

DOI 10.62821/lp12102

Navigating Narratives: Digital Diplomacy and Freedom of Navigation in the Black Sea

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ABSTRACT


The Black Sea case during the Russo-Ukrainian conflict shows that digital diplomacy is increasingly vital for maintaining freedom of navigation amidst traditional and hybrid conflicts. Although freedom of navigation is firmly rooted in the law of the sea, its practical enforcement increasingly relies on narrative authority, transparency, and quick international cooperation. The article argues that digital diplomacy serves as a supplementary layer to traditional mechanisms for protecting merchant shipping. It does so by shaping legal frameworks, documenting violations, rallying international support, and reinforcing adherence to maritime regimes. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines maritime law, security studies, and digital communication analysis, the research shows how Ukraine has used digital tools to internationalize maritime security threats, fight disinformation, and legitimize efforts such as humanitarian corridors and alternative shipping routes. The findings suggest that digital diplomacy needs to be integrated into the operations of state maritime agencies and multilateral coordination efforts as a key part of modern maritime security and governance.

CITATION

Kormych, L., Krasnopolska, T., Kormych, A., & Ulianova, H. (2026). Navigating Narratives: Digital Diplomacy and Freedom of Navigation in the Black Sea. *Lex Portus*, 12(1), 21–35. <https://doi.org/10.62821/lp12102>

KEYWORDS

digital diplomacy, freedom of navigation, Black Sea region, maritime security, strategic communications, international law, Ukraine, hybrid threats, information technologies

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Introduction

Despite its long-standing history, navigation rights and freedoms remain fundamental to modern maritime law and are essential components of the rules-based international system governing one of the ocean's most important uses (Long, 2025). However, even with relevant international legal frameworks in place, the freedom of navigation continues to face threats. In coastal and semi-enclosed seas, these freedoms are frequently challenged, even during peacetime (Cattelan & Sicking, 2025). Since Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014, and more sharply after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Black Sea has become a key geopolitical battleground amid conflicts over the liberal international order. Russia's military actions threaten freedom of navigation, raising questions about the effectiveness of international legal and security mechanisms (Scutaru & Pavel, 2025; Gaber, 2024). Notably, most literature on the maritime aspects of the Russo-Ukrainian armed conflict concentrates on Ukraine's efforts to secure its merchant shipping lines, which are vital for any nation operating in contested waters (Fink, 2022; Kormych et al., 2024; Kollakowski, 2025). Ensuring freedom of navigation and in the Black Sea region proved to be crucial for global stability, international trade, and food security. Disruptions caused by armed conflicts,

blockades, or hybrid tactics have repercussions that extend beyond the region, impacting world politics and international relations (Bas, 2025; Mkumbukiy et al., 2025; Reuters, 2025c).

An important element of this issue is Russia's consistent strategy to disrupt Ukrainian shipping throughout both the hybrid phase (2014–2021) and the ongoing conventional phase (2022–onward) of the conflict. This continuity is especially clear in Russia's persistent employment of various hybrid tools even after the onset of full-scale war, aimed at directly affecting freedom of navigation in the Black Sea or at justifying its restrictive actions (Bjørge & Høiby, 2024; Kormych et al., 2025). Countering these threats requires more than just military strategies or traditional diplomacy, as hybrid actions often involve spreading specific narratives and shaping "alternative" realities. Furthermore, although freedom of navigation is a core principle of international maritime law, as outlined in the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, its interpretation varies significantly across states' cultural perspectives, influencing their legal approaches and policies (Kraska & Ryou-Ellison, 2025). Therefore, in response to these challenges, states, international organizations, and other actors are increasingly leveraging digital diplomacy tools to build international coalitions, combat disinformation, legitimize their actions, and pressure violators of international law. Notably, Ukraine exemplifies how digital platforms, social networks, and online communication have become vital components of diplomatic efforts to secure freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and reopen sea routes (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021b). However, despite the increasing practical importance of digital diplomacy, it remains primarily analyzed within the contexts of image policy, public diplomacy, or crisis communication in scientific discussions. Its potential role in maritime security and in protecting freedom of navigation, particularly at the regional level, is less explored. Most studies on the subject concentrate on military, strategic, or legal issues and often overlook digital diplomatic mechanisms as a means of shaping the international agenda (Aceves, 1993; Pedrozo, 2023).

