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**Benchmarking of consulates' digital services quality during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study of Poland and Italy**Kamil Maksymilian Lada  <sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> EUNCET Business SchoolReceived:  
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under the terms of  
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(CC BY 4.0)**Abstract:**

This article presents the results of the *benchmarking* exercise carried out between the Italian Consulate in Barcelona and the Consulate of the Republic of Poland in Barcelona with the aim to gain an in-depth understanding of the quality of their digital services provided by these two consulates and define the gaps between them, as well as the desired directions to improve the quality. A methodology was applied to benchmark the quality of the 'consulates' operation, such as institutional context, usability and structure of the website, available information, and type of digital services offered. For each area, a series of variables and quality indicators were developed (33 indicators). The results obtained from the *benchmarking* show that in many of the variables analysed there are significant gaps between the two consulates studied. Both have much room for improvement in the quality of their services, although they are in a similar situation in some comparative variables. It is concluded that *benchmarking is a very useful tool to improve the quality of the services provided by consulates as it brings many benefits to them.*

**Keywords:**

benchmarking, consulates, digitalization, digital services, quality

## 1. Introduction

With the appearance of new communication channels, people have changed the way they relate and communicate, not only with other individuals but also with public institutions and companies. Due to this, institutional organs have had to face the constant development of digitalization by society and its components. As confirmed by the Ministerio de Hacienda y Administraciones Públicas:

In recent years, digital communication through websites and social media has acquired evident importance for the General Administration of the State (AGE), both in the relationship between organizations and in its direct communication with citizens (Ministerio de Hacienda y Administraciones Públicas, 2014, p.2).

In this sense, diplomacy has also been changing and is constantly evolving, taking advantage of opportunities, and managing the main challenges of communication in the digital era. The primary challenge of diplomacy is to amplify the messages of institutional organs through digital platforms.

Within the quality management framework, a governmental organization can use various methodological tools to achieve the highest level of quality. One of them is *benchmarking*, which is a systematic process used to evaluate the products, services, or processes of our organization and compare them with organizations considered to represent best practices, to improve them. The application of this comparison seeks to identify the best practices of other administrations to learn from them and improve the quality of a given action (Marciniak, 2015). Therefore, *benchmarking* is increasingly applied in the service quality management provided by governmental organizations, including consulates, which have had to deal with the constant development of society's digitalization, especially during the pandemic when digital communication has been a key tool for consulates to reach out to citizens. To this end, they have employed different platforms and digital tools to facilitate such communication and provide certain services. This period has seen an increase in requests and workload, as 'citizens' uncertainty has increased their willingness to consult official and accurate sources of information, as opposed to mass media saturated with fake news. Different governments have opted to develop the digital services provided by consulates through social media and other channels, increasing their online presence and improving their communication with their fellow citizens abroad. As stated by the Consulate General of Italy in Buenos Aires:

In order to further strengthen the preventive measures we have adopted in the face of the exceptional situation caused by the spread of COVID-19, and in line with the containment and prevention measures ordered by the Argentinean authorities, the teleworking modality has been adopted to allow in safe conditions, the provision of essential, emergency and assistance services to fellow citizens who so require, as well as the provision of ordinary services compatible with these modalities (Consulado General de Italia en Buenos Aires, 2021).

According to the results of the research conducted by Charycka and Gumkowska (2020) on the functioning of public and non-governmental organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic period, 50% of them provided all services to citizens, 33% have suspended their activities, and 27% have significantly reduced the services provided. As a result, 73% of the recipients of these services were unhappy with the quality of care provided to citizens. Many

migrants living in different countries (including Italians living in Catalonia) complained about the poor quality of 'consulates' digital services; although consulates used their digital channels most strongly to offer advice on return flights and repatriation procedures, but also to show solidarity with the local population affected by the pandemic and to explore conditions with host authorities seeking joint responses to the crisis (Instituto Mediterráneo Estudios de Protocolo).

These and other reflections motivate this work, whose general objective is the evaluation and improvement of the quality of the digital services provided by the Italian Consulate in Barcelona, based on the application of *benchmarking* as methodological and practical support for its completion.

## 2. Digitalization of consular services

By definition, a consulate is a permanent representation maintained by one state in another, with the primary purpose of protecting and assisting its nationals and promoting trade relations (Martí Martí, 2016).

Consulates provide many services to citizens, from the most generic to the most specific. Some examples are the renewal of documents for nationals of the sending state; acting as a notary, civil registrar, or exercising other administrative functions as long as they are not contrary to the laws and regulations of the receiving state; among others (Convenio de Viena sobre Relaciones Consulares, 1963). Many of these services are provided online. The most emblematic case is Estonia, which has revolutionized the concept of diplomatic digitization, digitizing practically all the most essential areas for citizens; from *e-identity* to *e-education*, *e-governance*, *e-healthcare*, *e-business*, etc. Another example is Switzerland. From 2014 to mid-2018, all Swiss consular representations offer the full range of services, from social welfare to registration of its citizens and issuing of passports, to civil status and many remotely (Burri, 2018).

In 2018 'Paraguay's Foreign Minister Luis Alberto Castiglioni announced that:

The country is committed to modernize and digitalize all consular services in order to put an end to the slowness of some bureaucratic processes, (...) putting an end to obsolete systems that allow manipulation and dishonesty (...) We will consolidate the sense of honesty and responsibility in this house so that it can be emulated by other institutions (Agencia de la Información Paraguaya, 2018).

