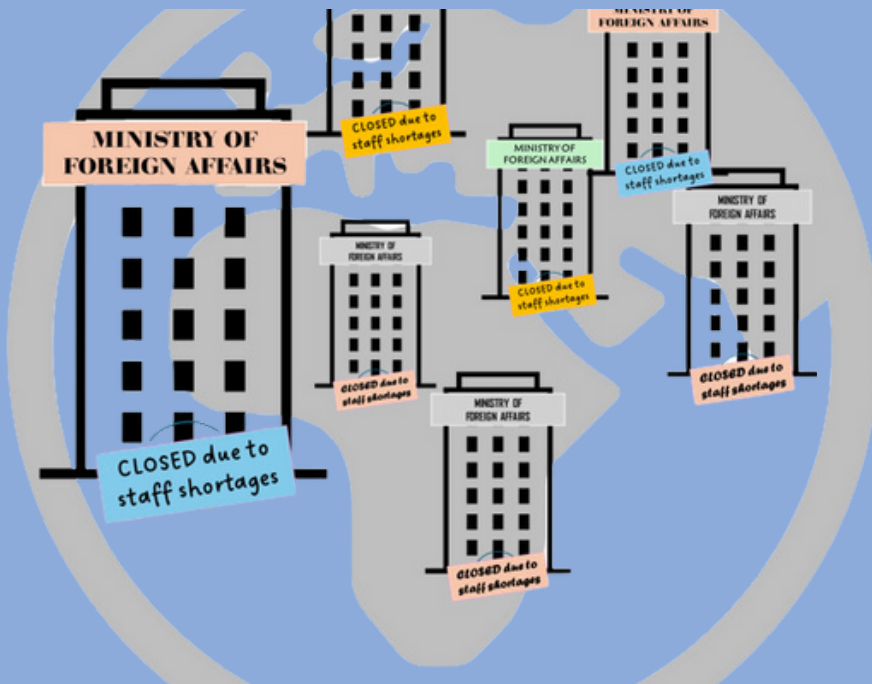


# Running out of diplomats? Exploring the drivers of the global ‘diplomatic shortage’



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## **Running out of diplomats? Exploring the drivers of the global ‘diplomatic shortage’**

### **Abstract**

Recent years have seen staff shortages in Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) all over the world. While diplomacy has traditionally been perceived as a highly-desirable, prestigious profession that is unlikely to face staff shortages, this perception is increasingly being called into question in light of senior-level staff quitting and an apparent decline in youth interest in joining the corps in the first place. This paper seeks to investigate the factors driving this alleged “diplomatic shortage” through a series of 33 interviews with potential young diplomats, current diplomats, and professors of International Relations and Public Policy. We find that there are both supply- and demand-side factors driving the shortage, including a variety of political, administrative, socioeconomic, and personal reasons. Additionally, while the challenging nature of the diplomatic profession was the number one reason for individuals being drawn to it, it was also a major deterrent alongside hiring obstacles. Overall, to mitigate against current and future shortages, this paper recommends the reformation of MFA human resources processes to adapt to modern developments in international affairs and the job market in general, as well as a more informed evaluation of the profession, its hurdles, and advantages by potential candidates.

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## Introduction

In December 2017, an article appeared in *Foreign Policy* detailing how a swath of demoralized diplomatic personnel had resigned from the U.S. State Department.<sup>1</sup> The cause was largely attributed to the changing values of the service - as one diplomat claimed, the administration had seemingly abandoned human rights as a value.<sup>2</sup> This massive exodus of employees had devastating results, impairing most notably the functioning of diplomatic missions in Africa due to lack of qualified individuals.

The lack of personnel from the U.S. Foreign Service continues to remain an issue today, endangering the future of U.S. international presence.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is neither a U.S.-specific one nor is it necessarily new. From the EU-27 to India, foreign services are chronically understaffed.<sup>4</sup> Beyond resignations, however, part of the cause of this personnel crisis is that youth interest specifically towards the public sector and diplomacy seems to be declining. Political apathy appears to be increasing as a reaction to corruption, for example, leading to declining young personnel. Talent shortages in the public sector are an increasing concern, especially among youth, and have been since 2014 or earlier.<sup>5</sup> The Great Resignation of 2022 was the most recent example of a skills shortage, where around 50.5 million people quit their jobs in the US alone, often citing unhappiness with traditional 9-to-5 workloads, stress, and working in person rather than remotely.<sup>6</sup> The public sector was not spared.

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<sup>1</sup> Dan De Luce and Robert Gramer, “U.S. Diplomat’s Resignation Signals Wider Exodus From State Department,” *Foreign Policy*, December 9, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, “Fact Sheet: Senior Leadership Shortages at American Foreign Affairs Agencies Endanger U.S. Leadership,” U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, March 2019; Robert Gramer and Amy Mackinnon, “U.S. Embassies in Africa Are Chronically Short-Staffed,” *Foreign Policy*, July 22, 2022; Democratic Staff Report for the Committee of Foreign Relations of the U.S. Senate, “Diplomacy in Crisis: The Trump Administration’s Decimation of the State Department,” Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, July 28, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Iain Marlow, “India’s diplomat shortage leaves it far behind China,” *The Economic Times*, August 18, 2018; Maia De la Baume, “Anger over France’s diplomatic corps overhaul as war rages in Ukraine,” *Politico*, April 22, 2022; Sanya Dhingra, and Srijan Shukla, “India wants to be Vishwa Guru but IFS gets too few diplomats to take us there,” *The Print*, August 17, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Paul C. Light, “A Cascade of Failures: Why Government Fails, and How To Stop It,” Center for Effective Public Management at Brookings Institute, July 2014; Catherine Rampell, “A slow-moving crisis is paralyzing states and cities,” *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2022; Georgios Athanasakopoulos, Sarah Blackburn, Norah Gardner, Sarah Lu, Megan McConnell, Bonnie Dowling, and Marino Mugayar-Baldocchi, “What workers want is changing. That could be good for government,” McKinsey & Company, October 26, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Greg Iacurci, “2022 was the ‘real year of the Great Resignation,’ says economist,” *CNBC*, February 1, 2023.