Methodology

This study aims to address the gap in practical understanding of digital diplomacy within the maritime context, framing it as a functional mechanism that supports freedom of navigation. It employs a qualitative methodology and case study approach, focusing specifically on the Black Sea region amid the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The research utilizes institutional analysis to examine interactions among government agencies, international organizations, and civil society, along with discourse analysis to evaluate how state and non-state actors leverage digital tools to frame maritime incidents, develop legal narratives, and either legitimize or delegitimize conduct at sea. The interdisciplinary approach combines digital diplomacy theory with maritime security to explore how legal norms, security practices, and digital communication intersect in maritime conflict scenarios.

1. Digital Diplomacy and Marine Policy: From Communication Tool to Regulatory Instrument

Digital diplomacy has developed over the past decade, driven by rapid digitalization, prompting diplomats to adapt to a landscape of new digital tools, workflows, and stakeholders (Hedling, 2025). In this context, many studies highlight the role of digital diplomacy as a form of change management. At the policy level, digital tools affect how diplomats and other actors perform their jobs, from data gathering to promoting negotiation agendas; at the institutional level, various organizations, from foreign ministries to NGOs, are being reshaped by digital technologies (Holmes, 2015, p. 199). Consequently, new actors, particularly Big Tech firms, now have a significant impact on international relations,

pursuing foreign policy objectives, shaping global discourse, and influencing worldwide audiences (Jarrin, 2025).

Contemporary scholarly works explore various facets of digital diplomacy, examining it alongside public diplomacy, diplomatic relations, cybersecurity, and technologies forming cyber diplomacy “toolbox” (Yusuf et al., 2025). Within these frameworks, digital diplomacy can adopt a dichotomous approach, blending confrontational and constructive messaging (Fu & Sullivan, 2026). Additionally, a broader range of messaging profiles can be identified. For example, Chinese digital diplomacy comprises at least five types of communication profiles: Informer, Promoter, Complex Challenger, Taiwan Challenger, and Provoker, which reflect consistent combinations of tone, function, topic, and geographic focus (Sullivan et al., 2026). The EU approach to digital diplomacy has been formalized as part of strategic communication efforts to counter disinformation and bolster resilience against hybrid threats (Borrell, 2023; European External Action Service, 2023; 2024).

Ukraine first outlined digital diplomacy in its 2021 Public Diplomacy Strategy, adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It describes digital diplomacy as a facet of public diplomacy that leverages digital technologies and platforms to protect the country’s national interests. The strategy highlighted three key aspects: (1) engaging with international digital platforms, (2) utilizing social networks and interacting with online communities to foster a positive image of Ukraine and advance its interests globally, and (3) employing digital tools to organize public diplomacy events and projects.

Bridging digital diplomacy with support for freedom of navigation involves several key tools including strategic communications and narratives, transparency and fact checking, coalition building and coordination of state and non-state actors, support of maritime legal regimes and maritime governance.

The most evident tool is strategic communication and narrative promotion related to maritime activities. When conflicts over navigation rights are framed as overlapping claims to maritime zones, digital diplomacy can serve as a tool to enhance the legitimacy of actions, build meta-power by advocating for maritime freedoms or restrictions, or act as a form of symbolic violence that damages the reputation or status of adversaries (Holmes, 2015, p. 200). These features make digital diplomacy especially important in security-sensitive regions, where governments, international organizations, and non-state actors can use digital platforms to shape common problems, cover policy justification, and sway opinion (Thapar & Thapar, 2026).

