

## **THE ROLE OF DIPLOMACY IN THE TIMES OF THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS**

Michaela Čiefová

*Department of English Language,  
Faculty of Applied Languages,  
University of Economics in Bratislava,  
Dolnozemska cesta 1, 852 35 Bratislava, Slovakia  
michaela.ciefova@euba.sk*

### **Abstract:**

The author's objective is to highlight the role of diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. We discuss selected dimensions of diplomacy (health, economic...) and analyse how they have been adapted to new challenges resulting from the disease outbreak. The paper is concluded by a series of recommendations aimed at increasing the efficacy of diplomatic efforts. Despite its horrific impacts, the pandemic can be regarded as an opportunity to revitalise certain areas such as national economies, to make them more innovative and environmentally friendly. For diplomacy in the future, we expect the prevalence of digital use and a focus on health, science, and environmental diplomacy.

**Key words:** *health diplomacy, science diplomacy, environmental diplomacy, economic diplomacy, COVID-19 pandemic*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the world as we know it has been subject to rapid change as all areas of human existence have been influenced by the pandemic. Many political, cultural, social and economic issues were intensified as a result of the pandemic (Golovei, Stoliarchuk, Prigoda 2020). The pandemic has also accentuated several areas of law, such as over employment and its forms [Rak 2020], and significantly altered education [Štefančík, Stradiotová 2021], which includes the training of future diplomats, too. As a consequence, economic systems and labour markets, businesses, education and health services and tourism and hospitality sectors are all currently facing challenges at an unprecedented scale. Similarly, this concerns diplomacy and its dimensions.

We use the term “dimensions” to refer to branches of the overall diplomacy concept, whereby each dimension of diplomacy is engaged in a specific topic and follows different objectives. Clearly, there is a frequent overlap regarding the goals of the individual dimensions of diplomacy. Among Slovak authors, analyses of the various dimensions of diplomacy and their respective actors can be frequently found in papers by Erik Pajtinka, who distinguishes European, economic, or cultural dimensions of diplomacy [Pajtinka 2007], based on their respective objectives. This list, however, is not exhaustive. Furthermore, the nomenclature is still evolving, as different authors tend to use various names to refer to certain diplomatic activities, or even suggest their own names. These names often mirror current developments in society, such as the notion of pandemic diplomacy.

In a way, diplomacy can be seen as a tool for conflict prevention, management and problem solving, hence its role in these challenging times is indisputable.

In the present paper, we attempt to address the issue of the mutual relationship between the coronavirus pandemic and diplomacy. In other words, we intend to outline the most critical areas impacted by the coronavirus and to illuminate how diplomacy and its individual dimensions have been reacting to them.

The hypothesis we operate with is as follows: “Countries have reorientated their foreign policy and diplomacy objectives as a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, hence also distinct dimensions of diplomacy have come to the foreground.”

The outcome of the research is a series of recommendations targeted at policy makers as well as diplomacy practitioners to make the respective types of diplomacy more effective and reactive when dealing with the issues linked to the ongoing pandemic and similar future challenges.

The research is of a theoretical, qualitative nature, applying methods of descriptive analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, supported by a review of relevant literature, i.e. qualitative desk research. We refer to both domestic and foreign scientific papers and other sources, such as institutional websites, and to a limited extent media articles or press releases. We describe and comment on the impact of the pandemic on countries, as well as policy responses.

It needs to be emphasised that the research presented herein is still a work in progress, an overview of what has happened in the field of diplomacy and international relations since the coronavirus emerged at the end of 2019. As the crisis is not over yet, some of the responses of countries to current problems are still being shaped. Therefore, let us consider this contribution as an introduction into the topic with which we are planning to engage more closely in our future scientific inquiry. Long-lasting changes in the diplomacy and foreign policy objectives of countries will be able to be properly evaluated after the definite end of the pandemic.

