

Interview: Triinu Rajasalu, Estonia

Triinu Rajasalu is the Director General, Department of Public Diplomacy and Media Relations at the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We interviewed her to share her thoughts and experience in the cutting-edge adoption of social media by the Estonian foreign service.

DiploFoundation: How can social media support public diplomacy activities?

Triinu Rajasalu: Social media is a valuable addition to the communication toolbox. It enables us to join conversations, reach people personally, inform, engage, but also monitor.

Social media can be very helpful in spreading information about public diplomacy events and about your country in general.

It has been said that public diplomacy begins with listening. Social media helps us track conversations, see what people are thinking and saying about you.

Our experience shows that people are more likely to contact you through social media than through traditional communication channels. It is quick and easy to post a comment on Facebook, it takes far less time than searching for an e-mail address or phone number of an embassy.

DiploFoundation: What are the activities that social media can support (e.g. public diplomacy, consular, etc.)?

Triinu Rajasalu: For domestic audience, consular information has become the most popular type of information. This is especially evident during a crisis. Our network in Facebook doubled during the recent “ashcloud crisis”. We used our FB page as a marketplace for people looking for ways to return home. The consular hotline simply could not take so many phone calls, so we started putting up information on our FB page, inviting people to share information. In addition, we cooperated with travel agencies and shared their info as well.

Most important updates were also posted on Twitter.

On an ordinary day we usually post information about travel updates, travel warnings, visa info, notifications about recent blog posts, etc.

DiploFoundation: How did your social media presence start?

Triinu Rajasalu: We first started using FB in our embassy in Athens where our

consul noticed that she has many clients with similar problems, mainly Estonians who had married a Greek. She also noticed that most of them are on FB. So the consul created a closed group for Estonians in Greece where they could exchange info and experiences. It significantly reduced the workload of the consul, because she did not have to answer the same questions over and over again. Instead, she created a FAQ with the most common questions and created a forum for people where they can exchange information and thereby help themselves.

In public diplomacy social media can help in sharing information about events, news, your country in general. However, you have to understand your audience. There is no point in using social media just for distributing your press releases. You cannot just tell and sell your story. Successful communication in social media means you have to know what your audience wants to hear. You have to know what is important to them, not just to you.

DiploFoundation: What is the Estonian experience with social media? How many embassies use social media tools and what are the tools? Is social media in experimental phase or is it streamlined in the main activities?

Triinu Rajasalu: A few years ago our special representative in Afganistan started a blog (blog.vm.ee). The representative has changed but the blog is still up and running.

One year ago we decided to open a collective blog where our diplomats participate in creating the content, because it is easier to get regular blog post if there are more writers.

At first we experimented with blog posts from different embassies on a rotating basis but now we have moved on to cover more current affairs. The blog gives us an opportunity to offer background information, but also to illustrate foreign policy events by adding photos, comments, etc.

There are currently 13 Estonian embassies on Facebook and on Twitter. The Ministry also has a FB page and two Twitter accounts (in Estonian twitter.com/valismin and in English twitter.com/estonia_eu)

We are currently in the process of moving from experimental phase towards streamlining social media into main activities.

DiploFoundation: What are the skills that diplomats need?

Triinu Rajasalu: Diplomats usually have very good communication skills. Engaging in public diplomacy just means we have to use these skills differently. People who write excellent memos can, with little guidance, also write excellent blog posts. People who are able to give a speech to a diplomatic audience are also able to talk to students. You just need to think about your audience and the ways

to reach them.

The ability to use social media tools is, of course, also necessary.

DiploFoundation: Is your social media done by specialists (only responsible for social media) who provide services for the diplomats... or you train your diplomats to become e-diplomats (mainly Web 2.0)? What is your experience in diplomats adopting social media tools? Is it done more from headquarters or from embassies?

Triinu Rajasalu: Social media is done mainly by diplomats who are assisted and advised by the Department of Public Diplomacy and Media Relations. We have started to train diplomats about social media skills, especially before their posting abroad.

Our experience has been mostly positive. There have been doubts and there still are, but the organisation has understood the importance of social media and the need to be involved.

The embassies are responsible for their own Facebook pages and other social media related activities. The headquarters assists and advises, if necessary. The headquarters also runs the collective blog.

We also do testing and analysing in the headquarters. Luckily, leading Estonian experts on social media have helped us a lot in planning our social media activities.

DiploFoundation: Thank you very much for this interview, Triinu! For those interested to get in touch with her, she is available for contact at twitter.com/triinurajasalu