

Innovating the Role of Honorary Consul In The Era Of Regionalization And Globalization

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Abstract

In the last three decades Governments and Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the Southeastern European countries follow the global trend to make use of the instrument – Honorary Consul as an added value, and quality and complementary enhancement of their existing network of professional diplomatic and consular posts. The terms honorary consul and consulate headed by an honorary consul are often used and represent integral and recognized part of the bilateral diplomatic and consular representation in the international relations. However, there still seems to be a great ‘gap’ in the understanding of the significance of the instrument of honorary consul, which is likely a result of unjustified underestimation and evident deficiency of a focused research on the topic. In the 21st century, the sophisticated network of honorary consuls gains a new quality role in the global processes of transformation of the international relations, alongside with the emphasized transformation of ‘traditional’ diplomacy. Honorary consuls are more often seen as a uniquely innovative and creative ‘tool’ for economic, trade, investment, cultural and scientific promotion of the countries. This research paper offers focused clarifications related to the complex process for identifying the objective need for opening a consulate headed by an honorary consul, selection criteria, role and responsibilities, expected functions and services of the honorary consul, and unique S.W.O.T. analysis with a contemporary review on the specific importance of this institution in the contemporary era of regionalization and globalization.

***Key words:** Honorary consul; VCCCR – Vienna Convention on Consular Relations; Transformation of diplomacy; Consular diplomacy.*

Introduction

The institutions honorary consul and consulate headed by an honorary consul is legitimately recognized and defined in the international law through the VCCR – Vienna Convention on Consular Relations of 1963, which provides a codified legal ground and general framework of consular relations between states, i.e. of consular service. Article 1, paragraph 2 stipulates two categories of consular officers, namely career consular officers and honorary consular officers. Chapter III of this Convention defines in details general provisions relating to facilities, privileges and immunities applicable to consular posts headed by honorary consuls “Regime Relating to Honorary Consular Officers and Consular Posts Headed by such Officers”.

It is quite evident that in the last three decades, mainly governments and ministries of foreign affairs (MFA) are following a global trend to make use of the instrument of honorary consul, as a quality and complementary enhancement of their existing network of professional diplomatic-consular posts.

Transformation of diplomacy and the innovative role of consular diplomacy

Accelerated globalization and regionalization in the world along with the impressive growth of the information and communication technology are imposing an inevitable transformation in international relations, in particular a transformation of the ‘old fashioned’ or traditional academic and practical understanding of diplomacy and consular service. Along with the processes of globalization and regionalization, it becomes obvious that growing economic opportunities for a bilateral cooperation are no longer concentrated in the states’ capitals – where Embassies are traditionally located. Certain regions, particularly developed parts of state territories, separate localities or city centers, emerge as areas of priority interest for establishing a direct diplomatic-consular representation. The latter is of exceptional importance for an efficient and economic model for developing bilateral economy cooperation in both directions. Moreover, vivid changes in the international relations require further modernization, decentralization, de-monopolization and democratization of diplomacy.

The significant changes in the world scene which followed the fall of the ‘bipolar world’ and the

shifting into a ‘multipolar’ one, created conditions for inevitable transformation of traditional diplomacy and growing prevalence of the innovative concept termed ‘consular diplomacy’. Consular diplomacy can be defined as the diplomacy conducted via consulates and consular representatives, focused on classical activities, citizen and corporate services, representation, and issues of trade, tourism and investment promotion between countries, regions and localities. In the 21st century it is quite evident that bilateral diplomacy is increasingly engaged in the ‘low-politics arena’, or the issues of economy, trade, investments, tourism, cultural and scientific cooperation...while ‘high-politics’, or burning high profile political issues are concentrating at the top ministers level, prime ministers and presidents. A coalition of social forces consisting of parliaments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, media and public opinion – has managed to catapult consular affairs to the forefront of today’s MFA’s concerns, showing greater interests to meet the demands of citizens. In contemporary democracies, MFAs must accept that citizens are no longer merely spectators. They increasingly behave like customers and demand a quality product from their governments.

