

Cultural Differences and the Application of Diplomatic Protocol in the Central and Eastern European Region

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Abstract

The success of diplomatic relations is closely linked to the understanding of cultural differences and the proper application of diplomatic protocol. In the countries of the Central and Eastern European region, the diverse historical experiences, collective memories, and socio-cultural characteristics significantly shape both formal and informal diplomatic behavior. This paper examines how cultural differences influence the application of diplomatic protocols in the region, with a particular focus on the role of cultural sensitivity in diplomatic interactions. Adopting a qualitative, multiple case study approach, the research analyzes contemporary diplomatic incidents in which culturally embedded symbols, gestures, dress codes, and gift-giving practices led to protocol unconventionalities or failures. The findings demonstrate that a lack of cultural sensitivity may result in misunderstandings, public embarrassment or diplomatic tension, while culturally informed protocol practices can contribute to strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations. By integrating cultural sensitivity theory with the analysis of diplomatic protocol and providing empirical evidence from Central and Eastern Europe, the paper contributes to the literature by offering a region-specific and practice-oriented perspective on diplomacy. The paper highlights how seemingly minor protocol deviations can carry significant symbolic and political meanings in culturally sensitive contexts, thereby influencing the elusiveness of international relations.

Keywords: diplomatic protocol; cultural differences; cultural sensitivity; Central and Eastern Europe; international relations

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1. Introduction

Protocol, etiquette, and diplomacy are fundamental elements of international relations, shaping the way states interact and communicate with each other. Diplomacy, as the art of managing relationships between countries and states, provides the framework for advising on foreign policy and protecting national interests (Barston, 2019). Closely linked to diplomacy, protocol emerges as a set of formal practices that guide official interactions and has evolved alongside the practice of diplomacy itself (Sille, 2016).

In addition to protocol and diplomacy, cultural factors profoundly influence how states structure their interactions, affecting not only economic development but also diplomatic customs and practices. From the exchange of gifts to interpreting non-verbal cues, cultural norms influence the way diplomats present issues, navigate tensions, and implement agreements (Hare, 2016). The ability to navigate cross-cultural differences is inevitable for comprehending individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. It contributes to stronger connections and more positive interactions between participants in diplomatic settings (Bolewski, 2008). Diplomats and politicians must acknowledge and embrace cultural diversity to better understand the underlying reasons for differing viewpoints. This awareness may encourage them to seek compromise and consensus-driven solutions, instead of forcing their own culturally biased opinions (Kappeler, 2004). The purpose of diplomacy is to safeguard and promote interests, while also working to prevent disputes and conflicts (Bolewski, 2008).

The present paper introduces the complex relationship between etiquette, protocol, and diplomacy, highlighting their interconnectedness and the determinant role of culture in shaping international interactions. The rationale behind the investigation is that the relationship between diplomacy and culture has been neglected to a certain degree in recent academic and practical studies, as Bolewski (2008) pointed out, even though knowledge, understanding, and competence during diplomatic interactions facilitate further intercultural relations and dialogue. In addition, facing the challenges of the 21st century, the issue of connection between diplomatic processes and cultural discourse becomes highly pertinent (Khalel et al., 2020). Therefore, the main objective of the present paper is to find out how cultural differences influence the application of diplomatic protocols in the selected region. The paper presents and analyzes cultural sensitivity that facilitates effective diplomatic dialogue, with a particular focus on national traditions, differences in etiquette, and the norms applied in political and business diplomacy. By examining these aspects, the research seeks to shed light on the complexities of intercultural communication within diplomatic contexts. Hence, the paper aims to answer the question of how the lack of cultural sensitivity influences the application of diplomatic protocol, which eventually affects the development of diplomatic relations between countries. To answer this research question, the paper applies a qualitative method by means of case study analysis. Case studies were collected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to theory, and then they underwent thematic analysis by using ATLAS.ti software.

The present paper contributes to the development of research on diplomacy and international relations in several original and significant ways. Despite the growing body of literature in the field, relatively little attention has been paid to the actual application of diplomatic protocol through the lens of cultural sensitivity, particularly in the Central and Eastern European region. Existing studies tend to focus either on diplomatic practices in general (Pajtinka, 2014; Pouliot & Cornut, 2015) or on cultural differences in abstract terms (Chen et al., 2009; Minkov, 2011), leaving a gap regarding how culturally embedded symbols, gestures, and protocol-related practices generate diplomatic tensions in specific regional contexts. The originality of the present paper lies in its endeavor to address this gap by analyzing real-world diplomatic incidents from Central and Eastern Europe, a less researched region. The paper also advances the field by offering empirical insights into how cultural insensitivity is manifested in protocol failures and influences international relations. Finally, the paper contributes to diplomatic studies by highlighting the political consequences of cultural misinterpretation at the micro-level of diplomatic interactions.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, it provides the theoretical background of etiquette, diplomacy, and diplomatic protocol together with the role and participants of diplomacy in modern times, and the role of culture and cultural sensitivity in diplomacy; second, it briefly

presents the methodology; third, it introduces the analysis on how cultural differences and the lack of cultural sensitivity influence the application of diplomatic protocol in Central and Eastern Europe through several case studies, as well as their discussions. In the end, the paper concludes by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of the findings and puts forward avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Etiquette, diplomacy and diplomatic protocol