## **1. THE INFLUENCE OF THE PANDEMIC ON SELECTED DIMENSIONS OF DIPLOMACY**

The global pandemic caused by the coronavirus has been challenging experience concerning all areas of our lives. Suddenly, new solutions to complex problems have to be found, with many of them requiring international participation. In spite of the obviously indispensable cooperation of nation states, the initial reaction to the pandemic was in many cases undertaken on national levels. An example are the European Union Member States which first acted separately, since the EU's response was delayed [Harakaľová 2020: 245]. In the next phase, the EU even cooperated with the Western Balkans as a geo-strategic priority, for instance by providing a financial aid package [Chlebcová 2020: 254, 256].

Despite the fact that the virus first appeared in December 2019, a number of studies have already been published, ranging from health-related topics, through the economic consequences of the pandemic to foreign policy and diplomatic responses. Additionally, the topic has received extraordinary media coverage.

Most of the papers published so far include at least a marginal reference to China as a country from which the virus spread into the world. China has made an enormous step forward regarding its economy in recent years, attempting to become a key player on the international scene. This is mainly visible in its relations with the United States of America, a great-power competition, as Gill [2020] refers to it, describing the mutual blaming of the countries for the pandemic outbreak. Since China is considered responsible for the crisis by most people, it is trying to stop such a portrayal. As Verma (2020a) states, the country has concentrated on changing this narrative, because of confidence and fear. "It is trying to save face internationally," [Verma 2020a: 205], questioning the origin of the disease, pointing at countries that have been less successful in fighting the virus, and emphasising the country's assistance and expertise sharing in the crisis [Verma 2020b]. China's activities abroad have indeed been noticed. As for Slovakia, for instance, the most visible actors of public diplomacy are China, the European Union and the WHO. In contrast to that, the United States as a country questioning the virus in the initial stages of the pandemic, has not been perceived as such [Čiefová, Szabó, Janubová 2021: 297]. Moreover, some countries such as the US focused more on their internal struggle against the pandemic rather

than joining the efforts of the international community [Javed, Chattu 2020].

In relation to China's activities, the author refers to so called *mask diplomacy* [Verma 2020a; Verma 2020b], although we consider the term figurative, relating mostly to activities falling under health diplomacy, which is described in the next section. Dodds et al. [2020] use similar notions, namely *facemask diplomacy* or *pandemic diplomacy* conducted by China and Russia; Kelly [2020] even describes China's actions as *Covid-diplomacy*. Another expression applied also in negative contexts is *vaccine diplomacy*.

At the time of finalising this paper, there have already been several vaccines developed by pharmaceutical companies. Furthermore, countries have initiated their vaccination strategies and managed to provide a substantial percentage of their population with the needed dose. However, many countries are still lagging behind in the process. In this context, some authors emphasise the problem of vaccine inequality and accentuate the necessity of international collaboration and the task of health diplomacy to secure access to vaccination for everybody [Javed, Chattu 2020; Su et al. 2021].

As for its negative connotations, vaccine diplomacy has for instance been used to describe Russia's attempts to strengthen its position internationally by offering Sputnik – Russian vaccine, despite its lack of use for the country's own citizens and a practically non-existing domestic vaccination plan [Sobotovičová 2021: 4]. In conjunction with vaccines, the country-of-origin effect seems to be present [Čiefová 2021], as in the case of availability of several vaccines, some citizens take into account not only their expected effectiveness, but also where they were manufactured. This may (in) directly reflect their geopolitical orientation and preferences.

The pandemic has also been accompanied by violent encounters, racism xenophobia, and anti-Chinese sentiment. Attacks have been targeted both on Chinese citizens and those with similar appearance, as well as on foreigners in China who may be regarded as virus-carriers [Verma 2020b]. Kelly [2020] emphasises the possibility of regional conflicts triggered by negative circumstances concerning economic and healthcare systems. In case these problems escalate, it can represent a serious matter of safety. On the other hand, the contemporary situation has illuminated numerous acts of solidarity towards the most vulnerable ones, such as unaccompanied children, migrants, asylum seekers and victims of domestic violence [Dodds et al. 2020]. This can be perceived as evidence of a feeling of shared responsibility towards others; the simple realisation that people have to help each other.

