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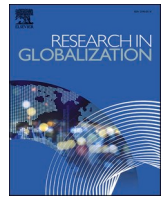
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EU-India relations in the multi-vector matrix of science diplomacy and Asia-Europe Meeting

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ABSTRACT

Online training events deserve more attention as a form of people-to-people connectivity. The purpose of the article is to elaborate on how online training events gain prominence in the context of the COVID-19 imposed restrictions on geographical mobility. The autoethnographic account provides new ideas on what higher education extra-curricular and capacity building activities should be taken into consideration when taking a comprehensive look at people-to-people sustainable connectivity. As the analysed three online training events that took place over the summer 2020 show, these virtual occasions of people-to-people connectivity are promising building blocks for the future exploration of the EU structural diplomacy towards India both in a bilateral setting and multilateral context of Asia-Europe Meeting.

Introduction

EU-India ties are not shaped in a vacuum. These bilateral strategic relations are affected by dynamics taking place in various international and multilateral forums (Allen & Smith, 2015; Dent, 2001; Doidge, 2019; Kavalski, 2016). Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) is one of them (Umezawa, 2015). Established in 1996, ASEM is a process aimed at fostering dialogue and cooperation. This multilateral forum assembles 53 Partners (30 European and 21 Asian countries) the EU and the ASEAN Secretariat. The vital importance of ASEM is clarified in the EU-India Roadmap to 2025. Namely, ASEM is one of two key multilateral forums where exchanges are expected to be enhanced (European Commission, 2020, 1). When talking about sustainable connectivity between Europe and Asia, these multi-layered processes should be kept on the radar as influential background factors. This article contributes to the debate on sustainable connectivity across Asia and Europe via mapping what conceptual and empirical considerations should be incorporated in the future study of the EU structural diplomacy and various sites that are conducive to the exertion of structural diplomacy but are not explicitly mentioned as prioritised venues in the official communication of the 15th EU-India Summit and ASEM.

Globalisation is affected by diverse international developments. COVID-19 has altered the prevailing forms of people-to-people connectivity. The pandemic helps to reflect on 'connectivity', especially 'sustainable connectivity' beyond a mere acknowledgment that this

term is a "key theme", "buzzword" or "name of the game" of ASEM and outside the notional confines of this multilateral format (Biscop, 2019; Borrell, 2019; Crescenzi, 2018; Islam et al., 2016, 11; Lay Hwee, Islam, & Gaens, 2018, 1). The term 'sustainable connectivity' refers to a multitude of interactions across countries that unfold in various forms and via diverse means (Becker et al., 2018, 20). In the ASEM context the term is used to evaluate and measure how prolonged, enduring or fragmented and ad hoc are various forms of interlinkages across countries.

As discussed during the first scientific conference "Asia-Europe Sustainable Connectivity" (AESCON) held on 22–25 September 2020, new considerations emerge about people-to-people linkages that should feed into a comprehensive examination of sustainable connectivity. ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal is an open access online database hosted by the European Commission. The portal offers an interactive interface and diverse data on connectivity and sustainability. The portal aspires to cover all 51 ASEM partner countries. The people-to-people connectivity is part of the Connectivity Index of the Sustainable Connectivity Portal that "[m]easures the mobility of people in education, tourism and migration, the collaboration in research and innovation, the exchange of culture and communication." (Becker et al., 2018, 24) The interactive map of the portal displays the following categories of people-to-people connectivity: international student mobility in tertiary education, research outputs with international collaborations, patents with foreign co-inventor, trade in cultural goods, migrant stock, common

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language users.

The prevailing COVID-19 context encourages looking beyond the data sets displayed on the ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal. A comprehensive look at sustainable people-to-people connectivity should incorporate other types of interactions that are not displayed on the ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal but grow in scope and importance.

COVID-19 has profoundly transformed the way higher education and training provided by higher education and research centres is organised. It has deepened digitalisation (Jana, Kononenko, Navarra, Stamegna, & Zumer, 2020, 19). These developments add a qualitatively new dimension to the decades-long policy-makers discussion on higher education in the globalisation context (IMHE-Info, 2009; Yelland, 2011). COVID-19 implications help to leave the earlier propensity towards contemplating a globalisation crisis aside (Frieden, 2006; Narlikar, 2017; Pisani-Ferry, 2018). Instead, the pandemic sets a conducive background for dwelling into the earlier noted complexity and multi-dimensionality of globalisation (Martens, Caselli, De Lombaerde, Figge, & Scholte, 2015, 225). ‘Soft globalisation’ or ‘slowbalisation’ gains prominence as a new stage of globalisation (Oliví & Gracia, 2020b, 38; Wang & Sun, 2020, 5). “Economic dynamism has given way to increasing and more varied forms of soft projection.” (Oliví & Gracia, 2020a, 1004) These forms are linked to information flows, culture, science, education, development cooperation and international tourism exchanges.