Diplomacy, explicitly negotiations between representatives of diverse groups or nations conducted with the intention of securing agreements or resolving conflicts (Cohen, 1997), is both a tool and a key component of foreign policy (Hare, 2016). Diplomacy is a structured form of communication carried out by recognized representatives of internationally acknowledged entities. It goes beyond state boundaries, focusing on the public good and shaping decisions, relationships, and global norms. The nature of relations between states, whether friendly or tense, cooperative or estranged, plays an important role in international affairs. Diplomats must carefully navigate the balance between advocating for the interests of their government and assessing how those actions might affect the wider global framework (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018).

Etiquette and diplomacy are connected as etiquette forms the foundation of diplomatic protocol, guiding respectful and polite interactions to maintain positive international relations. The requirements of etiquette are generally international, however, there are differences among national cultures. The goal is almost the same: to ensure smooth relationships between people and states, as well as to maintain and expand national connections. Violating local customs can have a negative impact on both personal and official relationships (Ottlik, 1995). Besides etiquette, protocol also has a leading role in diplomacy by facilitating diplomatic encounters, communications and negotiations (Gherasim, 2019).

In the past decade, two primary perspectives determined diplomatic practices: the first focuses on diplomacy as a means to create and maintain a balance of power, where sovereign states use diplomacy to enhance their own power; while the second view emphasizes diplomacy as a way to promote collective security, where countries prioritize cooperation due to mutual interdependence (Hare, 2016). Barston (2019) highlights the evolving nature of diplomacy today, emphasizing the expanding scope of diplomatic engagement. This shift is particularly evident through the internationalization of issues such as terrorism, immigration, political refugees, and other population-related matters.

Today, diplomacy is influenced by a wide range of participants (Hare, 2016). Diplomacy involves political diplomats, advisors, envoys, and officials from domestic ministries and agencies who collaborate with their foreign counterparts. Diplomacy also encompasses interactions between officials from different international organizations and individuals. There has been an increased role of heads of state or government, as well as ministries and non-state actors, all of which contribute to shaping the modern diplomatic setting (Barston, 2019).

While states may share common goals, like maintaining peace, their diplomatic outcomes often vary. A country's approach to diplomacy depends on its worldview and strategic objectives. It may focus on cooperation with others to serve its interests, enhance its power to counter external influence, balance power with others or pursue opportunities for growth while addressing potential threats to its status. As the number of states grows and individual state power declines,

the role of diplomacy becomes more crucial, as its effectiveness increasingly influences how global issues are tackled (Hare, 2016).

Diplomatic activities are regulated by the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations that establishes the framework for diplomatic protocol (Görög, 2019). Diplomatic protocol is a tool for relationship management, fostering respect, clear communication, alliance, generosity, and also the proper approach to international business interactions involving diverse cultures. Moreover, it acts as a guide for conducting formal relationships with individuals from different countries (Verheu, 2022). The general regulations of diplomatic protocol and the local codes of conduct govern adherence to dress codes, behavior, and local customs as well (Sille, 2016). Diplomatic protocol defines the diplomatic representatives and missions, the rules of ranking, the ceremonial protocols, the rules of diplomatic attire, the rules of personal interaction, and the organization of official protocol events (Molnár, 2017).

Taken together, etiquette, diplomatic protocol, and diplomacy form an interdependent system that governs international interactions at both symbolic and practical levels. While diplomacy provides the strategic and political framework of interstate relations, protocol operationalizes these relations through formalized rules and procedures, and etiquette ensures the culturally appropriate and respectful conduct of individuals involved. These concepts cannot be interpreted in isolation, as the effectiveness of diplomacy largely depends on the coherent application of protocol and etiquette within specific cultural contexts. Consequently, diplomatic protocol connects abstract diplomatic objectives and their concrete realization, translating political intentions into culturally intelligible actions and interactions.

