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The “Stakeholder Paradox” in Diaspora Diplomacy ^[1]



Over the past two decades, Romanian diplomacy has made significant progress in adapting to the evolving realities of a large and diverse diaspora. The expansion of the consular network and the streamlining and digitalization of their systems have significantly improved access to public services for Romanian citizens abroad. In parallel, dialogue with the diaspora has become a constant practice in diplomatic activity, aimed at strengthening the institutional capacity to identify and address the needs of Romanian communities abroad more efficiently (MAE, 2021 ). This institutionalization of dialogue with the Romanian diaspora can be analyzed within the broader conceptual framework of diaspora diplomacy, defined by Ho and McConnell as a diplomatic practice situated between domestic and foreign policy, characterized by the involvement of multiple parties, including non-state actors (Ho and McConnell, 2017).

Precisely because this dialogue has become a central pillar of diplomatic praxis, it is now both necessary and timely to reflect on how it is organized and, more importantly, how it is operationalized. While specialized literature indicates that dialogue is essential for institutional legitimacy, it is only effective when embedded in structured mechanisms that link consultation to decision-making and action.

This context gives rise to what can be termed the "stakeholder paradox," found at the intersection of theories regarding participation, organizational legitimacy, and collective action. As Elinor Ostrom and Mark Suchman demonstrate, extensive participation is vital for legitimacy, but it does not automatically translate into strategic clarity or measurable results without clear mechanisms for implementation (Ostrom, 1990; Suchman, 1995). Furthermore, a central element of this paradox appears to be the "illusion of representativeness," defined by Suchman as the assumption that an entity's actions are inherently desirable or appropriate (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

This quest for legitimacy often leads to the adoption of structures that signal compliance and performativity but are "decoupled" from real performance (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Mancur Olson's theory of collective action offers an additional explanation for this paradox by explaining the behaviour of actors in large-scale participatory contexts (Olson, 1965). In large groups, incentives for individual contributions to achieving common objectives are reduced, and organised interests tend to dominate the discourse, leaving the majority passive. As Elinor Ostrom emphasizes, collective action becomes sustainable only where there are "clear rules, well-defined limits, and accountability mechanisms" (Ostrom, 1990).

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Diaspora diplomacy offers a pertinent framework for analyzing the tension between extensive dialogue with all stakeholders and the capacity for action. Ho and McConnell show that diaspora diplomacy is inherently polylateral, involving multiple actors, levels, and channels of interaction, which increases legitimacy but complicates decision-making (Ho and McConnell, 2017). As Raluca Moise shows in her study of the Romanian community in the UK, the diaspora does not function as a homogeneous public but rather through intermediary actors who translate community interests through distinct modes of engagement, with unequal levels of access, legitimacy, and capacity (Moise, 2023 ). This dynamic is reinforced by emotional pressure and reputational risk, which research on the Romanian diaspora in the UK also connects to more reactive and defensive diplomatic behavior (Dolea, 2024 ). In this framework, the high political costs of excluding or prioritizing stakeholders tends to transform wide consultation into an anticipatory strategy for preventing criticism rather than an instrument of result-oriented governance.

Applied to diaspora diplomacy, the “stakeholder paradox” refers to a situation where the unstructured expansion of diaspora consultation, intended to strengthen legitimacy and inclusion, produces the opposite effect by fragmenting interests, diffusing responsibility, and weakening the ability of diplomatic missions to convert dialogue into clear priorities, decisions, and sustained action.

Addressing this paradox requires structural mechanisms that ensure selection, continuity, and accountability, enabling dialogue to translate into sustainable impact. A practical model, with comparable precedents, may involve the formal integration of consultative councils into the Romanian diplomatic network, a solution already tested in different forms by several European states. This model corresponds to the logic proposed by Ho and McConnell in which diaspora diplomacy functions through "assemblages" of actors that require coordination to produce concrete results (Ho and McConnell, 2017).

Such comparative models offer blueprints for anchoring consultation within diplomatic architectures. France uses *Consular Councils* with councillors elected by French nationals abroad in districts linked to consular posts (République Française, 2013). Similarly, Italy employs representative bodies such as *Comites* also elected by Italian citizens resident in the consular district (Parlamento Italiano, 2003). Poland adds a dimension comparable to the Romanian diaspora context at the level of diplomatic missions. Lesińska and Wróbel describe the existence of Polish Community Consultative Councils, comprising 10–15 experts nominated by the ambassador or consul general, with a role in cooperation on important themes for the diaspora (Lesińska and Wróbel, 2020).

Building on the achievement of institutional openness, the next challenge for Romanian diaspora diplomacy is to avoid the stakeholder paradox by consolidating these practices through mechanisms that connect dialogue to prioritization, prioritization to accountability, and accountability to results. This also creates an opportunity to leverage consultation through

structured co-production, transforming participation into impact by moving consultative councils beyond advisory roles to platforms that develop and implement solutions. By selecting members based on expertise to generate concrete interventions, this approach could shift the focus to shared responsibility, turning dialogue into an operational tool for partnerships and measurable results that complement the state's role.

While the expanded consular network and modernized services form the necessary infrastructure, the consultative councils could constitute the institutional mechanism through which this infrastructure is operationalized and oriented toward the co-production of results with a sustainable impact on diaspora needs.

In this sense, the reflection on the "stakeholder" paradox must be read as an invitation to institutional development and refinement. A diplomacy that combines openness with ownership, and dialogue with implementation, consolidates not just its legitimacy but also its capacity to respond durably to the real needs of the diaspora.

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and reflect a personal analysis.
