

## THE INFLUENCE OF THE PROTOCOL THROUGH THE PRISM OF POLICY

Sande Smiljanov, PhD  
[ssmiljanov@gmail.com](mailto:ssmiljanov@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The protocol is a combination of good behavior and logical reasoning, with one basic goal – efficient and effective communication between the stakeholders in diplomacy and politics. Considering that the protocol is both a science and an art, even the smallest deviations from the established rules and procedures can be perceived as sending a non-verbal message that has a political connotation and can seriously affect the reputation of the state in the international relations. The protocol is the hidden “conductor” which enables the “concert” to go smoothly, which, on the other hand, indicates that every mistake, every shortcoming or every intentional deviation is public and visible. But even after determining the deviation from what is considered an established practice, the question of whether it is an unintentional omission or an intentional transmission of a political message remains, and it is very difficult to find an adequate and true answer to this question. In this paper, apart from the communication aspect of conveying messages, the subject of analysis are also more practical examples that burdened international politics in the past period.

**Key words:** *protocol, (un)intentional protocol errors, politics, international relations*

### 1. THE PROTOCOL AND ETIQUETTE: BASICS

The Protocol is a set of rules which mandate good behavior in official life and at ceremonies involving entire governments and nations, as well as their representatives. It is a recognized system of international politeness (Thompson, 2001). It is, in fact, the simplest definition of protocol, which is basically a set of rules that should be applied in state and diplomatic ceremonies and official relations. The basis of the manners which are an integral part of the protocol is the etiquette, which derives from the customs, from the practice and from the authorities. Etiquette enables the preservation of respect for others and is accepted as correct behavior in the process of interpersonal interaction.

If viewed from a historical perspective, the protocol has indeed played a significant role in the development of the international relations. The protocol took its first form in ancient Egypt, through the “Instructions of Ptahhotep” (Donaldson, 1990), while as a science it experienced its renaissance in the 19th century. Its influence is particularly clear today, when, given technological progress and the development of communications, protocol and protocol practice are more visible and amenable to analysis than at any time before in the human history.

After all, it also requires a clear organization and implementation of the activities related to the protocol, with which the state will be presented as a modern, contemporary, organized society that lives Western values. That is why investing in protocol capacities and capabilities, the constant upgrading of protocol specialists, as well as creating conditions for

the work of organizational units dedicated to protocol at the highest state institutions, must be the first priority for every management.

## 2. PUBLIC COMMUNICATION AND PROTOCOL

The importance of public communication of every single elected official, today, if we take into account the speed of communications and advanced technologies, we can summarize it through one sentence of Warren Buffet – “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and only five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you would do things differently.”

And, indeed, today, the communication component of political life is more important than ever before, and this, in turn, is a reason for a closer look at the components which are an integral part of communication between people.

De facto, communication is composed of two basic components: verbal communication (Gilbert, 2002) with all its accompanying elements, and non-verbal communication, i.e., metacommunication (Paise, 2004). The accompanying elements of verbal communication - the tonality and pace of verbal transmission, can be singled out as a third pillar of communication, which is also called paraverbal communication.

Public figures and politicians, according to communication theory, are the sender of the message, political information (sent verbally and non-verbally) is the message, while the key audience (which varies in relation to the defined goal) is the recipient of the message. The fulfillment of the goal is also the main reason why public figures should (not) adhere to the established rules and procedures of the protocol, of course depending on the desired outcome.

Basically, the political structure should always convey its message in a credible way, encouraging the belief of others and building trust with key audiences – which is the basis for achieving political goals, especially in periods of election or re-election of political functions.

This can be very easily mirrored in the international relations where verbal and non-verbal communication go hand in hand and where they do not always move in the same direction. On the contrary, especially in international politics, words say one thing, but non-verbal gestures show a completely different behavior. In fact, it is even stronger if you consider that non-verbal communication represents 60-70 percent of communication, including eye movement, posture, gestures, kinesia (body movement), facial expression, touch, distance, etc. (Kurbljija, Slavik, 2001).