“Creativity” required in the process of opening a new consulate headed by honorary consul

The procedure for opening a consulate headed by an honorary consul starts with a recommendation from the head of mission (HOM - Ambassador). Recommendations include a number of details based on a demonstrable, unmet need for consular, trade and/or other program services in a location within a mission’s area of accreditation:

- number of citizens (nationals of the appointing country) residing or visiting the area
- estimated frequency and nature of consular assistance and services required
- intensity and extent of bilateral trade and investment
- intensity and extent of political, cultural, scientific and other interest/exchanges between the appointing country and the area
- challenges that prevent the supervising mission (the relevant embassy) from providing services in the area (i.e. distance, language, communications, accessibility or resources)
- unfamiliarity with local situation (new emerging country or region that requires reliable local expertise and knowledge)

Roles and responsibilities of the honorary consul, or the basic functions expected, may include:

- consular assistance and advocacy
- development of commercial and economic relations
- passport, citizenship, and notarial services

- support for the supervising mission in maintaining bilateral relations
- a local contact point for the supervising mission
- administrative and logistical support for official visits
- representation at diplomatic, ceremonial and public affairs and events...

It is quite evident in practice that functions will vary depending on the location, specifics and priorities. Supervising missions will determine that content of the honorary consul function and confirm it in annual tasking letters. Under the authority of the head of mission (HOM), the supervising mission holds ultimate authority for all actions undertaken by the honorary consul and identifies ongoing or changing needs through the – mission planning and reporting process.

The head of mission (HOM) consequently has the responsibility and authority to select and finally recommend an individual to be nominated for appointment as honorary consul. The following are important considerations when identifying suitable candidates:

- successful leaders from the academic spheres, business, entrepreneurs, legal experts, culture, arts, sports, and others
- independent means
- solid reputation of good standing in the local community
- good relations and easy access to local government authorities
- a valid reliability status
- number of years resident in the community
- capacity for service in the language of the appointing country
- good judgment
- a tangible connection to the appointing country
- availability of a suitable location for consular premises
- in general – nonpartisan capacity to maintain efficient network of relations and communications with all levels of governmental authorities, local municipalities, business community, civil associations, NGO's and media

Honorary consul: a S.W.O.T. analysis

The S.W.O.T. analysis that follows is a direct result of an extensive and purposely focused research related to the topic of this paper, as well as direct personal experience of the author from the real practice in his active engagement as an honorary consul.

Strenghts

- Legitimate institution with codified 'frame' in the International Law
- Highly 'economical'
- Exceptionally efficient and cost-effective option for widespread diplomatic-consular representation
- Created extensive network of contacts
- Excellent knowledge of the business climate, the language, the customs and the culture of the 'host' state
- Important 'tool' for public diplomacy
- Instantly operational and functional
- Long-term service and effects
- No bureaucratic manners and practices
- Possibility for appointing several consuls for the same territory
- Creatively tailored work program to fit the honorary consul and in accordance with current priorities and requirements
- Fast and easy dismissal, i.e. termination of the mandate without any commitments

The Vienna Convention on Consular Relations of 1963 and particularly Chapter III – “Regime Relating to Honorary Consular Officers and Consular Posts Headed by such Officers”, stipulates the optional character of the institution of honorary consul. Article 68 reads ‘Each State is free to decide whether it will appoint or receive honorary consular officers’, but once the State decides to use this instrument in its diplomatic-consular relations, it is then obliged to comply with all the Convention’s provisions and regulations on Honorary Consuls.

Generally, in the organizational mechanism, , the honorary consul is under direct authority of accredited diplomatic mission – an embassy or consulate general in the receiving state and this diplomatic mission delegates the scope of honorary consular officer’s functions and activities.

Customarily, the honorary consul is a citizen of the receiving state and is not part of the professional diplomatic-consular corps of the sending state. This is exactly why he/she is not burdened with bureaucratic restrictions, procedures and practices. He/she is most commonly successful and prominent person in his/her community, financially independent and experienced in his/her main profession – business, finances, tourism, culture, sciences, sport, art etc. The honorary consul performs

this prestigious function practically 'at no cost' for the sending state, being financed from his/her own resources (personal or corporate). Most often the official office of the consulate is located in the corporate premises or private property of the honorary consul and it is the honorary consul who provides the necessary communication equipment, logistic support, and vehicles. The honorary consul lives and works in the host country and logically, perfectly understands and speaks the official language/s of the host country and local dialects. Therefore, he/she does not start from the very beginning, but is accustomed to local specifics, traditions, and temperament. He/she has already well established network of personal contacts and individual authority in the country. This objectively enables affirmative influence in the public, economic, political, cultural and civilian life in the receiving state.

