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# What in the World is Roma Diplomacy?

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The pairing of “Roma” and “diplomacy” appears to be so unusual that the only relevant entries in Google for this conjunction relate exclusively to the Roma Diplomacy Project that has given rise to this book. Two substantial, recent monographs on the international presence of the Roma (Vermeersch, 2006; Klimova-Alexander, 2005) do not even have an index reference for “diplomacy.” Clearly, “Roma diplomacy” is a novel and unexpected concept made all the more striking through its linguistic oddity.<sup>1</sup>

Having caught attention with a startling title, the Roma Diplomacy Project raises questions about the suitability or adequacy of the term “Roma diplomacy.” The purpose of this paper is to probe such questions with a view to establishing the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of a Roma diplomacy. Broadly speaking, this is an inquiry into the specificity of Roma diplomacy. I propose to proceed by looking, first, at understandings of diplomacy and of diplomats and then at the difficulties, but also the opportunities, that such understandings offer for the subject of our concern.

## What’s Special about Diplomacy?

We have all heard the throwaway phrase that a diplomat is “a man sent abroad to lie on behalf of his country.” The phrase was always silly and it is even sillier now than it was in the past.<sup>2</sup> A diplomat may well be a woman rather than a man; as the Roma case we are considering here suggests, a diplomat may not have a country; and lying has never been a sound long-term policy. Whatever it once was, diplomatic activity has multiplied and diversified. We now combine the term diplomacy with one or another of an almost infinite number of modifiers: dollar diplomacy, oil diplomacy, environmental diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy, multi-stakeholder diplomacy and so on (Barston, 1997). The new diplomacy emphasizes the concerns of peoples, not those of governments (Davenport, nd). Harold Nicolson, a very classical diplomat, was close to the mark when, several decades ago, he defined diplomacy as “the ordered conduct of relations between one group of human beings and another group alien to themselves” (Nicolson, 1969, p. 5).

Nicolson’s qualification – “the *ordered* [my emphasis] conduct of relations” – is a most significant one. Diplomacy does not cover all sorts of human interaction or intergroup relations. It involves relations that are both orderly and that take place within a given order. Now, orderly relations are those that aim, through sustained dialogue and cooperation, at some sort of communality, a community of purpose, if possible, and, at the very least, a community of understanding. The common use of the term diplomatic to mean tactful is merely figurative, but it points us in a definite direction. Diplomats are cultural bridge builders, as a recent interesting article has eloquently demonstrated (Hofstede, 2000).

A way to approach the subject of diplomacy is to consider what diplomacy is not. Diplomacy is not a market-driven process, except in a very figurative way. Above all, however, diplomacy is not war or armed struggle. Where outright force begins, diplomacy ends. One might go further and suggest that diplomacy is not litigation. Diplomacy is not a one-off, zero-sum contest, where I win and you lose. Diplomats work for the long-term and consider cumulative gains. They seek continued cooperation, rather than clear closure. They may fantasize about wiping out their opponents (as we all do in moments of frustration), but they know they will have to deal with these same interlocutors anew and they must, therefore, search for agreement rather than elimination.

One might say that diplomacy is less like a football match than like a musical performance. Although this may be stretching the point, since harmony is not the rule on the international scene, the “Concert of Nations” was, nevertheless, long a staple figure of the vocabulary of international relations. It had its first and second fiddles, some instruments screeched, but the point was to harmonise rather than clash. *Accorder ses violons*, as the French say, and the expression applies to the Concert of Nations as well. The South African president, Thabo Mbeki, has pushed the point I am making even further. In his words, “I don’t know what quiet diplomacy means. All diplomacy is quiet. If there is shouting it is not diplomacy” (Mbeki, 2006).

### **What’s behind Diplomacy?**

Diplomatic conduct is orderly, in the sense I have outlined above. It also takes place, as I have suggested, within a given order, a set of political realities and legal fictions that we call the international order. As we know all too well, the fundamental or, to some minds, the only building blocks of this international order are sovereign states. Many authors, decrying the privileges of states in a world where other actors and forces have more real importance, have produced a vast literature on the topic.<sup>3</sup> Academics and policy makers seek to de-mystify that modern misnomer, the “nation-state,” by pointing out that this term applies to only a handful of today’s almost two hundred states. Most states contain more than one nation, in any recognizable sense of the latter term, and the vast majority of the world’s nations do not have their own state (Liebich, 2003). In recognition of such realities, some authors have given up speaking of titular majority nations, say, the Spanish in Spain, as opposed to minorities, such as, say, the Basques. They have looked instead toward concepts such as “multiculturalism” and “consociationalism” or they have adopted a vocabulary that relies upon the concept of “co-nations” (Malloy, 2005). Through these expedients, one can make even non-state actors subjects of diplomacy. Thus, Spanish diplomacy is also Basque diplomacy; admittedly, this is not a satisfactory solution for all Basques, but it is a step away from diplomatic facelessness.

