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Empathy in Diplomacy²

ABSTRACT

The authors argue that diplomacy as a higher-order cooperative activity is possibly only against the backdrop of assumptions about a prior disposition of those taking part in it to reach out to their counterparts not only rationally, but also emotionally. While the traditional, negotiations-based model of diplomacy continues to be verbally depicted as the generic model for diplomacy as a whole, it is essentially a negative stereotype that portrays diplomatic relations as compromise-seeking efforts between otherwise entrenched opposed positions. Modern diplomacy transcends this traditional model and can thus be called “integrative diplomacy”: it arises from broadening perceptions of common identities and similarities between the various communities, and thus rests much more on empathy, sympathy and solidarity than the negotiations-based model. It is thus not surprising that the integrative methodology of diplomacy makes it predominantly multilateral, as opposed to structurally fundamentally bilateral traditional negotiations.

Keywords: diplomacy, internationalisation, conflict-resolution, empathy.

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² This paper arises partially from an earlier work by Aleksandar Fatić, entitled “Modern diplomacy in the Balkans”, *Montenegro Journal of Foreign Policy*, vol. 1, no. 1–2, 1998, pp. 61–74. The text has been substantially changed, except for the introductory remarks that remain the same. The paper was presented to the Cultural Diplomacy Symposium, organized by the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, Berlin, 11–15 May 2011.

Controversies and pleasantries: A parallelism

Modern diplomacy in Europe is faced with a paradox. It takes place in an enlarged diplomatic arena with an increased number of highly diverse actors, who all wish to take part in a common cooperative effort, yet it deals with more regional conflicts than ever in the history of the Cold War. Diplomatic pleasantries are exchanged at the same time as tough negotiation efforts take place. The frameworks of loyalties are no longer clear, because they shift from case to case. Traditional loyalties are often in collision with current circumstances and national interests, and new cooperation drives are frequently soured by the resentment of a party's role in regional conflicts. The pressure that is placed on diplomacy is increasing. The ability of diplomatic negotiators, backed but not always totally covered by strategic advantages of their national assets, or those of the alliances on whose behalf they act, has become the deciding factor of successful conflict-prevention, management and, eventually, resolution.

The game of diplomatic negotiation takes place in a multi-polar world, with a plurality of major strategic interests, in a united Europe and a strengthened trans-Atlantic security partnership, against the backdrop of an increasingly widening rift between those who wish to see the joint European ideal fully realised, and those who want to place the unification process under their strategic control.³ The pleasantries remain the essential part of the game that makes contact possible, but the controversies are the substance of modern European diplomacy as much as they have ever been.

In this sense, the countries undergoing a period of social and political transition are finding themselves in a new context. Their interdependence is increasing, and the globalization of trade, mutual military assurances and cooperation, cultural contacts and exchange, is reflecting on modern diplomacy as well. Cross-cultural dimensions of diplomacy are an integral part of today's diplomatic skills. Ever more diplomatic efforts, especially those aimed at tackling regional crises, take place under the legitimisation umbrella and sometimes operational coordination of large international organizations, which during the Cold War had played only a minor part in world affairs. Diplomatic bodies decide the fates of nations that are not used to taking those bodies seriously, and are only learning to do so now. Some more stable countries compete for membership in major global decision-making bodies, and sometimes face rejection in the face of their own self-perception as increasingly important for their regions and for the world.

The training of diplomats in this new age must change substantially. The so-called "people skills" will play a much more important role in that training than the traditional disciplines such as history, politics and ideology.

³ See Aleksandar Fatić, "Russia courts Southeast Europe", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 31, no. 3, December 2010, pp. 441–64.

The internationalisation of local controversies and conflicts creates the need for a virtual space of diplomatic activity. Modern information technology is taking an increasing slice of modern diplomacy away from the embassies, and consultative decision-making is replacing the traditional “top-to-bottom” negotiation. Regional integration makes national specificity less relevant as a hindrance to cooperation, and more perceivable as an objective variable that is merely to be taken into account in the execution of communal decisions and policies. This seriously questions the traditional sentiments of sovereignty and self-sufficiency, which are facing the necessity of being seriously revised. Conflicts in diplomatic practice thus increasingly emanate from the convulsions of an old era faced with an increased globalization and internationalisation, and less so from differences in the interpretation of what laws and norms say. The phrase “international community” is indicative of this conflict, because it denotes a collective of consultative decision-makers with a substantial clout in military, economic and diplomatic terms, which often tramples the sovereignty of nations undergoing troublesome transitions marked by a lagging back in fully comprehending the new world realities.