The potential of digital diplomacy to enhance transparency in maritime and naval activities is closely connected to the rapid expansion of Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) and the increased involvement of civil society actors in intelligence work. This process is frequently described as either the “democratization” or “monopolization” of intelligence (Rønn & Ördén, 2026). Additionally, states have begun to widely use declassified intelligence in diplomacy. The Russo-Ukrainian war demonstrated that public intelligence serves multiple functions, including shaping narratives, countering misinformation, applying diplomatic pressure, combating disinformation, and enhancing strategic communication (Marleku, 2025).

Using digital platforms for coalition-building and quick coordination highlights that violations of freedom of navigation are a shared issue for both regional coastal nations and global maritime trade. Digital diplomacy reduces coordination costs and enables states or maritime businesses to internationalize their concerns. This coordination operates on multiple levels, involving institutional partnerships among governments, multilateral organizations, NGOs, maritime businesses, business organizations and civil society (Klynge et al., 2022). Furthermore, a peculiarity of modern digital diplomacy is the creation of online

communities. The latter example is the North Atlantic Fellas Organization (NAFO), a unique decentralized online civic resistance group with strong social ties and shared values, formed during the Russo-Ukrainian war to combat pro-Russian narratives and Russian information pollution (Kasianenko & Boichak, 2024; Munk, 2025).

Since freedom of navigation is central to the modern law of the sea, digital diplomacy can help by spreading legal knowledge and raising awareness of maritime rules. Supporting accepted rules is crucial during war when public diplomacy balances relational and adversarial narratives to sustain engagement, credibility, and international support. The Ukrainian case shows that emphasizing resilience and shared democratic values can complement adversarial messaging, avoiding overly negative or one-sided approaches (Bjola & Fjällhed, 2025). In maritime context such shared values can be also translated into more pragmatic topics like security of supply chains, maritime security, food security.

Therefore, digital diplomacy can be seen as a part of international security, allowing states to increase awareness and understanding of crises, which helps gather public support and promote international cooperation. It also involves framing security issues within modern legal discourse, considering innovative contexts (Gilboa, 2024). In this role, digital diplomacy acts not only as a tool of “soft power” but also as a mechanism for strategic deterrence and support of international law norms. Recording violations of international law allows states to apply reputational pressure on aggressors and legitimize collective responses. This is particularly crucial in maritime security, where violations often happen in disputed or remote areas and demand swift international action.

2. Ukraine’s Digital Maritime Diplomacy: Legal Framing of Security and Freedom of Navigation Risks

Freedom of navigation is a core principle of international maritime law, established in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The Montreux Convention of 1936 is especially significant for the Black Sea, as it governs the passage of warships through the Turkish Straits and influences regional power dynamics. On February 28, 2022, Turkey invoked this Convention at Ukraine’s request to close the straits to Russian warships (Ozerdem, 2022; Segell, 2023). Nonetheless, evolving security threats have exposed the challenges in enforcing the law of the sea. Although legal norms are formally inviolable, their practical enforcement relies heavily on political will, diplomatic efforts, and collective actions. This discrepancy between legal principles and their enforcement underscores the growing role of supplementary tools, such as digital diplomacy.

In the modern context, freedom of navigation faces several major challenges. The Black Sea region demonstrates how this freedom can be compromised through hybrid tactics that combine military, legal, and information strategies. Since 2014, and more intensively after 2022, Russia has employed naval blockades, illegal inspections, and threats to commercial shipping, turning navigation regimes into strategic tools (Kormych & Malyarenko, 2023; Bugajski, 2024; Chehtman & Rivera-López, 2024; Kuznietsov, 2025). These actions violate international maritime law and have global repercussions, particularly on food security and energy markets (Marson & Saccone, 2023; Yanovska et al., 2025). Disruptions in Black Sea shipping routes have directly impacted global grain supplies, illustrating the link between regional maritime security and broader global stability. In this context, freedom of navigation is not just a legal concept but also a geopolitical tool and means for states to pursue strategic interests. When traditional legal mechanisms can’t prevent violations, additional measures are needed for quick international attention and coordinated responses. Freedom of navigation involves both interstate and intrastate interests. Black Sea routes are crucial for Ukraine’s food,

energy security, and economic interests, prompting Russia's ongoing attacks on Ukrainian port and transport infrastructure, such as missile and drone strikes.