In 2020, Greece introduced the *myConsulLive* project, a platform to offer Greek citizens the possibility to communicate quickly and easily with embassy and consulate officials as well as to apply for documents and certificates online.

Through this platform, citizens would be able to speak to a consulate official via video call. This is the first step in the plan to digitize consular services, with the aim of providing better service and less hassle for Greeks abroad (Ospino, 2020).

Spain began the digitalization process in 2016, although the most significant push occurred in 2020, with the pandemic caused by COVID-19. One of the programme's plans is the comprehensive digital transformation of the Consular Service of the Ministerio de Asuntos

exteriores, Unión Europea y cooperación [MAEUEC] promoting a reorientation of its activity by moving towards a 360° vision (Ministerio de Hacienda y Función Pública, 2021).

Looking back over the last few years, it's clear that the pandemic has triggered most countries to start considering digitizing consular services that are still performed face-to-face. Consulates are widely using ICTs (information and communication technologies) in their services and have a positive perception of the benefits of digitalization, including increased efficiency, improved accessibility, and enhanced customer satisfaction. However, consulates still face some challenges in their digital transformation journey, including data privacy and security, limited resources, and resistance to change. Digitalization of consular services has the potential to enhance the quality and efficiency of consular services significantly, but it also requires careful planning and management to ensure that the benefits are maximized, and the risks are minimized. They also recommend that consulates should continuously monitor the changing technology landscape and consider innovative solutions to keep up with the fast pace of technological development.

### 3. Tools and areas of application of digitalization in services provided by consulates

In a global society interconnected through online communities and networks with no borders, citizens have numerous communication channels to demand more transparency, relevant information, flexibility in service, and speed in responding to their needs from the administration.

In this paradigm, social networks and virtual communities become both an opportunity and a challenge for diplomacy. Tools such as websites, social media, and blogs have become a fundamental part of communication by public institutions and diplomatic bodies.

The consular sphere is where most interaction with the public is recorded through social networks, so it is not surprising that the objectives of the External Action Strategy include the need to improve communication and information to citizens regarding their assistance and protection by the Administration, particularly in situations of special difficulty (Martí Martí, 2016, p.54).

The following is an analysis of the main tools of digital diplomacy used in the consular sphere: websites, social networks, and blogs.

- **Websites**

According to the report published by the United Nations in 2014, the evolution of e-government and the respective government websites is based on four key stages:

1. Emerging stage: Government websites provide information on public policy, governance, laws, regulations, etc. Citizens can obtain up-to-date information on national government and ministries and can follow links to archived information;
2. Advanced stage: Government websites provide two-way electronic communication between the government and citizens, such as downloadable forms for government

services and applications. The websites have audio and video capabilities and are multilingual;

3. Transactional stage: Government websites engage in two-way communication with their citizens. It requires some form of electronic authentication of the 'citizen's identity to complete certain actions successfully. Websites process transactions such as for example, online tax filing or approval of certificates, licenses, and permits;
4. Connected stage: Government websites are proactive in soliciting information and feedback from citizens. E-services and e-solutions are cut across departments and ministries in a more transparent way. Information and data are transferred from government agencies through integrated applications. Governments have moved from a self-centred approach to a citizen-centric approach. An environment is created that encourages citizens to become more involved in government activities to have a voice in decision-making (United Nations, 2014, p. 195).

The website of a given consulate provides general information about the Consulate, such as the location of the office, the hours of operation, and the functions that the Consulate can or cannot perform for the citizens in its consular district. Information about the political, economic, and social situation of the receiving country can also be consulted, as well as information about bilateral relations between the sending and receiving states.

- **Social media**

Social networks change the diplomacy paradigm, allowing actors other than states, politicians, diplomats, or public bodies to participate. They bring significant added value to diplomacy, making it possible to be heard, amplifying messages, and, above all, listen to users. An important aspect to consider is the demographic challenge. As Manfredi (2014) states:

Around 45% of the 'world's population is under the age of 24. We will not be able to influence or convey a message if we are not on social networks. This means understanding how these networks work, how messages are transmitted, and what socio-cultural practices are common (Manfredi, 2014, n.p.).

In the case of consulates, this represents an excellent way of obtaining relevant information directly from their "clients".

Social media also allows diplomatic bodies to engage in dialogue, more or less immediately, with their audience, thus intensifying the reciprocal link. All these aspects are useful in facilitating consular work, especially during crisis situations.

- **Blogs**

Many countries use blogs to "publicise the work and experience of various diplomats" (Martí Martí, 2016, p.61).

These blogs, in addition to serving to make the consular function more transparent, visible, and credible, allow for the humanisation of diplomatic work, based on a closer and more personal vision. Moreover,

posts with useful information, curiosities and/or news, are easily disseminated through social networks (Martí Martí, 2016, p. 61).

Today there are many blogs of counsellors, ambassadors, consuls, directors, and deputy directors general, advisors, etc., who share publications of different approaches disseminated on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union, and Cooperation website.