The whole picture thus created is additionally complicated by short-term benefit-seeking behavior of specific members of the international community, who take advantage of their cutting-edge positions in certain areas, and impose one-sided decisions on the consultative collectives. This, in turn, leads to a perception of inconsistency of principles within the international community by those “outside it”, and makes the job of diplomats dealing with crises “on the ground” more difficult.

Empathy, conflict-resolution

A personal element of modern diplomacy consists of the key role played by more or less charismatic elected officials, whose personal preferences and taste often decide the fate of many negotiations at least as much as “national interest” objectively perceived. This makes for an increasing significance of new methodologies, including inter-personal relations and the ability to put the message across to the interlocutor without eliciting defensive posturing. Such interpersonal dynamics require a number of psychological and emotional prerequisites, arguably the most important of which is empathy. Without the ability to effectively and transparently empathize with a different community and their political representatives many disputes just cannot be solved without violence. The contemporary situation with terrorism is a poignant example: the principle of “no negotiations with terrorists”, while seemingly rational, is in fact a classic case of failed understanding of what terrorism stands for. People willing to commit grave crimes against civilians because they feel that their political or

religious cause has no realistic chance of being effectively addressed through the existing institutions have become so fundamentally alienated from mainstream politics because of the complete lack of empathy for their cause, which is often quite legitimate in itself. Aspirations to autonomous self-governance in an own state can hardly be considered illegitimate, yet if they are systematically blocked throughout the institutional system, some groups will resort to terrorism in order to draw attention to their cause and force the relevant decision-makers to yield to their demands. A global marginalization of certain religious groups may reach the same outcome. While structural violence against groups is not always the motive for terrorism, it usually is: all major terrorist groups, apart from the various sects and Islamic religious zealots, tend to be connected with a political movement that addresses otherwise legitimate interests and right: the Shinn Fein in the Northern Ireland, the Basque movement in Spain, or the Palestinian groups in the Middle East. All of these groups try to address their national cause or their aspiration to a stable statehood through terrorist activity, which they themselves consider a forced strategy that they resort to in the absence of legitimate avenues to address their cause.

Empathy is a crucial element of diplomacy aimed to prevent conflict because it allows us to cross the cultural and geographic divide through an emotional reaching out to the other party: while we may not sufficiently understand the worldview of the Palestinians in Jericho, and may not know enough about their political and religious leaders, their current state of institutional relations with Israel, and the perceptions of political violence within the otherwise gentle and inclusive Palestinian community, a visit to Jericho will do enough to trigger empathy for the people who are above 80% unemployed, forced to cross borders with barbed wire and machine guns pointed at them while they undergo strip search every day, just in order to get to their jobs. We may not understand the rational aspects of the Palestinians' worldview; still, we are able to empathize with them on an emotional level. A diplomacy based on empathy is more likely to generate consensus and compromise than a large degree of rational understanding without the ability to self-identify with the plight of those who we negotiate with.

Generally speaking, our attitudes are shaped as much by emotional as they are by rational considerations. Even the liberal views of justice, which are extremely rationalised in the legion of literature that is being produced constantly about the topic, remain squarely based on emotions: repugnance to crime, corruption and violence, and a feeling that reciprocity is called for in the treatment of those who commit them.⁴

⁴ Robert Solomon, *A passion for justice: Emotions and the origin of the social contract*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Massachusetts, 1990.

Techniques of conflict-resolution: de-escalation, confidence building, mediation, and economic encouragement

There are 4 basic principles of conflict-resolution, namely de-escalation, confidence building, mediation, and economic encouragement. De-escalation implies efforts aimed at reducing the emotional potential of the conflict to lead to a lasting falling apart of the parties. In cases of ethnic conflict, de-escalation cannot be achieved without establishing an effective control of hate-mongering media.

Confidence-building is closely linked to *de-escalation*, and includes setting up decision-making bodies of mixed ethnic, ideological or racial composition, disseminating information relating to the real problems the communities have, and proposing and supporting projects by local actors aimed at invigorating the collective practical spirit, while ignoring the mutual differences that have, as a rule, been blown out of every proportion by national elites. Confidence-building also includes the setting up of judicial and conflict-prevention institutions and forces that practically warrant to all those who feel that they are in weak and vulnerable positions that no aggressive action will be taken against them by the other sides.