In the face of contemporary challenges, digital diplomacy serves as a key instrument for shaping global narratives and rallying political backing for maritime security efforts. Amid conventional and hybrid threats and information confrontation, a country's capacity to shape the interpretation of events is vital. The key tool for this is crafting a compelling narrative. In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in the Black Sea, by portraying adversary actions as violations of international law and threats to global economic and food security, digital diplomacy helps trigger international response mechanisms and gather multilateral support. In this regard, key framing strategies include problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendations (Thapar & Thapar, 2026). For example, Ukraine has actively employed digital diplomacy to portray maritime attacks as breaches of freedom of navigation and threats to worldwide food security. After Russian missile strikes on port infrastructure in Odessa during spring and winter 2025, Ukrainian officials used digital platforms to highlight the global significance of the disruption of shipping lanes (Reuters, 2025a; 2025d). By aligning these events with international legal standards such as UNCLOS provisions on freedom of navigation and rules of naval warfare for protecting neutral merchant vessels, Ukraine has effectively internationalized the issue, framing regional maritime violations as a matter of global concern.

Additionally, Ukrainian authorities have been actively using official social media platforms and targeted online campaigns to inform the public about how the Russian maritime blockade affects global food security and energy supplies. Later, Ukrainian officials have regularly commented on Russian attacks on ports and ships on social networks like X, Facebook, and Telegram, portraying these attacks as threats to global food security (Reuters, 2025b). This vividly illustrates the role of digital platforms in shaping international narratives. Unlike conventional diplomacy, digital diplomacy facilitates swift information sharing, which maximizes foreign policy engagement, enabling instant reactions to emerging threats (National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, 2025).

Strategic communication campaigns also serve an educational purpose by increasing awareness of legal frameworks like UNCLOS and the Montreux Convention. Since the beginning of the hybrid phase in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, infographics, webinars, and policy guides have been widely used as digital diplomacy tools to link complex maritime laws with public understanding (Embassy of Ukraine, 2021). This approach helps bolster the international legitimacy of efforts to support freedom of navigation. Success in strategic communications hinges on managing information competition, uncertainty, and disinformation. To achieve this, digital diplomacy offers tools for monitoring, verification, third-party reports, and campaign coordination to strengthen credibility and boost impact. Therefore, it is crucial that strategic communications are coordinated and integrated both within and across institutions and civil actors (Böhm & Niedringhaus, 2023).

Russian media often try to depict Ukraine as hindering maritime trade or violating agreements. Ukraine counters this by swiftly sharing verified information, collaborating with social media influencers, and engaging international journalists to ensure credible coverage. For instance, in early December 2025, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry publicly denied involvement in the alleged attack on a Russian tanker and stated on X that Kyiv "officially refutes any accusations of this kind made by Russian propaganda," showcasing an active diplomatic approach through digital platforms (Ukrainska Pravda, 2025). Coordinated online campaigns have highlighted the legality, humanitarian importance, and transparency of Ukraine's maritime activities. These initiatives reveal the dual role of digital diplomacy:

supporting the security of maritime communications and improving Ukraine's international reputation. By combining strategic messaging with real-time monitoring, digital diplomacy has proven effective for crisis management and upholding international legal standards.

3. Digital Platforms as Evidence and Narrative Power in the Black Sea

Digital platforms such as social media, government and NGO websites form the core infrastructure of modern digital diplomacy. They enable quick reporting of incidents, visualization of territorial claims, and communication of state policies to both domestic and international audiences. In the Black Sea region, these platforms are vital for documenting maritime blockades, illegal inspections, and disruptions to commercial shipping routes. For example, it was the social media accounts of the then Ministry of Infrastructure and Ukrainian Sea Ports Authority that, in the first days of the war on February 24–25, 2022, became the primary sources of information about the closure of Ukrainian ports to vessel entry and exit (Gorovaya, 2023) and remained the primary source of information on developments in merchant shipping to and from Ukrainian ports throughout the war.