The percentages of which type of communication dominates in the communication process vary, and can range as high as 93 percent of non-verbal communication and only seven percent of verbal communication, which clearly indicates that regardless of research, the common conclusion is that non-verbal communication shapes the communication process, and the verbal only complements it. In the international relations, it is also an important segment, because non-verbal communication can be significantly strengthened if the verbal segment, namely the words expressed by a certain official person, are in the same direction as the non-verbal components which are part of his or her communication package.

Taking into account that non-verbal communication takes the lead in the communication process, the first priority for public figures is the rules of good behavior, i.e., good manners, which are also part of the protocol. It is important to note that the protocol is apolitical, which means that the same rules apply regardless of whether a politician has a left or right orientation, belongs to the structure that manages the state or is in the opposition. Regardless of it, politicians must build an image as credible, competent, rational, calm and

clear-headed individuals with whom people can identify and trust to represent their interests at home and in the international environment in a certain period of time. (Deutsch, 1958).

The elements of non-verbal communication include:

- **Eye contact:** it is the primary non-verbal element that leaves a strong emotional impression. The absence of this element in the communication process usually leads to a termination of the communication.
- **Mimicry and facial expression:** these are non-verbal elements which are deeply connected to our personal feelings and can only be partially controlled. A strong emotional impact automates facial expressions, i.e., turns them into a reflex that takes place without personal intention (such as blushing).
- **Gestures and hand movements:** Hand movements are associated with multiple states of mind and must therefore be taken in the context of other segments of non-verbal and verbal communication. On its own, for example, the touch of the palms during communication can mean both stress and boredom.

### **3. THE INFLUENCE OF THE PROTOCOL IN POLITICS**

The security and stability in and of a country does not depend only on the evident, so-called “hard power”, but also on a more subtle form of power, i.e., defensive diplomacy, which, in turn, is connected to the rules and procedures of the protocol, as an integral part of diplomatic practice. Therefore, it is of great importance to make some analysis of the deviations from the protocol rules and procedures and to make a proper classification of any inconsistency whether it is intentional or accidental. Mistakes in protocol, although (perhaps) subject to insufficient knowledge of practices on the part of persons in charge of protocol activities, can cause political scandals and even impatience at state level.

The line between sending a political message versus a genuine error in protocol is a thin one indeed. After all, each of the potential mistakes, persons who are not skilled in the field of defense relations or protocol, can perceive them in one way or another, and this can lead to unwanted consequences, at each and even international level. The interrelationship between the protocol, defense diplomacy and security tells us that if just one detail of these three components is misperformed or misperceived, it affects the rest of the components as well. A poorly organized protocol, regardless of whether it is intentional or not, can mean ineffective defense diplomacy and even a reduction in security.

#### **3.1. Protocol mistakes in diplomacy**

Protocol mistakes can be found at any event, even at what are considered high-profile events staffed by a large number of professionals.

The past few years have been extremely hectic from a protocol point of view: a large number of visits, important events, large and complex organizations. In terms of protocol shortcomings, we remember the visit of the then Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, on September 7, 2018, when the wrong Austrian flag was flown on the plateau in front of the Government, during the welcome and singing of the Macedonian and Austrian national anthems. That mistake can very easily send several messages – the Austrian state is not of great importance for North Macedonia, or, on the other hand, North Macedonia is a country without professional staff in such an important area as protocol.

The same happens in other countries and other protocol services. On April 14, 2014, the President and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland, Didier Burkhalter, visited Ukraine, when during his first meeting with the acting Prime Minister of Ukraine, Arseniy

Yatsenyuk, i.e., during their handshake, in the background, instead of the Swiss flag, stood the flag of Norway.