In some countries, protests demonstrating dissatisfaction with the anti-pandemic measures or the overall political arena have been organised, frequently even despite strict prohibitions concerning the gatherings of larger groups of people. In contrast to that, many people have volunteered with determination to help those in need, for instance providing grocery shopping for the elderly. These positive as well as negative attitudes and actions can be observed, for example, in Slovakia.

In future investigations, it could be interesting to observe whether the emerging notions listed above (e.g. facemask diplomacy or pandemic diplomacy) will become fully incorporated into scientific discourse or not and in specific cases replace the general term health diplomacy. Nevertheless, several already established dimensions of diplomacy occur rather frequently in papers dealing with the current pandemic. These are primarily health diplomacy, science diplomacy, environmental diplomacy, and economic diplomacy. Due to their being the subject of many relevant papers and their obvious role in the pandemic, we have decided to focus on them and examine them in the following parts of the paper.

### **1.1 Health and science diplomacy**

For an individual, COVID-19 represents predominantly a health threat. This is true also on a regional, national and international level, since the number of casualties is growing continuously. As of 16<sup>th</sup> February 2021, there were above 109.9 million coronavirus cases worldwide, resulting in more than 2.42 million deaths. By the 4<sup>th</sup> August 2021, there were already more than 200.6 million cases of infection and more than 4.2 million casualties. As of 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2021, the number of cases exceeded 258 million; there were more than 5.1 million deaths and more than 233 million recoveries [Worldometer 2021].

Many countries were not ready to tackle a pandemic of such a scale. Developing countries often lack basic health facilities and educated labour; they are struggling with other diseases and their systems of health care are collapsing. The pandemic thus represents another burden that may equal a tipping point, and therefore may not be bearable anymore. In addition to what is happening in developing and the least developed countries, health care systems in some developed countries are also failing, demonstrating the unreadiness of these countries to manage the pandemic effectively and without assistance from abroad. Augustín [2020: 24] asserts, when considering public health system readiness, that countries were barely prepared for this, no matter what their political regime was.

As a response to this issue, countries have mobilised to provide face masks, respirators, or financial resources. In academic literature, such actions fall under health diplomacy – a term which often occurs in papers examining health issues related to COVID-19, even though it is already a well-established concept.

Many developing as well as developed countries have become recipients of international aid due to the spread of coronavirus. In February 2021, Portugal, for instance, was struggling to beat the virus. As its domestic capacities were exhausted, France and Luxembourg decided to send medical personnel to the country; Germany had done so even earlier [TASR 2021a]. Simultaneously, the situation in Slovakia has been critical with the country appearing at the top of the global ranking concerning deaths per one million inhabitants [TASR 2021b]. The seriousness of the situation had even reached such a level that a few patients were transferred to Germany or

Poland within the compass of European solidarity aid. Additionally, Slovakia has received international aid from Romanian medical personnel [TASR 2021c]. According to Chattu and Chami [2020], countries have reoriented their political and economic priorities in favour of health issues due to the disease outbreak, as the COVID-19 pandemic “has crippled and stagnated the economy and global supply chain systems,” [Chattu, Chami 2020: 2].

As Katz et al. [2011] argue, the notion *global health diplomacy* has become mainstream. Health diplomacy actors are expected to demonstrate interdisciplinary skills, i.e. knowledge of law, technical and diplomatic expertise. The authors further state, the concept has several meanings, usually divided into three categories. These are as follows:

- core diplomacy referring to negotiations between or among nation states;
- multistakeholder diplomacy including various actors, organisations, initiatives;
- informal diplomacy engaging public health actors, the public, etc. [Katz et al. 2011: 506].

What we consider especially important here is the involvement of state and non-state actors, as well as the public, since it seems to be often forgotten that diplomacy is not necessarily limited to official representatives of a nation state, no matter what the dimension of diplomacy (cultural, environmental...). Based on the division above, we regard health diplomacy as a field with the possibility – and even the necessity - of wide participation.

Concerning the nomenclature of the term health diplomacy, synonymous expressions found in both academic and media articles include *medical diplomacy* or even *disease diplomacy*, such as in Chauhan [2020], who further reminds us that the world has faced pandemics before. As countries tried to protect both the health of their citizens as well as trade, various agreements and measures were implemented in the past, including the use of quarantine. The practice of quarantine is no new phenomenon; it originates in the 14th century. In the current crisis, the World Health Organization (WHO) plays a crucial role, as multilateral cooperation is needed, even though the agency’s actions have been criticised [Chauhan 2020].