Mediation involves efforts by credible and impartial international actors aimed at facilitating reconciliation and resolution of disputes in an optimally mutually satisfactory way. This, as a rule, excludes the possibility of any maximum solutions from the point of view of any side, and thus promotes the culture of compromise and conciliation.

Finally, *economic encouragement* is essential if a culture of conflict and, for the elites, of gain from the conflict, is to be replaced by a culture of economic welfare and legitimate economic gain. This is especially important in post-autocratic or formerly racially divided states, where the need to secure a lasting cooperation is coupled with the need to promote a peaceful transition to a tolerant society. Economic incentives include international grants and joint ventures with local partners that will create short- and medium-term economic effects to stimulate authentic local economic rationalism and growth. The creation of jobs is a crucial part of economic encouragement, because former soldiers and veterans of social conflicts (including hooligans) tend to become a source of political violence if they remain as disenchanting social stratum of the long-term unemployed, an unwanted legacy of a social conflict that most citizens would rather forget.

One way to understand the role of economic incentive and empathy in resolving social conflicts is to contrast it with the sole use of repression to putatively “stamp out” societal violence. An example of social conflict in some countries is the violence that arises from an intolerance of minority social groups,

such as the gay and lesbian communities. In a recent outbreak of street violence on the occasion of a gay parade in Belgrade, Serbia, in 2010, it became apparent that the group leading the violence was an organization called “Obraz”, including mainly young people with strongly heterosexual views who considered the gay community to be based on unnatural and socially unacceptable aspirations to equalise the homosexual and the heterosexual orientation as constructive for the prospects of a society. Subsequently the leader of “Obraz” a young man in his 20s, with no prior criminal record and with a pregnant wife, was convicted of “planning the violence” (although he had been arrested prior to the parade and the violence taking place) and sentenced to 2 years in prison, although the law allows all sentences up to 3 years in duration to be converted to parole. His pregnant wife was sentenced to one year of house arrest. At the same time, a process against the wife of one of the most notorious wartime criminals and assassins from the ranks of the Serbs, the late Željko Arnatović Arkan — Svetlana Ražnatović, known as a popular folk singer, was abruptly finalized by a deal between her and the prosecution. Svetlana Ražnatović, charged for grand corruption because she had illegally sold football players from her late husband’s football club, confessed guilt in exchange for one year house arrest and a fine of a million and a half euro.⁵ Thus a situation in the public was created where a notorious criminal is sentenced in much the same manner as a young person with no criminal record, guilty of inciting violence out of conviction. The balance of justice, disturbed as it has been by these two verdicts, triggered serious objections to the Serbian judicial system, which is currently under EU review due to irregularities in the appointment of judges and prosecutors.

Clearly justice would have been served better by “social diplomacy”, as violence out of conviction is most effectively addressed by mapping out the convictions and their limits, and establishing a dialogue to ensure the recognition of another’s conviction or lifestyle. Equally clearly, repression is bound to generate new divisions and reinforce the old ones, especially when sentences are passed flying in the face of other, obviously unjust judicial outcomes, such as that for Svetlana Ražnatović.

Solidarity, trust, and back to empathy

Much has been written about solidarity as the glue of society, or “the social tissue” that allows the smooth running of social interactions and transactions.⁶

⁵ *Pressonline*, Belgrade, 21 April 2011, http://www.pressonline.rs/sr/vesti/vesti_dana/story/158650/Vo%C4%91i+%27Obraza%27+dve+godine+zatvora!.html, accessed 23 April 2011.

⁶ E.g. Aleksandar Fatić, *Freedom and Heteronomy: An essay on the liberal society*, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, 2009, pp. 5–41.

