

*L'ubomír Rehák*, PhD.

Ambassador of Slovakia to Russia

## MODERN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AS A FOREIGN POLICY TOOL - THE EXAMPLE OF SLOVAKIA

In a world of classical diplomacy, of summits, treaty signings, conferences and forums, but also from the point of view of the users of the consular and visa services of diplomatic missions, the support of culture sometimes seems to be just a kind of additional activity, of no comparable importance to the sharp end of political diplomacy.

However, the presentation of culture abroad, which is facilitated by diplomacy, has a number of undeniable positive effects. The state, through culture, carries out one of the main functions of foreign policy - to be perceived in the world community as a worthy player with a culture that makes a significant contribution to the global cultural heritage. Culture, with a skilful approach, is a significant soft power vector, influencing international relations. After all, culture is the business card of the country and every representative of it is obliged to use it. Unlike large countries, where cultural presentation is automatically included in soft power instruments and large funds are allocated for showcasing their country's celebratory days or even years of culture, small countries use cultural diplomacy to become more recognizable, to increase interest in their country and also to influence the growth of tourism. Among the tools that are successfully used is the promotion of information about UNESCO's world cultural heritage.

Slovakia is rich in material monuments of world heritage - castles, churches and fortresses, as well as in non-material heritage. Music performed on a wooden *fujara* - a wind instrument with a unique sound - is one such example. One of the presidents of Slovakia, Ivan Gašparovič, liked

not only to present the *fujara* to foreign guests, but he also played on it. By the way, I too can on occasion be persuaded to play soft tones on the *fujara* to my guests.

Sometimes the activity of cultural diplomacy is also important for overcoming stereotypes and mistakes in knowledge of the country among foreigners. Slovakia in this sense is an exemplary case – it used often to be the case that all the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia were known, for short, as Czechs. This stereotyping worked in both directions, however, and for the average inhabitant of Czechoslovakia every owner of a Soviet passport was also just a Russian. Slovakia is often confused with Slovenia because we both use the adjective “*slovensky*”, to describe our language although they are quite distinct. In London, my Slovenian colleague and I organized a series of events called “Distinguish Slovenia and Slovakia.” Realizing the hopelessness of this effort, we adopted a relaxed, even amusing approach, designed primarily to promote tourism and the economy. And, hey, our initiative was given a write-up in the *New Yorker* magazine.

Over the years of my diplomatic practice, I have always sought to spread knowledge of Slovakia's rich culture, while also appreciating the cultural influence of my host country and the countries of my colleagues in the diplomatic corps. It is good when a diplomat is personally disposed towards the perception of different kinds of culture; it makes it easier and more pleasant for him to engage in its presentation. I remember a humorous episode when one ambassador told an opera singer after the first section of a concert held at the embassy that perhaps we had had enough of operatic arias, and suggested she instead offer some fun and impromptu folk songs. I learned an important lesson on this occasion and, instead of long concerts, began to organize concert-cocktails, bearing in



mind that diplomats and embassy guests need above all the opportunity to converse. After a relatively short, say, half-hour concert, guests are invited to a small reception, where they can talk, not only about their impressions of the concert, but also about anything of interest. Cultural connoisseurs who want to give more attention and time to music, literature or the visual arts can have concerts and exhibition halls or theatres recommended to them, particularly if they host events related to their country or even with the participation of their embassy.

It is quite natural that each diplomat has his own personal profile and preferences, through which he influences the activities of the embassy. It is difficult to get an expert in the economy to pay excessive attention to supporting literature, or vice versa. In the sphere of culture, the classic example is the lazy division of diplomats into supporters of folklore, classics and contemporary art. By the number of events of each of these groups, connoisseurs can determine the cultural preferences of the organiser. Shifts at ambassadorial posts sometimes open up very new, unexpected horizons to which previous diplomats paid less attention. However, a balance needs to be found in the external presentation of a country, and this is important for central planning at the level of foreign ministries in cooperation with other central agencies. This applies to the presentation of the country and to its cultural activities. In the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, the Department of Cultural Diplomacy and the Department of Communications develop annual proposals for cultural events, usually tied to dates in the historical calendar or to different types of campaigns - the year of architecture, etc. There are special exhibitions prepared *à la carte*, offering visual arts presentations or



projects that can be easily mounted in the special conditions of diplomatic premises.

One recent and very successful example was The Year of Milan Rastislav Štefánik, held from April 2019 - the centenary of his tragic death in a plane crash - to July 2020, the 140th anniversary of his birth. Štefánik, our national hero, was an outstanding person in the early 20th century - astronomer, photographer, military pilot, General of the French air force, politician and diplomat, co-founder of Czechoslovakia. Slovak diplomacy has successfully carried out a number of events to refresh the memory of our national hero. The pandemic influenced some of the planned events - in London, for example, we planned to replicate a ceremonial dinner held at the Royal Astronomical Society, in which Štefánik participated in 1905. The dinner menu, still preserved, is among the documents in a new and interesting *book-museum* about Štefánik written by historian Michal Kšiňan. Through a mutual acquaintance, I was pleased to be able to present the book to The King of Tonga, His Majesty Tupou VI. Slovakia and this Polynesian island state still don't have diplomatic relations, but we are connected through Štefánik who on the Tongan island of Vava'ú conducted research into the solar eclipse in 1911. To this day, there is a preserved concrete base for optical devices built by Štefánik, who left his autograph on it there. Thanks to his short but active life, Štefánik provides a link between the Slovaks and many people around the world; that's why he is a favourite character for our diplomats in their quest to promote knowledge about our country in the world.