The institution honorary consul in the 21st century, inevitably imposes itself as one of the most useful 'tools' of the public diplomacy. In order to reach its goals, it is necessary to understand that public diplomacy of a state is not a simple one-way flow of information that influence its public interest and reputation abroad. The success for positive perception of the values and ideas of one state is rather a 'two-way street' and directly depends on the comprehension of these ideas, culture and tradition of a country where the mechanisms of public diplomacy function.

The function of honorary consul can be an advantage for long period of 'service' with continuous and long-term effects. Namely, a carefully selected honorary consul, whose functioning is effective and highly motivated, can be re-appointed for multiple mandates. On the other hand, in case of incompetency, inappropriate conduct, or lack of effects from his/her performance, the simple and easy revocation and termination of the mandate without any obligations and liability of the sending state can also be treated as an advantage.

Weaknesses

- Unawareness of the internationally codified legislation (immunities and privileges of the honorary consuls and consulates headed by them)
- It is not a principal activity, but a supplementary or secondary one
- Lack of education and training in diplomatic-consular affairs
- Lack of clearly defined standards
- Substantial discrepancy and inconsistency in the quality of services provided

- Reliance on the personal willingness and motivation of the honorary consul
- Aversion for acceptance of hierarchical subordination
- Unclearly defined professional accountability
- Inadequate perception of the role of honorary consuls by carrier diplomats and consuls (competition vs. compatibility)
- Lack of contemporary strategy for growth of the network in Foreign Affairs Departments

Generally looking, there is still a large ‘gap’ in the proper understanding of the essential meaning of the instrument of honorary consul in the contemporary conditions. This is a direct result of the evident lack of a focused research, and professional literature on this specific diplomatic-consular institution. There is evident lack of awareness and proper understanding of the long existing international legal framework such as the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations defining the function, immunities and privileges. A significant amount of indifference and unawareness of this Convention exists even with the most of already appointed honorary consuls, which inevitably contributes to an unclear and confusing perception created in the public about their true role. The same also applies to career diplomats, consuls and different administrative levels with the ministries of foreign affairs, who continue to ignore the significance of this instrument or unjustifiably consider it as their competition.

This perhaps draws its logic from the fact that the function of honorary consul is not a primary one as a professional engagement, but added activity or ‘part-time’ voluntary service. This reality proves that the persons being discussed here are individuals, experts in their own profession, without relevant education and training in diplomatic-consular affairs. In this context, the study points at a great individualism and apparent diversity which inevitably creates the impossibility for standardization or larger uniformity in the content and the quality of this service, which in a great extent depends on the individual capacity, motivation and dedication of the honorary consul.

The fact that honorary consuls are most often prominent individuals, of independent means, with an already affirmed professional authority as business persons, managers, bankers, university professors, or others sometimes might result in an ‘ego’ problem with recognition and subordination to the hierarchical structure in performing this honorary function. They might be ‘naturally’ reluctant to disciplined compliance with the bureaucratic rules, diplomatic-consular procedures and directives from the supervising accredited diplomatic-consular mission and the head of mission - ambassador from the sending state.

Opportunities

- Globalization, regionalization
- Transformation of diplomacy
- Economic crisis
- Trend for ‘outsourcing’ and state-private partnership
- Realization of personal need for positive contribution with voluntary engagement

In the highly globalized world of the 21st century, there is an evident and growing trend towards using the potentials of diplomatic-consular services focused on economic issues, along with traditional activities. Expedited globalization of the world economy causes dramatic changes on the international scene. The world has become a ‘global market’ where businesses, investments and tourism are gaining significance. The growing trend comes somewhat in contrast to traditional diplomacy, which is dedicated to political and military matters.

It is more than obvious that in the new millennium, regardless of extensive development of information-communication technology, the physical presence of diplomatic-consular missions remain of crucial significance. This is exactly where the role of honorary consuls imposes itself as an efficient, flexible and most cost-efficient model for an internationally wide representation of the interests of states. Being citizens and residents in their domicile country, authorized to represent and promote values and interests of another country, honorary consuls receive support from both governments. Providing that they have been carefully selected, they can wisely bypass protocol limitations and even affirm themselves as more efficient than career diplomats (Melissen & Fernandez, 2011, p. 67).

The inevitable transformation of traditional diplomatic and consular affairs results in a ‘renaissance’ of the institution of honorary consul. Certainly, professional embassies and consulates continue to keep their dominant role in bilateral diplomacy, but honorary consuls as a complementary or added value instrument, have the capacity to be extremely efficient and utterly economical in the longer term.