Health diplomacy is closely connected with another dimension of diplomacy, namely science diplomacy. The disease has resulted in a new position for this branch of diplomacy, which is understandable as scientific advancement is closely related to health issues and environmental problems as well as to economic phenomena. As Pisupati [2020: 10] asserts, “The mere collaboration of scientists across the globe to fight the pandemic has turned the discourse on multilateralism and diplomacy to unprecedented levels.” The author goes further to claim that medical professionals and scientists have been receiving probably even more media attention than athletes, politicians, or people from the entertaining industry. Furthermore, the contemporary scientific progress and development triggered by COVID-19 is significantly faster than under normal circumstances [Pisupati 2020]. Colglazier’s [2020] research indicates



that the response of the global scientific community to the current circumstances was appropriate, with knowledge and information sharing and substantial collaboration. According to the author, science diplomacy is now indeed more important than ever, and it is the obligation of countries with an advanced level of scientific and technological development to assist less developed countries with capacity building. Due to the fact that the fight against coronavirus, as well as the problems brought by its global scale, demonstrate how critical a joint approach, knowledge sharing and related spill-over effects are, we agree with the above cited scholar and support the view that the scientific dimension of diplomacy will gradually become one of the most prominent areas of foreign policy. This standpoint is also supported by Augustín [2020: 25] who says that knowledge and science based policy is crucial in times of global health crises, i.e. at the moment, too.

### **1.2 Environmental and economic diplomacy**

The next area of diplomacy impacted by the coronavirus outbreak is environmental diplomacy, or climate diplomacy. Climate change and other environmental problems require urgent solutions, regardless of COVID-19. For the year 2020, several conferences and forums had been scheduled, however, the pandemic hindered their taking place and thus the adoption of new commitments to fight climate change (Emerald Insight 2020). Since the pandemic has affected all areas of human existence, including transport and industrial production, the virus and its impacts are often debated through the lens of the environment. Some of the papers discussing environmental issues in the context of the coronavirus adopt a (partly) regional approach, such as Yazdi (2020), who focusses on Iran. Regarding the global environmental effects of the pandemic, the author points out the two opposing perspectives – the optimistic belief that the pandemic will help ecosystems recover; and the pessimistic opinion that positive consequences of the situation on the environment are only short-term. The narrative is that after the crisis, the countries will attempt to restore their pre-pandemic economic growth. Nevertheless, the author talks about a reduction in environmental diplomacy [Yazdi 2020: 5]. A discussion about the positive and negative impacts of the pandemic on the environment is to be found in other works, too. Furmańczyk and Kaźmierczyk [2020], for instance, claim that once people's lives return to normal, this will leave its mark on the environment. Additionally, the authors stress the waste caused by medical and personal protection equipment, such as face masks.

The pandemic has intensified the necessity to promptly respond to the issues concerning the changing climate. Recent research indicates that the phenomenon of climate change may be one of the triggers of pandemics, as animals such as bats tend to migrate to areas out of their original habitat. What is more, urban development and cities' extension bring people closer to wild animals. Hence in the end, there are two factors responsible for the potential contact of the human population with wild animals, who might possibly be the virus carriers. This, of course, is not limited to

SARS-CoV-2 which might have been triggered by climate change but can occur also in connection to the origin of similar viruses [Beyer, Manica, Mora 2021].

The premise that the outbreak of the pandemic and climate change are interlinked is supported also by Manzanedo and Manning [2020], who have compiled a list of the differences and similarities between these two phenomena, as well as the lessons to be learnt. As they emphasise, the list of lessons for the climate emergency is not comprehensive, but includes the following points:

- high momentum trends;
- irreversible changes;
- social and spatial inequality;
- weakening of international solidarity;
- less costly to prevent than to cure.