#### 4. Benchmarking and its essence

There are many definitions of *benchmarking in the literature*. Some of them are mentioned below table:

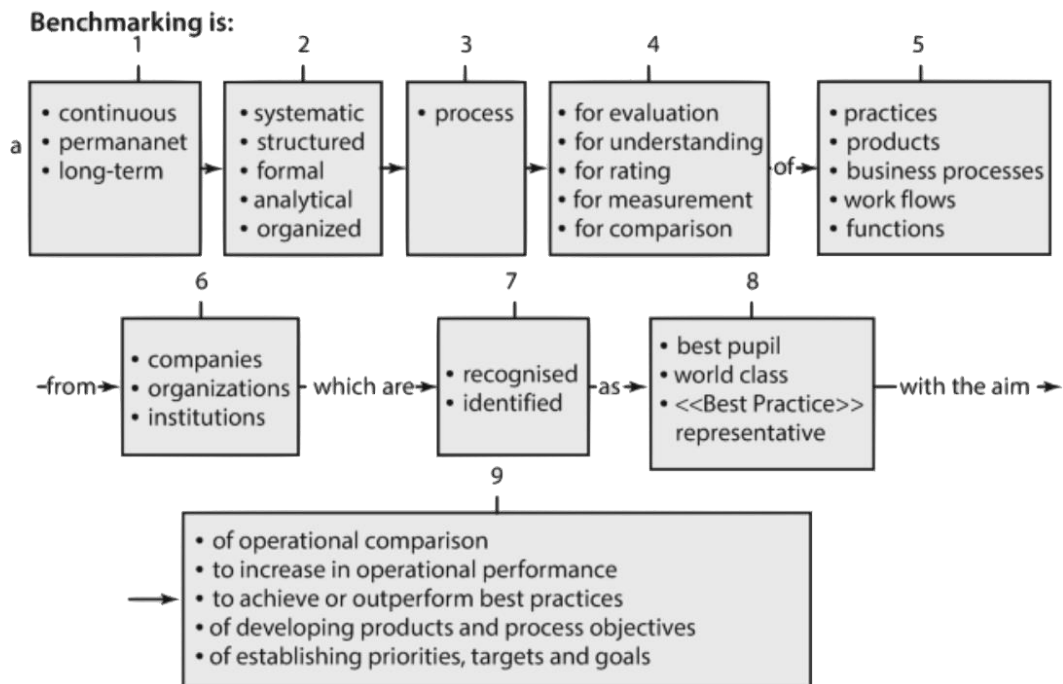
**Table 1.** Comparison of the Benchmarking definition by different authors

Author	Definition
Jacoby (1991)	<i>Benchmarking</i> is a tool for organizations to gain a competitive advantage by adapting and improving their processes and practices. Is a continuous improvement process that involves identifying, analyzing, and adapting best practices from other organizations to enhance one's own performance.
Spendolini (1992, p.11)	<i>Benchmarking</i> is a systematic and continuous process of evaluating products, services and work processes of organizations that are recognized as representing best practices for the aim of making organizational improvements.
Manene (2014)	<i>Benchmarking</i> is a way of determining how well a company performs compared to others.
Fazlagic (2006)	<i>Benchmarking</i> is the systematic process undertaken by a particular organization to learn from the best locally or globally, by <i>benchmarking</i> products, services, processes, methods, procedures, and strategies.
Centro de Políticas Comparadas de Educación (2009, p. 23)	<i>Benchmarking</i> is a continuous and systematic measurement process, which continuously measures and compares an organization's business processes against the processes of leaders anywhere in the world (...) to obtain information that helps the organization develop actions to improve its performance.

Source: own elaboration

The definition that seems to be the most complete and that has the capacity to adapt, independently of the subject that wants to use *benchmarking* and the field of action of this process, is the one indicated by Spendolini (1992):

*Benchmarking* is a systematic (1) and continuous (2) process (3) of evaluating (4) products (5), services (5), and work processes (5) of organizations (6) that are recognized (7) as representing best practices (8) for the aim of making organizational improvements (9). (p.11).



**Figure 1.** The "menu" of Benchmarking according to Spendolini

Source: own elaboration based on Spendolini (1992)

It is important to emphasize that *benchmarking* is not a "copy & paste" practice. It is more than that. As Harrington (1996) states: "*Benchmarking* means generating better solutions based on business knowledge. It is not about copying the best."

Marciniak (2016, p.175), quoting Valls Roig, (2000), completes this definition by pointing out that:

*Benchmarking* is not about copying. The idea is to stimulate creativity when adapting to our culture the superior practices that happen in other organizations or within our own, to achieve excellence and access leadership (p. 48).

Hernández Rodríguez and Cano Flores (2017) argue that the general objectives of any *benchmarking* project are:

- Analyse the results of other successful companies in our sector.
- Define how these results can be achieved.
- To make a database to establish objectives and strategies, and then implement them in the company (p.33).

There are fundamental aspects to be analysed before *benchmarking* is carried out. Among these aspects are quality, productivity, and time (Spendolini, 1992).

• **Quality**

In order to adopt a quality strategy, planning, organizational and analytical activities are involved that respond to specific learning objectives aimed at discovering, employing, and adopting new strategies for the various areas of the organization.

It is important to know how other companies form and manage their quality systems, apart from being used from a quality point of view according to the quality perceived by customers.

- **Productivity**

Productivity *benchmarking* is the search for excellence in the areas that control the resources that go into the company; productivity can be expressed by the volume of production and the consumption of resources, which can mean profit or loss.