The varied restrictions on travel and physical presence should not mislead analysts that the connectivity and interactions have plummeted. Even in unprecedented times of an international lockdown and post-lockdown phase with substantial limits posed on physical mobility (Lam, 2021; Lytras & Tsiodras, 2021; Smith Jervelund & Eikemo, 2021; Warren, Lofstedt, & Wardman, 2021), multiple online learning, training, and networking opportunities are contributing to a sustained interaction between individuals located in ASEM partner countries.

The online diplomatic training encounters are such telling examples that should be taken into consideration to comprehensively assess the multifaceted forms of interaction and mutual learning facilitated by various higher education and research institutions located across ASEM partner countries and elsewhere.

The article is guided by the research question: What other forms of people-to-people connectivity should be taken into consideration in a future conceptual and an empirical examination of the EU structural diplomacy towards India? The exploration of this research question is pursued from a purely bilateral context, as well as the multilateral scope of ASEM.

The question is instrumental for arguing about the value of future quantitative and qualitative mapping of online diplomatic training events. Additionally, in the context of the existing body of literature on the role of people-to-people connectivity across ASEM (Gaens, 2008a; Murray & Brennan, 2015, 421; Reiterer, 2015, 397), it provides some suggestions on what components of people-to-people connectivity remain understudied and underexamined via quantitative means.

The second section of the article elaborates on the research design, methods and material analysed. The third section outlines the conceptual foundations of EU structural diplomacy and people-to-people diplomacy. The subsequent part discusses the results of the performed research on three online training events related to science diplomacy that were convened during the summer of 2020. The discussion part elaborates the relevance of the findings in the context of the debate on the future of education amidst the disruptions caused by COVID-19. The conclusions revisit the main findings and reflect on their relevance in the context of the ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal, as well as indicates some promising avenues for future research.

Material and methods

Data collection

ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal provides useful quantitative data for the study of people-to-people interaction. The geographical mobility of students is one such valuable and appreciated resource. The earlier mapping of major EU-India interaction dynamics and trends within one specific EU national context – Latvia – provided an interesting picture of growing ties (Šime, 2020a). It matches the earlier recommended increase in higher education and research exchanges (Benaglia, 2016, 6). However, COVID-19 caused major disruptions and its implications on higher education, research and training (Šime, 2021a, 3; Šime, 2021b), including the e-resilience (van de Laar, 2020), encouraged to profoundly reconsider the research method. The internationally experienced shift from geographically located auditoriums to digital ones requires more attention to understand what forms of interaction should be considered for a comprehensive exploration of people-to-people connectivity.

There was no pre-defined intention to prepare an empirical analysis of the summer schools before the events took place. The idea came into being after these training occasions. The nimble digital unfolding of the academic sector during the COVID-19 lockdowns deserves more attention. This article embraces ‘pocketing’. The heuristic concept is aimed at exploring how data that materializes on site is used. Pocketing builds on the notion that “the way ethnographers translate what they observe in the field into ethnographic knowledge is often implicit and *practice bound*” (Neubert & Trischler, 2021, 2). The concept details “*what materializes how* in the field, and *in what way* materialization of data is related to practice” (Neubert & Trischler, 2021, 2). Data production is a process of material theorizing in the field (Neubert & Trischler, 2021, 3). Personal notes taken during the three outlined training events and impressions gathered via active participation in the collaborative intellectual exchanges, drafting and reading of follow-up publications after the schools are instrumental. The author transforms this data from random training assignments into valuable fragments for further exploration of the understudied practices of the EU structural diplomacy and the digital EU-India people-to-people connectivity in the ASEM context.