This begs the question as to whether there is a shortage of staff within the diplomatic sector, including because of a declining interest among youth. If there is, is this a long-term trend or a temporary downturn in employee attraction and retention à la The Great Resignation of 2022 in the US? And if this is attributable to youth, what factors are driving it? This paper suspects that such a decline of interest and a subsequent shortage of staff does exist, given evidence from the Great Resignation, values of young people, and the general trends exhibited in recent years regarding both deliberate decisions to choose other professions as well as demographic ageing. This paper as such aims to answer the following questions: (1) What factors serve as motivators and deterrents for young people to enter the diplomatic service in today's environment?; (2) How might these contribute to driving a diplomatic shortage?; and (3) How can diplomatic human resources be reformed in order to curb this diplomatic shortage?

We define *diplomatic shortage* both as a shortage of staff that has possible detrimental effects on the daily functioning of a diplomatic service, as well as a decrease in interest by potential candidates, particularly among youth. In light of the aforementioned 2022 Great Resignation, ageing population, and overall shifting preferences of younger generations, it is important to understand why young people in particular are choosing not to go into the diplomatic profession. And, having done so, it is even more crucial to investigate possible ways to mitigate the catastrophic effects of understaffed public administration. To date, however, there have been very few papers examining human resources issues in the diplomatic sector specifically, and to the authors' knowledge, there have been none examining the problem from the perspective of prospective young diplomats.

To answer these questions, this study conducted semi-structured written and spoken interviews with 24 young people across 12 different nationalities, 5 professors of International Relations, Political Science, Public Policy, across 3 different nationalities, and 4 current diplomats, across 3 different nationalities. These interviews were then inductively coded by theme and analytical category. Ultimately, and in line with the literature review findings, the interview results indicated that the diplomatic sector today is indeed facing a personnel crisis. Most young interviewees were interested in diplomacy, but not through MFAs; all professors indicated a significant decline in their students' interest vis-a-vis the diplomatic corps; all diplomats but one recognised the existence of personnel issues. The reasons - which were streamlined in all responses - given for this declining interest were found to be personal (e.g., work-life balance, gender equality, family/spouse, less trust in the public sector), socioeconomic (e.g., opportunities in other fields, private sector competition, new technologies), and political (e.g., nepotism, political appointments, foreign policy priorities), and administrative (e.g., budget cuts, bureaucracy). Nevertheless, all interviewees agreed upon the fact that diplomacy remains indispensable, but also that it should be evolving with the times and so should its human resources and mode of operation. Thus, on the one hand, many of the young interviewees still wish to become diplomats, but will either opt for other ways of producing diplomacy - via academia, civil society, or the private sector - or will reconsider the diplomatic dream overall citing the aforementioned reasons.

The article proceeds as follows: first, a literature review will be conducted. Then, the methodology behind the semi-structured interviews will be presented. Following this, the findings will be presented and analyzed, while the conclusion will briefly touch upon some recommendations to MFA human resources departments and to prospective candidates in order to address the drivers of this personnel crisis.

## Literature Review

This section examines existing literature on the concept of the diplomatic shortage. The arguments detected will then be measured against our own findings.

### I. The Term “Diplomatic Shortage”

Before anything else, it shall be noted that we detected only a few purely academic accounts on the concept of diplomatic shortage and similar concepts – mostly drafted by think tanks – while most accounts upon these topics were drafted by and published in news agencies and/or blogs. Another preliminary point has to do with the conceptualization and term of the *diplomatic shortage*. Similar terms were only detected in four different sources. More precisely, the term *staffing shortage* was used in a well-circulated *Foreign Policy* report by Gramer and MackInnon in order to describe the “persistent and acute shortage” of diplomatic personnel in US embassies in Africa.<sup>7</sup> The term in this report simply referred to the reality of the lack of diplomatic personnel in a particular region for a particular country, while the authors mainly attributed this phenomenon to personal preferences, mostly related to safety concerns, and to domestic politics.

Moving on, the term *diplomatic deficit* was used in a *British Council* article, in an article by the *Diplomat* magazine, and in an article hosted in *Statescraft*, a South Asia-focused daily news agency. Interestingly, each source used the term with a rather different meaning. Donaldson and Younane primarily address the changing nature of diplomacy and international relations in general, with a focus on and critique of British diplomacy.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, the authors describe the fact that nowadays power – within the international system – is more dispersed, going beyond interstate interactions. Thus, today’s international system is the antithesis of a one-player game, incorporating states, sub-state and non-state actors, transnational corporations, international organisations, and individuals themselves. Within this system, the authors argue, ‘traditional’ state-to-state diplomacy is neither sufficient nor effective. Therefore, the diplomatic deficit, for them, refers to the gap between the emerging need for new ways of doing diplomacy – that is, in response to the new international system – and between the inadequacy of ‘traditional’ diplomacy and its slow process of modernization. In other words, the deficit is translated into outdated techniques, ideas, and path dependency of diplomacy, thus bearing a quality-based connotation that incorporates ideational and material elements.

On its part, the *Diplomat* article, again commenting on British diplomacy, also embraced a quality-based understanding of the term diplomatic deficit but did so with a twist.<sup>9</sup> The authors cite British diplomats’ complaints about how chronic budget and resources cuts (and, thus, of personnel) that have been imposed on the Foreign Service are impacting British diplomacy’s influence. In other words, the deficit refers to a deterioration of the quality of foreign policy itself because of mainly material reasons.

Lastly, in the *Statescraft* article, Vats deals with India’s assertive foreign policy, as exercised by PM Modi.<sup>10</sup> The author argues that there is a diplomatic deficit, by means of the existence of a gap between

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<sup>7</sup> Gramer and MackInnon, “U.S. Embassies in Africa Are Chronically Short-Staffed.”

<sup>8</sup> Alasdair Donaldson and Isabelle Younane, “A diplomatic deficit? The rise of non-state actors,” *British Council Insight Articles*, February 2018.