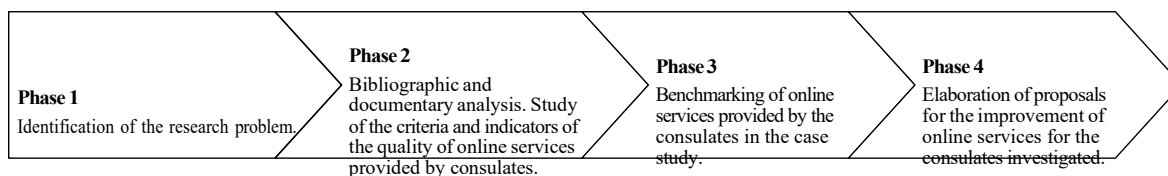
- **Time**

The study of time symbolizes the direction of industrial development in recent years. Time has become a driving factor in sales, administration, production, and distribution, leading to higher productivity. Developing time-focused programs has led to shorter lead times and, thus, increased competitiveness.

## 5. Research methodology

### 5.1. General methodology

The present work has been carried out in four phases, presented in Figure 2 and described below.



**Figure 2.** The sequence of the phases of the research carried out

Source: own elaboration

In the first phase, the research problems were identified by defining a series of questions to be answered during the development of the work. At the end of this phase, the objectives of the research were determined.

During the second phase of research, a bibliographical and documentary analysis was carried out on *benchmarking*, as well as on consulates, embassies, and diplomacy in general, in order to get a general picture and subsequently be able to go into more depth on the subject. Different indicators of the quality of services provided by consulates to citizens were also analysed.

In the third phase, the *benchmarking* methodology was applied to compare the digital services of the consulates investigated and, in this way, to be able to carry out the fourth and final phase, which consists of drawing up proposals for the improvement of the subjects investigated.



As a source of information, interviews with the Consuls of the Republic of Poland and Italy have been used, among others, to gain a broader view and more knowledge about quantitative data, as the latter are difficult to acquire through bibliographic sources.

## 5.2. Benchmarking methodology

*Benchmarking* is not a simple task, as it involves several aspects to be considered. As Marciniak (2016) states *benchmarking* involves the application of a methodology that requires the proper organisation and planning of a set of stages, phases, activities and/or tasks" (p.180). *Benchmarking* the digital services provided by the Polish Consulate in Barcelona (hereinafter also referred to as the Polish Consulate) and the Italian Consulate was carried out according to the methodology presented below. As shown in Figure 3, the proposed *benchmarking* methodology is divided into three phases:

- **Phase 1**

The first phase represents the planning of the *benchmarking*. In this phase, the *benchmarking* objectives, variables, and quality indicators have been defined, which will be fundamental to establish comparisons between the two consulates analysed. On the other hand, data collection techniques and sources will be established.

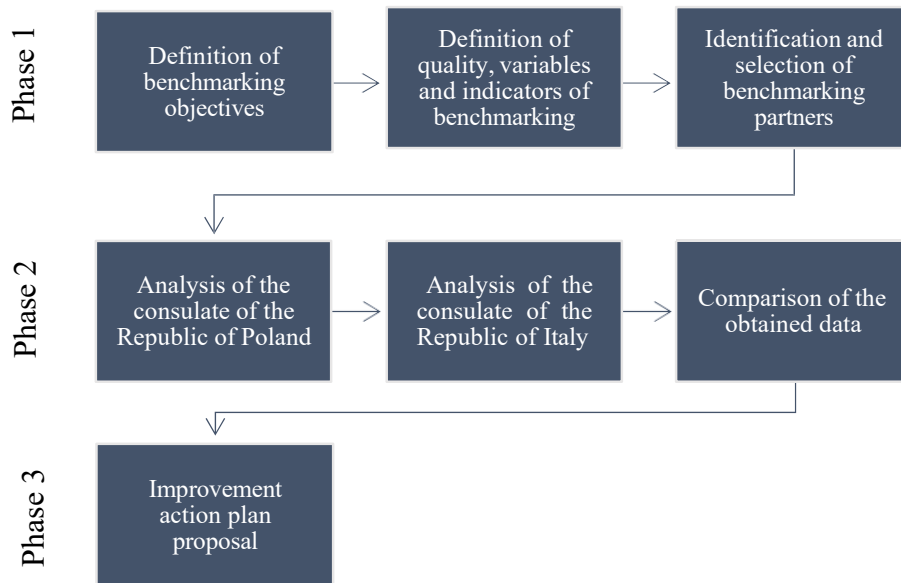
- **Phase 2**

In the second phase, *benchmarking* was carried out. All performance variables considered useful for the study were identified. Subsequently, the analysis of the consulates was carried out based on interviews with the two consuls.

The variables, indicators, methods, sources, and data collection instruments developed in the first phase were used. The results obtained from the *benchmarking* were also compared, determining the possible gaps between the two consulates.

- **Phase 3**

Finally, in the third and last phase, a proposal for an action plan to improve the quality of digital services provided by the two consulates investigated was drawn up.



**Figure 3.** Benchmarking methodology of the digital services offered by the Polish and Italian consulates in Barcelona

Source: own elaboration based on Marciniak (2016)

### 5.3. Limitations of the research

The present study on the *benchmarking* of digital services offered by the consulates general of the Republic of Poland and Italy in Barcelona has certain limitations and deficiencies that are presented below:

- Time available to conduct the research since other research methodologies, such as virtual ethnography and surveys addressed to Polish and Italian immigrants could not be used to know their perception of the quality of online services provided by the consulates under investigation.
- Lack of literature on the analysis of the application of *benchmarking* in the evaluation of diplomatic bodies, specifically consulates general. This led to an extrapolation of the existing information on the subject in the field of *benchmarking* in the business environment.
- Given the magnitude of existing indicators, the most appropriate ones were selected for *benchmarking*, excluding those that were not suitable for analysis or outside the context of the proposed study.