This article captures a very concise small-n case study approach applied to three online educational and training encounters that were entirely or partially dedicated to science diplomacy and were organised by various higher education and research institutions over summer 2020. The reason for such a choice is an attempt to map more comprehensively what forms of extra-curricular and capacity-building activities should be incorporated in a more all-encompassing study of the EU structural diplomacy towards India in the ASEM context. Moreover, such a selection of cases brings new considerations into the discussion on the indicators of the ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal. Namely, it invites to pay attention to what forms of people-to-people connectivity are left outside this framework but play a considerable role in the facilitation of encounters between highly skilled citizens and residents of ASEM partner countries.

Selected three cases are the Warsaw Science Diplomacy School 2020 organised by the Horizon 2020 funded project “Inventing a Shared Science Diplomacy for Europe” (InsSciDE), the São Paulo School of Advanced Science on Science Diplomacy and Innovation Diplomacy 2020 (InnSciD SP 2020) hosted by the Institute of International Relations and the Institute of Advanced Studies of the University of São Paulo, and Second Summer School “Modern Diplomacy: Across Levels, Actors and Tracks” organised by the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS) and Vienna School of International Studies, in collaboration with the Department of Foreign Affairs of Flanders, Ghent University and Vrije Universiteit Brussel. All events were initially planned as in-person gatherings in specific locations in Europe and South America. The reason why South

America-hosted case is not left outside of the scope of the research design is to show that the people-to-people connectivity among residents of ASEM partner countries is not taking place solely within the geographical confines of Europe and Asia. It is an argument for a more comprehensive look at which virtual sites are presently shaping the way sustainable ASEM people-to-people connectivity evolves. An autoethnographic account of all three events combined with a review of secondary literature through the conceptual lens of the EU structural diplomacy and its intersections with the people-to-people diplomacy form the research results.

Data analysis

Autoethnography “is a research method that uses personal experience (“auto”) to describe and interpret (“graphy”) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (“ethno”)” (Adams, Ellis, & Holman Jones, 2017, 1). In this particular research design, the method is applied to incorporate personal experience acquired as a participant and to a limited extent facilitator of such training events. This research project takes stock of some virtual field- and headnotes. A distinct nuance in this example of the application of the research method is that it is not employed to analyse societal issues similar to those pointed out by some authors of the methodological description (Adams et al., 2017, 3; Den-shire & Lee, 2013). In this article autoethnography is applied to a less explored thematic area. The overall account provided in this article on the online education and training events should be treated with full recognition that autoethnography “is interpretivist, postmodernist, and does not rely on neutrality and objectivity” (Pisani-Ferry, 2017, 15). That is where the value lies in the analysis captured by this article. It taps into a participatory experience to shed light on some real-world complexities that are worth considering in the future study of the EU structural diplomacy and EU-India people-to-people connectivity in the ASEM context.

Fieldnotes are “descriptive accounts [that] select and emphasize different features and actions while ignoring and marginalizing others” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011a, 9). This article follows the encouragement to use this resource for the production of journal article manuscripts (Pacheco-Vega, 2019, 2). Headnotes capture “soft data” (Neubert & Trischler, 2021, 6). Headnotes are “the impressions, scenes, and experiences of the field that are far too numerous to record” (Wall, 2008, 45). Both field- and headnotes show how “self is used” (Wall, 2006, 156). Nevertheless, it is worth stressing that the autobiographical account elaborated in this article is just one of the participatory experiences. It is one attempt to “capture what is out there” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011c, 86) that should inform the further scholarly enquiry into the future of higher education.

Publicity material and open access accounts of the summer schools published by the organisers and participants enrich the diversity of impressions and lessons learned during the examined three events. These are treated as valuable accounts of people-to-people contacts that characterise sustainable connectivity across Europe and Asia and remain understudied in the EU structural diplomacy.

The autoethnographer is familiar with the overall setting of in-person science diplomacy training (Pérez-Porro et al., 2019) and on-line tools of academic gatherings. Therefore, the analysis is written by an author who has lost direct access to her first impressions of such types of events (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011b, 24). Autoethnography and fieldnotes have proven valuable methods in earlier elaborations on science diplomacy (Roig, Sun-Wang, & Manfredi-Sánchez, 2020, 2). This article is another complementary element that leans towards more reflexivity (Ploder & Hamann, 2021, 6) among science diplomacy researchers and professionals. This reflexivity is synthesised with the scholarly thinking on ASEM captured in academic and grey literature.

