

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN THE POST-COMMUNIST SPACE

Cultural diplomacy remains neglected as a tool of intercommunal relations in many parts of the world. In particular, the “classic” model of cultural diplomacy is ineffective in the post-communist area. This article argues that the source of this failure lies in the imposition by former communist regimes of the wrong understanding of the role of religion, history, and ethnic identity in society. This led to the emergence of many “cultural” conflicts after the abolishment of the communist monopoly on power. The author relates a number of reasons why Central European countries are particularly well placed to foster cultural diplomacy that could help resolve frozen conflicts in the former USSR and former Yugoslavia countries, and to bring Eastern European countries closer to the West.

Egidijus Vareikis*



* Dr. Egidijus Vareikis is a Member of the Lithuanian Parliament.



Almost all the present conflicts in the world are of a cultural nature, i.e. they are fueled by religious, historical, and ethnic misunderstandings. Even though some of them have an economic dimension, such as wars declared to ensure oil or river passage, often underlying is a more fundamental and even moral conviction to defend one's own religious or ethnic identity.

Despite the logic that cultural conflicts can be resolved mostly by finding cultural "solutions", cultural diplomacy is still very much neglected in peacebuilding. Cultural diplomacy is a set of means to promote cultural relations between national or ethnic cultures. Societal aspects such as heritage, intellect, and education link societies, state institutions, and NGOs across borders. Cultural diplomacy, unlike official state-to-state relations, functions without government intervention, and can include transactions of private trade, people-to-people exchanges, tourism, student flows, communication, books and works of art, migration, media access, and intermarriage.

Cultural diplomacy is a concept oft-misunderstood. It is marginalized as "NGO level" or "second track" diplomacy. In reality, cultural diplomacy can be even more effective than formal political agreements and geographic or economic arrangements. According to the classic idea of Carl von Clausewitz, ceasefire can stop a war, but only conciliation can bring real peace.¹

Unlike other forms of diplomacy, cultural diplomacy is not highly formalized. That provides it with greater freedom of action through the elements of well understood culture: art, education, ideas, history, science, medicine, technology, religion, customs, mannerisms, commerce, philanthropy, sports, language, professional vocations, hobbies, etc. The various media by which these elements may be communicated render them a tool for today's conflict resolution and confidence building efforts. Cultural diplomacy can also be enhanced by other elements of diplomacy, such as foreign policy, religious "ecumenism," and establishing relationships of trust. Finally, cultural diplomacy produces those levels of mutual understanding, trust, and comfort by contact with foreign cultures that promote better international relations in other fields including, commercial, diplomatic, and military.

Cultural diplomacy is used in many places and cases, with successes and failures worldwide. However, the conflicts in the region of states formerly ruled by communists are far from resolution largely because instruments of cultural diplomacy are used incorrectly; sometimes deepening conflicts rather than solving them.

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), p. 162.

“Cultural Traumas” of Post-Communist Societies

What was wrong with the societies that existed under communist rule, and why are their cultural conflicts difficult to solve?

First and foremost, the legacy of the Communist Party’s domination shaped the cultural identity of societies in rather unique ways. First, the Party tried to change the role of religion in society. According to Marxist ideology, religion is an unnecessary element of society –merely an “opiate of the masses”– and would die out in one or two generations. The role of the administration was to “help” this process along with policies of atheistic education and obstacles to the practice of religion. The origins of such policies’ logic stemmed from the “Darwinist” understanding of the universe and strictly biological nature of the human being. Religious believers were considered to be an uneducated segment of society or even worse – enemies of the proletarian ideology.



Second, the Communist Party tried to reassess the role of history. Like religion, history was also considered an item of minor significance. Theses of Marx stating that “proletarians have no homeland” can be extended into the notion that proletarians have no history as well. Marx said, “The history of all hitherto existing human society is the history of class struggles.”² They did not need history because despite the events of the past, all proletarians were approaching the same state of happiness – communism. Historical differences simply were not important; international conflicts between communist societies were deemed impossible.

Third, national, and ethnic cultural heritage was relegated to folklore appearances during official festivities. Instead, “proletarian culture” or “socialist realism” –canonized artificial forms of cultural expression– were promoted.

Fourth, the party’s policy of interethnic relations divided ethnic groups and ethnic minorities into several hierarchies of significance with different statuses of representation, from “Soviet republics” to “autonomous regions”. Soviet-style Bantustans of different hierarchical levels were thus established throughout communist countries.

² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (New York: International Publishers Co; New edition, 2014), p. 48.