- The improvement proposal plan is valid only for the two subjects analysed since, unlike a standard *benchmarking*, the present study compares only the consulates general of Poland and Italy in Barcelona.

## 6. Benchmarking of digital consulate services: a case study of Poland and Italy

### 6.1. The context of reference

#### 6.1.1. Consulate of the Republic of Poland in Barcelona

The Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Barcelona is located at Avda. Diagonal 593-595; in Barcelona. Its main task is to protect the interests of the Polish state and its citizens in Catalonia and the Balearic Islands and to help them whenever they need it.

The Consulate is composed of five officials: Consul General Karolina Cemka, Consul Tomasz Gos, and three other officials in charge of the administration and finance department, consular and cooperation with Poland department and secretariat (Consulado General de Polonia en Barcelona, 2021; MAEUEC, 2021).

The consular district of the Polish Consulate includes the autonomous communities of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands.

The Consulate provides consular services to 20,000 Poles residing in its consular district: 17,000 in Catalonia and 3,000 in the Balearic Islands.

These services include activities in passport matters, activities in Polish nationality matters, activities in visa matters, issuance of certificates and permits, obtaining and transmitting documents, legalization activities, notarial activities, preparation and certification of translations, as well as activities in civil status matters.

Annually, according to estimates provided by Consul General Karolina Cemka in the interview held on 24 March 2021, the workload of the Consulate ranges between 4,000 and 7,000 people requesting consular services annually. It should be noted that the Polish Consulate is supported by the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Madrid, the most crucial diplomatic body of the country it sends to Spain, and by five honorary consulates located respectively in Andalusia, the Canary Islands, Galicia, the Community of Valencia, Murcia, Navarra, and Andorra.

#### 6.1.2. Consulate of the Republic of Italy in Barcelona

The Consulate General of the Republic of Italy in Barcelona is located at Calle de Mallorca 270. Its main objective is to protect the interests of the Italian State and its citizens in Catalonia, the Balearic Islands, Aragon, Murcia, and the Principality of Andorra and to assist

them whenever they need it. The Consulate is composed of six officials: Consul General Gaia Lucilla Danese, Consul Alessandra di Pippo and four other consular agents (MAEUEC, 2021).

The consular district of the Italian Consulate includes the autonomous communities of Aragon, Catalonia, Murcia, the Balearic Islands and Andorra. This Consulate provides consular services to 80,000 Italians residing in its consular district.

Among the services provided by the Consulate are civil status matters, notarial matters, activities in passport and visa matters, activity in Italian nationality matters, matters related to disputes, judicial assistance, and voluntary jurisdiction, matters related to the administration of private interests, matters related to maritime and air navigation, administrative matters, notarial matters, legalization activities, and translations.

It should be noted that the Italian Consulate is supported by the Embassy of the Republic of Italy in Madrid, the most crucial diplomatic body of the country it sends to Spain, and by five Honorary Consulates located respectively in Andalusia, Asturias, the Canary Islands, Castile and Leon, the City of Ceuta, Galicia, Navarra, and the Basque Country.

## 7. Benchmarking results applied to the case study

*Benchmarking was carried out during the months of February and April 2021 according to the methodology presented in Figure 3 and described above (point 5.2).*

- **Phase 1**

In the first phase, the objective of *benchmarking* was defined, and the areas of analysis, the variables, the *benchmarking* indicators, and the partners were identified and chosen.

The main objective was to gain in-depth knowledge of the digital services provided by the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Barcelona and the Italian Consulate in Barcelona, as well as to establish the level of quality of these services and define the existing gaps between the two. The results obtained have been used to draw up a proposal for an action plan to improve the quality of the digital services provided by the two consulates under investigation. In order to collect all the necessary information, an evaluation protocol (Table 2) has been designed, which has been useful both as an observation guideline and for the comparative evaluation carried out. The areas, variables, and indicators chosen for the research are presented below.

**Table 2.** Evaluation aspects of benchmarking

Scope	Variable	Indicator
<b>Institutional context</b>	Scope of action	Informs which is the consular district.
	Human resources	Indicate how many people are part of the Consulate. Explain the roles assigned to each worker. It outlines the consul general's career.
	Digital presence	Use of social networks. Use of blogs or forums.
<b>Usability and structure of the website</b>	Website structure	Contents of the navigation menu. Order of content on the website.
	Functionality of the website	Possibility to change the language. Possibility of web search. Easy to navigate.
<b>Information</b>	Contacts	It sets out the address of the Consulate. It indicates the timetables. It provides a telephone number and e-mail address. It lists the non-working days. Exposes emergency contacts.
	News	Group the news according to topics. Group the news in chronological order. It presents the most important news. It frequently exposes the new restrictions of COVID-19. Indicates the updated rules for travellers.
<b>Digital services offered</b>	Consular procedures	It indicates the services offered. It allows consulting the services available in the official language of the Consulate and the language of the receiving country. Deviations in the services offered between the official language of the Consulate and the language of the receiving country. Clearly explains the different steps to be taken to process services. It clearly indicates how to obtain an appointment.
	Consular fees	It clearly sets out the prices of the various consular procedures. It groups the different procedures according to the type of service offered. It offers the possibility to pay for procedures using different transactional methods.
	Quality of services	Good customer service. Positive feedback from users. Satisfaction with the time taken by users to complete procedures.

Source: own elaboration

• **Phase 2**

In this phase, a comparative analysis of the quality of the digital services provided by the two consulates was carried out to measure and evaluate the level of compliance with the indicators developed in the previous phase.