Theory

The article builds on structural diplomacy. This conceptual lens is judged to be especially relevant for a study of multilateral settings because these are arenas of joint or multi-party coordinated efforts (Keukeleire, Keuleers, & Raube, 2015, 204). It is a lens benefiting from a growing body of literature that seeks to explain the evolving international engagement of the EU:

“Diplomacy has been defined as ‘the process of dialogue and negotiation by which states in a system conduct their relations and pursue their purposes by means short of war’ (Watson, 1982: 10). Structural diplomacy, then, is a specific dimension of diplomacy. It refers to the process of dialogue and negotiation by which actors in the international system seek to influence or shape sustainable political, legal, economic, social and security structures at different levels in a given geographical space.” (Keukeleire, Keuleers, & Raube, 2015, 200)

The reason why a conceptual lens of structural diplomacy is a conducive choice for an examination of sustainable connectivity is the objective of this type of diplomacy to not only have specific effects on certain structures targeted beyond the borders of the EU, but also that these structures should be sustainable (Keukeleire, Keuleers, & Raube, 2015, 200–201). The term ‘structures’ refers to the “general principles (such as ‘free market economy’, ‘democracy’ or ‘rule of law’) and the operationalisation of these principles through a constellation of institutions, rules and practices” across various policy domains and multiple governance levels (Keukeleire, Keuleers, & Raube, 2015, 200). Traditional diplomacy is considered a ‘relational’ one with a focus on building and managing relations. ‘Structural’ diplomacy is a complementary approach that does not compete, but instead, complements the more established diplomatic patterns (Keukeleire, Keuleers, & Raube, 2015, 201). There is no juxtaposition between actions taken by traditional diplomatic actors and the new ones as long as they share similar goals and implement coordinated and mutually compatible actions. This mirrors the well-established understanding that the EU does not speak with one voice. The EU foreign policy is characterised by an informal division of labour (Delreux & Keukeleire, 2017). The EU is represented by multiple voices and the diverse academic enquiry in the actorness of the EU is anecdotally praised as “some kind of cottage industry” (Allen & Smith, 2015, 176; Barston, 2019, 123; Drieskens, 2017, 1537; Keukeleire et al., 2015, 210). Staff of the EU, other international and regional organisations are continuously kept under the scholarly magnifying glass (Barston, 2019, 246; Ege, 2020; Littotz-Monnet, 2017; Morgenstern-Pomorski, 2018; Reinalda, 2020; Task Force “EEAS 2.0,” 2021). In contrast, other actors who exert a certain role in the EU structural diplomacy remain relatively understudied. This article aims at pointing out some actors and initiatives that are suggested as promising contexts for a more comprehensive study of the EU actorness and sites where the EU structural diplomacy is projected.

The discursive practices of a structural diplomacy actor are directed towards “convincing other actors about the desirability and feasibility of the relevant structures and, second, at supporting those actors in their efforts to translate general organising principles into institutions and rules” (Keukeleire et al., 2015, 202–203). Online training events that are organised by or engage entities supported or representing the EU should be seen as such virtual sites where the briefly explained discursive practices take place. Besides their value as being promising discursive sites, the virtual schools should be viewed as an additional space for an EU supported actor or an EU representing actor to go beyond the mere declaratory level one-way communication, learn about the perceptions of targeted audiences and receive feedback via active or empathetic listening (Di Martino, 2020, 23–24; Task Force “EEAS 2.0,” 2021, 16; Šime, 2020b). It is a suggestion aligned with the earlier assessment that there “is clear room for improvement in the way in which learning is institutionalised within the diplomatic set-up” (Keukeleire et al., 2015, 212). Looking at a broader spectrum of instrumental sites, such as beyond the social media networks (Ingenhoff, Calamai, & Sevin, 2021,

9), would be one way how to go about this challenge.

The intended recipients of structural diplomacy efforts are diverse and include individuals (Keukeleire, Keuleers, & Raube, 2015, 201). This is yet another component of this conceptual framework that makes it highly relevant for exploring the EU-India ties in the ASEM context. In this article, it is judged as compatible with another strand of diplomatic studies that focuses on people-to-people contacts. Tapping into this compartment of scholarly enquiry holds the potential to induce the ongoing reflections on structural diplomacy with some fresh influences. People-to-people diplomacy is “intentional, political, and transboundary communication-based interactions between groups of people for public, rather than private interests that have or aim to have foreign policy implications” (Ayhan, 2020). The compatibility between the thinking developed by the structural diplomacy scholars and people-to-people diplomacy researchers is based on the joint interest in ways certain structures are advanced and projected via a human agency and the ‘embedded capital’ of their personal and professional backgrounds (Biersteker, 2017, 112; Tocci, 2018, 839). “[P]eople are agents of certain structures, such as ministries, embassies and societies, and this agency also has a constitutive effect in practices of agents and outcomes of these practices.” (Ayhan, 2020) As components of the suggested “‘non-state’ turn” in science diplomacy (Dall & Young, 2021, 70), the online training events are great sites for the exploration of the multi-faceted interaction between the structures that come along with individuals involved.

