

MODERNISING DIPLOMACY: FROM ETIQUETTE TO EFFECTIVENESS*

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Formality and ceremonial procedures often come to mind as a rather inherent feature of diplomatic practice. In the fast-paced, ever-evolving global arena, where the Heraclitean axiom 'everything flows' remains relevant as ever, the diplomatic milieu could not have remained untouched.

The gradual transition from traditional to a more contemporary diplomacy comes – in part – as a result of the changing global dynamics. Its footprint can be identified in the bits of contemporary diplomatic practice, with digitalisation at the core.

But there is, in fact, much more to it than what is often perceived as a mere change of the instruments employed in diplomacy. It is a process of transformation in diplomatic culture, which finds its root-causes in a number of parameters and timidly emerges at various levels.

Efficient and results-oriented diplomacy

There is a simple, overarching principle guiding us through: getting things done. Also, getting them done properly and, furthermore, in the most cost-efficient way. This approach can explain and justify the shift of focus from formality to substance; from the vehicle used to the end-result and the added value it may, or may not, bring to an organisation.

Effectiveness paired with efficiency is the ultimate goal and for that to be attained, it is necessary to have quality content complemented by lean and flexible structures (and attitudes). Disposing of what is cumbersome, anachronistic and – ultimately – superfluous, to make way for what is functional, sustainable and geared towards results.

Resourceless-ness vs. resourcefulness

Adaptation of any sort usually occurs as a consequence of a certain need. Contemporary diplomatic practice is no exception to this rule. With the current tendency requiring us to do more with less, limited resources – both human and monetary – lead foreign services to seek alternative routes in carrying out their mandates and achieving their strategic goals.

This applies all the more to small states, which naturally have more limited capacity, and particularly in the context of the European Union, where all member states are called to equally assume their (institutional)

* The ideas expressed reflect solely personal views of the author.

responsibilities, so as to fulfil their role as fully-fledged members of the EU.

Remaining operational and effective is a key challenge when functioning with limited capacity. This undoubtedly requires diplomatic services to adapt to circumstances and devise alternative practices, making the best out of what is available. Being innovative may not be a *sine qua non*, but being resourceful, flexible and able to think outside the box are certainly necessary components of remaining effective, and thus relevant.

European diplomacy: leading by example

The EU may often be criticised for its cumbersome and bureaucratic machinery. Nevertheless, when taking a closer look one can identify certain elements that render the EU as global actor a fine sample of modern diplomacy, in the sense that its very own hybrid nature makes it more responsive to realities following a needs-based approach.

European diplomacy was placed under the umbrella of a diplomatic service when the European External Action Service was launched in December 2010. This EU foreign policy organ reflects the hybrid patterns of the EU itself and constitutes an innovative approach to the traditionally formalistic diplomatic system.

The EEAS, with its extensive network of EU delegations across the globe, sets the example by virtue of its unique structures alone. In there one may observe a symbiosis of foreign policy professionals from different walks of life: EU officials (*fonctionnaires*) previously employed with the European Commission's or the Council's external relations services, seconded or detached career diplomats from national diplomatic services, contracted personnel, or even temporary agents.

The result is an amalgam of diplomatic cultures, encompassing a wide variety of features that originate from different working cultures as well as professional backgrounds, with a direct impact on the process of transition to contemporary diplomacy.

Recap

Diplomacy today should disentangle from stiff formalities that used to be a main characteristic of traditional diplomatic practice. Instead, modern-day diplomacy should be flexible enough, so as to be able to adequately respond to current needs, with a view to fulfilling its role in an efficient and effective manner.

In this vein, the specificities of a given situation at hand should be taken into account. At the same time, decisions leading to tailor-made solutions should be taken with a sense of pragmatism and a degree of adaptability. After all, it is the result that matters.