This information was collected by filling in the *benchmarking* protocol and using the data collection sources presented in Table 3.

The results obtained from the protocol have been configured using a Likert scale. For each indicator, a value between 1 and 4 has been chosen, depending on whether the indicator is less or more fulfilled, where: 1 = Does not fulfil at all; 2 = Fulfils little; 3 = Fulfils quite a lot; 4 = Fully fulfils. Due to the limited size of the article, Table 3 presents an example of the completed protocol.

**Table 3.** Example of a completed comparative assessment protocol

Variable	Indicator	Consulate of the Republic of Poland				Consulate of the Republic of Italy				Evidence
Field: Institutional context										
Scope of action	Informs which is the consular district	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	Consulate's websites
		Comment: Yes, it clearly states the consular district.				Comment: Yes, it clearly states the consular district.				
Human resources	Indicate how many people are part of the Consulate	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	Consulate's websites; Consular List (MAEUEC, 2021)
		Comment: Yes, the Consulate's template is set out, although it does not quite match the MAEUEC publication (2021).				Comment: No, only the Consul General is listed. There are no references to other members of the Consulate.				
	Explain the roles assigned to each worker	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	Consulate's websites; Consular List (MAEUEC, 2021)
Comment: Yes, the roles and responsibilities of staff are set out, although this is not entirely in line with the MAEUEC publication (2021).				Comment: No, only the Consul General is listed. There are no references to other members of the Consulate.						
It outlines the consul general's career	It outlines the consul general's career	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	Consulate's websites
		Comment: Yes, it gives a detailed account of the career path.				Comment: Yes, it gives a detailed account of the career path.				

Source: own elaboration

Once the *benchmarking* protocol had been completed, it was possible to observe and analyse the different indicators proposed, which made it possible to determine the level of quality of

both consulates' digital services. The existing gaps in this quality are then identified and analysed:

**Gaps in the institutional context**

The *benchmarking* on the institutional context and its comparative analysis (Table 4) shows that the three comparison variables do not show significant differences between the two consulates analysed. Examining in more detail, the Italian Consulate shows the following shortcomings: the number of people in the Consulate and their roles and, in general, the digital presence, since through its website it communicates only the official channels of the Italian Embassy in Madrid and has no official presence on social media. On the other hand, the Polish Consulate, although it has a presence on Twitter, and communicates on its official website, does not use blogs or forums.

**Table 4.** Gaps between the Polish and the Italian Consulate in the institutional context

Indicator		1	2	3	4
Scope of action	Informs which is the consular district				
Human resources	Indicate how many people are part of the Consulate				
	Explain the roles assigned to each worker				
	It outlines the consul general's career				
Digital presence	Use of social networks				
	Use of blogs or forums				

Explanation: Polish consulate ● Italian consulate ●●

Source: own elaboration

**Gaps in website usability and structure**

The *website usability and structure benchmarking* and its comparative analysis (Table 5) present some considerable differences. Firstly, the Polish Consulate's website is incorporated within the official website of the Polish government. Compared to the Italian Consulate, which has its own website independent from other institutional bodies, it presents confusion in terms of the structure of the website in general. Secondly, as it is incorporated within the Polish government website, the option to search for content on the website using the search bar is impractical, as it drags up results that are not very relevant. Finally, due to the above, navigation is less intuitive on the Polish website.

**Table 5.** Gaps between the Polish and Italian Consulate in website usability and structure

Indicator		1	2	3	4
Website structure	Contents of the navigation menu				●
	Order of content on the website		●		●
Functionality of the website	Possibility to change the language			●	●
	Web search facility		●		●
	Easy to navigate			●	●

Explanation: Polish consulate ● Italian consulate ●  
 Source: own elaboration

**Gaps in information to citizens**

The *benchmarking of* the gaps in information for citizens and its comparative analysis (Table 6), shows important differences in terms of contacts and news sections on the website. On the one hand, on the Polish Consulate's website, the non-working days due to public holidays are not updated, as those for 2020 are still displayed. On the other hand, on the website of the Italian Consulate, the emergency contacts are not listed in the contacts section but elsewhere on the website. Finally, it is worth noting that the Italian Consulate's website, unlike the Polish one, highlights the news about the restrictions caused by the pandemic and informs travellers about the latest restrictions.

**Table 6.** Gaps between Polish and Italian consulates regarding the information

Indicator		1	2	3	4
Contacts	It sets out the address of the Consulate				●
	It indicates the timetables			●	●
	It provides a telephone number and e-mail address				●
	It lists the non-working days				●
	Exposes emergency contacts		●		●
News	Group the news according to topics				●
	Group the news in chronological order				●
	Highlights of the most important news				●
	It frequently exposes the new restrictions by COVID-19		●		●
	It indicates the updated rules for travellers		●		●

Explanation: Polish consulate ● Italian consulate ●  
 Source: own elaboration



**Gaps in digital services offered**

Benchmarking of the gaps in the digital services offered and their comparative analysis (Table 7) shows significant gaps, especially in terms of the quality of the services offered. Analysing the opinions of users published on Google about the two consulates shows that users of the Italian consulate rate the service received negatively, as well as the length of consular procedures. In general, negative feedback is perceived.

Unlike the Italian Consulate, the Polish Consulate benefits from a better perception by its users in the above-mentioned aspects.