The role of people-to-people interactions is not new to diplomatic studies. “In a more interconnected world, all countries desire greater influence, both abroad and online. But to achieve this, national leaders can no longer simply focus on governments. They must bring their citizens into international exchanges in fields as varied as entrepreneurship, science, and technology, to name but a few.” (Walker, 2014, 13) It means not simply engaging with individuals but doing that via a certain set of facilitatory measures, such as expertise, know-how arranged in the form of specific typologies of assistance or external actions tools and on certain occasions also employing distinct technical equipment.

This line of people-to-people thinking is compatible with the logic of structural foreign policy that comes along with technical, material, financial and economic assistance to the recipient that can be not solely a country but also other types of entities (Keukeleire, Keuleers, & Raube, 2015, 201). Certain features of the EU are emulated in other parts of the world (Tallberg, Lundgren, & Sommerer, 2020, 630). The growing body of literature on regionalism and insights shared by the administrators demonstrate that the EU institutions are willing and highly interested in complementing their traditional dialogue with other entities, such as the staff of regional organisations or technical secretariats of regional forums and other entities, by sharing their expertise, offering training and capacity-building (Björkdahl, Chaban, Leslie, & Masselot, 2015; Björkdahl & Elgström, 2015; Chaban, Kelly, & Holland, 2015; Gabella Carena, 2018; Hopkins & McNeill, 2015; Onestini, 2015, 263). Bearing in mind the ASEM composition, it is worth pointing out the ASEAN Secretariat among such examples that span beyond the more well-known bilateral engagement between the EU and a specific ASEM partner country (Fawcett, 2015, 43; Gaens, 2008b, 172–173; Islam, 2015; Onestini, 2015, 267; Poole, 2015).

The research design devised for this compact article takes a people-to-people perspective on science diplomacy-themed events. Such a combination is not novel. It follows an earlier acknowledgment of this intersection of different strands of diplomatic studies. “The value of innovation and science diplomacy starts with personal exchange programs that enrich individuals but also links technology communities and transfers skills and values to where they are most needed.” (Walker, 2014, 13) Due to the brevity of this article, it does not question the superior qualitative dimension of in-person encounters that is praised among public diplomacy and soft power analysts (Brown, 2020; Portland, 2020; Rana et al., 2016). The conceptual framework and the existing body of knowledge does not allow to argue that the online

capacity-building, training and networking sessions provide a similar enduring effect on the strength and the profundity of people-to-people ties that would facilitate mutual understanding and affinity among respective geographic areas where the individuals are located. It is not argued to be one of the most influential tools of EU structural diplomacy. This dimension begs for more academic enquiry.

However, the growing interaction facilitated by extra-curricular, training and capacity-building events hosted online should not be left outside of the scope of the discussion on ASEM sustainable connectivity. It is an intrinsic component of the multi-faceted forms that are shaping the relations across ASEM and globalisation as a process that facilitated more interconnections among people living in various countries (Ayhan, 2019, 65). This argument is based on the earlier observations in the people-to-people diplomacy literature that “[c]o-creating solutions with civil society and the private sector — not dictating solutions from national capitals — is the wave of the future given today’s new dynamics.” (Walker, 2014, 14) Summer schools are not events devised to result in ready-made solutions. However, those are consultative encounters that help to bring various sectors together for collaborative brainstorming.

Another important argument from the existing body of literature that gives additional weight for more research focus on the variety of forms of people-to-people encounters facilitating interactions among ASEM partner organisations and countries is “the disparity between the demand for people-to-people exchanges and the supply capacity of both established and emerging powers.” (Walker, 2014, 15) The growing number of online training help to address this shortage of opportunities. The scholarly thinking on the matter should evolve accordingly.

