

THE ASPECTS OF THE DIPLOMATIC PROTOCOL THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

Sande Smiljanov¹

¹ Ministry of Interior, Str. “Dimche Mirchev” No.9, Skopje, North Macedonia,
ssmiljanov@gmail.com

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Abstract: Europe is living its hardest moments since the end of the Second World war. Open conflict on the continent was considered to be impossible, not only by the security experts and the European heads of states, but also according NATO strategic documents. February 24th, 2022 changed it all – Russia launched a full scale invasion on Ukraine (designated as a special military operation by Russia), that threw the continent in chaos and disbelief. Although none of the European authorities believed that there is a possibility for substantial change in the European security architecture, there are some subtle signs that the situation will escalate, signs only visible in the eyes of the diplomatic protocol specialists. The paper focuses on the diplomatic protocol and its essence, the communication and public diplomacy theory and practice, and on an analyses of the most intriguing high level diplomatic events in this period that outline the relations between Russia and other states, from the perspective of the diplomatic protocol.

Key words: Russia, Ukraine, conflict, diplomatic protocol

1. INTRODUCTION

The diplomatic protocol for centuries now has been considered to be the blood flow of the organism called international relations. It has been defined as the “gold standard” in how high officials interact at ceremonies or in official contacts with one primary goal – mutual respect, and understanding between the countries in the global community.

The Diplomacy and protocol are two areas interlinked together in an unbreakable tie. The essence of protocol is actually the practice on which diplomacy stands. Protocol is a combination of good behavior and logical reasoning, with one basic goal – to create an efficient communication channel between the diplomats, and in that context it is not only science – it is art. Moreover, it is a mixture of subtle science and art in which the smallest deviations can have major impact on diplomatic relation throughout the world. Etymologically, the term “protocol” comes from the Greek term relating to marking documents. In more details, protocol comes from the word „protókollon“, a mixture of the words “protos” and “kólla” meaning first and glue, respectfully. It literally means the first glued paper (Smiljanov, 2020). Maybe the simplest definition of protocol is that it is a “set of rules for good behavior at

ceremonies and in official purposes by dignitaries and officials from the governments and nations of the world” (Smiljanov, 2021). Protocol gains its form during the old Egyptians, which in the so-called *Maxims of Ptah-hotep* set the basics of what protocol represents as a science and as practice. These instructions were written in 2.000 BC and they still are the oldest proof that protocol existed even two thousand years ago. The French terms „protocole diplomatique“ and „protocole della chancellerie“ in the XIX century marked ceremonial rules during official meetings.

Although the diplomatic protocol has its roots deep in humankind history, it is important to focus on its relevance today, especially during the open conflict that burdens the European continent. In that context, considering that in diplomacy as in every other aspect of life, verbal and nonverbal communication go hand in hand, diplomats must be extremely conscious on their behavior at all times. This is very important concerning the nonverbal communication, which represents 60-70 percent of the entire communication process and includes eye movement, gesticulations, body movement, facial expressions, touch, distance etc. (Kurbija, Slavik, 2001). The percentages vary and my go up to 93 percent in favor of the nonverbal communication in the entire communications process, which leads to the sole conclusion that the nonverbal communication drives the communication itself, and the verbal element only adds up to it.

As a continuation to the above mentioned, for public personas it is highly important to keep to the rules for good behavior and good manners that are part of the protocol, especially when the eye of the public is pointed at them. To note, the diplomatic protocol is apolitical, meaning that the set rules and regulations are in force no matter the country, no matter the political option, no matter if one is in power, or part of the opposition. If a politician or an official looks to build credibility, he or she must be (or look as they are) competent, calm and clear and concise. That spurs confidence in them at home and in the international relations (Deutch, 1958).

Here are some important parts of the nonverbal communication:

Eye contact: a primary nonverbal signal that brings strong emotional impression. If an eye contact is missing, most likely the entire communication process will come to a halt.

Mimicry and facial expressions: nonverbal signals that are deeply connected to our personal feelings and as a result can only be partially controlled. The strong emotional impact automates our facial expressions and turns them to a reflex that cannot be controlled (ex. Skin redness).

Gestures and hand movements: The movement of the hands is connected to the state of mind at the given moment and in that context it has to be connected in context of the other nonverbal and verbal elements of the communication. Looking at them alone brings the possibility of misinterpretation. As an example, the hand that touch each other may mean both stress and boredom.