The two comparisons may be biased, as the sample of comments on the Italian Consulate - 788 reviews- (consulted on Google search engine on 02/05/2021) is much more representative compared to the comments received by users of the Polish Consulate -50 reviews- (consulted on Google search engine on 02/05/2021).

Finally, focusing on consular procedures and their respective fees, the two consulates do not present significant differences. It is worth noting that the Spanish version of the Polish Consulate's website offers fewer services than the Polish version. On the other hand, the Italian Consulate's website indicates that the only way to pay for consular services received is by bank transfer; however, the Polish Consulate offers more payment options.

**Table 7.** Gaps between the Polish and the Italian Consulate in the digital services offered

Indicator		1	2	3	4
Consular procedures	It indicates the services offered				
	It allows consulting the services available in the official language of the Consulate and the language of the receiving country				
	Deviations in the services offered between the official language of the Consulate and the language of the receiving country				
	Clearly explains the different steps to be taken to process a service				
	It clearly indicates how to obtain an appointment				
Consular fees	It clearly sets out the prices of the various consular procedures				
	It groups the different procedures according to the type of service offered				
	It offers the possibility to pay for procedures using different transactional methods				
Quality of services	Good customer service				
	Positive feedback from users				
	Satisfaction with the time taken by users to complete procedures.				

Explanation: Polish consulate ●—● Italian consulate ●—●

Source: own elaboration

• **Phase 3**

In the third and final phase, a proposed improvement plan was designed for the Polish (Table 8) and Italian consulates (Table 9) to close or reduce the gaps established in the previous phase.

**Table 8.** Proposed improvement plan for the Polish Consulate

<b>Strategic objective: to improve the quality of consular services offered</b>		
<b>Specific objective</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Actions</b>
Promoting digital presence	Use of blogs or forums	Implementation of blogs or forums on the website itself. It is important to give users a voice to know what they think and what their feelings are. The closer the Consulate is to its users, the more possibilities it will have to receive their inputs, and consequently, to know how and where to improve.
Improve the structure of the website	Contents of the navigation menu	Elaborate the design of a new website structure. A clear improvement, in this case, would be the development of its own website, independent from the central structure of the Polish government. This would make the navigation by users more efficient, as they would find only relevant information about the Consulate.
	Order of content on the website	
Improve the functionalities of the website	Web search facility	With the development of an own website, when searching on the website, results of little interest would not be crawled. This would make it quicker for users to search the web.
Improve contact information on the website	It lists the non-working days	Constantly update the Consulate's closing holidays. It can avoid repetitive questions from users, saving time for consulate officials.
Improving the news section of the website	Group the news according to topics	Develop a specific section for news on the website. Especially because of the pandemic, users need to know the latest updates on restrictions or travel updates. A good rule of thumb would be to group the various news items by topic.
	Highlights of the most important news	
	It frequently exposes the new restrictions by COVID-19	
	Indicates updated rules for travellers	
Improving consular procedures	Deviations in the services offered between the official language of the Consulate and the language of the receiving country	Align the services offered by the Consulate in the available languages. This can avoid confusion for users and provide value for those who prefer to browse the website in the Spanish language.

Source: own elaboration

**Table 9.** Proposed improvement plan for the Italian Consulate

<b>Strategic objective: to improve the quality of consular services offered</b>		
<b>Specific objective</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Actions</b>
<b>Improve the human resources section</b>	Indicates how many people are part of the Consulate	Incorporate on the website all employees of the Consulate with their respective roles and responsibilities. This would add transparency and professionalism to the Consulate.
	Explain the roles assigned to each worker	
<b>Promoting digital presence</b>	Use of social networks	Implementation of own social media channels and blogs or forums on the website. Opening channels in the most used social networks would not only represent closeness to users but would also help to know what users think and what are the most frequent questions they have. The same applies to the blog or forum. In this way, you could reach a wider audience and give more breadth to the messages you want to communicate.
	Use of blogs or forums	
<b>Improve contact information on the website</b>	Exposes emergency contacts	Implement emergency contacts in their respective section on the website. It would add value for users, as in case of an emergency it would make it easier to find these contacts.
<b>Improving the news section of the website</b>	Group the news according to topics	Group the different news items according to topics covered. This would be useful for users, as they would be able to access their preferred topics quickly.
<b>Improving consular procedures</b>	Deviations in the services offered between the official language of the Consulate and the language of the receiving country	Align the services offered by the Consulate in the available languages. This can avoid confusion for users and provide value for those who prefer to browse the website in the Spanish language.
<b>Improving consular fees</b>	It offers the possibility to pay for procedures using different transactional methods.	Increase methods of payment for consular services. Especially with today's multiple ways to pay, it would provide value for users.
<b>Improving the quality of services</b>	Good customer service	Increase users' perception of the quality of consular services. Offering training courses for employees on customer service could increase this perception. On the other hand, implementing social listening as an internal tool could improve users' perception, by identifying the problems that people report, the respective insights could be extracted and work on improving these insights.
	Positive feedback from users	
	Satisfaction with the time taken by users to complete procedures	

Source: own elaboration

Finally, it is necessary to point out that the indicators with low scores are those that clearly require the most urgent improvement, although those with higher scores are not exempt from review and must be dealt with as part of the continuous improvement process.