2.2. The role of culture in diplomacy

As the American anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher, E.T. Hall (1976, p. 2) highlighted: "... the future depends on man's being able to transcend the limits of individual cultures. To do so, however, he must first recognize and accept the multiple hidden dimensions of unconscious culture, because every culture has its own hidden, unique form of unconscious culture". This quotation indicates that culture is fundamentally a characteristic of society rather than an individual trait. It is formed through the experiences of learning and adapting to social norms and practices. It represents a distinct set of values and behaviors that influence how people live and interact within their community. This identity is shaped by various factors, including national, governmental, financial, historical, and regional influences. Culture acts like a guide that outlines social roles, relationship structures, etiquette, and daily practices, so it is defined as the "collective programming of the mind" that distinguishes the member of one group or category of people from another by one of the most noted cross-cultural researchers, the Dutch social psychologist, Hofstede (1980, p. 25). However, cultural guidelines are only relevant within the specific social context in which they are formed and shared. To effectively interact on a global scale, it is necessary to understand the cultural frameworks of other members of the international community (Bolewski, 2008).

Culture can be seen as the foundational value system that shapes not only the mindset and attitude of the individuals but also manifests itself collectively through the institutions and policy choices of a nation. The visible aspects of culture, such as how diplomats conduct themselves or the viewpoint they represent, has a significant impact on diplomacy. Therefore, recognizing the fundamental cultural values of opposing parties can help identify shared interests and foster agreements that accommodate the needs of several stakeholders. Despite the growing evidence emphasizing the significance of national culture and the importance of understanding it, diplomatic representatives often tend to overlook the cultural values and

attitudes that shape the positions countries take when engaging in diplomacy (Anagondahalli & Zhu, 2016).

Ryan (2016) emphasizes that cultural exchange allows individuals to explore both the distinctions and similarities between different cultures, providing a platform for mutual learning. Through cultural exchange, people can discover shared values and interests in a safe and non-confrontational manner. This process highlights the potential for collaboration and supports the desire to work together (Ryan, 2016). Culture shapes how time is perceived, the way individuals communicate and affects the importance placed on relationships, social norms, and manners (Hall, 1976). Since these elements all play a part in diplomatic engagements, they also have the potential to influence diplomatic practices. Diplomacy involves cultural connections just as much as it involves political interactions: the cultural dynamics establish the foundational principles guiding diplomatic methods and frameworks (Bolewski, 2008).

Of the culturally determined factors mentioned above, communication is of paramount importance for diplomacy and diplomatic protocol (Baartman, 2023). In diplomacy, cultural characteristics, norms, and values influence how communication is understood and interpreted. Cultural norms affect everything from greeting styles, seating arrangements, and negotiation tactics to the use of symbols and ceremonies (Neuliep, 2014). In addition, the lack of physical barriers in communication can offer both advantages and challenges for diplomacy. While it facilitates quicker achievements, it also makes diplomatic efforts more sensitive to vulnerabilities and rapid exposure of weaknesses (Hare 2016). A communication strategy will fail if it contradicts the underlying policy, as actions have a greater impact than words. Information is always filtered through cultural lenses and bold statements are often misunderstood or not received as meant. It is essential that actions correspond with words and is equally vital to recognize that messages and images that resonate with a domestic audience may have the opposite effect on foreign audiences (Nye, 2008). To ensure smooth diplomatic interactions, it is essential for international communication to follow universally recognized customs and structured practices. Effective diplomatic relations depend on the clear understanding of how to navigate cultural differences, as variations in social norms significantly impact how business is conducted and how people relate to one another within international settings (Verheu, 2022).

Jönsson and Hall (2003) highlight the role of nonverbal communication in diplomatic exchanges. Body language tends to capture the attention of audiences more effectively than verbal communication. Additionally, from a diplomatic perspective, nonverbal cues are inherently ambiguous and can be easily denied, offering greater flexibility in managing sensitive situations. Simple gestures, like a handshake, are often used to symbolize the nature of relations between states. Other factors, such as the setting and structure of meetings, the arrangement of the negotiation table or the makeup of delegations also contribute to the nonverbal signals exchanged during diplomatic discourse. Every move or gesture made by diplomatic representatives conveys a message, what is more, both active behaviors and the absence of action can serve as forms of communication (Jönsson & Hall, 2003).

Diplomats and professionals involved in international projects, therefore, must develop greater expertise in managing cultural differences. However, possessing key skills like adaptability, respect, attentiveness, collaboration, self-control, and cultural sensitivity can also make adjusting to a foreign environment more challenging. Individuals who thrive in intercultural settings have to share certain traits to achieve success in diverse cultural contexts, including the ability to build relationships, show consideration, endure ambiguity, stay adaptable, develop practical expectations, exhibit proactiveness, and sustain self-assurance (Kealey et al., 2004).

Successfully managing these cultural differences is crucial for maintaining positive international relations and adhering to diplomatic protocol (Hare, 2016).