Štefánik, by the way, visited the Russian Empire several times - in 1907 with a French scientific expedition to Turkestan; he visited the Pulkovo Observatory in St. Petersburg, and also travelled to Yasnaya Polyana to



meet Leo Tolstoy and Dr. Dušan Makovický, Slovak, Tolstoy's family physician and Štefánik's friend. He also visited Russia several times during the First World War as a member of the Czechoslovak National Committee. In 1916 he was received by Emperor Nicholas II. As Minister of Defense ("War" at that time) of the new Czechoslovakia, General Štefánik arrived in November 1918 in Vladivostok to organize the return of over 50,000 Czechoslovak legionnaires from Siberia to their homeland. After crossing all of Siberia both ways, he left Russia on January 25, 1919. But on landing in Bratislava on May 4 on his return to Slovakia, where he had not been since 1913, his plane crashed, and Štefánik died at the age of 39.

Taking the example of Štefánik's life story, we can highlight the important role of personalities and historical events in public diplomacy with the goal of connecting and building understanding between different people. Similar connections between people and events can be found anywhere in the world - the question is how much desire is there to explore them and whether it is possible to use these points of contact for purposes that correspond to the interests of both sides. It is also important to add that the instruments of influence of public and cultural diplomacy need to be used naturally, sincerely, and without excessive exaggeration or pressure, otherwise they will miss their target. The presentation of the country and its reality should emphasize the authenticity that fits into the cultural perception of the country abroad. Stereotypes cannot be wished away, whether we like it or not. Russia will always be associated with its image as the bear country, and it is better to embrace that image with dignity, as was done with the Olympic Bear in 1980.

One possible benefit enjoyed by Slovakia is the paucity of knowledge about her abroad. This gave us the opportunity to invent a brand with which



to present our country to foreigners. It is no coincidence that after the attempts of our tourism agency with the slogan *Little Big Country*, the process of establishing a new branding was led by the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. The result is quite worthy, with a rhyme in its widely used English version: *GOOD IDEA SLOVAKIA*. It is quite a flexible slogan - speaking of culture, we can say *CULTURE IN SLOVAKIA - GOOD IDEA*, and similarly of any other topic we wish to use to showcase Slovakia.

Today, the new branding and its design are used in all government bodies, and they are enjoyed by non-governmental agencies, based on a free licence. At the same time, it is important to recall that support for Slovak culture also means supporting the culture of all national minorities who have been living in Slovakia for centuries; together they form the rich and diverse cultural heritage of our country. No less important is religious diversity - from dominant Catholicism, through Protestantism, Orthodoxy, to the significant contribution of Jewish culture to Slovak heritage.

I mentioned the example of London, where I spent 5 years leading the embassy. Our embassy in the UK, despite its location in one of the world's most prominent cultural capitals, operated without a dedicated cultural centre - we call them Slovak Institutes. Working with social media networks became an important part of our work. Twitter, in general terms, serves more to communicate with professionals, diplomats and British representatives, while Facebook is more commonly used to communicate with compatriots and diaspora.

As part of our cultural promotion work in the UK, we supported the translation of works of Slovak literature. Here in Moscow we are working together with the Library of Foreign Literature named after M. I. Rudomino on the publication of Russian translation of "Bloody Sonnets", poems of the



Bard of Slovak poetry, Pavol Orságh Hviezdoslav. In this way, we want to celebrate the centenary of the poet's death and the centenary of the establishment of the library in 2021.

It is also important for diplomatic missions to cultivate common cultural and historical heritage - in the United Kingdom, where during the Second World War there was a Czechoslovak government in exile and up to 10,000 Czech and Slovak soldiers, and where Sir Nicholas Winton brought hundreds of imperilled children from occupied Czechoslovakia, there still live many Czechoslovak descendants. The Slovak and Czech Embassies are working closely with the Memorial Association for Free Czechoslovak Veterans. It is important to add that the projects of the Embassy in London, for which no budgetary funds were allocated, were supported by the charitable foundation of a British entrepreneur of Czech origin with investments in Slovakia - Jan Telenský. Some of his ancestors, by the way, belonged to the white emigration from Russia to Czechoslovakia after 1917. No doubt we can identify many other positive examples in Slovak-Russian history of relations which can contribute to the further development of cooperation.

This article provides only a small number of examples of how diplomatic missions in different settings can promote cultural and public diplomacy in order to develop relations between countries and people, even in a situation where political relations might be temporarily minimized. This work, of course, is not easy; it requires a lot of effort and creativity, especially in the situation of limited financial or human resources. But witnessing the better perception of your country abroad is worthwhile remuneration for the work of any diplomat.



*Translation: Magdaléna Reháková and Michael Roberts*