Results

Online training events constitute a rather neglected form of people-to-people connectivity. These are intellectual spaces that have grown in importance due to the prolonged restrictions and public safety considerations linked to physical mobility internationally. Three examples give a better understanding of how online training events sustain intellectual interactions.

Among 28 admitted candidates of the Warsaw Science Diplomacy School 2020, were individuals who reside or are holders of citizenship of 28 countries from 6 continents, including several EU member states and India (InsSciDE, 2020; Siekiera, 2020, 203–204). However, these were not the only ASEM partner countries that were represented by the participants of the Warsaw Science Diplomacy School 2020 (Šime & Adeel, 2020). Organisers appreciate the “co-constructive learning process” that “supported successful knowledge transfer” (Meyer et al., 2021, 30). The thought-provoking discussions and highly collaborative spirit is captured in one of the co-authored overviews of group discussions “Science Diplomacy and the Litter at Sea” (Polejack, McMahon, Nyborg, Sinha, & Šime, 2020). This publication echoes the author’s headnotes that the EU (or more precisely Horizon 2020) funded consortiums assemble a wider pool of experts that keep an eye on the EU-India agenda, hence a reference to the Roadmap to 2025. Following this thread of a headnote, it gives a convincing impression that certain EU funded projects attract a receptive audience to the latest developments revolving around EU structural diplomacy.

Among 100 participants of the São Paulo School of Advanced Science on Science Diplomacy and Innovation Diplomacy 2020 half were from Brazil and the rest from across the world, including several EU member states, and India (University of São Paulo, 2020). Again, these were not the sole ASEM partner countries that were represented among the overall pool of the attendants of the school. Some of the attendees of the Warsaw Science Diplomacy School were participating also in this online training event and had an opportunity to continue exchanges during the group sessions (Hardy, Mays, Staszkievicz, Kyrzyzanowska, & Czajkowska, 2020, 27; Namdeo, Goevas, & Manjengwah, 2020; Sinha, Goevas, & Siekiera, 2021). Moreover, this was not the only commonality that accompanied a handful of freshly trained experts in EU science

diplomacy. Another thematic interlink that eloquently connected both schools was the opening public lecture “Exploring Science Diplomacy: A People-Centred Approach” delivered by a representative of the InsSciDE consortium Prof. Pierre-Bruno Ruffini before the commencement of the São Paulo School. As the title of the lecture indicates, the individual agency in advancing science diplomacy is a subject of recent scholarly enquiry. Thus, this article should be seen as a complementary attempt to engage with this subject from a different conceptual perspective of diplomatic studies.

Second Summer School “Modern Diplomacy: Across Actors, Levels and Tracks” (UNU-CRIS, 2021) gathered more than 40 participants from across the world, the EU member states and India, among other ASEM partner countries, included. This event entailed only one presentation on science diplomacy given by Prof. Luk Van Langenhove. It featured the completed Horizon 2020 funded project “European Leadership in Cultural, Science and Innovation Diplomacy” (EL-CSID). However, such a fact that a two-week-long training session had only one lecture on science diplomacy should not mislead into an assessment that it had very scarce relevance to the overall education process revolving around science diplomacy internationally. Science diplomacy studies borrow from and synthesise a great variety of concepts from a broad spectrum of domains of diplomatic studies, science and technology studies, as well as social sciences in general. Thus, several other thematic lectures provided throughout the school were also contributing to comprehensive training on science diplomacy as closely intertwined with other strands of scholarly enquiry.

The online events serve the overall aspirations of the EU-India strategic partnership and the ASEM goals to bring people closer together. Putting a headnote into words, the analysed online events provided a common frame of reference, a mutually shared conceptual understanding of specific terms of diplomatic studies and enhanced awareness about some international policy issues that the participants gladly shared in joint follow-up open access publications (referenced in the earlier paragraphs). Warsaw Science Diplomacy School 2020 built a common reference point among the participants through timely dissemination of mandatory and suggested reading both for thematic groups and overarching guidance. Participants were encouraged to complete the European Science Diplomacy Online Course offered by the project “Using Science for/in Diplomacy for Addressing Global Challenges” (S4D4C). São Paulo School of Advanced Science on Science Diplomacy and Innovation Diplomacy 2020 group work was structured following the São Paulo Framework of Innovation Diplomacy (InnSciSP, n.d.). The school on modern diplomacy included a rich and diverse reading list circulated to the participants. Following the essence captured by the field- and headnotes, being familiar with a specific set of terminology and sharing the same or similar understanding of this terminology has the potential to enhance the level of the nuance of future consultations and multilateral endeavours of the trainees.