<sup>9</sup> The Diplomat, “Diplomatic Deficit,” *The Diplomat*, December 1, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Rishap Vats, “An Assessment of India's Diplomatic Deficit,” *Statescraft*, December 24, 2019.

this assertive foreign policy and the size of and budget dedicated to the diplomatic corps of India. In other words, this article embraces a rather quantity-based notion of the diplomatic deficit, while adding a quality-based touch by referring – as the *Diplomat* article – to the connection between an efficient foreign policy and a strong diplomatic sector.

Overall, then, there is no holistic conception and analysis of the diplomatic shortage phenomenon yet. A holistic analysis, as we understand it, would incorporate both a quantity- and a quality-based conception of the term; both material and ideational elements; both a supply and a demand side of the deficit; and both a society-, government- (this includes the general government, Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs), and the diplomatic corps itself), and individual-based driving factors of the shortage. Nevertheless, the elements stressed by these four different accounts reveal something important; as the actors, places, and methods of diplomacy are changing, the pathways of becoming a diplomat *lato sensu* and of producing diplomacy – here, understood in a broader term than traditional MFA diplomacy – are multiplied as well. This element is of importance since it relates to the individual- and job market-related factors affecting the interest of people for joining the diplomatic corps.

## II. Examining Personnel Shortages and Their Effects

All reviewed material leads to the conclusion that countries worldwide face practical staffing problems and resources/budget shortages vis-à-vis their foreign services, irrespective of the size, population, and/or power of the country.

On the one hand, to give some personnel shortages examples, in 2019, the number of candidates taking the foreign service exam in the US was the lowest in 2008, with the country facing severe staffing problems, especially in Africa, despite its size and global standing;<sup>11</sup> India, despite its population of more than 1 billion, is also facing severe personnel shortages, having approximately only 850 career diplomats;<sup>12</sup> Sri Lanka has hired only 10 people for its foreign service between 2012 and 2022;<sup>13</sup> “Germany lacks diplomats,” something that does not align with its diplomatic leadership bid;<sup>14</sup> France’s foreign service is chronically understaffed, currently having around 800 diplomats, a surprising number given how diplomatically active France was to be in Europe and globally;<sup>15</sup> while, on the European Union (EU) level, a paradox is in place as EU countries’ national diplomatic staff numbers are decreasing, at the same time when EU diplomacy is becoming more proactive and the role of EU Delegations is being strengthened.<sup>16</sup> This diplomatic personnel shortage is double faced, referring to both the low and/or diminishing numbers of current diplomats worldwide, and to the low and/or diminishing numbers of candidates and low

<sup>11</sup> De Luce, “Fewer Americans are opting for careers at the State Department”; E.A. Crunden, “More than 40 countries lack a U.S. ambassador. That’s a big problem,” *Think Progress*, February 28, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> De la Baume, “Anger over France’s diplomatic corps overhaul”; Dhingra and Shukla, “India wants to be Vishwa Guru.”

<sup>13</sup> Colombo Gazette, “Government notes shortage of staff in Foreign Service,” *Colombo Gazette*, November 18, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Brockmeier, “Making the German Foreign Office Fit for Berlin’s New Role in the World,” *Global Public Policy Institute*, March 28, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> De la Baume, “Anger over France’s diplomatic corps overhaul.”

<sup>16</sup> Federica Bicchi and Daniel Schade, “Whither European diplomacy? Long-term trends and the impact of the Lisbon Treaty,” *Cooperation and Conflict* vol.57, no.1 (2022): pp.3–24.



interest for the foreign service. In other words, there is both a shortage of staff and a shortage of candidates, with the former being a global and the latter a case-by-case problem. This trend appears to be continuing - for instance, in 2022 the number of people taking the foreign service test in the US was the lowest since the aforementioned 2008 low, and during the beginning months of the Trump administration, the number of FSOT test takers “fell 26 percent from June 2016 to June 2017,” a record decline.<sup>17</sup> Also, it is surprising to read that “top grad schools for international affairs that typically funnel graduates to the State Department also report a drop-off in interest,” with only three students showing up to a career briefing that used to gather around 25 of them.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, budget cuts – translated into lack of material resources, closing of embassies/consulates, lowering of salaries, hiring only few new diplomats – constitute *la vie quotidienne* for MFAs worldwide.<sup>19</sup>

These personnel and resource shortages have had serious consequences for existing diplomats and for countries’ foreign policy, while they have fueled heated protests in several instances. For example, Czech diplomats are experiencing chronic burnout, with the sudden death of three Czech diplomats in their late 40s-early 50s in April 2023 having stirred up discussions for working conditions’ reforms within the Czech MFA.<sup>20</sup> In France, Macron passed a controversial decree that basically disbands the French diplomatic corps, with career diplomats being replaced by case-by-case opaque hiring processes.<sup>21</sup> French diplomats immediately expressed their opposition to yet another blow to the chronically understaffed and overextended French diplomatic corps. They underlined that this reform will strengthen elitism, favouritism, and the role of political appointees, while at the same time blurring the lines between public service and foreign policy, and leading to questions about diplomats’ political neutrality. Israeli diplomats took to the streets in 2019 in an unprecedented indefinite duration protest against the chronically underfunded diplomatic service and in light of salary cuts going hand-in-hand with an extremely challenging workload.<sup>22</sup> In 2021, Greek diplomats protested against the imminent lowering of the budget

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<sup>17</sup> De Luce, “Fewer Americans are opting for careers at the State Department”; Daniel Lipman and Nahal Toosi, “Interest in U.S. diplomatic corps tumbles in early months of Trump,” *Politico*, August 12, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Lipman and Toosi, “Interest in U.S. diplomatic corps tumbles in early months of Trump.”