Another mistake of the Macedonian diplomatic protocol, again in connection between the protocol of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and that of the Ministry of Defense, is the mistake during the arrival of the Secretary of Defense of the United States at Skopje International Airport on September 18, 2018. During the preparation of the short military ceremony, which is intended to show respect to the distinguished guest from the United States of America, several professional soldiers of the Army of the Republic of North Macedonia blocked the path of the Secretary of Defense, Mattis, by sweeping the red carpet. The sensational images of this important event had the potential to be reinterpreted as an example of the dysfunctionality of the state and, accordingly, the ineffectiveness of the Army.

The facts from the internal procedures for determining the real picture say that it is not a question of deliberate disregard of the protocol rules, which are especially strict in the second case with the high-ranking American guest (primarily the entry of the leader of the protocol team into the plane, followed by the exit of the distinguished guest), but for a classic and plastic example of non-coordination and insufficient cooperation of protocol persons from different institutions. That is, in the first case we are talking about an inadequate check during the purchase of the flag (which was registered as an Austrian flag and kept as an Austrian flag), and in the second case it is partly the fault of the guest who did not sufficiently take into account the relevant protocol rules and procedures.

There are such examples in the nearest neighborhood. An example of how much a protocol mistake can stir up spirits in world politics is the gaffe with the seating of Kosovo President Hashim Thaci at the celebration on the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First World War. The wrong place to sit for the Kosovo president has so strongly affected interstate relations that the ambassador of France in Belgrade, Frédéric Mondoloni, issued a formal apology to the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, and to the Serbian people. The apology which says: "...we are very close to Serbia. In the First World War, Serbia lost almost a third of its population, 62 percent of the male population, and France will not forget that" indicates that this protocol mistake still left a mark on the relationship between Serbia and France. The French ambassador goes so far as to say "...I am sad because we should have celebrated our common victory, and that in view of the announced visit of President Macron to Serbia. This action in some way spoiled it all." This is the most evident example of the stain that a seemingly benign event can cause.

After the scandal with the seating arrangement of the ceremony in Paris on the occasion of the Day of Exemplary in the First World War, the President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, was in the foreground at the Peace Forum, where the same protocol mistake was repeated. Namely, Thaci is sitting right behind the leaders of the countries which were the main players in the First World War – France, Germany and Russia.

Worth noting is the comment of the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, which most plastically shows how much such a protocol gaffe (or not!) can stir up geopolitical spirits: "You can imagine what someone thought when they put Thaci next to Putin. Thaci came behind Putin's back and offered him a hand. When Putin realized who he was, he turned to others," Vucic told reporters at the event.

The protocols of major sporting events can also have an impact on the way politics are perceived. Vladimir Putin, Emmanuel Macron and Kolinda Grabar - Kitarović, in one place – the final of the World Cup in football, organized by Russia, played by the national teams of France and Croatia. The World Cup is a global event taking place every four years

and always receives a lot of attention around the world. The significance of this event can be seen through the explosion of media attention for Croatian President Grabar-Kitarović who, as an experienced former diplomat, used it by all means in the presentation of her country. What was really interesting to see was not only the match, but also the minutes after the match when in really heavy rain, the security and protocol people had only one umbrella, and that only for the Russian president, Putin. From a protocol point of view, this shows a serious flaw in the organization, but from another point of view, this event is perhaps the best moment to show strength and power, to humiliate the “enemy” and to show the opinion of the leader of the “other side”. This is an example of how one likely protocol gaffe, one bad judgment and lack of reaction, can leave open questions about the relationship between the two European powers France and Russia.

The list of diplomatic gaffes and mistakes, which are assumed not to be related to the intentional transmission of a certain political message, is really long. Practitioners in the field of defense diplomacy and protocol understand that every element of the protocol, every detail can have repercussions on political developments and therefore, simply put, mistakes and shortcomings in the implementation of the protocol are not allowed. As a part of these, presumably, unintentional mistakes can be listed – the Montenegrin Prime Minister Igor Luksic's greeting to Sweden, on the occasion of the Day of Swedish Statehood, in which success and prosperity of Denmark are wished; the hug of the former first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, with the Queen of England Elizabeth II (with which, according to the protocol, any touch is prohibited); the inappropriate place for the presidents of Albania, Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro to sit in the Plenary Hall of our Assembly during the inauguration of the former president, Gjorgje Ivanov; the white suit of a Macedonian VIP-representative at the commemoration for the Polish President Lech Kaczynski... (Smiljanov, 2021).