Such theoretical innovations go only so far in furthering the cause of the Roma. The tacit assumption in all such discussions is that the collectivities involved – minorities, co-nations, nations, or whatever other designation is adopted – have an identifiable territorial basis. Even diasporas, a term in great vogue today (Shain and Aharon, 2003), have homelands which they do not inhabit, but to which they can

refer.<sup>4</sup> In tacit imitation of such diaspora identification, Roma activists have invoked India as a mythical or historical homeland. New Delhi diplomacy has sometimes even gone along with such claims, but it has never done so in a meaningful way.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it appears increasingly clear that, historically, the Roma acquired an identity as Roma only after they had left their Indian homeland, if, indeed, they came or they all came from India (Fraser, 2000; Hancock, 2000). The recently coined formulation that Roma constitute the first or the only pan-European minority is not of much help either for bestowing a diplomatic personality upon the Roma. The notion of a European diplomacy is tenuous and a quarter or so of the world's Romani population lives outside Europe, even if one understands Europe in the narrow sense of members of the European Union.

The international state system has witnessed some creative attempts to establish legal territorial identity where no such identity exists in fact. Prime among the examples from which Roma might seek inspiration are the Knights of Malta, formally entitled the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta. This entity claims sovereignty, even though its present sovereign territory is limited to a Roman palazzo. The Order issues widely recognized passports and it enjoys permanent observer status in the United Nations General Assembly, if only as an organisation than as a state.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the only non-member of the United Nation with observer status as a state is the Vatican, whose territory extends over 0.4 square kilometres; its territoriality must certainly be considered symbolic. Even the smallest member state in the United Nations, the Principality of Monaco, extends over 1.9 square kilometres. In comparison, the microstates of the Pacific, Tuvalu (25 square kilometres) and Nauru (21 square kilometres) appear as empires. Surely, some philanthropist somewhere or, better yet, some collective effort might purchase a piece of real estate of these dimensions to serve as a Roma homeland. One could even compromise on the matter of sovereignty. The Principality of Andorra, a United Nations member, lies under the joint tutelage of the President of France (co-prince!) and a Spanish bishop. A more limited example of quasi-sovereignty is Mount Athos, the Autonomous Monastic State of the Holy Mountain, which operates under Greek sovereign protection. Territoriality may be in the eyes of the beholder.

### **What's Really behind Diplomacy?**

Territoriality may remain pre-eminent in the present international state order, but it is qualified by an even more fundamental constitutive principle of the world order, that of the formal equality of states. The smallest, poorest, and weakest state is the legal equal of the greatest superpower. I suggest that the tenet of the legal equality of states opens a door towards countering the handicap of statelessness and, thus, it creates the possibility of Roma diplomacy.

The principle that all states are equal is a fiction. Who would dream that the weight of a microstate compares with that of a great power? The fiction of equality, however, serves primarily as a symbolic acknowledgement of dignity. It operates as a demand for respect within the international order, obliging other members to bestow this respect or to risk the disruption of the system as a whole. The task of any

non-state actor that seeks recognition in the international arena lies in obtaining the sort of respect accorded automatically to states. This respect will not entail legal equality, given the present international arrangements, but it can offer non-state actors or non-state stakeholders the measure of dignity they will require to practice their own diplomacy.

What are the means by which a non-state actor can win such recognition? Colossal wealth is one possibility. Microsoft outranks many states, in fact, if not in law. More than a century of universal humanitarian work, resulting in a record of service, utility, efficiency, and integrity, may be another means. This is how the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has come to acquire the enviable position it holds as one of a small group of very special non-governmental organisations with particular (though, of course, not state) status at the United Nations and in dealings with states.

Options such as those available to Bill Gates or to the ICRC are not available to Roma diplomats. Therefore, Roma must rely on other assets and skills. They may draw on the personal charisma of Roma leaders and on the good will of other actors. The latter may be individuals, such as George Soros, whose Open Society Foundation and other initiatives have been in the forefront of support for Roma. They may be non-governmental organisations, international organisations, and even some states. Roma diplomats can invoke the numerical strength of their constituency – ten to fifteen million people in Europe alone – and the perceived urgency of addressing Roma issues. Roma diplomats, thus, have a number of instruments at their disposition.