What is noteworthy is that the mere numbers of participants in the studied online training events equal the annual student flows from some EU member states to India. Latvia is one such example. This generalised comparison between the statistics available on the ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal and participant composition of the analysed online training events strengthen the argument of the considerable role these virtual encounters deliver to the overarching goals of the ASEM people-to-people connectivity.

In terms of qualitative research dimension, the superior role of in-person encounters in promoting lasting ties, a sense of affinity and mutual familiarity is not questioned. More studies should be dedicated to examining the impressions and impact of online interactions to give a clearer understanding of how those compare to virtual sessions. Such studies might be helpful not only to the researchers of structural diplomacy, people-to-people diplomacy, and public diplomacy. These findings are of potential relevance to explore in greater detail whether these are conducive means for the exertion of the EU structural diplomacy and enhance the sustainability reached via in-person

engagements.

Irrespective of the form in which the gathering is convened – physical or online presence – the agency that comes along with individuals and their professional ties, expertise and experience, by and large, feed into the discursive practice. This article does not address the anecdotal “cottage industry” of the EU actorness studies. Instead, it provides some additional empirical insights where to look for the multiple voices emanating from the EU that implicitly or explicitly through their engagement in or facilitation of science diplomacy related online training events potentially contribute to the EU structural diplomacy or the audience’s overall understanding of the EU structural diplomacy and its practices, including those of the people-to-people connectivity.

Discussion

Besides the conceptual framework devised in the previous section, it is vital to clarify that this article is not dedicated to the underpinnings of science diplomacy. Instead, as earlier outlined, science diplomacy related online training is treated as empirical evidence of small-n case studies for the autoethnographically built argument that a comprehensive look at the ASEM sustainable connectivity should incorporate not solely the geographic mobility of students, tourists and accomplished collaborative research outputs. In line with the post-AESCON reflections (Hwee and Tonchev, 2020, 12), online science diplomacy related training clearly shows that amidst various public safety restrictions the online encounters gain substantial prominence. Devising typologies for the classification and quantification of these encounters might be an arduous task due to the diverse forms and hosting entities of these training events. But neglect of this growing set of interactions or a reference to these with a reiterated downplaying remark of being a mere “laundry list” or proneness towards a “Christmas tree” phenomenon (Keva & Gaens, 2008, 116) would miss out a crucial component of people-to-people interactions. The vision of “A Swinging and Eclectic Marketplace” or a “bustling Asia-Europe Marketplace” (Lay Hwee, 2014, 2; Lay Hwee, 2015, 33) has already transformed into a reality. Perhaps it is just a matter of giving full credit to those events that (implicitly) contribute to the spirit and overarching goals of ASEM.

This is an invitation to look beyond the ASEM Online Summer School convened in September 2020. Even without being marked by the ASEM or Asia-Europe Foundation’s logo or explicit references to the ASEM, three training events analysed in this article give substantial support to the people-to-people connectivity among ASEM partner countries. These events enhance mutual familiarity among the EU and India in particular, as well as facilitate joint learning and discussion of specific concepts and policy issues.

The swiftness with which the hosts of the examined training events transformed physical gatherings into online sessions is also a weighty episode for the researchers preoccupied with the evolution of the higher education sector amidst the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic is judged to be a ‘super wicked’ problem (Schiefloe, 2021, 8). It has turned into “a human rights crisis” (Pesce-Monteiro & Trobbiani, 2020, 4). The United Nations elaborate: “Education is not only a fundamental human right. It is an enabling right with direct impact on the realization of all other human rights.” (United Nations, 2020, 3) This aspect relates to the overall enquiry around the EU structural diplomacy that promotes such indispensable values as human rights. The examined training events should be valued as uninterrupted means for ensuring sought after learning opportunities while being exposed and trying to master the worldwide unprecedented challenges. Since all three examined schools are annually reoccurring events, then summer 2020 came with a steep learning curve. It was an exploratory process of virtual interactive methods and formats and how certain notions of people-to-people connectivity and structural diplomacy unfold in the online setting.