On the other hand, members of the European Parliament perceive the pandemic as an opportunity for modernisation and innovation in certain sectors of the economy (such as tourism and hospitality). It is believed that now there is a chance to make those fields more socially responsible and – last but not least - more environmentally friendly [European Parliament 2020]. Chlebcová [2020: 259] agrees and adds, COVID-19 is slowing down physical globalisation, although accelerating and supporting its online, digital form. The author continues by saying that only those economies capable of adapting to digitalisation will eventually be successful at fighting the pandemic and subsequent revitalisation. We can further elaborate on this premise by putting an emphasis on knowledge- and best-practice sharing among countries.

As for economies, tourism is one of the sectors that have been negatively influenced the most by the pandemic [European Parliament, 2020]. The World Tourism Organisation publishes data concerning tourism decline across the regions of the world. Based on data for January – October 2020, international arrivals in the Americas and Europe experienced a decline of 68%; Africa 69%; the Middle East 73%; and Asia and the Pacific 82% [UNWTO 2020]. According to Stuchlíková [2020: 645], it may take from two to three years to revive tourism in its pre-pandemic state. Many travellers decided to spend their 2020 summer vacation in their homeland, or to avoid travelling at all as a precaution. In Slovakia, for instance, some people were worried about the pandemic and potential exposure to the disease and subsequent quarantine; others were determined to help domestic tourism, and the situation in summer 2021 seems similar. Some help was also provided by the state in the form of financial contributions for recipients such as hotels, restaurants, aquaparks, zoos, museums, travel agencies and similar entities [Ministry of Transport and Construction of the Slovak Republic, 2021].

Certainly, it is also the objective of business owners and policy makers to promote domestic tourism and thus to literally save hundreds of small and medium enterprises and jobs. One way to do so is by the application of public or cultural diplomacy, and appropriately selected place branding and marketing. By doing so, both domestic as



well as foreign visitors can be supported, unless foreigners are restricted access to the country [Čiefová 2020]. In our opinion, the pandemic also offers room for countries to revisit their country or nation branding strategies and recreate them in an innovative, mindful, and attractive way. According to some authors, systematic nation brand creation possesses social and economic importance, as well as a significant role in foreign policy [Čiefová, Goda 2019]. The same applies for cultural diplomacy, the aim of which is to present a country's culture and traditions to the outside world. Now, as tourism in many countries is severely threatened, attractive cultural diplomacy may help kickstart the sector once the pandemic ends and travel restrictions are removed. Indeed, cultural as well as public diplomacy and attractive nation branding can promote tourism for a country in these difficult times by presenting the country as a destination worth exploring [Čiefová 2021]. Targeted actions could subsequently boost not only tourism, but also the field of creative industries, as this sector is one of the sectors most negatively affected by the ongoing situation [Baculáková 2020: 36]. Surely, countries can do so individually, or cooperate on a regional level. The intersection between economic and cultural diplomacy in this context is obvious.

On the European level, the Commission's objective is to present Europe as a safe and attractive destination, supporting Europe-wide communication campaigns. Moreover, the aim is to facilitate the sustainability of the European tourism, to conduct its digital transformation, while adhering to the principles of the protection of the environment. These ambitions will require intense cooperation among the Member States [European Commission 2020], which may pose further challenges for European diplomats.

Certainly, tourism is not the sole sector of the economy impacted by the crisis. To cite Buckley [2020], the virus has caused a supply and demand shock to the global economy. This is with no doubt true, as whole economies are struggling with the economic consequences of the virus that are visible both on a macroeconomic as well as on a microeconomic level. As for the macroeconomic determinants, Barua [2020] enumerates the following ones: "demand, supply, supply chain, trade, investment, price level, exchange rates, and financial stability and risk, economic growth, and international cooperation." Some countries, such as Japan, intend to provide loans to their companies located in China to relocate, either to Japan or to third countries [Buckley 2020]. Such actions can eventually lead to a reshuffle of countries' positions in the global economy. With economies not being closed systems but dynamic "organisms," these complex problems will often require a joint approach, with economic diplomats playing a crucial role.