2. THE NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY IN EUROPE

Russia’s geopolitical maneuvers both on a global scale and on the European continents have been analyzed extensively over the years. What is common in many of the analyses is the fact that none of the experts truly considered the possibility for an open conflict on the European continent or an open Russian aggression using conventional forces. A December 2016 European Council on Foreign Relations edition published Mark Galleotti’s analyses on the Russian diplomatic practices, named “Heavy metal diplomacy: Russia’s political use of its military in Europe since 2014”, which is focusing on the fact that “since 2014, Russia has mounted an extensive, aggressive, and multi-platform attempt to use its military and the threat of force as instruments of coercive diplomacy, intended to divide, distract, and deter Europe

from challenging Russia's activities in its immediate neighbourhood".

This analyses states that there is an increasing willingness on the part of the Kremlin openly to threaten military consequences – even thermonuclear ones (Galeotti, 2016) and that was a very realistic scenario among the academia, but not among the political decision makers.

The paper also states that "Russia lacks the capacities or even a reason to launch an offensive in Europe" (Galeotti, 2016) and that the aggressive stand toward the European countries is a form of coercive diplomacy that seeks to compel certain actions and to deter others.

According to the analyses done eight years ago, there are so-called "4 Ds" behind the Russian "heavy metal diplomacy" – Divide, Distract, Dismay and Dominate. Getting into more details, the first "D" is focused on the relations between NATO and the European Union – a military – political and a political organization far more powerful than Russia itself. Sheer numbers show that in 2021, considering the crisis on the European continent, EU's GDP totals 17,09 trillion \$, while Russia totals at 1,78 trillion \$. In defense spending, NATO's defense budget has seen a continuous rise in recent years. It totaled 1,2 trillion \$ in 2021, while Russia that same year spent 65,9 billion \$, which is incomparable.

"Distract", the second "D", focuses on taking actions that can confuse the "enemy", and one clear example is what happened in 2015, when Russian cruising missiles hit Syrian targets, while at the same time there was a spike in the fighting intensity in the region of Donbas in Ukraine.

These distractive steps alone bring out the fear that war is inevitable and that the sole quest for the diplomacy now is the search for a peaceful resolution to the differences. That may have been an element of distraction on the path of Sweden and Finland to NATO – something that now is under way (or in the phase of ratification between the 30 NATO Allies).

The Russian unpredictability and the everlasting possibility of an open conflict between Russia and the West is in the center of the Russian diplomatic strategy for decades now, and the military exercises conducted on the European East only adds to the Russian diplomatic style presented throughout the years. We have seen numerous examples of the "Diplomacy of the metal": the series of exercises named "West", a Russian exercise in March 2016 when 33.000 troops simulated an offense on Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. The Baltic States are also in the area of interest, especially since Lithuania borders the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. As an example, in October 2016, close to 5.000 paratroopers exercised near Pskov, close to the Russo-Estonian border, while an additional 2.500 paratroopers simulated offensive activities. In comparison, the Estonian armed forces have around 6.400 personnel.

The situation in the last months changed dramatically. It is not only the "diplomacy of the metal" Europe should be worried about, but the metal itself. Nothing is the same regarding the security architecture on the "old continent" after February 24th, and that is clear to the EU authorities, as well as to NATO. The Russian president Vladimir Putin in the morning of 24 of February announced that a "special military operation" in Ukraine is underway and that the sole goal of this special operation is to "demilitarize and denazify" Ukraine. The military capacities until then used only in the purposes of exercising and showing strength, were now entering Ukraine from many directions (Yeung, Renton, Picheta, Upright, Sangal, Vogt, Macaya and Chowdhury, 2022) all while Russian officials were adamant in their public statements that there are no Russian troops on the ground, only precision air strikes targeting military installations. The attacks were conducted on the so-called northern front from neighboring Belarus towards the Ukrainian capital Kyiv, on the northeast toward Kharkiv, in the south from previously annexed Crimea and on the southeast from Donbas. After numerous issues in the north, the Russian troops retreated from the area around Kyiv and by mid-April,

the fighting was mostly focused in the area of Donbas.

This may very well be the bare minimum on the situation unfolding in Ukraine at the moment, needed to go deeper in to the diplomatic protocol and the signs that can be interpreted as a possible warning that the situation is unfolding in an unwanted direction.

