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Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me first of all thank the organizers for their kind invitation. I am privileged to share this platform with such distinguished fellow speakers. And I am also humbled by the challenge of saying something that you would not know. But let me try.

I am a career diplomat. British Prime Minister Edward Heath once said that “A diplomat is a man who thinks twice before he says nothing”. I can assure you that that is not the case today. For the challenges we face as a result of the digital revolution are too many to ignore. Today I want to explore this new landscape. To explain how Kazakhstan uses the new tools of diplomacy at our disposal, and explore what some of the challenges of the future might be.

I began my diplomatic career in Kazakhstan in 1994. It is incredible to think how much has changed over the last 20 years in terms of digital diplomacy. Just think back at the clunky word processors, the modem connections and painfully slow faxes. Today, just two decades later, we possess the technology to communicate and share information with millions of people around the world in minutes, if not seconds. Not only words. Images, video, data – all of it supplanted across the world as fast as you could will it.

The impact of digital communication on the work we do at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been nothing short of revolutionary.

We have been determined not to be left behind by the digital revolution. Over the last few years we have made it a priority to harness the power of the digital age and social media.

There are two aspects to our digital diplomacy strategy. First is to better communicate the MFA’s policies to our citizens. Second, to communicate our foreign policy to audiences in other countries. The two strands can overlap quite frequently, which in itself presents challenges in terms of choosing appropriate communications strategies.

For seven years, the Kazakhstan government has been bridging the gap between government and citizens. Online platforms, where citizens can interact with government officials, ask questions or make complaints, are the key to closing that gap. In a country the size of Kazakhstan, it’s not something that’s taken for granted.

Closing that gap remains a priority. I am proud of the progress we’ve made. Today, any citizen can use online forms to contact any government department, MFA including, via the website, and they are guaranteed a speedy written response.

Social media is playing a large part too. We use the MFA’s Twitter account and Facebook page to connect with our citizens travelling abroad.

Social media is immediate. So we can assist immediately if things go wrong. We all know what can happen – a lost passport or a broken bone. It’s in these moments that our citizens rely on consular support. We want them to know they can connect with us quickly. Twitter is a platform transforming how we offer our consular services. It’s intuitive, fast and accurate. Twitter users are within a community. They’re never isolated. In an emergency, it’s much easier for them to tweet us than use Google to find our phone or email number.

Let me give you an example from last year. Several Kazakh tourists got caught up in the crisis near Gaza during the July 2014 crisis. They got in touch with us through Twitter and the machine whirled into action: the Ministry’s communication team informed relevant officials, who got in touch with our embassy in Israel to organise their safe and timely return home. This emergency had a happy ending – all thanks to the speed of the reaction, all made possible by a couple of tweets.

It’s a remarkable example for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that people do indeed use Twitter in emergencies, rather than email or phone. Second, it shows the speed of Twitter. The MFA in Astana knew all about the problem practically before our embassy in Israel.

Twitter then helps us, the foreign ministries, stay *with* the news curve. The role the MFA team played in securing the safe return of these citizens was covered across Kazakh media. And that coverage will ensure citizens know what an effective platform for communicating with the government it can be.

So we know from our own experience how news spreads on Twitter faster than through traditional media. Most journalists will tell you *they* get their news through the platform. That's why we make sure to use Twitter to monitor global developments, especially those that can potentially have an impact on Kazakhstan and its reputation abroad.

Twitter allows us to better prepare and react quickly. Twitter can help us as governments grasp the magnitude of unfolding news and immediately plot our reaction. Just last month, a Kazakh national was arrested in New York on charges of planning to join the so called Islamic State. Before that, Kazakh nationals were alleged to have aided and abetted the Boston marathon bomber in 2013.

In both cases, Twitter alerted us to the situation. In both cases, we were able to state clearly and immediately, on Twitter and elsewhere, our readiness to cooperate with the authorities in their investigations, and express our condemnation of terrorism and extremism in all of their manifestations. And the statements were carried over by other channels immediately allowing us to present our position.

Communicating quickly and clearly builds trust between government and its citizens. The MFA is committed to using social media to strengthen this bond.

Over the last two years we have regularly been organizing "Twitter chat" sessions with our Foreign Minister under the #ASKMFAKZ hashtag. Anyone in Kazakhstan and beyond can ask Minister Erlan Idrissov questions on any issue. The sessions have proved to be extremely successful. They form a connection between citizens and the officials that represent them. And users from abroad can learn about our positions on a range of issues.

Our Minister writes blog posts, regularly sharing his thoughts on foreign relation issues, which we post on a monthly basis. They too get picked up and covered extensively in the traditional and social media.

As a result of our endeavours, the MFA has become one of the most trusted government bodies in Kazakhstan. All we have done – on the webpage, Twitter, Facebook and our blog – all reinforces the relationship of trust we have built with our constituents.

Sharing information is a pillar of our digital strategy. Our Facebook page is updated on a regular basis. Our posts are quoted as "the government position". Why send a press release when journalists and commentators have immediate access to government lines?

Visual media is a powerful tool in our digital arsenal. We are increasingly using Instagram and Flickr as platforms to share images and visual content, such as graphs and charts. It is only a matter of time before media outlets start to use our visual content in their news articles.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have been working in diplomacy for many years, but I can safely say that the rise of social media has been one of the most exciting and useful developments over the last two decades. We can monitor events and quickly react to information. We can provide real time channels to deliver our messages directly to our audience. Social media has transformed the delivery of our services through closer engagement with our citizens. It has allowed us to react with speed to crisis. Last, but not least, it has made us more accountable and transparent through open dialogue. In an age of cynicism, we are building trust between governments and their citizens.

Yet more is to come. The speed of transformation is inspiring as it is staggering. I would not be surprised if in just a few years it will transform once again the way we do our work.

If we were to agree with our distinguished Czech colleague that Diplomacy 2.0 is "imploding", I would say that the only way for it to go is to transform into a sort of Diplomacy 3.0, whose shape we cannot even begin to imagine now but which will come before we even know it, so we better prepare for it. Whatever the challenges and opportunities, Kazakhstan is committed to remaining a pioneer in making the most of these developments.

Thank you very much for your attention and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Roman Vassilenko