## 8. Conclusions

The main task of the consular service is to protect the interests of the state and its citizens abroad. The way in which this task is carried out is of great practical importance for millions of citizens residing permanently or temporarily abroad (Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). This research has provided a broader picture of the quality of digital services provided by some consulates that are part of the public administration. Such services are very important as postulated by the European Commission:

Efficient and transparent public services have a direct impact on the quality of our lives. If fully exploited, digital tools that support the modernisation of public administrations can support efficient and user-centred administrative processes, improve the quality of services through flexible and personalised interactions, and increase the efficiency of the public sector (Comisión Europea, 2020).

This work has been developed from the definition, characteristics, and the social role played by consulates, to the *benchmarking* of the digital services provided by the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland and Italy in Barcelona. This has made it possible to determine the existing gaps between the digital services they provide to their citizens, as well as to draw up a proposal for improving the quality of these services.

The *benchmarking* results show that in many of the variables analysed there are significant gaps between the two consulates studied. Both have a high margin for improvement in the quality of their services, although in some comparative variables they are in a similar situation.

The first variable corresponds to the institutional context of the consulates. In this field, the main difference was the absence of the Italian Consulate's failure to explain to the other members of the consular body, their respective roles, and responsibilities (only the trajectory of the Consul General is indicated). It should also be noted that the Italian Consulate does not have a presence on social media.

In relation to the usability and structure of the website, several gaps have been detected between the two consulates. The Polish Consulate shows shortcomings both in the content of the navigation menu and the general order of the website together with the possibility of searching, unlike the Italian Consulate.

Regarding the information, there are many gaps between the two diplomatic bodies analysed. Firstly, when analysing the contacts variable, the Italian Consulate indicates the opening hours, although it does not provide the opening hours of the telephone helpline. Secondly, the Polish Consulate does not indicate the updated non-working days on its own website, as it continues to display the previous year's holidays. Thirdly, the Italian Consulate does not clearly announce emergency contacts in the relevant section of the website. Finally, although both do not group news according to topics, the Polish institutional body does not display news highlights, new restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the latest rules for travellers on its own website.

Finally, analysing the last area of digital services offered by the two consulates, there are considerable dissimilarities. In the consular procedure's variable, the Polish Consulate presents differences in terms of the possibility of consulting the services available in Spanish,

as some services are not available in that language. However, the Italian diplomatic body lacks clarity in explaining the steps to follow in order to process a given service, as well as in indicating how to obtain an appointment in person.

Another aspect is the possibility of making payments for consular procedures, where the Italian Consulate only offers bank transfers, while the Polish Consulate offers more options. Regarding the variable of the quality of services offered, the Italian Consulate, compared to the Polish Consulate, shows significant deficits in terms of the attention given to citizens and the long waiting times for bureaucratic procedures.

The main objective of *benchmarking* has been useful not only to determine the gaps between the two consulates but also to identify the strengths of the consulates analysed and to be able to provide a broader view of these institutional bodies.

This research does not aim to classify the consulates analysed as good or bad in providing digital services but rather to identify opportunities for improvement for both diplomatic bodies, as no similar studies have been found in the literature.

It should be stressed that the aim of the project has been to identify the level of their quality, as well as opportunities for improvement.

As stated by Gairín, quoted by Marciniak (2015), "the objective of *benchmarking* will always be to learn from what others do well in order to adapt it to one's own reality and thus increase efficiency and effectiveness" (p. 131).

Applying it to the present case study, Burt, Robison & Fulton (1998) are convinced that:

"*Benchmarking* comparable practices from industry or other elements of government should be an integral part of the change plan. Routinely practiced in progressive corporations, *benchmarking* is used to ensure competitiveness by introducing efficiencies, reducing overhead, and improving quality" (p. 71).

Future research should bear in mind that the variability of consular service quality conditions in the digital era implies the need to investigate the determinants of consular service quality, adjusting the *benchmarking* methodology applied to ensure continuous updating.

## 9. Discussion and conclusions

*Benchmarking* has been a proper tool to carry out the present study, analysing the performance of the consulates general of Poland and Italy in Barcelona.

Evaluating government portals could be considered an important and necessary first step towards more sophisticated studies on e-government implementations (Sandoval-Almazan, Gil-Garcia & Leyva, 2012).

The methodology used to carry out the *benchmarking* was adequate to achieve the objective, obtain solid results, and draw up the improvement plan for the services provided by the two consulates investigated. These results will be presented to the consulates and analysed

together with the improvement plan proposal so that they can implement them in their daily practice.

Digitalization and diplomacy are increasingly linked, especially in the last years. The first adds value to the second, feeding back into the other.

As stated by Yerina, Mazurenko and Demydiuk (2021):

"The transformation of the public administration system in the direction of digitalization has become a global trend. The basic component of public administration – e-government – plays a key role in establishing information communications between various branches of government, citizens, and business, in ensuring quality standards for the provision of administrative services" (p.7).

In turn, digital transformations in the field of public administration are aimed at improving the quality of service for citizens and businesses and increasing the openness, transparency, and efficiency of public bodies (Matvejiuk, 2019).

As it is well pointed out by Berntzen and Olsen (2009). "Governments are introducing new e- government services every day, and *benchmarking* is an important mechanism for keeping track of developments and a source for identifying best practices, but as the number of e- government services increases, data collection becomes more challenging".

As the last reflexion during the interview with Consul General of Poland in Barcelona Karolina Cemka, she stated that:

It cannot be excluded that tomorrow the most demanded consular services such as passports and visas will be completely digitalized. Digitalization is very important, but we cannot forget the old ways that have brought so many benefits to society. One does not exclude the other. I think it will all be quite subjective and depend on the policies of each country. Diplomacy must be very prudent, calm, and long-term.

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