INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

SCIENCE DIPLOMACY IS MUCH MORE THAN SCIENCE IN DIPLOMACY

Based on the remarks of Tarmo Soomere to the 1st European Science Diplomacy Conference[79]
Madrid, 18–19 December 2023

The meaning and perspectives of science diplomacy are radically different for different players and players of different sizes. In this regard, Estonia is in a perplexing position, being small in size and population but strong in science and having a challenging and inspiring location at the crossroads of history. It is a feature of our times that more and more of the major challenges are international in nature and that science and its applications are part of the curse as well as the cure.[80] This situation makes it imperative to contribute to the shaping of what science diplomacy is today and how the role of scientists in science diplomacy and the perspective of the entire endeavour can be framed from the viewpoint of a small country.

There is also a delicate (im)balance between the demand and supply sides in science diplomacy. These aspects were nicely linked at this conference by Mr Stephen Quest.[81] Estonia and the Estonian Academy of Sciences mostly represent the supply side. In essence, filling this side with ideas and people is one of the ways in which science can serve society.

Photo: https://eu-science-diplomacy.service-facility.eu

The panel discussion of the Conference 'Making European diplomacy more strategic, effective and resilient through scientific evidence and foresight', with the participation of Tarmo Soomere.

On the one hand, the conference has demonstrated a brilliant set of examples of how science diplomacy could work. On the other hand, a couple of paradoxes were also depicted. This situation probably requires the attention of mathematicians, who, like me, cannot resist the temptation to reduce problems to first principles. In social sciences, doing so is often called deconstruction. At least in essence these approaches are very similar.

79 https://eu-science-diplomacy.service-facility.eu/en/streamingdecember-firstday, https://eu-science-diplomacy.service-facility.eu/en/streaming-decembersecondday

80 Turekian, V. 2018. The evolution of science diplomacy. Global Policy, 9(S3), 5–7, doi: 10.1111/1758-5899.12622

81 Director-General of the Joint Research Centre (JRC) at the time of conference, Director-General of the Directorate-General for Human Resources and Security (HR) of the European Commission from 1 April 2024.

The supply side of science diplomacy is the community of researchers; more generally, the worldwide academic ecosystem. There are roughly 9 million scientists worldwide, plus supporting staff. This is the second largest highly connected group of people, after global religious congregations. The connectivity in the academic ecosystem is created first of all from scientists sharing the same basic principles all over the world. The basic principle of this connectivity is that facts and logic have priority over, for example, friendship or political interests. Moreover, the same values of research integrity and ethics are maintained in the scientific community all over the world.

On the one hand, it is important to stress that the scientific community is not necessarily more rational than other communities, as research has shown. On the other hand, and equally importantly, extensive ways of communication have made this community much stronger and much faster connected than any other similarly sized community. Sharing these values and functioning as a whole is happening all the time just by engaging in science either together or in parallel in the world. The presence of common values is an inevitable feature of science. This implies that science is a massive channel of soft power that is not only able to but is actually changing the world. This potential of science is totally underexploited. Moreover, it is likely that this underexploitation is one of the reasons why misinformation or fake news are spreading so extensively.

Estonia is not simply a small country. It is a very small country. You need a microscope to locate it on a globe. Estonia has an even smaller Academy of Sciences. It may even become the second smallest Academy in the European Union (EU) in the future. This may happen quite soon in fact, if Montenegro joins the EU.

A small country has little financial power to affect the world, any global economic power or any global military power. But those who are small in mass can be great in spirit. This is a kind of two-way street. We learn from and contribute to global science. In this sense, the participation of small countries in science and in (science) diplomacy follows the main principle of the EU: one country, one vote, even though size sometimes does matter in the EU.

The Estonia Academy of Sciences is extremely active in all European and international global academy networks. We massively contribute also to science advice, from EASAC (European Academies' Science Advisory Council) to SAPEA (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies). This way, our Academy's competences are very much used in science advice for policy systems.

However, one channel is really underused. This is channelling crucial information across some boundaries. By this I mean knowledge and messages that cannot be communicated between diplomats of different countries.

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There are some messages that need a significant amount of knowledge and experience to understand. I refer here to Bertrand Russell, who has said, indelicately and undiplomatically: A stupid man's report of what a clever man says can never be accurate because he unconsciously translates what he hears into something he can understand.

Many scientific messages are far too complicated to communicate outside of the scientific community. Such messages, however, can be communicated to scientists in another country in a much more complete form than to society. Since each country tries to cover the entire spectrum of science, we have a recipient in almost every country.

The problem starts when complicated facts need to be communicated. As you all know, facts have three basic properties. They are negative, they are pessimistic and they are unpatriotic. We know that. Our fellow scientists in other countries also know that. We have to communicate such facts to our government and to the European Commission. Scientists in fellow countries inevitably do the same. It is much easier to reach a mutual understanding between fellow scientists compared to more sophisticated diplomatic channels.

This sort of communication depends also on the geographical position. The belt of countries from Nordkapp (North Cape) down to the Black Sea has for a long time been considered at the periphery of Europe. In the changed world since 24 February 2022, these countries are now on the front line.

Moreover, they are at the fore in the battle of values. This is a challenge to which we cannot offer a full solution, but at least some arguments. Many scientists in these countries and many members of their Academies of Sciences were actually trained in Russia (even though it's very undiplomatic to say it today). They lived in Soviet conditions under Soviet rule for decades. They understand the message between the printed lines. Remember Peter Drucker, who said that the most important things are those which have been unsaid.

Madrid Conference participants.

These countries and their scientific communities and Academies are now embedded into the European research landscape. Some of them most successfully. This knowledge is concealed in those research communities and is almost completely untapped. The value of their carriers as brokers or expert knowledge providers, or even ambassadors, you name it, is sometimes vaguely recognised, but never really harnessed.

In this context we do have a plan in small Academies in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and in some other Academies. Almost like guerrillas, we try to organise at least local cooperation between the most experienced people in this context in the area. We try to organise annual meetings of various European-wide and global Academy networks in the so-called former Eastern European countries. In this way, we try to build bridges to their academic communities. The decolonisation of science is not only a process that should happen between the global North and global South of science. We have a similar gradient in Europe – but it's just in the East-West direction. The goal is simple and transparent: the integration of the research community and smart and experienced people in the Academies in this belt is one of the major challenges that could boost science diplomacy within the meaning that is being pursued by European Commission now.

EUROPEAN SCIENCE ADVICE FORUM (ESAF)[82]

President of the Estonian Academy of Sciences Tarmo Soomere handed his position as Chair of ESAF over at the forum's 9th annual meeting, which was held in Timişoara, Romania, on 11–12 September 2023 and organised by the Estonian Academy of Sciences in cooperation with the West University of Timişoara. At the meeting, the participants were given an overview of the Romanian science system and its funding and challenges, as well as the system of giving the scientific advice in Romania. Several members of the Forum provided an overview of the system of science advice in their countries along with any changes that have taken place and the related challenges. The representatives of the European Commission presented the Commission's vision with regard to scientific advice and its expectations for the ESAF. The most important discussions involved the future of the forum and the amendment of the basic documents, which were drafted in 2016 and have since become somewhat obsolete. At the end of the annual meeting, President of the Research Council of Italy Professor Maria Chiara Carrozza was elected as the new Chair of ESAF.

82 http://esaforum.eu