The Soviet model of society was presented as the only right and “scientifically” proven form. Even the study of alternatives was allowed only in order to criticize and demonize them.

Through these practices, the new identity of the “Soviet person” was created. This had to be an individual without any religious affiliations, lacking any pride in national history, and without affiliation to any national cultural area. This exclusion and criminalization of all things cultural created mistrust and egoism, which finally weakened the regime.

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This is because society, or at least part of it, did not fully accept this model and developed alternative cultural trends. For those who lived in countries ruled by communists, it was in fact quite normal to have a double life. Widespread individual religious practices were sustained but kept mostly outside official public appearances. It was no secret that many people baptized their children, married in churches, and celebrated religious holidays.

An alternative form of history was also taught informally, outside the public realm. The ethnic and national histories learned inside the family and from friends differed completely from what was in specified handbooks. Ethnic cultural heritage and uniqueness were also secured *via* folklore events, song and dance festivals that were not forbidden.

From the onset of the Cold War, the *Voice of America* –a U.S.-based broadcasting network practicing its own form of cultural diplomacy against communism– started to provide a different interpretation of global and national developments. Foreign radio stations became the most trusted alternative to communist propaganda.

In the end, communist regimes, and even some post-communist regimes, saw their monopoly of political power and military strength destroyed by cultural means. They were not ready for such uprisings, and thus were incapable of preventing “singing”, “velvet”, or “color” revolutions, in which the driving force behind these movements was intellectual, cultural, religious, and the historical heritage. Singing and dancing became the manifestation of resistance in the Baltic States. In the

predominantly Catholic countries like Poland, Lithuania, and Hungary, religious organizations became the stronghold of opposition.

Despite the cultural elements of societies that refused to be extinguished and eventually brought about the fall of communism, communist cultural policies that produced negative legacies must also be examined.

Suppression of religious practices in the past and the religious freedom gained in the post-communist era produced a different extreme in young, democratizing

states, i.e. the phenomenon of religious fanaticism. Far from being a minor factor as the communists had thought, religion became a decisive factor in the former Yugoslavia and some areas of the former USSR. Religious beliefs, especially in smaller ethnic groups, became a tool of fighting others and gaining power in political and economic areas. Instead of ecumenical cooperation, religion became the excuse for conflicts and atrocities.

The second extreme that post-communist societies face is extreme nationalism and sensitivity to the “big brother” factor that is difficult to understand in the West. “Big brother” nations such as Russia in the former USSR or Serbia in former Yugoslavia were symbols of cultural imperialism for smaller ethnicities. Thus, many ethnic, cultural, or religious movements became anti-Russian or anti-Serb. Nations and ethnicities are expressing themselves mostly by rejecting everything that is different from their own, “pure” identities or imposed by cultural imperialists. There are numerous conflicts over the use of local language, including the writing of personal names and street name signs. This affects the rights of Russian minorities in a number of post-Soviet countries, for example.

The third set of extremes involves different forms of intolerance, from racial to sexual. It is no secret that extreme right parties, skinhead movements, and intolerance toward sexual minorities have a fertile ground in former communist societies. This kind of extremism has a discourse of preserving national tradition and identity, while rejecting parties that espouse the universal values of socialist, liberal, or European People’s Party ideologies.

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All this created misunderstandings and conflicts that fermented into ethnic, religious, and even social wars, especially when former administrative entities became independent countries with internationally recognized borders.

Some Cases of Cultural Conflicts

War of religions and confessions occurred in numerous post-communist countries: In the former Yugoslavia, religious differences triggered the war in which Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia participated. There is still no cultural peace in the region. In Macedonia, tensions between Slavic and Muslim populations persist. There are problems of recognition of some religious communities (Uniate Church) and church property issues (Ukraine, Moldova). Among others, conflicts between ethnic groups exists in Moldova (Gagauz), Georgia (Abkhaz, Adjarian, Ossetian), Bulgaria (Pomaks), between numerous ethnic groups in Russia, and in the form of recognition of ethnicities such as Ruthenian and Kashub in Poland. Conflicts over writing in so-called foreign language characters in passports (Kovalski vs Kowalski, for example), the name of the country (Československo or Česko-slovensko), and issues of separate Moldovan (vs Romanian) or Macedonian (vs Bulgarian) languages are used to express identity of historical affiliation.

Problems arise when a “choice of identity” is incompatible with the one existing before it. This is evident in Kosovo (vs Serbia), Transnistria (vs Moldova), Karabakh (vs Azerbaijan), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (vs Georgia), Crimea (vs Ukraine), and Chechnya and others (vs Russia).