According to Ian Macneil, solidarity is an element of group dynamics that does not necessarily presuppose trust:

Solidarity or social solidarity is a state of mind or, rather, a state of minds. It is a belief not only in future peace among those involved but also in future harmonious affirmative cooperation. (An equally good word for solidarity is „trust“.) Solidarity by no means requires liking the one trusted nor is it dependent upon a belief that the other is altruistic; nor does solidarity necessarily imply friendship, although friendship often is a manifestation of solidarity. From the viewpoint of an individual, he may sacrifice solidarity, enhance it, or even, in theory, maximise it if he has no conflicting goals.⁷

The strictly rationalistic concept of solidarity, while perhaps sufficient to explain why solidarity is desirable, or even necessary, unavoidably leaves out the emotional aspects of why solidarity ought to exist in a society, even if it had no instrumental value. The positive value of a community as opposed to a discrete, a-social individual, which is inherent in Aristotle's infamous definition of man as a "political animal", carries a particular emotional load, and is closely connected with trust. In fact, there are ways to perceive trust as a moral imperative, even in situations where it is exhibited without prior experience. In his *The moral foundations of trust*, Eric Uslaner argues that there is a legitimate moral expectations that we extend to other members of our community that they will trust us, even if they had no prior experience with us, unless, or until, they gain sufficient evidence that we are *not* trustworthy.⁸

The entire argument on whether trust is required for solidarity or not depends on the way one perceives the morality of trust and solidarity. If solidarity is seen as merely desirable for the effective conduct of transactions, which is Macneil's view, then trust, as a partly emotional relationship, may not be part and parcel of solidarity. However, if solidarity is seen as an essential moral requirement in an organic community, which is a view shared by us, and one with a long philosophical history at least from Aristotle onwards, then it includes trust as an emotional and moral relationship that makes solidarity morally desirable; it would be contradictory to claim that solidarity is morally required, while trust is morally neutral, because that would mean that positive moral worth would be attached to solidarity with people of whose actions one disapproves and whom one finds untrustworthy. Morally required solidarity entails that the efforts with which one shows solidarity are in themselves subject of positive moral evaluation. In other words, the subjects of actions that command solidarity are

⁷ Ian R. Macneil, "Exchange revisited: Individual utility and social solidarity", *Ethics*, vol. 96, no. 3, April 1986, pp. 567–93.

⁸ Eric M. Uslaner, *The moral foundations of trust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

morally positive characters, thus necessarily trustworthy. Solidarity with an untrustworthy or bad person would not *necessarily* carry a positive moral worth. (It would not necessarily carry a negative moral worth either, and would have to be judged on a case-by-case basis, but our point is that solidarity as a generally desirable element of social dynamics can only be based on the presupposition of a general trustworthiness of the people with whom solidarity is shown. Some people who are not trustworthy might deserve solidarity due to various considerations, such as our willingness to sacrifice our reputation or interests to help such people, but the principled meaning of solidarity is that of enhancing activities that in themselves are socially constructive: solidarity with those in need means giving, with the courageous ones, acting courageously, with successful athletes, supporting them; however, solidarity with criminals is generally considered a crime in itself, and solidarity with adulterers is considered morally reprehensible. One might show solidarity with a repentant adulterer, in supporting him rather than punishing him, however solidarity in itself as an active principle is then tied to the act of repentance, and not to adultery itself. Thus, once solidarity is seen as a morally tilted relationship, namely as one with positive moral worth, trust is also seen as an inclusive and equally morally worthy relationship.

Let us look, however, at why solidarity and trust are morally worthy. Both relationships ultimately depend on one's ability to identify with another, to share in another's predicament as a human being and as a member of the same political community. Such sharing has cognitive and value-laden aspects: it is easier for us to share the views and predicament of some people than that of others; this cognitively depends on our experience and imagination. In some basic human situations, such as those of the Palestinians in Jericho, however, the cognitive requirements are so low (it is so clear to everyone that the people are suffering) that the emotional aspect of solidarity becomes particularly apparent: the sharing in the easily understandable *emotions* of grief and deprivations. In other words, the emotional side of solidarity is empathy.

Diplomacy, as opposed to conflict, is a cooperative activity aimed at achieving optimum outcomes with the optimum expenditure of resources and within acceptable bounds of social cost. Such parameters clearly require the same dynamic pre-requisites as any other cooperative social activity, including both trust and solidarity. While the diplomatic game, coated in pleasantries, but based on controversies, is far less transparent than many ordinary social interactions and transactions, its effective conduct depends heavily on unsaid norms of honesty: modern diplomacy, due to its dynamism and wide reach, does not tolerate lies. The modern "non-papers", "off-the-record" conversations and diplomatic consultations rest on a clear expectation of truthfulness and confidence; once a diplomatic actor abuses this expectation, he loses credibility

in the long term and sacrifices much of his potential diplomatic effectiveness. Thus the optimum solutions that modern diplomacy seeks are likely to be most readily available in situations where solidarity with the interlocutor and mutual trust, arising from empathy, are opulent.

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