<sup>19</sup> **for the US**, De Luce, “Fewer Americans are opting for careers at the State Department”; Gramer and MackInnon, “U.S. Embassies in Africa Are Chronically Short-Staffed”; **for the UK**, Donaldson, and Younane, “A diplomatic deficit? The rise of non-state actors”; “Diplomatic Deficit”; **for Germany**, Brockmeier, “Making the German Foreign Office Fit for Berlin’s New Role in the World”; Sarah Brockmeier, “Without Diplomats, No Diplomatic Solutions,” *Global Public Policy Institute*, April 27, 2017; **for India**, Vats, “An Assessment of India’s Diplomatic Deficit”; **for Austria**, Sandra Sonnleitner, “Der österreichische auswärtige Dienst,” in *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs*, ed. Martin Senn, Franz Eder, and Markus Kornprobst (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2023); **for France**, De la Baume, “Anger over France’s diplomatic corps overhaul”; Sophie Pommier, “Diplomacy Without Diplomats? The Disputed Reform of the French Foreign Ministry,” *Orient XXI*, January 31, 2022; **for Greece**, Naftemporiki, “«Ισχνός» ο προϋπολογισμός του υπουργείου Εξωτερικών, παραδέχτηκε ο Ν. Δένδιας,” *Naftemporiki*, February 19, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Dimitris Athinkais, “Οι ξαφνικοί θάνατοι Τσέχων διπλωματών και η πιθανή αναθεώρηση των συνθηκών εργασίας,” *Kathimerini*, April 19, 2023; Ketrin Johecova, “After 3 Czech Diplomats Die Suddenly, Prague Urges Staff to Improve Work-Life Balance,” *Politico*, April 17, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> De la Baume, “Anger over France’s diplomatic corps overhaul.”

<sup>22</sup> Times of Israel Staff, “Foreign Ministry forced to freeze most diplomatic activity due to lack of funds,” *Times of Israel*, September 8, 2019.

provided for the Greek MFA for 2022, and against the lowering of their own salaries.<sup>23</sup> The then Greek MFA denied the cuts, mentioning a rise in functional expenses instead, despite him and former Ministers having publicly recognised some months before that the MFA budget was indeed not that strong.<sup>24</sup> And, lastly, Canadian diplomats have been protesting while chanting “overseas, overworked, underpaid, undervalued” since 2000, but hardly anything has changed since then.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, the diplomatic shortage affects both the current diplomats’ work and personal life, as well as the efficiency of a country’s foreign policy. Diplomats are forced to work more, with less resources and lower salaries, to cover more issues and/or countries, while at the same time not getting the professional recognition their qualifications and/or achievements require. At the same time, they are asked to deliver results of good quality, as if these issues did not exist. However, as Brockmeier, a non-resident fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute, put it: “Without Diplomats, No Diplomatic Solutions.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, an efficient and assertive foreign policy cannot function without educated, skilled, and experienced personnel, nor without sufficient resources. Thus, there is (or there should be) a direct correlation between the size and quality of the diplomatic service and the assertiveness, width, and content of a country’s foreign policy.

China’s behaviour can easily support this argument; China’s bid for global presence and influence via an expanding foreign policy has gone hand-in-hand with an unprecedented growth in foreign policy spending, including the enlargement of its diplomatic corps.<sup>27</sup> In fact, China has surpassed the US in the number of diplomatic posts worldwide, according to the Lowy Institute’s 2021 Global Diplomacy Index.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, as mentioned, the US, despite its (diminishing) preponderance in international politics and its economic power, is facing severe diplomatic shortages, while most European countries are doing so as well, despite their diplomatic fervour within European and global politics. In fact, it is in these cases where the diplomatic shortage raises concerns about the ability to conduct efficient foreign policy – and to keep their diplomats ‘up and running’ – that is, alive and not burned out, we would add.

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<sup>23</sup> Documento, “Στάση εργασίας των Διπλωματικών Υπάλληλων για την μείωση του Προϋπολογισμού του ΥΠΕΞ,” *Documento*, December 16, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Naftemporiki, “«Ισχνός» ο προϋπολογισμός του υπουργείου Εξωτερικών, παραδέχτηκε ο Ν. Δένδιας”; Newsroom Efimerida, “Υπουργείο Εξωτερικών: Δεν υπάρχει μείωση στον προϋπολογισμό του 2022 για το υπουργείο,” *Efimerida*, December 17, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> CBC News, “Canadian diplomats stage wage protest,” *CBC News*, June 20, 2000.

<sup>26</sup> Brockmeier, “Without Diplomats, No Diplomatic Solutions.”

<sup>27</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. “China’s Diplomacy in 2021: Embracing a Global Vision and Serving the Nation and its People,” Address by H.E. Wang Yi, State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the Symposium on the International Situation and China’s Foreign Relations in 2021, December 20, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Lowy Institute, *Global Diplomacy Index*, 2021.