2.3. The relations between cultural sensitivity and diplomacy

Cultural sensitivity – also referred to as intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993), intercultural awareness (Chamberlain-Quinlisk, 2005), intercultural competence (Stier, 2006), and cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003) – is a current topic nowadays, due to the growing number of intercultural interactions (Chen, 2008). Since cultural sensitivity has many denominations, it has no single definition. Despite the multiplicity of definitions in the literature, the concept is more or less interpreted in the same way (Szőke, 2023). In their conceptualization, Earley and Ang (2003) stressed that cultural sensitivity is the capability of an individual to function effectively in situations characterized by cultural diversity. Similarly, Fantini and Tirmizi (2006) understand cultural sensitivity as an ability needed to perform effectively and properly when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different. In other words, cultural sensitivity is a soft skill that embraces the awareness, understanding, and respect for cultural differences, and that facilitates interactions between representatives of different cultures.

Given that diplomacy, the main instrument for managing international relations, is deeply embedded in cultural settings, as described in section 2.2., cultural sensitivity plays a crucial role in the success of diplomatic interactions as well as in avoiding inconvenient situations. Lacking cultural sensitivity, diplomatic relations may face misunderstandings, miscommunication, personal offences, protocol failures, and even conflicts between states. Therefore, diplomats must be able to recognize and adapt to the cultural expectations of their international counterparts. Empirical research on diplomatic negotiations confirms that cultural differences significantly shape communication practices and negotiation behavior. Intercultural communication competence is a key factor in effective diplomatic negotiations, as negotiators are required to interpret and respond appropriately to culturally embedded verbal and non-verbal cues. Their findings underline the importance of systematic training in intercultural communication and cultural sensitivity in order to enhance diplomats' negotiation effectiveness and reduce the risk of misinterpretation in cross-cultural diplomatic contexts (Repez et al., 2025). Similarly, Cohen (1997) emphasizes that cultural differences influence international negotiation processes and outcomes, and that effective negotiators must develop cultural awareness and adaptability to communicate across cultural boundaries in order to achieve successful diplomatic negotiations.

Cultural sensitivity, therefore, enables diplomats to manage cultural differences. It makes them able to adjust their communication, appropriately apply diplomatic protocol in line with cultural variations, and avoid behaviors that could be perceived as offensive or disrespectful. This idea is supported by the research findings of Wiseman et al. (1989), who claimed that in addition to the knowledge of cultural norms, i.e. cognitive understanding, cultural sensitivity also involves behavioral adaptability, i.e. the ability to adjust one's actions accordingly. Both of these are essential competencies in the practice of diplomacy, since misinterpretations resulting from a lack of cultural sensitivity have historically contributed to a number of diplomatic failures. As Jönsson and Hall (2005) pointed out, many diplomatic crises do not arise from fundamental disagreements but from perceived grievances, loss of face, or protocol failures rooted in cultural misunderstandings. This is especially true in regions like Central and Eastern Europe, given the multiplicity of cultural and linguistic traditions in the region.

Considering that diplomacy gradually addresses international challenges, such as migration, climate change, and global health, cultural sensitivity is more crucial than ever. These issues are inherently transnational and require sustained cooperation among states with diverse historical and cultural backgrounds, value systems, and political priorities. Effective diplomatic responses, therefore, depend not only on technical expertise and political will, but also on the ability of diplomats to navigate differing cultural perceptions, communication styles, and societal norms in order to build trust, foster consensus and avoid misunderstandings that could undermine collective action. Moreover, cultural sensitivity has become a principal dimension of modern diplomacy (Kealey et al., 2004). It determines how communication is carried out, how diplomats behave in international encounters, how diplomatic protocol is used and ultimately, how international relations are maintained and strengthened.

3. Methodology

The research starts from extensive theoretical and conceptual insights into the relationship between cultural differences and the application of diplomatic protocol. The paper adopts a qualitative case study approach to assess how the lack of cultural sensitivity affects the application of diplomatic protocol in the Central and Eastern European region. Given the context-specific and revelatory nature of diplomatic interactions, a qualitative methodology was considered the most appropriate to capture the complexity of cultural differences and protocol unconventionalities, or even failures. As case study research allows for an in-depth examination of real-life phenomena within their specific contexts, it is particularly suitable for exploring diplomatic incidents shaped by cultural meanings and norms (Babbie, 2004).

The research, therefore, is based on a multiple case study design, enabling a thorough examination of real-world diplomatic events where the lack of cultural sensitivity influenced the adherence to or breach of diplomatic protocol in the Central and Eastern European region. Specifically, the paper investigates a total of seven diplomatic cases, each illustrating situations in which culturally embedded practices, symbols, or communicative patterns resulted in protocol unconventionalities or failures. The empirical material was drawn from a systematically compiled dataset of publicly documented diplomatic incidents in Central and Eastern Europe between 2015 and 2025 that garnered international attention as a result of protocol-related controversies.