Issues remain regarding the status of Hungarian ethnic groups in the countries surrounding Hungary (Card of the Hungarian holders), the Polish community abroad (Card of the Pole holders), the status of Roma population, and the status of Russian-speaking citizens and non-citizens (Latvia, Estonia).

How can Cultural Diplomacy be Helpful?

We live in a world full of crises and misunderstandings. It is evident that traditional diplomacy consisting of classical methods such as the separation of fighting powers, peacekeeping, imposed plebiscite, or local elections only delivers temporary solutions. A range of conflicts in this region that are handled through classical diplomatic means have quickly turned into frozen conflicts.

Solutions to frozen conflicts *via* classical methods are nearly impossible. These methods lead either to victory by military means like in some cases of former Yugoslavia, or peaceful non-solutions, i.e. sustaining the frozen conflict. Stopping

violence is important indeed, but it is not the ultimate goal in such cases. We have to understand that cultural priorities are often higher on the political agenda than non-violence.

We can accomplish this by investigating the cultural nature of the conflict. Often we look for an economic explanation for a conflict and try to resolve it by making economic and business arrangements. We do not really believe that people are fighting for their culture rather than economic realities. Westerners, for example, often did not understand that the Soviet system was destroyed not by economic hardship or military uprisings, but rather by those inspired by deeper beliefs.

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Recognizing this, it is necessary to strengthen the importance of the cultural and spiritual dimensions of cultural diplomacy. Some societies are indeed the victims of their historical or religious heritage. Instead of telling them to forget or bury their cultural understandings, we have to invent a method to transform individuals affected by conflict from victims into creators of history. Societies need an attractive picture of their national histories that proves that they are on the right path of development and that creating the “here and now” is more important than restoration of the past. Cultural diplomacy can accomplish this.

Further, we need to teach individuals to accept multiple cultural identities rather than insisting on the replacement of one by another. The question of ethnic minorities or ethnic groups is still of great importance. Societies of former communist countries do not know how, for example, to be Welsh and British at the same time. National minorities in these countries are mostly teaching their members to resist the majority instead of finding the way to be in harmony with it. The general picture is that majority treats them as “different,” and the minority treats the majority as a “suppressor.” Political arrangements and conventions on minorities, even specific laws in particular countries, do not help if there is no model of comfortable cultural and spiritual co-existence.

In post-communist societies, despite their independence and increased possibilities, there is still much discontent. Cultural diplomacy has to establish a kind of “menu for happiness”, offering an image of how these societies can cooperate in existing situations rather than creating conflicts. Such a menu for happiness cannot be

imposed by laws, but can be cultivated by cultural diplomacy. In other words, we have to teach that creation of new cultural environments holds greater prospects than paranoid attempts to restore the “truth of history”.

Sometimes it looks like we need a new “code of conduct” for understanding cultural relations, and cultural conflicts in these societies. The existing conventions and charters were designed in a different time and in a different political environment.

The Council of Europe (CoE), for example, was once created as a “gentlemen’s club” for Western Europe and later accepted the countries of former communist regimes. The conventions of the Council of Europe were shaped based on Western norms and traditions. Countries of the Central and Eastern part of the continent wished to adopt these conventions as soon as possible. In doing so, however, the implementation of Western-style rules of engagement was more difficult than expected. The countries of Central Europe, including the Baltic States, quickly became fully respected members of the CoE, but the rest of the former USSR and the former Yugoslavia are still under a monitoring procedure of their implementation of the rules. Some of them even say unofficially that the so-called European standards are too high for them, and that the monitoring process will be a never-ending story. One can blame the countries that do not do enough to implement the “rules”, but, maybe, the rules are not necessarily well-designed for these countries.

Finally, we can look for the players who can be the best diplomats in this area. These are the countries of Central Europe, especially Poland, Hungary, and the Baltic States. They are good mediators in conflict solution and in bringing Eastern European countries closer to the West.

The reasons for this include that these countries are already part of the West, but they still retain “Eastern” norms and practices. These countries’ populations also still speak Russian, and can connect with the cultural environment of the former USSR or Yugoslavia. Further, they carry no label of being a “big brother”, as the West or Russia may be perceived; rather they are “beloved brothers”. Finally, as these countries do not impose their identity on others, there is no danger of cultural imperialism.

For the future, it is clear that cross-border challenges of climate change, terrorism, war, and famine are rooted in multiple geographies, which rarely correspond to nation-state boundaries. Cultural diplomacy in the 21st century will not be led by nation-states. The diplomacy will not be defined by states engaging with each other, or only by classic means. Rather, the form of cultural diplomacy outlined in this article will be more important.