III. Setting the Stage: Examining the Driving Factors of the Diplomatic Shortage

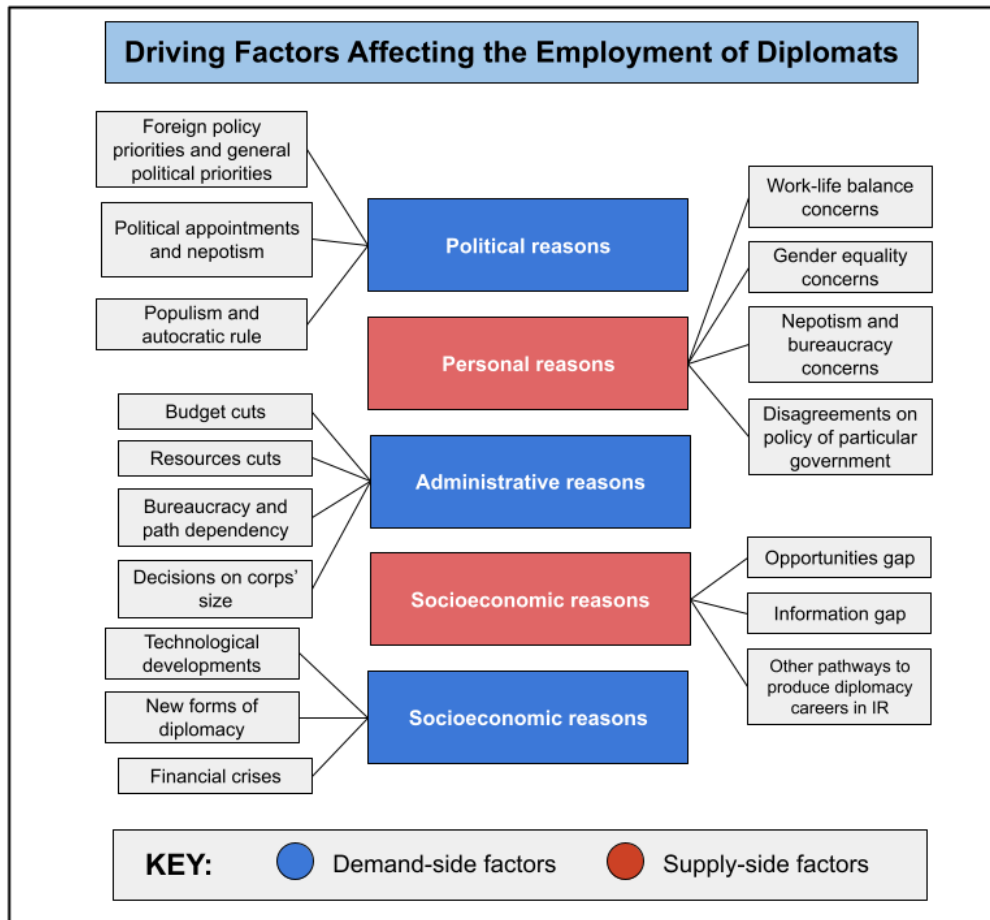


Figure 1. Driving Factors Affecting the Employment of Diplomats.

Taking into consideration all the above, the question of the driving factors of the diplomatic shortage arises. Exploring existing scholarship has allowed us to induce a framework, presented in the above Figure 1, and summarize the arguments in the following section. Given the conceptualization of the diplomatic shortage as a lack of diplomats and of material resources, its driving factors can be largely divided into two categories, namely demand for diplomats and supply of diplomats. The demand for diplomats is shaped - and, as we find, driven down - by foreign policy and other political priorities, by administrative decisions, including budget availability and human resources needs, as well as by socio-cultural developments, such as new technologies. Therefore, the demand-side factors refer to state/government-based elements, sub-divided into political, administrative, and socio-economic reasons. The supply of diplomats refers to the - as we find - low/decreasing interest of qualified potential candidates in becoming diplomats. The supply-side factors are, thus, sub-divided into personal reasons (e.g., work-life balance) and socio-economic reasons, including both an opportunity and an information gap. Therefore, the following lines will delve into all these drivers of the current diplomatic shortage.

*i. Demand-Side Factors*

To begin with, based on existing scholarship, demand for diplomats stems from a variety of government/state-based reasons. It has been argued that the choice between a small and a larger diplomatic corps is deep-down a policy choice, by means of an assertive foreign policy not being a priority

for the said state, thus, requiring less people. Nevertheless, we do not find this absolute argument to be reflective of today's reality where anything from trade to travel is based on globalization and interdependence, of course to different degrees. But, as mentioned above with the example of China, an increase of the diplomatic footprint of a country may reflect its bid for a more proactive, more assertive foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> Yet, once more, this is not absolute, as economic, or other reasons might stand in the way, thus resulting in a situation of proactive foreign policy with an understaffed foreign service, as is the case with India. A similar line of thought has implied that understaffed embassies – or no embassies at all – in particular regions result from a lack of policy interest in the region.<sup>30</sup> Certainly, not all countries have embassies and/or consulates in all countries of the world; this is a matter of logistics (e.g., resources, personnel, funding, safety, etc.) and policy priorities (e.g., existence of diplomatic relations, bilateral political and economic ties, regime type, etc.). Also, an embassy in one country can be responsible for the representation of the country of origin to more countries, other than the host one, while in the context of the EU, the EU Delegations represent all EU member states. Therefore, we do agree that the elements mentioned form the demand for personnel. However, some say that the shortage of staff in particular regions, as in the Middle East and Africa, might have to do with diplomats' personal lack of preference for such posts for a variety of reasons. But this argument does not stand as in most MFAs career diplomats do not have a say – or at least their preference is noted, but not necessarily taken into account – as to where they are posted. Diplomats cannot refuse a post, as this would equal to resigning from the corps altogether.

Moving on, the most cited demand-side factor for diplomatic staff shortages is financial - and, thus, administrative - in nature. Budget cuts are indeed on the daily agenda for MFAs worldwide, irrespective of how proactive a country is in terms of foreign policy, supplemented by the general tendency to reduce public spending post-the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>31</sup> Budget cuts can take place both via reduced funding for MFAs and via measures such as assimilating economic, trade, political representation duties to one diplomat (instead of three), closing embassies/consulates, or having embassies that represent the country of origin to more than one country simultaneously. An interesting argument was put forward by Perez, the Director General at the US State Department responsible for overseeing personnel; in an interview she argued that the state of the economy altogether is driving the diplomatic shortage. She said that “interest in the exam tends to coincide with the unemployment rate, with more applicants taking the exam when the economy is weak. A jump in test takers from 16,125 in fiscal 2009 to 22,281 in fiscal 2010 followed the major recession of 2008” in the US.<sup>32</sup> The interviewer, though, noted that the number of applicants has fluctuated over the decades, “sometimes rising in the wake of a recession — but also during economic booms,” thus casting doubt on this argument.<sup>33</sup> Such a correlation needs to be based on concrete data, collected over decades, for a large number of countries so as to be able to stand as is. However, recessions do constitute a cause of budget cuts and either less or no new hires, something that might lead to more competition (more applicants) in the hiring process, but certainly not to more hires.

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<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “China's Diplomacy in 2021: Embracing a Global Vision and Serving the Nation and its People.”