Cases were selected through purposive sampling to ensure theoretical relevance and relevance to the objective of the research, not representativeness (Yin, 2017). The criteria for selection included that (1) the case must have taken place in the Central and Eastern European Region, (2) the incident must involve a notable failure and/or unconventionality related to diplomatic protocol, and (3) sufficient documentation or reliable reporting must be available for analysis. In addition to these inclusion criteria, cases were excluded if the protocol-related incident could be primarily attributed to legal disputes, strategic political considerations, or institutional decision-making without a clear cultural or symbolic dimension. For the purposes of this paper, data, i.e. cases were collected from reputable news outlets, preferably from countries outside of the region investigated, as well as from interviews with protocol officers and experts where possible.

Beyond these initial criteria, the selection of cases was further guided by the types of issues through which cultural insensitivity manifested itself in diplomatic practice. These issues

included (1) verbal and non-verbal communication failures, (2) culturally sensitive gestures and forms of address, (3) deviations from expected diplomatic dress codes, (4) gift-giving practices carrying unintended symbolic meanings, and (5) the use or display of historically sensitive symbols and representations. Identifying these issues enabled thematic comparability across cases and facilitated the exploration of recurring patterns as well as context-specific diplomatic challenges within the region.

The collected cases were subjected to thematic analysis to enable the exploration of the lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness, as well as the identification of recurring patterns and/or unique country-specific challenges. This methodological tool involved the deductive coding of data into themes and categories derived from the theoretical framework presented in Section 2, including cultural norms and values, communication styles, protocol expectations, and the symbolic meanings attached to diplomatic actions. In the course of the analysis, particular attention was given to differences in communication styles, non-verbal communication, etiquette, and ceremonial traditions across cultures within the Central and Eastern European region. For the purpose of the present paper, case studies were analyzed, but not selected, by a qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti. This software facilitated thematic analysis by enabling hierarchical coding, the identification of recurring patterns, and the linking of empirical material to analytical categories. Due to the relatively low number of publicly available and published cases meeting the predefined criteria (a total of 12 cases), the final set of seven case studies resulted from an iterative analytical process rather than an automated function of ATLAS.ti. During thematic coding, the software facilitated cross-case comparison by making it possible to identify recurring themes, patterns, and degrees of empirical richness across cases. Cases that did not provide sufficient relevance or thematic saturation in relation to the research objectives and the research question were excluded. The decision to retain seven cases was therefore made by the researchers, with ATLAS.ti serving as a tool to support transparency and consistency in this process.

The originality of this methodological approach lies in its culturally informed thematic analysis of diplomatic protocol incidents rather than a focus on formal diplomatic outcomes or institutional processes. By examining symbolic practices such as gestures, dress codes, gift-giving, and historical representations, the paper moves beyond traditional diplomatic analyses and captures the cultural meanings embedded in everyday diplomatic practice. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how culturally specific symbols and actions contribute to protocoling unconventionalities and diplomatic tension in the Central and Eastern European context.

4. Results and Discussion

The following analysis examines real-world international cases that violated diplomatic protocol in Europe, with a particular focus on the representatives of the countries of the Central and Eastern European region. The thematic analysis adds depth to understanding the impact of the lack of cultural sensitivity on the proper application of diplomatic protocol. In the analysis of each case study, a common set of analytical tools was applied in order to ensure theoretical and methodological consistency, as well as comparability across cases. Drawing on the theoretical framework presented in Section 2, each case was examined along four interrelated analytical dimensions: (1) the culturally embedded norms, values, or historical sensitivities relevant to the diplomatic interaction; (2) the specific element of diplomatic protocol involved,

including rules of conduct, ceremonial expectations, or symbolic practices; (3) the form of cultural misalignment, misunderstanding, or insensitivity that emerged; and (4) the diplomatic implications of the incident, such as public controversy, bilateral tension, or reputational consequences. Applying these analytical dimensions systematically allowed for a structured interpretation of each case, while preserving sensitivity to its unique political and cultural context.

In 2015, a Romanian diplomat was dismissed after the embassy in Paris accidentally sent out invitations to a reception that included rude comments about the guests. A spreadsheet was attached to the invites, labelling some guests as “undesirable” and as “ghastly”. The Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the incident inadmissible and profoundly regrettable (Daily Mail, 2015). The ambassador of Romania to France, Bogdan Mazuru, called the incident unfortunate. He stated that he was willing to provide explanations to parliament if needed. Mazuru emphasized, *“I don’t consider myself guilty, I can be responsible though. There are two different things. When something is happening in your courtyard, then you are responsible.”* (BBC News, 2015a). This situation breached cultural protocol by publicly portraying individuals in a negative manner, disregarding the expected respect and discretion in diplomatic communication. In addition, it violated diplomatic protocol by disclosing internal evaluations to external parties, compromising the professionalism and confidentiality fundamental to diplomatic relations. While the incident can be interpreted as a failure of politeness due to the use of explicitly derogatory language, its broader diplomatic significance lies in the lack of cultural sensitivity rather than in courtesy alone. Politeness primarily concerns interpersonal communicative norms, whereas cultural sensitivity requires an awareness of how actions may result in culturally embedded forms of public embarrassment and loss of face in formal contexts (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). From a cultural perspective, this incident showcases public embarrassment stemming from a lack of cultural sensitivity and loss of face, since the accidental disclosure of derogatory internal comments represented not merely a technical error, but a profound cultural offense. The failure to anticipate the symbolic and reputational implications of such exposure reflects insufficient awareness of the hidden cultural dimensions governing appropriate diplomatic conduct (Hall, 1976; Bennett, 1993). Moreover, the ambassador’s response echoes a cultural framing of responsibility common in many Central and Eastern European contexts, where formal responsibility can be distinguished from personal one. Mazuru’s statement accentuates a cultural approach to public accountability, typical in post-communist countries, that seeks to acknowledge organizational responsibility, while protecting individual reputation (Krastev, 2002).

Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán is known for using traditional gestures, such as hand-kissing, to great female leaders, reflecting Central European cultural customs. During the official visit of Angela Merkel to Budapest in 2015, Prime Minister Orbán welcomed the German Chancellor with a hand kiss. A prominent Hungarian protocol specialist, Ibolya Görög criticized the gesture of Prime Minister Orbán, arguing that hand-kissing is inappropriate in modern diplomatic protocol as it highlights gender rather than official status (HVG, 2015). In the meantime, style expert, Miklós Schiffer promoted the gesture, putting an emphasis on the fact that hand kiss has remained a part of the European cultural heritage and can be interpreted as a sign of respect rather than a breach of protocol (Magyar Nemzet, 2015). This case pointed out a tension between traditional cultural practices and modern diplomatic protocol deriving from the lack of cultural sensitivity. Firstly, the use of the hand kiss symbolized a form of courtesy rooted in the European tradition, but in the setting of high-level diplomacy, it jeopardized being perceived as outdated or patronizing. In addition, this case revealed the shift

in diplomatic protocol and etiquette towards stricter professional equality, discouraging actions that might unintentionally underline gender differences.

During a news conference celebrating 135 years of diplomatic relations, the Foreign Minister of Romania, Bogdan Aurescu, presented a gift to the Foreign Minister of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. However, the gift mistakenly featured a map of France instead of Germany. In response to the error, the Foreign Ministry of Romania dismissed the spokeswoman, Brandusa Predescu. Despite the mishap, Foreign Minister Steinmeier remained tactful, stating that he had not noticed the mistake. The Romanian Foreign Ministry later issued a formal apology (Charlton, 2015). The Romanian Foreign Ministry described the mistake as a “regrettable technical error”. Agerpres, the national news agency of Romania that created the booklet, stated that its purpose was to highlight notable moments in the diplomatic relationship between Romania and Germany. Although the ministry had originally received the accurate electronic version, the agency acknowledged that the printing mistake was due to a technical fault on their end. The agency has expressed its apologies to both foreign ministries for the oversight (BBC News, 2015b). This incident demonstrated a lack of cultural sensitivity, as it reflected inadequate attention in representing a foreign partner accurately during a diplomatic event. Presenting a gift featuring a map of France instead of Germany not only showed a failure to properly acknowledge cultural and national distinctions but also risked offending the German counterpart. It also violated diplomatic protocol by compromising the professionalism expected in high-level interactions. Such errors can undermine mutual respect and trust, especially during formal occasions meant to celebrate long-standing bilateral relations. Although the Romanian Foreign Ministry and the national news agency apologized, the mistake highlighted the importance of thorough preparation and cultural awareness in diplomatic exchanges.

At a 2015 summit in Riga, former President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, greeted Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán with the controversial phrase, “*Hello, dictator*” (Walker, 2015). President Juncker also gave him a light slap on the right cheek. The media referred to this remark as a gibe aimed at Orbán, who has faced criticism for undermining democratic institutions, restricting civil society and striving to establish an illiberal state (Fox News, 2015). This incident also demonstrated a lack of cultural sensitivity as it failed to consider the cultural and political sensitivities associated with addressing a foreign leader in a controversial and provocative manner. Labelling the Hungarian Prime Minister as a dictator during a formal summit disregarded the importance of maintaining respect and modesty in diplomatic interactions. It breached diplomatic protocol by undermining the dignity of an official guest and potentially damaging bilateral relations. Such behavior can be perceived as unprofessional and disrespectful, contradicting the expected standards of diplomatic conduct.