### **3.2. When a protocol "gaffe" is a way to convey a political message**

In 2010, Israel humiliated the Turkish ambassador. January 12 is the day when an Israeli official, through a protocol mistake, let the whole world, especially the Arab world, know what his opinion is about Turkey. Namely, at a meeting in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs between the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Daniel Ayalon, and the Turkish Ambassador to Israel, Ahmet Oguz Çelikol, the interlocutors were placed in seats with an evident height difference. The reason is that Turkish TV series continue to portray Israeli agents as brutal. After all, it was the reason why Deputy Minister Ayalon called the Turkish ambassador to express a protest about the TV program in which Israeli agents kidnap children and shoot adults. Just one day later, on January 13, there was an express apology from the Israeli side, because the ambassador was placed on a lower chair. The Turkish ambassador and Turkish authorities expressed open outrage for the humiliation of their special envoy. Namely, in a short ultimatum to Israel sent a day after the incident, Ankara asked for an apology for what it described as “Ayalon's humiliating behavior towards their ambassador on Monday.” Headlines in Turkish newspapers reflected that fury: *Insolence*, *Vatan* newspaper reported, while *Cumhuriyet* reported: “Ties with Israel are deteriorating.” *Sabah* distanced itself with “evil conspiracy”, while, on the other hand, the pro-Islamic newspaper *Yeni Safak* reacted furiously: “Vile and immoral.” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's media relations office later issued a statement saying, in part, “the protest delivered to the Turkish ambassador was essentially correct, but should have been conveyed in a conventional diplomatic manner.” Ayalon himself issued a statement, saying “it is not

my style to show disrespect to ambassadors and in the future I will explain my position in a diplomatically acceptable way" (Smiljanov, 2021).

### **3.3. The recent “gaffes” in international relations**

In recent history, the so-called “couch scandal” when, during a visit to the Republic of Turkey, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, was “surprised” that, unlike the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, she was not given a chair next to the Turkish President Erdogan and had to sit on a couch, especially considering that von der Leyen and Michel have the same protocol rank and must be treated in the same way.

This case gained additional weight if you take into account the fact that Von der Leyen is a woman and that the attitude of the Turkish president was considered a disrespectful attitude that is “absolutely unacceptable” in the European Union.

On the other side of the Atlantic, things were not perfect either. Namely, an already world-famous case is the refusal to shake hands by the former US President Donald Trump, during the official visit of the now former German Chancellor Angela Merkel to the White House. On March 17, 2017, the two leaders had their first official meeting at the White House, and after the welcoming ceremony, Trump and Merkel had a brief conversation with reporters. The US president, Donald Trump, refused to shake hands with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel after a private conversation. Although he had previously warmly welcomed Chancellor Merkel in front of the White House, when they shook hands, Trump in the Oval Office did not respond to the request of photojournalists and videographers to shake hands with his guest. The conversation, which lasted 15 minutes, was evaluated by the two as “good”, and then journalists and cameramen were called. When the cameramen started chanting, “Handshake, handshake please,” Trump did not react. Then Merkel tried to snap out a handshake, but Trump did not even react to that. “Shall we offer a hand to each other,” Merkel asked in English. But Trump just smiled at the cameras and looked straight ahead as if he was not listening to Merkel.

Just two weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, during the visit of the British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss to Moscow, another protocol “gaffe” can be seen, indicating strong impatience and sending a harsh political message from one country to another. Namely, after arriving at the Moscow airport, Truss was not greeted by any Russian diplomat, and later, when the procession with Minister Truss arrived at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, she was not allowed to get out of the car, i.e., they were told to park down the street and turn back. Additionally, at a press conference after the meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the British Foreign Secretary and her diplomats came to the meeting “unprepared” and that it was “like talking to a deaf person.” For her part, the British foreign minister emphasized that “Lavrov told me that Russia has no plans to attack Ukraine. But we must see the words followed by deeds and the soldiers to move to another place,” to which Lavrov reacted sharply by saying openly that “what Russia does on its territory is not your business,” after which he left the press-conference and left the guest alone on the podium.