### **What Might Diplomats Do?**

If Roma diplomats are to use these instruments effectively, they must adopt an appropriate stance towards themselves and among themselves. We might best describe this stance as one of dignity and pride.

As long as others have a perception of Roma as victims, it will be difficult for others to consider Roma diplomats as equal in dignity to their interlocutors. Victims and perpetrators or even victims and non-victims are, by definition, not equal. The stance that victims must assume by virtue of their position is that of claimants or morally empowered supplicants who appeal (perhaps even forcefully) for concessions and compensation. Credible diplomats, however, cannot be supplicants. They must be partners and they will serve themselves better by engendering an attitude of respect rather than one of condescension or pity. To be sure, internalizing a victim status as an unchanging reality of life is a condition that corresponds to the fate of the Roma (Project on Ethnic Relations, 1992). However, as Beate Winkler, Director of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, put it at the Roma Diplomacy Project's conference in Brussels in December 2005: presenting oneself as a victim is counter-productive because ultimately people blame the victims or consider them responsible for their own fate. Roma are victims and the thrust of Roma activism towards recognizing their victim status is both morally and politically appropriate, even though it carries the risk of treating Roma as passive victims (Braham and Braham, 2003). The point is that victimhood need not be the strategic orientation of

Roma diplomacy and it should certainly not be its exclusive orientation. Even in the matter of restitution and compensation for past injustice, a classic victim agenda, claimants equal in stature to wrongdoers are most effective in the pursuit of satisfaction. Israel has been successful in enforcing Holocaust-related claims against Germany because it could speak on terms of equality.

Pride in their identity should be the first quality of Roma diplomats and ensuring respect should be the goal. The means employed to attain this goal are not particularly different from those practiced by other diplomats. Public diplomacy consists of projecting an image of oneself to the outside world, regardless of whether one is a state or a stateless nation. Canada has conducted a campaign to have itself seen as cool, connected, civil, competitive, captivating, and cosmopolitan. Norway has gone to great pains to identify itself with peace, equality, and nature (Batora, 2006). One can discuss at length the specific agenda that Roma diplomats might set themselves. It seems to me, however, that if their goal is to ensure respect they will act in such a way as to counter negative or deprecatory images of Roma.

By way of example, Roma diplomats might begin with the field of culture and emphasise the contributions of Roma to the creative arts. To be sure, they would have to handle such an orientation gingerly in order to avoid the re-enforcement of stereotypes. I have before me a press release about Damian Draghici, a Romani panflutist from Romania (Divers Bulletin, 2007). It praises this "top Gypsy musician celebrated around the world" and notes that Draghici's international tour is funded by the Romanian foreign ministry. Such sponsorship lends itself easily to criticism, although Draghici himself is not bothered by it: "Our music changes people's perception of Gypsies and that is the objective," he is quoted as saying (Divers Bulletin, 2007).<sup>7</sup> His attitude may appear naive but, nevertheless, it appears to me to be self-defeating to refrain from celebrating, say, Romani accomplishments in music out of fear that Roma would be seen as "only" musicians.

Another area through which Roma diplomats could promote respect for the community they represent is that of learning and scholarship. The dearth of academic chairs of Romani studies and of similar institutional arrangements is a reflection of the ignorance and disregard that surround the Roma presence. The under-development of Romani studies represents a disservice to Roma themselves who are unable to cultivate knowledge of their language, culture, and history. It fosters the widespread sentiment among *gadje* that Roma are not a worthy subject of inquiry. This is only one step away from saying that they lead an unworthy existence. Obviously, Roma diplomats will not be the scholars occupying such chairs. However, they will intervene with public authorities and foundations to sponsor chairs, library collections, and scholarships.

Finally, Roma diplomats have a strategic interest in emphasizing Romani roots. The stereotype of Roma as nomads is deeply set, in defiance of all realities. It is invariably associated with shiftiness and social irresponsibility. A way of underlining the presence of Roma as resident, full citizens is to see that they acquire statistical visibility. What is not counted does not count. Roma have traditionally been reluctant to be included in census figures or to be registered in state documents (Covrig, 2001; Project on Ethnic Relations, 2000). They have sensed, rightly, that statistics and

records are a form of control and a potential instrument of oppression. Their experiences in the Third Reich tragically confirmed suspicions, when routine police files aided in rounding up Roma for imprisonment and elimination, as even unsympathetic sources recognize (Lewy, 2000). Roma diplomats should be mindful of the potential for abuse in data collection and they should press for data protection safeguards. Their overriding interest, however, is in seeing that national and international statistics affirm loudly the Romani presence. Authorities cannot ignore a group or statistical category that embraces hundreds of thousands – in Romania, probably millions – of its citizens. By declaring themselves as Roma to the census-taker, individuals take the first step towards demonstrating that pride in identity which is the pre-condition to effective action.