<sup>30</sup> Gramer and MackInnon, “U.S. Embassies in Africa Are Chronically Short-Staffed.”

<sup>31</sup> See footnote 19.

<sup>32</sup> De Luce, “Fewer Americans are opting for careers at the State Department.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Also, there might be a caveat in this line of thought. In most countries, the academic and professional qualifications, and the hiring process for the foreign service render it approachable only by highly educated, highly qualified people that, theoretically, would not be the first victims of an unemployment crisis. But, of course, there can be no *a priori* prediction on who suffers during a recession.

Within the state-based political reasons, nepotism-based hires are the next most cited reason. In autocratic, dictatorial, or populist states, usually there is not even a career diplomatic corps *stricto sensu*. Instead, diplomats are basically political appointees, temporary or permanent, based on opaque appointment processes. For example, Poland, which has a record of populism and state capture measure in the recent years, has been criticised for its 2021 reform proposal that would basically disband the diplomatic corps, rendering diplomats mere political appointees with no to limited training, hired based on blurry criteria.<sup>34</sup> An example on the authoritarian side is (former) President of Afghanistan Karzai's thirteen years rule that saw the majority of diplomatic positions staffed by family members, close friends, or political affiliates.<sup>35</sup> Such measures logically limit the number of posts, as well as the pool of potential candidates, while also forging a culture of nepotism which diminishes the public interest towards the job altogether.

But the phenomenon of political appointees in diplomatic posts is not only limited to autocracies; it is becoming more and more common even in democratic states (especially when populism is on the rise) to be having non-career diplomats in non-permanent positions.<sup>36</sup> They are usually chosen for key positions, have specialized expertise on a particular topic, or they simply serve the interest of the government better. Again, this process, especially when opaque, fuels nepotism, and poses obstacles to the stability and continuity coherent foreign policy requires, as well to the political neutrality necessary for a well-functioning foreign service. Also, on the supply side, it can reduce the attractiveness of the profession to potential candidates, further fuelling the diplomatic shortage. Potential candidates not only see career diplomats, their expertise and knowledge, being stepped aside, but they are also faced with uncertainty regarding the academic and professional background one needs to prepare for a diplomatic career that is determined by politics. The reaction of French diplomats to Macron's decision to render the French diplomatic corps a basically political appointees-based corps can be understood through this lens.<sup>37</sup> The complaints of Lithuanian diplomats for the nepotism cultivated by the presence of political appointees is also justified on these terms.<sup>38</sup> In Australia political appointees are being preferred by governments than diplomats more frequently in recent years, raising questions regarding the cost to diplomacy's efficiency and coherence.<sup>39</sup> And, lastly, it is worth mentioning the unprecedented rise in

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<sup>34</sup> Christian Lequesne, "The troubling reform of Poland's Foreign Service," *Centre for European Policy Studies*, February 3, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Azizullah Hamdard, "Nepotism detected in appointing diplomats," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, March 1, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Christian Lequesne, "Ministries of Foreign Affairs: A Crucial Institution Revisited," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* vol.15, no.1-2 (2020): pp.1-12.

<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Chainay, "Le corps diplomatique français va être supprimé, on vous explique la polémique en six points," *Ouest France*, April 19, 2022; Radio France Internationale, "Suppression of diplomatic corps could leave France without professional diplomats," *Radio France Internationale*, April 19, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Modesta Gaučaitė, "Nepotism and inequality plague Lithuania's diplomatic service – union rep," *LRT*, December 19, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Flitton, "Do politicians make good ambassadors or is nepotism at play?" *ABC News*, March 4, 2019.

numbers of political ambassadors during the populist rule of (former) President Trump in the US.<sup>40</sup> Surely, political appointments have always existed, but it is surprising to note that approximately one third of US diplomatic staff considered resigning during the first year of his presidency citing “opaque appointment processes” as one among many reasons.<sup>41</sup>

Lastly, the changing nature of diplomacy due to the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s socio-economic developments is considered by many to be fuelling the lack of demand for diplomats. More precisely, new technologies are forging the so-called “dematerialisation of diplomacy,” with new ways of information gathering, communication, and inter-state contacts, thus reducing the “diplomatic footprint on the ground.”<sup>42</sup> More and more states are establishing “online embassies,” creating what is now being called “the laptop ambassador” that represents their country to another or IOs from the corridors of the MFA itself.<sup>43</sup> A widely circulated *Foreign Affairs* article is asking “do we need embassies anymore?” and whether diplomats are now irrelevant, while underlining that “embassies are now usually the slowest way to get information, unable to compete with lightning-fast media reporting and exhaustive country analyses prepared by NGOs and risk consultancies.”<sup>44</sup> At the same time, the modern international relations environment is a multi-actor and multilevel one. As mentioned above, power is more diffuse nowadays, with sub-state, non-state, non-governmental, and governmental actors, transnational corporations, and others all having a say in the international arena. The role of diplomacy is, therefore, changing, with new forms emerging, such as citizen diplomacy, academia diplomacy, media diplomacy, public diplomacy – forms that do not necessarily require career diplomats, or require different skill sets, or create a need for a financial balance between traditional and new forms of diplomacy. In a similar vein, the evolving nature of EU diplomacy is leading to an increasing EU Delegations presence, with co-locations rising in numbers, and a decreasing national EU member states diplomatic presence globally.<sup>45</sup>

Certainly, diplomacy is and should be changing with the times, going together with changes in staffing needs. Nevertheless, it is better to avoid absolutist arguments on the obsolescence of traditional diplomacy and the human diplomat. For example, intelligence gathering may be easier and quicker via technological means, but human intelligence, mediation, negotiations, or policy choices all boil down to the individual. International relations scholarship on diplomacy in the later years clearly argues for

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<sup>40</sup> Democratic Staff Report, “Diplomacy in Crisis: The Trump Administration’s Decimation of the State Department.”