In November 2022, Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán sparked international controversy by wearing a football scarf featuring a map of Greater Hungary, the historical territory of Hungary before the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, during a friendly match between Hungary and Greece. The scarf, which included regions now part of neighboring countries such as Croatia, Slovakia, Romania, and Serbia, was seen as a provocative symbol in the region. Croatian officials reacted strongly, with former President Zoran Milanović calling the act pathetic and sick, while other Croatian politicians condemned it as a form of historical revisionism. In response, Prime Minister Orbán attempted to minimize the impact of the situation, stating that if he had intended to provoke, he would have done so in a more effective way (Haász, 2022). However, the comments of Prime Minister Orbán did little to calm the situation. Croatian Foreign Minister, Gordan Grlić Radman formally protested, calling for restraint in the use of historically sensitive symbols. Slovak officials responded more humorously, the Slovak Prime Minister, Eduard Heger posted a photo with Orbán and gifted him a scarf bearing Slovak

national colours, implicitly criticizing the message behind the Hungarian choice of attire (Horváth, 2022). This case illustrates how culturally symbolic gestures referencing Hungarian pre-Trianon borders can reignite regional tensions. It highlights the fragile balance of historical memory and diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe, where historical grievances remain potent and easily inflamed by national symbols.

A similar incident happened two years later. In December 2024, István Balogh, the permanent North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) representative of Hungary, presented copies of the National Atlas of Hungary as Christmas gifts to representatives of several NATO member states. The atlas contained historical maps, including depictions of Greater Hungary, illustrating the Hungarian borders prior to the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. This gesture triggered diplomatic pressure not only with Croatia, but also with Slovenia and Romania, where officials perceived the representation of the historical map as a nationalist provocation and a reminder of contested historical outrages (Rádi, 2024). The Croatian Foreign Minister, Gordan Grlić Radman, formally protested, arguing that the atlas symbolized revisionist ideas and disrespected the sovereignty of Croatia (Gál, 2024). Similarly, Slovenian and Romanian officials expressed concerns over the indirect historical message, viewing the gift as inappropriate in a diplomatic context. Hungarian officials, including Foreign Minister, Péter Szijjártó, downplayed the controversy, emphasizing that the National Atlas was intended merely to showcase the cartographic and cultural heritage of Hungary, without implying any territorial claims (Kolozsi, 2024). The incident of the National Atlas of Hungary serves as an example of how a poorly chosen diplomatic gift – stemming from cultural insensitivity – can lead to significant pressure among nations. In the Central and Eastern European region, where collective memory and interpretations of history remain deeply divided, references to the historical past remain highly sensitive still today, and symbols from the past can easily provoke modern diplomatic disputes.

Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy is known for not wearing formal suit, opting instead for military-style attire as a symbol of unity and resilience amid the ongoing conflict. During a meeting with the U.S. President, Donald Trump in 2025, Zelenskyy was greeted with the remark, “*You’re all dressed up today*” reflecting surprise at his casual appearance. Later that day, Zelenskyy calmly stated that he would wear formal attire “*after this war will finish*”, emphasizing his commitment to representing his country’s struggle through his choice of clothing (Skiba, 2025). The remark of President Trump about the outfit of Volodymyr Zelenskyy was perceived as sarcastic. Zelenskyy appeared in black slacks, boots, and a black sweatshirt featuring an embroidered Ukrainian trident. It was presenting a stark contrast to the formal suit and tie of President Trump (The Economic Times, 2025). This case demonstrated a lack of cultural sensitivity from two perspectives. Firstly, the choice of President Zelenskyy of military-style attire was deeply symbolic, reflecting his commitment to unity and resilience during a time of war. In Ukrainian culture, especially in the context of war, this informal clothing conveyed solidarity with his people and reinforced his image as a leader actively involved in the struggle of the nation. Failing to recognize the cultural and situational significance of this attire led to misunderstandings and comments perceived as sarcastic or disrespectful. Secondly, the situation also highlighted a breach of diplomatic protocol, as formal attire is typically expected during high-level meetings between heads of state. Diplomatic etiquette generally prescribes suits and ties as a sign of respect and professionalism. The contrast between the casual outfit and the formal suit underscored the tension between personal symbolism and protocol expectations, resulting in a perception of informality that some saw as inappropriate for the occasion.

The presented cases prove that the lack of cultural sensitivity, whether deliberately or unintentionally, can have serious consequences from the viewpoint of diplomacy. In the course

of the thematic analysis of the case studies, several key themes can be explored. These themes include the nature and context of the protocol unconventionality/failure, the cultural differences contributing to misunderstanding or misapplication of diplomatic protocol, consequences for bilateral or multilateral relations, and remedial actions and lessons learned. It can be observed that the case studies revolve around the culturally determined concepts of verbal and non-verbal communication, dress code, and gift-giving. While the findings are consistent with earlier research on cultural sensitivity and diplomacy, the present paper extends the literature by demonstrating how culturally embedded symbols and protocol-related practices function as triggers of diplomatic tension in Central and Eastern Europe. The analysis reveals that seemingly minor protocol deviations may carry disproportionate political and historical meanings in this region, thereby amplifying their diplomatic impact. The most important lesson to be drawn from these cases is that the knowledge, awareness, and understanding of cultural differences along with the proper application of diplomatic protocol can facilitate successful international relations and help avoid troublesome diplomatic encounters.