The pandemic also raises questions regarding the future of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a project of enormous scale with regards to the number of countries involved as well as its costs. Verma [2020b] describes the project as ambitious, aimed at providing loans, financial assistance and building infrastructure, with more than 100 countries included in the plan. Moreover, one of China's objectives, citing the

author, is to “become a rule maker rather than a rule taker,” [Verma 2020b: 254]. Countries with fewer economic resources and an underdeveloped infrastructure and poorer countries are likely to suffer more from the COVID-19 pandemic in the long run. Economic recovery is expected to be much slower compared to developed countries. Consequently, economic inequalities between or among countries may even deepen (Manzanedo, Manning 2020), constituting another problem to be solved on the international level, also by means of economic diplomacy.

## **CONCLUSION**

We can see that in crises like this, several subdisciplines of diplomacy are being practiced simultaneously as some of their objectives tend to overlap. For example, cooperation in the area of health and science diplomacy is crucial. Except for the coordination of actions among individual diplomacy dimensions, the involvement of various stakeholders (diplomacy practitioners, academics, scientists, NGOs...) is necessary. The interconnectedness of various sectors, and thus also of these diplomacy dimensions, should be recognised.

Indeed, it is obvious that a crisis of such a scale requires engagement of national governments, international organisations and even multinational corporations, and individuals. Nowadays, the cooperation of countries on a global level is more critical than ever. Developed countries should mobilise to assist developing countries which commonly lack the necessary resources. Besides, these countries are often in humanitarian crises, hence they are especially vulnerable, experiencing displacement, violence, further diseases or incompetent governance [Poole et al. 2020]. Such environment does significantly complicate the struggle with coronavirus. Moreover, the COVID-19 experience has highlighted the importance of prompt reaction from the actors involved. Dealing with unknown viruses and other threats should not be postponed or avoided.

As already emphasised, the current pandemic may be considered an opportunity to modernise, revitalise and digitalise various sectors, for instance the economy, whereby the solutions should reflect the need for measures protecting the environment. It is obvious that industries, governments, and diplomacy as well, are facing changes and developments that require responses and action. The state in which the world is right now, what had preceded before and what has been done should serve as a set of guidelines on what to do and what not to do in case another crisis emerges. Diplomacy is reacting to these special circumstances, too, trying to find the most appropriate solutions. What is proven right and effective can serve as a tutorial for possible future actions. Once the crisis is over, an in-depth analysis of its progress, taken measures and their impacts, as well as an assessment of the overall crisis management should be conducted to form the basis of detailed guidelines and crisis management plans for the future. Taking into consideration the above cited research on the relationship between climate change and the pandemic, the ongoing pandemic may not necessar-

ily be the last one to come. Intensive dialogue between policy makers and scientists will be necessary in the future to address the challenges the globe will be facing.

It is likely that future research on diplomacy and diplomatic practice, will be dominated by the health and science aspect, with the objective to articulate ways of how to deal with possible comparable crises in the future. Furthermore, the transformation of diplomacy into digital diplomacy (or eDiplomacy) and related innovations such as investigated by Mattoš [2015] are, in our opinion, likely to be accelerated by the latest developments in the world. As Mattoš [2015] asserts, the development of information and communication technologies and their application in diplomacy can eventually make some of its operations even more effective.

Our hypothesis that countries have re-defined their foreign policy objectives due to the pandemic has been proven. What we perceive as the main shift in diplomacy is this reorientation towards objectives that seemed not to be that fully articulated before, such as global health. Due to the pandemic, scientific advancement and a constructive dialogue between scientists and policy makers have been given exceptional significance. The linkage between the pandemic and its environmental implications is also important, as well as the relationship between public health and economic development. Hence, we can conclude, new approaches to diplomacy and the dominance of other dimensions may be observed.

In the current era of globalisation, no country has all the necessary means and expertise to fight the pandemic “solo”; isolation within your own borders is not possible [Javed, Chattu 2020]. On the contrary, countries need to demonstrate solidarity and resolve issues in a peaceful manner [Taghizade et al. 2021]. The paper can be concluded by the words of Chauhan [2020], that “no country no matter how hard it tries can protect itself alone, the fate of the world is going to be collective, the world may sail or drown but it will do so as one entity. Hence multilateralism and cooperation is the need of the hour.”

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