

***Ministries of Foreign Affairs in the World: Actors of State Diplomacy***, edited by Christian Lequesne, Brill | Nijhoff, Leiden, Boston, 2022, Series: Diplomatic studies, 1872-8863, volume 18, ISBN: 9789004505889 (eBook)

Book Review by Irina Grosu<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *The book offers a new perspective in comparing the ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) around the world, accentuating their role of high interest on the diplomatic scene, in the context of numerous drastic changes taking place at international level. In the past years, the MFAs had to adapt to a diverse range of situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine, the recruitment challenges in a multi-ethnic environment, or the science diplomacy. The research offers a multidisciplinary approach of MFAs from Europe, South America, Asia and other parts of the world.*

**Keywords:** *diplomacy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, geoeconomic diplomacy, science diplomacy, consular diplomacy.*

The book proposes a fresh perspective on the ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) in the world, aiming towards contributing to the existing academic gap in the research field of contemporary diplomacy. In this context, the editor included articles already published in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* (2020), as well as new chapters dedicated to professionals and researchers looking for new perspectives on MFAs globally. Moreover, the relevance of the present research topic can be challenged, due to the “natural preference of scholars for new diplomatic institutions<sup>2</sup> rather than classical ones” (p. 13), the emergence and increasing influence of other non-state actors on the international scene, and the decreasing role of the MFAs. Furthermore, data on MFAs concentrates on studies about democratic regimes, since the information available from authoritarian regimes is harder to obtain, due to their opacity. Leaving all these aspects aside, there is always the challenge of “the rules of secrecy and low transparency” (p. 14) specific to the diplomatic field, where there is a tendency to maintain a general level of confidentiality.

The book's editor, Christian Lequesne, has a PhD in political science and held different positions in the academic sphere, some of his affiliations including College of Europe, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, and the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna. Furthermore, the contributors (28, including the editor) are mostly researchers from universities around the world (e.g., France, Canada, United Kingdom, Norway, Singapore, Brazil, India), but also professionals from different MFAs (e.g., Denmark, Mexico).

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the European External Action Service of the European Union or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the field of human rights.

The research carried out for this book underlines a change of paradigm regarding the role and position of MFAs in different societies. Thus, a transition is observed from a classical system, where diplomats are selected from a specific social category to a more representative system for societies, where policies respecting the principle of inclusion are mainstreamed.

The book focuses on several areas such as recruitment and career (I), diplomacy and politics (II), new policy practices (III), and researching and theorising ministries of foreign affairs (IV). The book dedicates an entire chapter to the phenomenon of the politicisation of MFAs, which raises lots of concern worldwide. Nevertheless, this risk can be avoided with the help of essential qualities that must characterise a diplomat: high professional standards and the true representation of the citizens' identity. Several chapters refer to examples of states having functional democracies (such as France and Norway) and others experiencing a hybrid regime, as Hungary. As it can be observed, the book opens new paths for research revealing how national policy is connected to the MFAs without the politicisation of foreign affairs.

United Kingdom is analysed in the book by Andrew F. Cooper, considering the pressure its diplomats were subjected to during Brexit. In this context, the analysis exposes how the populist challenge led to different ways of degrading the status of diplomats. The peak of this process is emphasised by the author quoting from a Eurosceptic politician, who suggested that it would be preferable for more diplomats to withdraw from their positions due to their perceived cosmopolitan views, as exemplified by the resignation of Sir Ivan Rogers, the British permanent representative to the European Union. This kind of approach is indicative of a low level of professionalism and trust, as it criticises senior officials working on a lengthy and arduous process such as the withdrawal from the European Union. The British case showed that diplomats are not protected from populist pressures disrupting their activity, even if the UK is a country situated at the forefront of the development and promotion of international law.

Going further, Kim B. Olsen focuses on new policy practices, in the field of sanctions regimes. This chapter describes the issues diplomats have to tackle in the current context, being engaged in relations with multiple state and non-state actors, relevant to geoeconomic diplomacy. The case-study revolves around French and German diplomats in their quest to implement the European Union's sanctions regime against Russia in 2014-2016, following Crimea's illegal annexation. In this process, the diplomats had to cooperate with national actors showing a high level of economic and political power and less respect for international law. This analysis can provide useful lessons and best practices for the current diplomats in the context of the illegal Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The book chapter signed by Pierre-Bruno Ruffini tackles another facet of today's diplomacy, called science diplomacy, forcing MFAs to adapt to an ever-changing world, where science and technology are influencing the international relations. Countries like the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Spain are taking significant steps towards meeting the emergent challenges, through the new realities of science diplomacy, by strengthening their strategy in this area. This approach proved itself very useful in times of COVID-19 crisis when securing vaccines required strong diplomatic efforts.

Going further, another chapter addresses the new challenges of the digital age for consular diplomacy, since governments have to be closer to the citizens and meet their

needs in a timely matter, with technology acting as a factor that can help in the process. Due to the extensive use of social media by embassies and MFAs, public diplomacy gains more and more territory, even though “televised news reporting influenced diplomat’s policies” (p. 290). As such, nowadays Facebook, Twitter and other social media channels are regularly used by diplomatic personnel to promote various accomplishments in the international field, or conversely, concerns related to the current environment, characterised by war and uncertainty. The book examines the example of Denmark, the first country to appoint a Tech Ambassador, a revolutionary idea, which can serve as an example for other countries to build a much-needed relationship with tech companies and to adapt to the ever-changing world of technology.

The last part of the book suggests possible avenues of research regarding the MFAs. One of them is through the use of ethnography, the authors proposing to analyse the diplomats’ behaviour, considering the challenge of the inaccessibility of information related to their activity, most of the sources usually offering data informally and anonymous. In addition, there is the issue of professional ethics, as diplomats can compromise themselves by sharing information, which raises the issue of protecting the source when circulating the results of the research, while information provided makes the source identifiable due to various factors. A possible solution to this limit can be avoiding or even eliminating any reference containing political substance.

Furthermore, the authors underline the importance of face-to-face diplomacy, even though the COVID-19 pandemic imposed alternative ways of interaction. Gradually, however, the diplomatic world returned to its old rituals, interpolating technology as well, when needed. Nevertheless, the latter cannot replace the social interaction, but it can help support the social processes.

In conclusion, this book offers a fresh holistic approach on MFAs around the world, giving a much-needed analysis on the current status of these institutions in the national polities, as well as on the international arena. Similarly to other works of this kind, the book has its own limitations, shared even by the authors, one of them being that certain countries are not covered due to their regimes (e.g., Russia, China), even though their role is anything but negligible on the international scene. Nonetheless, this research can represent a starting point for other studies exploring the topic and offering more insights into the current shifts in the way of functioning of MFAs around the world.