Ukrainian authorities demonstrate a high level of coordination in digital diplomacy. Official social media accounts of government agencies and their leaders act as key sources of information. Furthermore, there are several instances of public-private partnerships to promote messaging on social media. One example is the Instagram account *Ukraine.ua*, a key part of the Ukrainian government's communication efforts after the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022. Operated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in collaboration with the NGO Brand Ukraine, this account has been crucial in shaping Ukraine's digital communication strategy (Ventura, 2025). Additionally, after the full-fledged Russian invasion, many Ukrainian think tanks have shifted their focus: some explore the war's implications, others consider Ukraine's future, and some are deeply engaged in volunteering activities (Kulchytskyi, 2022).

A key aspect of digital diplomacy is how non-state actors utilize OSINT data and digital shipping infrastructure – such as navigation software, port management tools, and ship tracking systems – to promote transparency and combat disinformation. For instance, international maritime monitoring initiatives combine satellite imagery, Automatic Identification System (AIS) data, and citizen reports to develop transparent and trustworthy databases of military activities. Projects like Global Fishing Watch use satellite radar images to track vessel movements and detect "AIS spoofs" by integrating satellite SAR imagery with AIS data (Bergman, 2023; Kroodsma, (2022)). These collaborative strategies enhance the credibility of digital diplomacy and supply policymakers with practical analytics. The scalability of digital platforms enables states to maintain a persistent presence in global conversations. Automated alerts, online press briefings, and multilingual materials ensure effective communication of key messages across diverse audiences. Consequently, digital diplomacy complements conventional maritime security efforts, functioning as both an early warning system and a reputation management tool.

Another approach to integrating OSINT tools and digital diplomacy during the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is to identify and locate sanctioned vessels of the Russian "shadow fleet" involved in illegal energy trade (Khomeenko, 2024). Maritime OSINT can identify key maritime data and offer valuable context, revealing the who, what, and why behind vessel activities that support sanctions compliance programs (Sage, 2023). This strategy yields positive outcomes not only when such vessels are detained or seized but also by raising operating costs through exposing vessels, operators, or shipowners involved. Indicatively, in digital diplomacy efforts to expose the Russian "shadow fleet," there are two main tracks.

One involves non-governmental organizations, and the other involves Ukrainian intelligence. The Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense manages the portal “War-Sanctions,” which features a dedicated database of aircraft, marine vessels, airports, and ports involved in transporting weapons, stolen Ukrainian goods, or circumventing sanctions (War-Sanctions, n.d.).

One example of OSINT-driven digital diplomacy is the Black Sea News portal, which is supported by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). Originally, it reported on events related to the Russian occupation of Crimea. As the Russo-Ukrainian conflict evolved, its coverage broadened. For example, the database on Russian attacks on Ukrainian seaports maintained by this resource offers detailed descriptions of attack dates, targets, weapons used, and ships damaged (Black Sea News, 2025b). Additionally, there are databases focusing on Russian maritime oil exports and related sanctions evasion, including information on shipowners and ships from the Russian shadow fleet (Black Sea News, 2025a).

The fact that maritime digital diplomacy heavily relies on IT solutions that provide information on vessels, routes, and cargo creates a link between digital diplomacy and cybersecurity. Incorporating cybersecurity measures into digital diplomacy enhances resistance to disinformation efforts. For instance, Russia is running a broad disinformation campaign, denying the shadow fleet’s existence or framing sanctions evasion as “alternative logistics mechanisms.” They also manipulate narratives around “globalist conspiracy,” “environmental risks,” and “energy security” (Spravdi, 2025).