Any potential future discussions on the feasibility of quantitatively mapping online training events should strive towards comparability of the data sets throughout several editions of the indicators. The diverse

formats and participants' pool of the summer schools presented in this article clarify the challenge. In the case of the EU funded projects, centralised data bases, such as the Community Research and Development Information Service, might be considered as a helpful point of departure to assemble information on training events hosted by specific projects, as well as acquire further information on the overall composition of participants. However, the feasibility of this suggestion remains to be verified.

To learn from the past experience, it is a well-documented scholarly malaise of interrupted or altered indicator systems being a challenge for longitudinal studies on certain dynamics of regionalism (De Lombaerde, Saucedo Acosta, Fernández Moriana, & Melissa Vida, 2017). These considerations are noteworthy when it comes to the potential of any new indicators of diverse forms of connectivity to remain relevant and enduringly utilised reference point throughout the years to come.

Conclusions

To answer the research question, online training events constitute a rather neglected form of people-to-people connectivity. Online training events gain prominence in the context of the COVID-19 imposed restrictions on geographical mobility. These gatherings should be taken into consideration and their quantifiable registration options considered for the future exploration of connectivity. These virtual occasions of people-to-people connectivity are promising building blocks for the future conceptual and empirical examination of the EU structural diplomacy towards India both in a purely bilateral setting and multilateral context of the ASEM.

The people-to-people diplomacy studies offer some conceptual notions that are suggested as worthy of further reflections and expansion of the overall framework of structural diplomacy. Although actorness has been criticised for its scholarly heterogeneity, it is seen as one of the ways how to bring into the conceptual reflections on structural diplomacy some entities that represent the EU multiple voices but so far have benefited from a rather limited examination. Institutions and their representatives involved in the EU funded science diplomacy projects are among such voices that would benefit from more research attention. The COVID-19 guided virtual transformation of training events further increases the weight of these EU supported voices that host exciting virtual sites or offer lectures during events convened by other institutions. The scholarly attractiveness of these sites is based on the online training events being a conducive environment to novel forms and projection of the EU structural diplomacy.

At the age of 'slowbalisation' and 'soft globalisation', the people-to-people connectivity among individuals living in ASEM partner countries occurs in different constellations and diverse gatherings hosted across the world. The analysed events show that participants listen to and interact with different types of EU multiple voices. They are exposed to and familiarise themselves with a range of forms of EU actorness. Thus, it could be argued that online training events also offer exposure to a varied intensity of EU structural diplomacy. The examined training events do not have a distinct or formal affiliation to ASEM. Nevertheless, it does not mean that it is a mere "laundry list" of events that might have potential formal relevance to furthering ASEM goals. The dynamism of people-to-people online interactions across ASEM does not always come with an outright logo tag or proclaimed ambition to turn the vision of a vibrant Asia-Europe "bazaar" (Lay Hwee, 2015, 33) into a reality.

The joint capacity building experienced by individuals living across ASEM partner countries holds the potential to promote common understanding and awareness of certain conceptual lenses and the contextual factors that guide the use of specific terminology. These terms are not the intrinsic components of the traditional official agreed language of the ASEM documentation. However, they serve the purpose of promoting ASEM-wide shared understanding of certain processes that characterise the multi-dimensional landscape of diplomatic studies and evolving diplomatic practices.

The EU-India encounters during the analysed online diplomatic training events show awareness and receptiveness to the high-level political guidance. Such empirical insights of people-to-people connectivity should feed the curiosity of scholars of diplomatic studies to look for new or understudied sites of the ever-evolving forms of diplomacy and people-to-people interactions gravitating closer towards certain forms of non-traditional diplomatic relations. As the analysed case studies show, there is a plenitude of such formats of encounters organised worldwide that are conducive to promoting EU structural diplomacy, mutual familiarity both among individuals residing in EU and India, as well as across the ASEM and beyond.

Given their offered space for promoting mutual familiarity and better awareness of geographically situated perspectives, these events are worthy of more attention in the overall context of ASEM higher education and research cooperation. The feasibility of constructing quantified categories, which would help to render the future connectivity indicators even more comprehensive, remains to be clarified. To maintain any potential new indicators as major go-to sources of information on the connectivity across ASEM, the longitudinal comparability of the data sets should be addressed. The existing body of scholarly findings on the fragmentation experienced in the life span and structure of other indicator systems invites for caution.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Zane Šime: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Investigation, Writing - review & editing.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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