



# The New Normal in EU Affairs and Diplomacy

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Radu MAGDIN<sup>1</sup>

The COVID-19 shock has not been the great equalizer, but, undoubtedly, it has been a great disruptor. It took a pandemic for all of us to realize how dependent we are on offline, face-to-face interactions and how the migration to online solves only some problems while redefining others. The EU cooperation and diplomacy more broadly have been deeply impacted by this shift, which asks from an endeavour known for strict protocol, summits, and slow change to fully embrace the new normal and take full advantage of this technological turn.

An old-school diplomat could argue that we only need to wait for the end of the crisis and then everything will go back to normal. Provided that the “new” normal will be the same as the “old” one, everything can be put on hold. However, this is a big assumption and current events really show that **the world cannot go “business as usual” even if a vaccine is mass produced and distributed.**

The US - China relations are a major source of concern, a EU-UK (non-)deal will have to be figured out this year, the multilateralism is under threat (take a look at WHO, WTO, ICC!), globalization will have to be redefined, climate change will not slow down, disinformation is more widespread than ever, Russia and China (from different perspectives) are a threat respectively a competitor to the liberal order, and turbulent domestic politics will have international spill overs.

Realistically, diplomacy and EU affairs more specifically will have to take these into account and adopt and adapt digital diplomacy tools while understanding at least four challenges:

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<sup>1</sup> Radu MAGDIN is a Romanian EU affairs analyst and a former Brussels operator. He advised Prime Ministers in Romania and Republic of Moldova. E-mail: [radu.magdin@thesmartlink.org](mailto:radu.magdin@thesmartlink.org)

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- 1) **Finding ways to replicate online (at least partly) the informal component that is essential to diplomacy.** There are no easy or magic alternatives to face-to-face interactions, but it is time to get creative.
- 2) **Ensuring the highest level of security, as the cyber-attack threat to high-level meetings and consultations is real.** Online “terrorist” attacks could have far-reaching consequences as well.
- 3) **Reliance on digital diplomacy does not have to be equivalent to “maintenance” diplomacy;** breakthroughs can happen, but they require more work and coordination.
- 4) **International affairs professionals need to be conversant in both the old and new paradigms and this will not happen overnight.** Training and preparation will be key.

We will not have to wait long before observing whether a change in behaviour and tools is really happening. **The Future of Europe conference is an opportunity to innovate;** amid the current disengagement and cold shoulders the project has received, a smart strategy about (meaningfully) going online could save the day.

**For the first time in 75 years, UNGA will not gather everyone in the same place** - again, given the growing pressure the international organizations have faced, this is a chance to expand the realm of possibilities of the management of global affairs.

The **German presidency of the EU will most likely be the first one to take place online:** as some were complaining during a recent meeting between US Secretary of State Pompeo and EU foreign ministers, it is hard in this type of e-meetings for someone to speak more than a few minutes, so **finding the best format for everyone to feel included and heard is not an easy, but remains an essential task.**

The EU has already a long list of topics to deal with, but the style remains important. The Leipzig summit between the EU and China has been postponed, but the issues on the agenda will not go away and will become only more intense if unaddressed; new forms of consultations to keep the problems (and tensions) in check will have to be imagined. Perhaps the COVID-19 was a good excuse for Chancellor Merkel not to attend the G7 meeting hosted by the US, but the transatlantic relations still require a hard conversation.

**The pandemic asks from the worlds of international and European affairs to get out of their comfort zone and reimagine cooperation. It is a tall order, but something that has to be addressed at a time when, more than ever, no country is an island and we all need each other to mitigate a cocktail of toxic crises.**

**Let us act smart and use this crisis as a e-opportunity!**