However, carrying out such a disinformation campaign would be impossible without interfering with navigation and port IT systems to conceal routes and vessel data, including calls at Russian ports. The most common methods for Russian-affiliated sanctioned vessels involve various types of AIS manipulation, such as AIS shutdowns and AIS spoofing—faking positions (Melnyk et al., 2024). For instance, Russian sanctions have led to a doubling of vessels with falsified AIS over 2023–2024 (Androjna et al., 2024). However, these measures don’t prevent the military, law enforcement, insurers, or OSINT experts from tracking shadow-fleet vessels, as false positions can be identified using existing data-analysis methods (Sage, 2023; Bunwaree, 2025). Therefore, efforts to manipulate AIS data primarily aim to create a misleading narrative for the public and to prevent media exposure and criticism of those who enable sanctions evasion (shipowners, vessel operators, and insurance companies involved).

In the Black Sea region, Russian disinformation campaigns can disrupt international reactions to freedom of navigation violations, sway markets, and escalate conflicts. For instance, Chatham House notes that Russia’s information activities in the wider Black Sea area highlight fears of war, potential spillovers into neighboring countries, and depict the West as an unreliable security and economic partner. These narratives typically emerge on Kremlin-linked digital and social media platforms and are then amplified by mainstream media (Sabanadze & Dalay, 2025, p. 42).

Coordinated digital strategies that leverage proven intelligence, expert analysis, and quick rebuttal help reduce risks and maintain the integrity of maritime communication security (World Economic Forum, 2023; Melnyk et al., 2025). Therefore, integrating strategic communications, digital platforms, and cybersecurity transforms digital diplomacy from a supplementary tool into a fundamental part of the modern maritime security framework. This approach enables states to influence international perceptions, reinforce legal standards, coordinate multinational responses, and safeguard navigation in disputed waters. In the Black Sea region’s asymmetric environment, digital diplomacy offsets the constraints of military or legal power by offering alternative methods to attain security objectives.

4. Black Sea Grain Initiative and Ukrainian Maritime Corridor as Models of Digitally Supported Maritime Governance

A clear example of digital diplomacy supporting Ukraine's maritime goals is the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI), agreed upon in July 2022 through UN and Turkey mediation. The initiative aimed to unblock Ukrainian ports and facilitate the safe transport of grain, essential for worldwide food security. While the agreement was legally formalized and politically mediated, digital diplomacy significantly supported its execution. The same digital promotion approach can be observed in the case of the Ukrainian Maritime Corridor, established after Russia abandoned BSGI (Shipping Administration of Ukraine, 2025).

Digital promotion primarily occurred via official online channels – such as the websites of Ukraine's president, government agencies, international organizations – and through live-streamed summits and widespread sharing of materials globally. The launch of the "Grain from Ukraine" humanitarian effort was officially announced at the November 2022 international summit in Kyiv. The event was immediately broadcast digitally to an international audience, enabling Ukraine to reinforce its narrative within the global food security discussion (President of Ukraine, 2022).

The second international "Grain from Ukraine" summit in November 2023 marked a shift from a solely humanitarian gesture to a sustained international practice. Official online sources highlighted ongoing efforts, the growing list of donor states and organizations, and Ukraine's strategic role in maintaining food stability during wartime (President of Ukraine, 2023). A key aspect of digital diplomacy was blending a humanitarian message with historical memory, as the summit coincided with the commemoration of Holodomor victims, enhancing the moral and cultural significance of the communication.

In 2024, the third "Grain from Ukraine" summit showed how digital tools help legitimize policies by publicly showcasing results. State sources reported on millions in Africa and Asia who received food aid via Ukrainian grain, along with the international support scale (President of Ukraine, 2024). This digital reporting became a form of "soft power," building trust in Ukraine as a responsible global actor. It was also important to publish information about Russian theft of Ukrainian grain and its cynical use for profit through illegal exports and sales.