Lavrov, in fact, is not immune to conveying political messages in a non-protocol manner, using both verbal and non-verbal communication. Namely, at a press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia in August 2015, the cameras recorded Lavrov listening to his guest, and then suddenly saying “fools”, and during the official visit to Japan, when he was on the plane celebrated his 67<sup>th</sup> birthday, his celebratory T-shirt had the inscription: “Who does not want to talk to Lavrov, will talk to Shoigu.”

On July 22, 2022, during the official visit of the Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin to Croatia, a deviation from the protocol caused a gaffe that was interpreted by the public as transmission of a political message, although there are no open issues publicly between Croatia and Finland. Namely, during Marin's visit to Zagreb, immediately before the meeting with Croatian President Zoran Milovanovic, Finnish Prime Minister Marin was left alone in the lobby, waiting for the Croatian President for almost two minutes. Marin walked through the reception hall, looking at the art paintings in the hall, her body language showing boredom and anticipation. Although critics can describe this event as an inappropriate protocol mistake, if we take into account the statement of the Croatian president regarding Finland's application for membership in NATO - the Alliance, in which it is said that "the request of Finland and Sweden for membership in NATO is a very dangerous adventure" and that "it should be discussed", supplemented by the opinion that the Croatian parliament should condition this membership on the fulfillment of the Croatian conditions for amending the Election Law in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the whole event acquires a political connotation and conveys a political message.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Protocol rules are the foundation of good manners in international relations and are accepted by political and diplomatic officials regardless of their political background. And, while the protocol should bring order to international relations and enable them to be carried out efficiently and effectively, in an acceptable and predictable manner, but also in a dignified and civilized manner, individuals keeping in mind their own (or state's) agenda and goal, with deliberate deviations from what is considered acceptable from a protocol point of view, they convey a message that can affect relations between high-ranking officials, and also relations between two or more states. Simply put, using the tools of a process that should be the basis of good behavior and generally accepted manners in international relations, individuals express their opinion in a non-diplomatic manner on a given topic or about a particular person or country. In analyzing whether or not a particular concession conveys a message, many factors need to be taken into account because not every concession is intended to "say" something, and not every communication (especially non-verbal) has a connotation that is commonly accepted as certain message. Therefore, when performing analyzes of behavior or a specific event of an international nature, this issue should be dealt with by persons with high expertise and significant experience. However, the state policy also depends on the results of the analysis.

## 5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Thompson, Erika, academic discussion, Protocol Seminar held in Skopje in 2001.
- Donaldson, F. (1990). *The Maxims of Ptah-hotep: Humankind's Earliest Wisdom Literature*. Vantage Press, Incorporated.
- Gilbert, Matthew (2002). *Communication Miracles at Work*. Berkeley, CA: Publishers Group West.
- Hogan, Kevin and Stubbs, Ron (2003). *Can't get Through 8 Barrierto Communication*. Grenta, LA: Pelican Publishing Company.
- Pease Barbara, Pease Allan (2006), *The Definitive Book of Body Language: The Hidden Meaning Behind People's Gestures and Expressions*.
- Forms and Functions (2nd ed.) Waveland Press, Pease, New York, NY: Bantam Dell.
- Kurbalija, Jovan, Slavik, Hannah (2001). *Language and Diplomacy*. Diplo Projects, Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, Malta.
- Deutsch, Morton (1958). *Trust and Suspicion*. Journal of Conflict Resolution.
- Smiljanov, Sande (2021). The role of the protocol and defense diplomacy in achieving the security of the Republic of Macedonia, Faculty of Philosophy, Doctoral Dissertation. page. 106-111.