<sup>41</sup> TRT World, “A personnel crisis: How an empty State Department is weakening US diplomacy,” *TRT World*. August 12, 2022. This source draws upon data from the following report: Zúñiga Castro, Constanza, Ghaznawi, Mojib, Kim, Caroline, *The Crisis in the State Department: We are losing our best and need to ask why*, Institute of the Study of Diplomacy, 2021. See, though, the following article where political appointments are presented as an almost historical tradition in the US; Lequesne, Christian. “Ministries of Foreign Affairs: A Crucial Institution Revisited.”

<sup>42</sup> Bicchi and Schade, “Whither European diplomacy? Long-term trends and the impact of the Lisbon Treaty”; Jérémi Cornut and Nadia Dale, “Historical, practical, and theoretical perspectives on the digitalisation of diplomacy: An exploratory analysis,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* vol.30, no.4 (2019): pp. 829–836.

<sup>43</sup> Lequesne, “Ministries of Foreign Affairs: A Crucial Institution Revisited”; Sandra Sonnleitner, *Bilateral Diplomacy and EU Membership: Case Study on Austria* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2018).

<sup>44</sup> Alex Oliver, “The Irrelevant Diplomat: Do We Need Embassies Anymore?,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 14, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Bicchi and Schade, “Whither European diplomacy? Long-term trends and the impact of the Lisbon Treaty.”

combining progress and continuity, and we do find this to be the case.<sup>46</sup> However, this progress might indeed be partially driving down demand for more diplomats, while also alienating current and old-school ones.

## ii. Supply-Side Factors

The supply of diplomats, as mentioned, is determined by both socio-economic and personal reasons. Starting from the former, given the changing nature of international relations, nowadays there are more pathways to ‘produce’ diplomacy and more international affairs jobs than in the past. IOs, international NGOs, think tanks, consulting companies, citizen diplomacy, are only some examples.<sup>47</sup> In the same vein, the diplomatic profession is not the only one offering international travel, moving to different countries regularly, or exploring other cultures. The rise of transnational companies and the increasing professional mobility globally prove this.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the latter can be considered more attractive given that, in comparison to the foreign service, one might have a say as to where they are posted, while they might change their field of expertise over their career. Nevertheless, the public sector offers relatively more professional stability than the private sector, given the safeguards vis-à-vis salaries and lay-offs.<sup>49</sup> But again, this is not absolute. Regarding salaries, it has been argued that the private sector provides better remuneration than the foreign service, especially after the MFA budget cuts of the later years. However, this is not the case globally nor for all private companies and positions. Yet, it might be true that the private sector takes more into consideration qualifications, skills, and years of experience when determining salaries.<sup>50</sup>

Socio-cultural reasons on the supply-side also refer to a wider opportunity and an information gap. The former refers to the requirements for entering the foreign service (higher education, professional experience – which usually translates to unpaid internships, lived experience abroad, languages, etc.) and the pool of people who have the financial and practical ability to fulfil them. The latter refers to rural and underdeveloped areas, where people might lack the necessary information on how one gets into the foreign service, what steps are needed to build a diplomatic career, etc. Indeed, these two combined immediately limit the people who constitute potential candidates, while the opportunity gap might also limit motivation in the first place.<sup>51</sup>

Turning to personal preferences, the interest for the diplomatic profession is shaped by how the safety and personal life hurdles it involves are perceived by a potential candidate. Being a diplomat is considered one of the most challenging professions, with an intense everyday life and increased stress

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<sup>46</sup> For an insight into modern diplomacy, refer to: Andrew Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> De Luce, “Fewer Americans are opting for careers at the State Department.”

<sup>48</sup> Marlow, “India's diplomat shortage leaves it far behind China”; Dhingra and Shukla, “India wants to be Vishwa Guru.”

<sup>49</sup> Conrad Turner, “Foreign Service Stereotypes,” *USC Centre on Public Diplomacy*, May 3, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Maggie Olson, “Why Young People Don’t Want to Work for Government,” *Strixus*, July 22, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Alexandra Nita, “How can youth get involved in diplomacy,” *US Institute of Diplomacy and Human Rights*, March 30, 2020; Dan Moxon, Cristina Bacalso, and Solome Dolidze, “The cost of unpaid internships,” *European Youth Forum*, January 2023.

levels, regular long hours, security concerns, secret missions, regular travelling and moving from country to country, and many more.<sup>52</sup> It goes without saying that this creates difficulties for a ‘normal’ personal life, both for single and married diplomats, with kids or without. For example, the job prospects for the diplomat’s spouse in the host country, good quality education and a stable social life for diplomats’ children constitute two goals that can be more or less difficult to achieve.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, there are several posts that are considered non-family friendly due to safety concerns, so being a diplomat can be quite a lonely profession in conflict or dangerous zones.<sup>54</sup> Thus, some people might not be willing to succumb to the difficulties of this profession. However, long hours, burnout, regular work trips, etc. also exist in other professions, especially in modern work environments. But these issues may be amplified with security-based concerns, and even children-based concerns.

Furthermore, bureaucracy and nepotism, as well as an ‘allergy’ towards any kind of change are commonly presented by potential candidates as discouraging elements for entering the foreign service. MFAs are still ministries, and ministries worldwide are known for their red tape.<sup>55</sup> Yet, diplomacy is sometimes all about quick decisions, acting on the spot, improvising, taking initiative – all within the context of the generally approved policy line though. One wonders whether there is a job anywhere that does not involve bureaucracy. However, MFAs are (in)famous for sticking to existing routines and modes of work, being reluctant to change, even if circumstances have done so. Indicative of this is the slow progress of digitalization of diplomacy, contrary to the speed of technological progress, and modernization of diplomacy. For example, COVID-19 and the need for online diplomacy found diplomats completely digitally unprepared, even though they eventually adapted to the circumstances.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the diplomatic profession operates within a strict hierarchy and an orders-based system. To some, this looks like an environment where individual ideas and initiatives are not welcome or tolerated. While this is true to a certain extent, it shall not be forgotten that diplomacy sometimes is all about thinking outside of the box. At the same time, a single diplomat cannot change a country’s policy on their own will; after all, diplomats serve their country, implementing policy as formulated by the government. Therefore, some special attributes of the diplomatic profession can serve as demotivators, but some others cannot be held against the profession, as without them it would simply not exist.