5. Conclusions

Driven by the challenges stemming from the constantly increasing number of international relations, the present paper investigated the role of cultural sensitivity in diplomacy with a focus on diplomatic protocol. Protocol, etiquette, and diplomacy are indispensable parts of international relations, shaping how states interact and represent their interests on the global stage. The success of diplomatic activities of nations often depends on the careful use of etiquette and protocol, both of which are deeply tied to cultural understanding and respect. Being able to navigate cultural differences, that is being culturally sensitive, is not just a valuable skill but a necessity for diplomats, as even small misunderstandings or breaches of protocol can strain or even damage international ties. Cultural sensitivity, therefore, becomes an essential asset, helping diplomats adjust their communication and behavior to fit the expectations of their counterparts. Diplomats who approach their work with cultural awareness are better equipped to build lasting relationships, negotiate more effectively, and uphold the smooth flow of diplomatic engagements.

The findings made it clear that cultural sensitivity in diplomacy is not only a matter of politeness, but it is a key tool for preventing misunderstandings, preserving mutual respect, and strengthening international ties. Especially in regions like Central and Eastern Europe, where history and identity are deeply entangled, a careful and respectful approach to cultural differences is indispensable. The Romanian diplomat's mishandling of an invitation in 2015, exposed the vulnerability of diplomacy when cultural sensitivity was disregarded. The Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán's use of traditional gestures, like hand-kissing, during high-level meetings, reflected the ongoing tension between cultural tradition and modern diplomatic expectations: while the hand-kiss is rooted in European heritage, its use in diplomacy today risks being misinterpreted as outdated or even patronizing. The gift-giving mishap by Romania's Foreign Minister and the controversial display of historical symbols by Hungarian politicians illustrated how historical memories and national symbols can reignite tensions. These situations highlight the importance of understanding the messages sent through symbolic gestures, gifts, and clothing, as they can unintentionally carry political or cultural meanings. The case of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's military-attire also served as an example of how the personal symbolism behind cultural choices can be misunderstood.

within the framework of formal diplomacy. While Zelenskyy's attire conveyed a strong message of solidarity with his people amid ongoing conflict, it was met with comments that reflected a lack of understanding of the deeper cultural context.

In all of the above cases, the lack of cultural sensitivity resulted in either public embarrassment or diplomatic tension, demonstrating how important it is for diplomats to understand and respect the cultural context in which they operate. Beyond their immediate effects, several of the analyzed cases also demonstrate how culturally insensitive actions may activate deeper historical narratives, collective memories, and identity-related sensitivities. Incidents involving historically charged symbols, territorial representations, or nationally significant gestures did not merely generate short-term controversy but reinforced existing mistrust or revived unresolved symbolic grievances between states. Although the long-term diplomatic consequences of individual incidents are not always directly observable, their collective effect may shape diplomatic perceptions, expectations, and patterns of interaction over time. In this sense, cultural missteps should be understood not as isolated protocol failures, but as factors that may indirectly influence the quality and resilience of long-term diplomatic relationships.

From a theoretical perspective, the present paper contributes to research on diplomacy and international relations by integrating cultural sensitivity into the analysis of diplomatic protocol, emphasizing the symbolic and communicative dimensions of protocol practices. Empirically, it enriches the literature with contemporary case studies from Central and Eastern Europe, a region that remains underrepresented in protocol-focused diplomatic research. From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the need for culturally informed protocol training, particularly in regions where historical memory and national symbolism remain highly sensitive.

Despite these contributions, the present paper is subject to several limitations. First, the qualitative multiple case study design prioritizes interpretative depth over generalizability; therefore, the findings cannot be extended to all diplomatic contexts or regions. Second, the analysis relies primarily on publicly available media reports and official statements, which may reflect journalistic framing and varying degrees of interpretative bias, despite efforts to mitigate this through the use of reputable international sources. Third, the focus on protocol unconventionalities and failures may overrepresent high-profile or controversial incidents, while everyday diplomatic interactions characterized by effective cultural sensitivity remain underexplored. Finally, while the paper argues that cultural missteps may have longer-term implications for diplomatic relations, it does not empirically trace the longitudinal effects of individual incidents. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal approaches, incorporating interviews with diplomatic practitioners, or conducting comparative analyses across regions.

The findings align with previous research on the relationship between cultural sensitivity and diplomacy, emphasizing that cultural awareness is essential for the development of strong, positive international relationships. Cultural sensitivity is not just a formality in diplomacy but an important tool for ensuring the smooth functioning of international relations, avoiding unnecessary conflict and fostering constructive cooperation among nations.

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