To move from the general to the particular, in a very specific item on the international diplomatic agenda Roma stakes are high and Roma diplomats can intervene effectively to make an impact. This is the question of Kosovo, whose future is at stake at this very moment. The international community is concerned to make of Kosovo a model polity and, for that reason, it is keen to co-opt minority support (Project on Ethnic Relations, 2006). The challenge to Roma diplomats is to see that such concern for what is known in local jargon as the RAE (i.e., the Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian population) goes beyond issues of humanitarian and social welfare. Kosovo Roma (and kindred groups) are not only victims of the tragedy of Kosovo, they are also stakeholders in Kosovo's future. Roma representatives have asked to take part in all final status negotiations (European Roma and Travellers Forum Press Release, 2007) and members of the United Nations Administration in Kosovo have stressed that protection of minorities will be one of the most important issues during the status talks (OneWorld.net, 2006). If such affirmations become practice, participation in the talks will serve as a test of fire for the theory and practice of Roma diplomacy

### **Any Problems with Roma Diplomacy?**

It is easy to think of obstacles to the successful implementation of a Roma diplomacy. Diplomacy is a set of techniques and instruments used to implement a foreign policy defined by others (Calvet de Magalhaes, 1988). One can, therefore, go only so far in discussing diplomacy without inquiring into foreign policy. This is all the more true in a democratic order where a duly registered popular mandate is the only legitimate basis of political action.

From where would Roma diplomacy draw its mandate? If diplomacy is the implementation of a foreign policy, whose foreign policy is it implementing? Who defines the foreign policy that Roma diplomacy executes and to whom are Roma diplomats responsible? These are questions that go to the heart of the Roma Diplomacy Project because it involves not only Roma diplomacy's effectiveness, but its credibility. It seems to me that no straightforward answer to these questions present themselves, but a number of responses deserve consideration.<sup>8</sup>

First, Roma diplomacy may be seen as the expression of Roma international civil society. The many earlier attempts at finding a world-wide Romani voice have lately re-emerged in a number of organisations with aspirations to either European-wide or universal representation of the Roma people. Among the former is the European Roma

and Travellers' Forum under the sponsorship of the Council of Europe<sup>9</sup>; among the latter one must include the Roma National Congress and the International Romani Union (IRU).<sup>10</sup> Although the IRU is contested among Roma activists and, formally, it is only one of over two thousand non-governmental organisations with consultative status at the United Nations, it is the only Roma organisation that enjoys such status (Klimova-Alexander, 2005). Thus, the IRU comes closest to a universal body that can speak on behalf of the Roma of the world. Moreover, the structure of the IRU and the thrust of its thinking have been evolving in the direction of a quasi-state formation so that it can accommodate quite comfortably the notion of a diplomatic dimension to its activities.

Second, Roma diplomacy can take inspiration from and foster cooperation with the indigenous peoples' movements that have attained a successful diplomatic dimension. To do so, Roma activists must overcome their many reservations towards assimilating Roma and indigenous issues. It is true that an almost ontological difference lies between Roma and indigenous or "first" peoples whose claims on the international community rest on original possession of land and on colonial dispossession. Moreover, an inverse numerical relationship results world-wide between the presence of Roma and of indigenous peoples; Roma are present where indigenous peoples are few and vice versa. Existentially, however, the situations of Roma and of indigenous peoples bear many similarities in terms of social marginalization, widespread discrimination, and political powerlessness. Notwithstanding such handicaps, indigenous peoples can boast of enviable achievements in the international arena. The United Nations Economic and Social Council, the United Nations' prime locus for non-governmental organisations, hosts a permanent advisory forum on indigenous people. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights sponsors a working group on indigenous populations and a special *rappporteur* on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous peoples. As well, in 1989 the International Labour Organisation adopted Convention number 169 "concerning indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries" (ILO, 1989). The *elan* of the indigenous peoples' movement has recently encountered a major setback with the shelving, in November 2006, by a committee of the United Nations General Assembly, of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which had previously sailed through the United Nations Human Rights Council. Nevertheless, Roma will be able to celebrate when they have attained as much international recognition as have indigenous peoples. Moreover, and of particular interest from our point of view, at least one diplomatic programme for indigenous peoples seems to bear comparison, in terms of structure and aims, with the Roma Diplomacy Project. Awanuiarangi, a New Zealand institute of higher education for indigenous people, offers a Certificate of International Diplomacy for Indigenous Delegates (Awanuiarangi, 2007).