Ukraine has used digital platforms to share operational details on vessel movements, security measures, and port conditions. Additionally, a separate track includes reports of Russian attacks on naval vessels and Ukrainian port infrastructure (Interfax-Ukraine, 2026). Another key message is that cargo turnover and attack numbers are not just statistics; they have a human side – involving port workers, logisticians, sailors, dispatchers, engineers, and repair crews, who work in very tough and dangerous conditions but ensure the passage of ships and fulfillment of export contracts (Government Portal, 2026). Interactive maps and panels enable international stakeholders, including governments and NGOs from other countries, to monitor Russia's compliance with the BSGI or general rules of naval warfare, in the case of the Ukrainian Maritime Corridor, evaluate potential risks, and recommend support actions. By maintaining transparency and ongoing communication, Ukraine has built trust with its partners and reduced the risk of adversary's disinformation campaigns (Centre for Global Studies Strategy XXI, 2022).

In addition, Ukraine repeatedly held online briefings, issued press releases, and published multilingual content to engage a wide international audience, emphasizing the humanitarian importance of unblocking the port and linking it to global food security and international law (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2022; 2023 & 2025). This framing raised the reputational risks for Russia and other potential violators who do not comply, while also offering moral and political backing to European and global supporters of Ukraine.

Alongside humanitarian summits, international industry conferences – particularly “Grain Ukraine” and other forums focused on logistics, agricultural exports, and alternative grain supply routes – became significant in digital diplomacy. These conferences, held via professional online platforms and organizers’ websites, fostered an expert international discourse on Black Sea security and Ukraine’s economic sustainability, complementing official diplomatic statements with technocratic arguments. The “Food from Ukraine” in 2025 was also primarily advanced through digital channels. Announcements regarding the IV International Food from Ukraine Conference and the AGROEXPO exhibition aimed to build a broader brand of Ukraine as a global food supplier beyond just grain, reflecting an evolution of food diplomacy amidst war and recovery (Mission of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, 2025). Digitally, this shifted from reactive crisis communication to strategically positioning the state as a responsible actor, ensuring maritime security in the international information space.

Overall, conferences and summits focused on the maritime corridors and “Grain from Ukraine” initiative have become a key part of Ukraine’s digital diplomacy over the past four years. They have combined offline diplomacy with strategic online communication, ensured Ukrainian narratives are present in the global information space, and helped strengthen Ukraine’s image as a responsible and proactive player in international food security.

5. Digital Diplomacy as Coordination Tool to Support Maritime Legal Regimes

Discussing digital diplomacy as a means for coordination and engagement, Ukraine had some experience with it prior to the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion. One of the initial key areas was the Crimean Platform, which, since its inception in 2021, has evolved into a sustained digital diplomatic ecosystem. Using its official website and online summit broadcasts, Ukraine regularly communicates to the international community the narrative that the illegal militarization of Crimea poses a major threat to the security of the Black Sea region, navigation freedom, and adherence to the law of the sea (Crimea Platform, n.d.). The platform acts as a digital repository of political declarations, panel discussions, and statements by national leaders, enabling Ukraine to maintain a consistent presence in the international information landscape.

The Black Sea Security Forum is a key platform shaping the security narrative, serving as an international expert and diplomatic hub focused on Black Sea geopolitics and security. Through online broadcasts, digital publications of panel discussions, and open access to its materials, Ukraine consistently incorporates expert discussions into diplomatic messaging, especially regarding Russian military presence, threats to sea routes, and NATO’s role in regional security. An additional aspect of digital diplomacy involves scientific and data-driven initiatives, such as digital modeling within the BRIDGE-BS program and other international scientific collaborations. These models visualize environmental, security, and infrastructure risks and are used as evidence in debates on maritime management using innovative technologies. While scientific in nature, these digital models also act as concrete data supporting Ukraine’s political and security positions.

Digital diplomacy encompasses open environmental and spatial data that facilitates discussions on maritime security. For instance, MARMAPS, launched in 2024 under the Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin program, is a digital platform dedicated to maritime spatial planning and conserving vital ecosystems in the Black Sea (EuroAccess, n.d.). These open digital resources support international cooperation and the creation of common standards. Another example is the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea (CMA), chaired by Ukraine in 2025, which aims to coordinate efforts to protect marine and coastal ecosystems, foster sustainable

maritime economic growth, and share data on the impact of military activities on the marine environment. Russo-Ukrainian war has already inflicted significant damage on the Black Sea's ecology, caused by incidents like the explosion of the Kakhovka hydroelectric dam and accidents involving outdated ships transporting Russian oil or fuel oil. Russia has yet to address the serious ecological repercussions for the Black Sea. Ukraine must oppose Russia's attempts to conceal or distort this information, and the international community must comprehend the real situation through digital diplomacy tools.