3. THE PRACTICING OF THE RUSSIAN DIPLOMATIC PROTOCOL THROUGH EXAMPLES

As mentioned above, the diplomatic protocol is apolitical, and its rules are in force no matter the country, the entity, the political alignment. Having that in mind, the Russian diplomatic protocol often through not-so-subtle means shows their officials' attitude toward their counterparts. One of the greatest examples is the finals of the World Cup in 2018, organized by Russia, when Vladimir Putin was the host of Emmanuel Macron and Kolinda Grabar – Kitarovic, the presidents of France and Croatia which teams were playing in the finals. The World Cup and especially its finals is a planetary event, grabbing the attention of billions of people from around the globe and in that sense it is the perfect place and time to showcase international politics. Grabar – Kitarovic as an experienced diplomat made a perfect presentation of her own country, but what captured the attention of the world press was not only the game itself and the president of Croatia, but the fact that there was only one umbrella and when it started to rain heavily, it was used for the Russian president. From the aspect of protocol this represents major error in judgment, but it may very well be seen from the perspective of intentionally humiliating two other highest officials and showing them “who is in charge” and what is the real opinion of them and their countries. That protocol mishap is even more interesting for the public if we take into account that it is between two major European powers, Russia and France that have a long “love and hate” relationship.



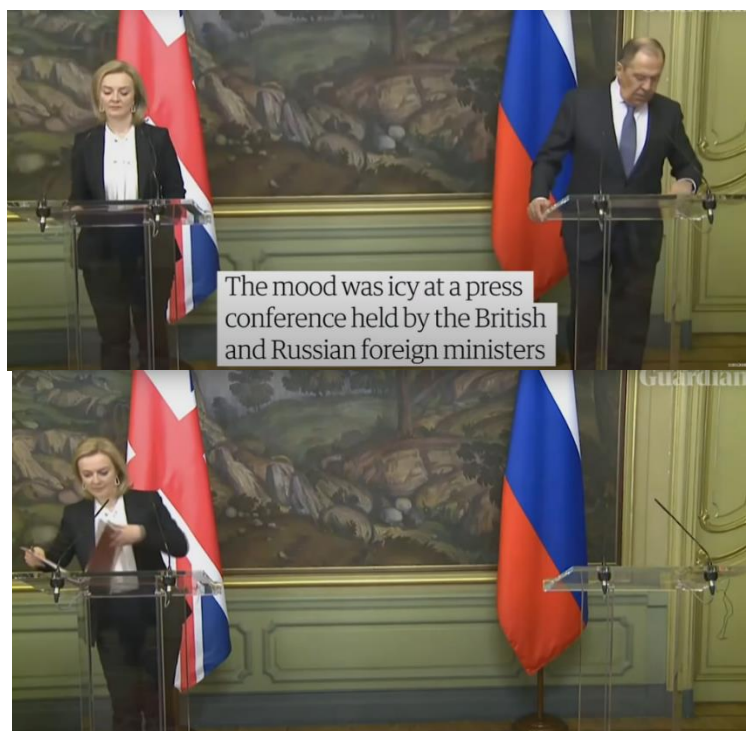
Picture 1: The presidents of Russia, Putin, France, Macron and Croatia, Grabar – Kitarovic at the ceremony after the final match between France and Croatia, held in Russia in 2018.

There is only one umbrella midst the heavy rain and it is for the Russian president

Source: (<https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/989248/world-cup-final-france-vs-croatia-emmanuel-macron-rain-vladimir-putin>)

In terms of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, only two weeks before the start of the open aggression, the British Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, Elizabeth Truss made an official visit to Moscow, but was the witness of the crudeness of the Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Lavrov. There were a couple of mishaps

throughout the visit that clearly pointed to the strong intolerance that this high ranking Russian official had toward its British counterpart. These protocol mishaps started right after Liz Truss landed at the Moscow airport, where she was greeted only by Embassy officials, but not by members of the Russian government. Later on, when Truss's motorcade arrived at the Russian Ministry of foreign affairs, the British MFA wasn't allowed to exit the vehicle up until it was parked away from the entrance (down the street), which made her walk over to the entrance by foot. Maybe the clearest show of power and intolerance could be seen at the joint press-conference on which after Truss pointed that minister Lavrov at the meeting said that "Russia has no plans to invade Ukraine", Lavrov bluntly pointed that the British minister came to the meeting unprepared and that it was like "taking to a deaf man" and left the press-conference, leaving Liz Truss alone with the media.



Pictures 2, 3: The icy press-conference between the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov and British Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, Elizabeth Truss in Moscow, only two weeks prior to the Russian aggression on Ukraine.

Source: (<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/11/britains-top-diplomat-mocked-over-russia-trip-gaffes-a76337>)

4. THE POWER GAME BETWEEN ERDOGAN AND PUTIN BEFORE AND DURING THE WAR IN UKRAINE

As seen from the examples above, Vladimir Putin has a long history of using protocol gaffes to show his true opinion of his counterparts. That was the case with the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan when during a visit to Moscow in 2020, was left in the hallways waiting to enter Putin's office for two whole minutes, which is unprecedented for a high level visit as that one.