The usual calls to budget restrictions on one hand, and the evident need for reevaluation and relocation of priorities on the other hand, imposed as a dominant trend for the international policies of all states in the first decade of the 21st century. This trend encourages the ministries of foreign affairs to search for alternative and more creative solutions which will offer optimal dispersed physical presence with diplomatic-consular representation in the parts of the world of their interest. One of

these optimal solutions is certainly a well-organized inclusion of a wide network of small consular posts headed by honorary consuls. In the era of decentralization and ‘privatization’ of diplomacy, which involves inclusion of new actors from the non-governmental sector, the consulates headed by honorary consuls have proved to be an excellent and innovative model for ‘public-private partnership’.

Threats

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Possible profanation, degradation and discredit of the institution of honorary consul• Primary abuse of the status and the position for personal interests |
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The actual ‘renaissance’ or increased level of innovative use of the instrument of honorary consuls, at the same time presents an evident threat for its possible profanation, degradation and discrediting. This is mainly result of two factors:

Firstly, since the functioning of honorary consuls is not funded from national budgets and practically is a ‘costless’ service for the tax-payers from the sending state, the ministries of foreign affairs may not engage seriously in developing, organizing and constantly upgrading sophisticated network of honorary consuls’ posts. Their ‘superficial’ priority is just to concentrate on quantity i.e. increasing of the number and locations of these small consular posts. Consequently, candidates are being nominated without implementation of basic criteria for their quality selection, or ones they are nominated, MFA’s and responsible embassies tend to leave them on their own. This ‘quantity approach’ is inevitably creating a public image of honorary consuls as a needless pro-forma title.

Secondly, the tremendous transformation processes of the political and economy systems within the countries of Southeastern Europe that took place in the past three decades produced a large number of newly fashioned rich businessmen and entrepreneurs. Reaching their high financial independence and some authority in their societies mainly based on financial power, they are looking for different ways to obtain for themselves a visible social status. Honorary consul’s title often seems to be the easiest and fastest model for joining in the attractive diplomatic-consular corps. This type of potential candidates, in fact, directly offer themselves for this function unselectively ‘hunting’ for any state that would eventually accept to nominate them. The trend to literally ‘purchase’ the position is inevitable resulting in producing a profile of honorary consuls who have no real idea about the creative and innovative significance of this institution as a 21st century tremendously important, efficient and complementary ‘tool’ to the existing bilateral diplomatic-consular career service network.

As an illustration, my research on this subject, based on extensive number of interviews with honorary consuls nominated primarily in South-East Europe countries, points out to a rather astonishing and embarrassing results that more than 70% of the interviewees have not heard of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations and Chapter III – “Regime Relating to Honorary Consular Officers and Consular Posts Headed by Such Officers”.

Conclusion

Considering the indisputably high potentials, capabilities and unique cost-effectiveness of the institution of honorary consul, this paper suggests that an honorary consuls’ program would be especially relevant to ‘Small States’.

In formulating their international policy strategies and priorities, small states continuously try to find the most efficient model that balances objectively limiting factors and resources with national interests. In this respect, their diplomacy and their diplomatic-consular network of representation need to be creative, innovative, flexible and proactive. Such diplomatic models can create representational capacities for small states to influence and enrich bilateral relations towards their interests. Honorary consuls have proven capacity to present, promote and facilitate the possibilities for business cooperation, export and foreign investments; to add value and to expand the efficiency of the existing career diplomatic-consular posts; directly and competently to assist and support the rights and interests of individuals, corporate and other organizations from the sending state; to provide precious contacts with the commercial, cultural, academic, administrative, political and media associations in the host State. In an age of increased virtual presence through the internet, honorary consuls remain a beacon for a ‘face-to-face getting business done’ approach in a very cost-effective manner.

This paper recommends that the Ministry of foreign affairs in the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia implement creative and innovative approach in permanent re- evaluation, re-prioritization, repositioning and reshaping of the existing network of diplomatic and consular missions in bilateral relations. Undoubtedly, the institution of honorary consul is “tailor-made” concept for a ‘small’ country like the Republic of North Macedonia as it offers an exceptionally efficient and cost-effective (highly economical) option for extensive diplomatic-consular representation in all countries of particular interest.

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