Another element of digital diplomacy is the Black Sea Indicator of Shipping, which provides current open data on maritime transport in the Black Sea region, including tonnage, vessel types, and port call information. This tool helps international partners and experts evaluate trade efficiency and sea route security (Center for Transport Strategies, 2023). The Maritime Security Strategy of Ukraine, adopted in 2024, also plans to establish the "Secure Black Sea" platform, focusing on digital tools to gather, share, and analyze data on sea route security and navigation threats (Interfax-Ukraine, 2024).

Therefore, Ukraine's digital diplomacy in the Black Sea creates a multi-layered communication system that includes official statements, press releases, official briefings, political initiatives like the Crimean Platform, expert forums such as the Black Sea Security Forum, scientific projects like "digital twin," MARMAPS, CMA, maritime indicators, and situational awareness systems. This framework promotes transparency, openness, and a solid evidence base for international discussions, reinforces Ukraine's security messages, and enhances its stance on navigation freedom, legal governance of the Black Sea, and global supply chain stability.

Conclusions

The research shows that digital diplomacy has become a vital part of current efforts to defend freedom of navigation in conflict-affected maritime areas. In the Black Sea, digital tools have allowed Ukraine to make up for gaps in military and enforcement capabilities by spreading legal narratives, highlighting violations, and maintaining international focus on maritime security threats. Digital diplomacy serves several interconnected roles: it strengthens the authority of maritime law, helps build coalitions quickly, improves transparency through open-source data, and raises the reputational costs of illegal actions at sea. In conflict zones, where violations are often hidden, denied, or reinterpreted, controlling the story and providing verifiable information become a form of maritime power. From a policy perspective, the findings support several recommendations that could enhance the effectiveness of digital diplomacy in the maritime context: (i) institutionalizing digital diplomacy by integrating it into maritime administrations and foreign ministries, ensuring coordination among legal, security, and communication functions; (ii) standardizing digital documentation of violations of freedom of navigation to support diplomatic engagement and accountability; (iii) implementing cyber-secure maritime IT systems to protect navigation information's integrity and counter disinformation; (iv) developing multilingual and audience-specific strategies tailored to global, regional, and industry-specific audiences to maximize legitimacy and impact.

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Приклад Чорного моря під час російсько-українського конфлікту демонструє, що цифрова дипломатія стає дедалі важливішою для підтримання свободи судноплавства в умовах традиційних та гібридних конфліктів. Хоча свобода судноплавства є міцно вкоріненою у морському праві, її практичне забезпечення дедалі більше залежить від авторитетних наративів, прозорості та швидкої міжнародної співпраці. У статті стверджується, що цифрова дипломатія є додатковим рівнем традиційних механізмів захисту торговельного судноплавства. Це відбувається шляхом формування правових рамок, документування порушень, залучення міжнародної підтримки та посилення дотримання морських режимів. Використовуючи міждисциплінарний підхід, що поєднує морське право, розробки у сфері безпеки та аналіз цифрових комунікацій, дослідження показує, як Україна застосовує цифрові інструменти для інтернаціоналізації загроз морській безпеці, протидії дезінформації та легітимації таких зусиль, як гуманітарні коридори та альтернативні судноплавні маршрути. Отримані результати свідчать про необхідність інтеграції цифрової дипломатії у діяльність державних морських адміністрацій та багатосторонні координаційні механізми в якості ключового складника сучасної морської безпеки та управління.

Ключові слова: цифрова дипломатія, свобода судноплавства, Чорноморський регіон, морська безпека, стратегічні комунікації, міжнародне право, Україна, гібридні загрози, інформаційні технології.