The Turkish president wasn't amused by the long wait. He showed signs of impatience, and he even sat down before entering Putin's office. According to Russian expert Cenk Başlamış, in a analyses for Medya Günlüğü, "only the Russians know whether the two-minute wait was an "ordinary" or a "particular" situation". What is even more interesting is that the Turkish delegation appeared in front of a portrait of Aleksandr Suvorov, a Russian commander who fought and won battles against the Ottoman Empire. The fact is that the portrait has been hanging there for a while but what is interesting is that a reporter was directing viewers toward the portrait.



Pictures 4, 5: The moment when the Turkish delegation led by the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan enters the hallway and the situation after almost 2 minutes, when the Turkish president waits while seated.

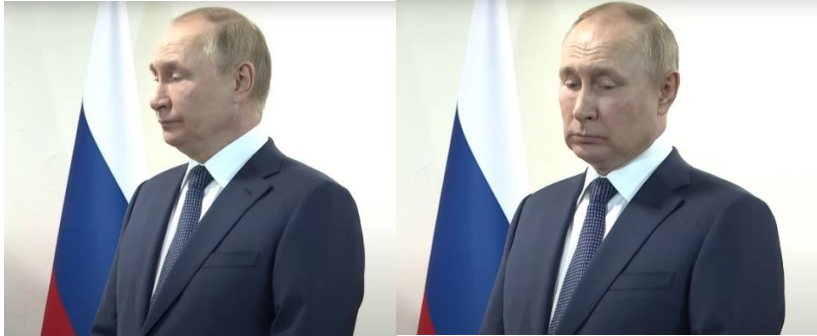
Source: (<https://www.duwarenglish.com/diplomacy/2020/03/10/what-is-the-significance-of-putin-making-erdogan-wait>)

This behavior by Vladimir Putin is nothing new. Putin made former US Secretary of State John Kerry wait for a meeting for three hours, while former US President Barack Obama waited "only" 40 minutes. In 2014 former German Chancellor Angela Merkel waited for hours, and even the Queen of England waited (in comparison) mere 14 minutes.

After the war in Ukraine started, some table have turned, or it may appear so by focusing on the details in protocol rules and regulations. The Russian President had to wait almost an entire minute for his Turkish counterpart before a meeting this July in Teheran, Iran. Many speculate that this is a way of paying Putin back for the meeting in Moscow in 2020, and since the media were present in the room, it can clearly be seen that Putin is not amused. If we look carefully for the nonverbals, the movement of the legs, the facial expressions and the gestures with his hands at the moment Erdoğan enters the room, we can easily see aggravation, nervousness and disbelief.



Pictures 6-7: Russian President Vladimir Putin waiting for his Turkish counterpart in Teheran: the moment when Putin started waiting (above-left), the moment when Erdoğan enters the room (above-right), and Putin's facial expressions during the 50 sec wait (below).
Source: (<https://a1on.mk/world/video-ostaven-da-go-cheke-erdogan-najdolgite-50-sekundi-na-putin/>)



Pictures 7-8: Russian President Vladimir Putin waiting for his Turkish counterpart in Teheran: the moment when Putin started waiting (above-left), the moment when Erdoğan enters the room (above-right), and Putin's facial expressions during the 50 sec wait (below).
Source: (<https://a1on.mk/world/video-ostaven-da-go-cheke-erdogan-najdolgite-50-sekundi-na-putin/>)

The National News Senior Correspondent and Adjunct Professor at George Washington University, Joyce Karam commenting on Twitter said that Putin's long wait for Erdoğan shows how things have changed after the invasion of Ukraine and that this is the perfect "sweet revenge" after their 2020 meeting in Moscow.

5. CONCLUSION

The diplomatic protocol sets a set of rules that make international relations work. There are numerous examples of breaches of protocol, but one has to be fluent in protocol to be able to analyze whether it is just an error, or the situation sends a political message. The continuous examples of Putin's behavior with many world leaders clearly shows that he asserts himself as the power holder in the room. The absence of a more prominent reaction on Putin's part is a clear example that the power has shifted and that the invasion of Ukraine has lowered Moscow's ability to project strength through the rules of the diplomatic protocol. At the same time, the last two events with the Turkish president can be easily defined as the rise of Turkey's position in the international community, serving as a bridge between the East and the West, whilst at the same time being a full – fledged NATO member. And, all of that in front of the eyes of the public and the media that covers every movement, every gesture and handshake. It is Warren Buffet that said "it takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently" and that applies to every public persona, including heads of state and government representing country politics in every given moment or situation.

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