy, the utilisation of tailored communication by Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia via Twitter, and the adjustments made by Russia in its digital public diplomacy following the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Through a comprehensive analysis of Twitter communications from Russian Embassies in both countries, this research has shed light on the varying practices and strategies of Russian official use of digital public diplomacy efforts. Simultaneously, this study expands the literature on Russian digital public diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

The findings showed how institutional factors originating from foreign ministry play a role in the adoption of a particular strategy, explaining some degree of similar digital public diplomacy practices across embassies representing one country. Meanwhile, how each embassy adjusts to the audience-specific preferences will create more tailored digital public diplomacy, causing variations and differing efficacies in digital public diplomacy practices.

Moreover, the findings reveal the importance of tailored communication in engaging diverse audiences. The study underscores the adaptability of digital public diplomacy during times of crisis, such as the invasion of Ukraine, wherein Russia projected a similar narrative to the global audience while implementing tailored communication approaches in each country. The insights

gained from this study offer valuable implications for diplomats, policymakers, and scholars in understanding the evolving dynamics of digital public diplomacy and its impact on international relations in the modern age.

### Theoretical implications

The implications of the findings for tailored communication theory reveal a dynamic relationship between audience preferences, diplomatic messaging, and engagement strategies. Notably, this study contributes to understanding how the interplay of institutional and audience factors influence digital public diplomacy.

As anticipated, the study underscores the significant influence of the audience on shaping communication approaches, validating the hypothesis that the local audience's favourability towards Russia affects the adoption of tailored communication in digital public diplomacy. Catering to local audience preferences may explain the higher online engagement rate received in Indonesia. This indicates a more effective strategy, as the main objectives of digital public diplomacy—digital agenda-setting, digital presence expansion, and digital conversation generation (Bjola & Jiang, 2015)—were achieved. This result highlights the importance of understanding and responding to the preferences and sentiments of the target audience when crafting communication strategies, as a one-size-fits-all approach may not effectively resonate with diverse audiences in different countries and regions. While audience factors shape diplomatic activities, continuous exposure to narratives projected by diplomatic actors may conversely influence public opinion online.

This study also sheds light on institutional factors and their impact on tailored content and engagement. Despite shared institutional guidelines and policies of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the analysis reveals both similarities and variations in communication strategies between the Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia. While the type of content is generally similar across embassies, the proportions differ significantly. The results extend to the formats used in digital public diplomacy in social media, where the analysis uncovers similarities and differences. Some elements, such as the rate of multimedia usage, show consistency across embassies, implying a shared approach to engaging audiences through visual content. However, other aspects, such as mentions versus hashtags, reflect variations in engagement strategies. These

findings indicate that the choice of formats is subject to contextual factors and the specific engagement goals of each embassy, suggesting that tailored communication extends not only to content but also to the means of conveying messages. This suggests institutional guidelines do not strictly dictate digital public diplomacy content, allowing context-based flexibility.

Although, this study acknowledges that other aspects of institutional factors, such as the broader geopolitical objective of Russian foreign policy in the Southeast Asia region, may contribute to similarities and differences in digital public diplomacy practices adopted by embassies. For instance, the strategic importance of a country to Russian foreign policy interests may define the strategy adopted. However, this aspect goes beyond the focus of this study.

In terms of understanding how countries use social media during crises, the study shows the coordinated and escalated activities from Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia following February 2022. Similar messaging patterns are observed between Russian Embassies in Indonesia and Malaysia and with narratives projected globally by Russia. This shows how institutional factors play a role in shaping coordinated strategy in times of crisis. Given the extensive online media coverage of the Ukraine topic globally, Russia's heightened activities might be linked to its aim of guiding online discussions by presenting official Russian viewpoints. At the same time, it may also indicate how the interplay between audience factors and social media interactions shapes the institutional guidelines.

Overall, the implications for tailored communication theory emphasise the dynamic interplay between audience preferences, institutional guidelines, and contextual considerations in shaping digital public diplomacy practices. The study highlights that tailored communication is a nuanced process that involves understanding the nuances of each audience, strategically crafting content and engagement formats, and striking a balance between general and tailored approaches.

### Practical implications

The practical implications of this study carry valuable insights for diplomatic practitioners and actors engaged in digital public diplomacy. Firstly, the findings underscore the significance of audience-centric approaches in shaping diplomatic communication strategies. Diplomatic practitioners should recognise the diverse preferences and sentiments of target audiences in

different countries and tailor their messaging and engagement accordingly. Understanding the specific interests and concerns of the local audience can lead to more effective and resonant digital public diplomacy efforts, foster positive perceptions and enhance diplomatic relations.

Second, the study highlights the need for flexibility and adaptability in digital public diplomacy practices. While institutional guidelines provide a framework for communication, this research reveals that tailored communication strategies can coexist with general themes of message content. Diplomatic actors should embrace the contextual nuances and opportunities presented by each country and remain open to adjusting their communication approaches based on audience feedback and evolving geopolitical events. By adopting a flexible approach, diplomatic practitioners can ensure their digital public diplomacy remains relevant, impactful, and responsive to the dynamic international landscape.

Moreover, the study emphasises the importance of monitoring and analysing digital public diplomacy efforts to gauge their effectiveness and relevance. Diplomatic actors should employ data-driven approaches to assess audience engagement, track sentiment, and evaluate the impact of tailored communication strategies. Regular evaluation and analysis can inform diplomatic practitioners about the effectiveness of their digital public diplomacy initiatives, enabling them to make informed decisions and adjustments to optimise their outreach and engagement efforts.

In conclusion, this study's practical implications advocate for a more audience-centric, contextually flexible, and data-driven approach to digital public diplomacy for diplomatic practitioners and actors. By embracing tailored communication strategies and understanding the complexities of audience preferences and institutional guidelines, diplomatic actors can navigate the digital realm with greater effectiveness, fostering meaningful international dialogues and promoting positive diplomatic relations in an interconnected world.

#### Directions for future research

For future study, comparing how embassies engage in digital public diplomacy on various platforms can provide more insights into how diplomatic actors tailor communication across social media. Additionally, including Tweets in the format of re-Tweets might give broader insights into how diplomatic actors under one institution interact and engage with other diplomatic entities on

the Twitter platform, hence creating digital networking. These two orientations might offer a more comprehensive understanding of digital public diplomacy practices within the social media sphere and broader diplomatic community.

Moreover, conducting more in-depth analyses of audience engagement can provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of tailored communication strategies in building meaningful connections with target audiences. By assessing audience responses, researchers can better comprehend the impact of tailored content on shaping perceptions and fostering positive interactions.

Furthermore, interviews with diplomatic actors responsible for managing the Russian Embassies' Twitter accounts should be considered to enrich the analysis of driving factors behind the adoption of tailored communication. Interviews with diplomats can also provide nuanced insights into the decision-making process and the operationalisation of content creation and dissemination strategies. This may also provide ample explanation on the aspect of broader foreign policy and geopolitical objectives of Russia in the region.

Expanding the future study to include social media activities of other branches and agencies of the Russian Federation may also be useful to enrich the literature on Russian digital public diplomacy. Particularly exploring the role and limitations of institutional factors in shaping social media activities of its agencies.

Addressing these limitations and exploring the suggested directions for future research would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities and dynamics of tailored communication in the realm of digital diplomacy.

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