Finally, as we inquire into the mandate of Roma diplomats, we suggest that giving a voice to those who are voiceless is a legitimate enterprise as well. It is at the heart of rights advocacy. UNICEF or children's' rights organisations do not claim to have a mandate from the children of the world and Amnesty International does not limit itself to prisoners who have asked for its intervention. In these cases, the universally

recognized normative nature of the concern gives moral legitimacy to the undertaking. Advocates are, in a sense, mandated by humanity as a whole. Roma diplomats can appeal to such universals as other Roma activists have done. This is, however, a moral, not a political and democratic legitimation. The effects of Roma diplomacy would be qualitatively different if Roma diplomats grounded their action in a constituency that loudly and proudly declared its identity and if they founded their action on the decisions of representative and democratically functioning non-state institutions.

### **What Next?**

Roma diplomacy as advocated in this paper is not the only way forward for the Roma people nor is it their only means of acceding to a diplomatic function. States are increasingly concerned to have their diplomatic corps reflect the multicultural realities of the countries they represent. As Roma attain elected and appointed positions on a national or international level, one can expect that individual Roma will appear as ambassadors and consuls of one country or another. This development is to be applauded and emphatically encouraged.

However, diplomats of established states who happen to be Roma will not be diplomats in the sense in which we have spoken of Roma diplomacy here. They will be traditional diplomats whose loyalty will properly lie with the state they represent and not with the transnational community from which they come.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Roma who are diplomats, like members of other minorities, will have to be on guard to counter suspicions of double allegiance. Roma diplomats as we have understood them here will be unique figures on the international scene. They will combine the traditional aspects of diplomacy with the novelty of representing something other than a state. If they succeed, they will impart a new dynamic to the practice of international diplomacy and render a unique service to Roma everywhere.

### **Endnotes**

1. "Romani diplomacy" is the linguistically correct term. It is incorrect to use the term "Roma," a masculine plural noun, as an adjective (Hancock, 2003). We would never say, for instance, "Frenchmen diplomacy." Ian Hancock has, however, graciously overlooked this anomaly in the Project's name and has participated fully in this project. May I take this occasion to thank him.

2. I have not found the origin of this quip. Another one which comes closer to the truth and has the merit of rhyme is attributed to one Isaac Goldberg writing in 1927: "Diplomacy is to do and say/The nastiest thing in the nicest way."

3. This is the heart of an ongoing debate among specialists of international relations between those who argue that we are living in a world "beyond the nation state" and those who, while recognizing transnational forces, defend the continued relevance of the nation state. Badie (1995) is among those who eloquently argue that we have reached the "end of territory," that henceforth



networks are more important than territory, and that even territorial identity is defined by discourse or the “word” [*le verbe*] (Badie, 1995, p. 113). An interesting attempt to think of alternatives to a state-centred international order has been undertaken by Gottlieb (1993).

4. One of the seminal collections on diasporas does not touch upon the Roma case (Sheffer, 1986).

5. In fact, if Roma came from Sind, which is one possibility among others (a doubtful etymology suggests that “Sint” comes from “Sind”), it should be Pakistan that sponsors them.

6. Order of Malta passport holders carry another passport as well, as would Roma in a corresponding arrangement created on their behalf.

7. Ironically, the only criticism mentioned in the press release is that of the Romanian right-wing politician Gheorghe Funar who accuses the foreign minister of wanting Europe to believe that in Romania there are only Gypsies.

8. This is, of course, part of the general question of Roma leadership. For frank discussions of this issue and, in particular, its relevance to the IRU, see Project on Ethnic Relations (2001).

9. The relation of this organisation to the also recently founded European Roma Forum is not clear. The previous website of the latter, <http://www.EuropeanRomaForum.org>, was not publicly accessible on 15 January 2007.

10. According to Klimova-Alexander (2005), the focus of the Roma National Congress is also overwhelmingly European.

11. The United Kingdom appears to be making a particular effort to diversify its diplomatic corps (Government of the United Kingdom. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2005). Efforts elsewhere are pitched at a junior level. For example, the Czech Diplomatic Academy invites Roma, without restriction to Czech Roma, to enrol and similar initiatives will be taken by other countries (MINELRES, 2001). The Council of Europe has a formal Roma internship scheme (Council of Europe/Open Society Institute, 2004) and the availability of such internships has been a prime concern for members of the Roma Diplomacy Project.

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