Nevertheless, disagreeing with or disliking a particular government’s foreign policy and, for this reason, not wanting to join the corps or wanting to resign constitutes a different issue.<sup>57</sup> Governments change over time; thus, the same person might be interested in joining the corps later, or might just stay in place and be patient until the change comes. A characteristic example is the 30% of US State Department officials who wished to resign during the first year of Trump’s presidency, and the record low candidatures for the foreign service exam during the same term. More broadly, though, it has been argued

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<sup>52</sup> Athinakis, “Οι ξαφνικοί θάνατοι Τσέχων διπλωματών και η πιθανή αναθεώρηση των συνθηκών εργασίας.”

<sup>53</sup> Gramer and MackInnon, “U.S. Embassies in Africa Are Chronically Short-Staffed.”

<sup>54</sup> Turner, “Foreign Service Stereotypes.”

<sup>55</sup> E.g., slow process of nominating and confirming senior positions at US State Department. US Global Leadership Coalition, “Senior Leadership Shortages at America’s Foreign Affairs Agencies Endanger U.S. Global Leadership.”

<sup>56</sup> Fotini Zarogianni, “Multilateralism,” *United Nations Geneva 59<sup>th</sup> Graduate Study Program Post-COVID World: Reset, Resilience, and Recovery*, 2021: pp.33-39.

<sup>57</sup> Alex Evans, “Why being a diplomat sucks,” *Global Dashboard*, September 1, 2010.



that nowadays trust vis-à-vis governmental institutions globally is going down among younger generations, while political apathy is said to be on the rise.<sup>58</sup> Some cite corruption, inaction against problems held close to the heart of youth, as climate change or gender equality, nepotism and gerontocracy, lack of diversity, red tape, and others as causes.<sup>59</sup> However, distrust of the public sector does not necessarily drive down interest to join it. On the contrary, some might be even more motivated to do so, in order to “change things” from the inside.<sup>60</sup> Also, it is not accurate to be talking about youth political apathy, given the high levels of youth civic engagement globally through other means, particularly non-governmental organizations or the private sector.<sup>61</sup> And, lastly, increasing social diversity within MFAs worldwide has been detected by several scholars, yet gender equality within the corps is still an important issue.<sup>62</sup>

Moving on, the issue of nepotism is double sided; there is demand- and supply-side to it. Some argue that nepotism affects the hiring processes of the foreign service, with people of certain backgrounds, e.g., children of current/retired ambassadors and/or politicians, being privileged. Indeed, this has been proven numerous times in various countries, while the surge of political appointees with blurry hiring processes certainly adds to this story.<sup>63</sup> However, most hiring processes of MFAs worldwide are centred around an exam system, involving language, skills, and knowledge examination, with the latter including International Relations, international law, history, economics, and others. These exam systems usually have some safeguards against corrupted results; for example, in Greece, for each course examined there is both an oral and a written exam, while the oral exam is held in public, with an audience. Therefore, nepotism as a discouraging factor can exist as a fact – in cases where no such safeguards or ways around them exist – or as a stereotypical misconception presented as an excuse for lack of motivation for a generally demanding exam process. Turning to the internal side of nepotism, potential candidates argue that promotions and appointments are not merit-based within MFAs. Instead, they are either politics-based or elitism/gerontocracy-based.<sup>64</sup> Again, this has been proven numerous times in practice, with

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<sup>58</sup> Diplomat Magazine, “The necessity of youth support in sustaining democracy,” *Diplomat*, November 20, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Samuel Barnett, Natalie Thompson, and Sandy Alkoutami, “How Gen Z Will Shake Up Foreign Policy,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 3, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Lipman and Toosi, “Interest in U.S. diplomatic corps tumbles in early months of Trump”; Olson, “Why Young People Don’t Want to Work for Government.”

<sup>61</sup> Diego Reyeros, “The rise of the youth diplomat,” *Chevening*, January 25, 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Christian Lequesne, Gabriel Castillo, Minda Holm, Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, Halvard Leira, Kamna Tiwary, and Reubon Wong, “Ethnic Diversity in the Recruitment of Diplomats: Why MFAs Take the Issue Seriously,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* vol.15, no.1-2 (2019). pp.43-65; Lequesne, “Ministries of Foreign Affairs: A Crucial Institution Revisited”; Zach Stanton, “America is diverse. Why aren’t its diplomats?,” *Politico*, July 31, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Castro et al., *The Crisis in the State Department: We are losing our best and need to ask why*.

<sup>64</sup> Gerontocracy refers to the oldest people in the hierarchy that want to maintain their place and not, for example, retire, something that leaves middle rank officials ‘stuck’, unless they have the right connections, and, of course, hinders the hiring of new people. See: Michael Schaffer, “The Real Problem With America’s Gerontocracy,” *Politico*, October 21, 2022; Franklin Foer, “You’ll Miss Gerontocracy When It’s Gone,” *The Atlantic*, January 3, 2023; Olson, “Why Young People Don’t Want to Work for Government.”

diplomats complaining about a work environment “that lacks accountability and transparency.”<sup>65</sup> MFAs are run by alternating governments who wish to promote their own policy goals, and who might find it easier to work with one rather than the other person. Thus, some preferences are to be expected, but certainly not to the extent of all-out nepotism. However, an efficient MFA is one that has skilled personnel that does its job successfully, thus choosing unqualified people will, in the end, have an impact on the quality of the diplomatic output.<sup>66</sup>

### Methodology

This paper follows a qualitative research approach with a series of 33 inductively coded, semi-structured interviews. We prepared interview questions that asked about the interviewees’ personal experiences as well as their opinion on the general situation of diplomatic human resources. As the aim of the study is to provide an initial understanding of the factors motivating or discouraging people from entering the diplomatic service (or leaving it), a qualitative approach via semi-structured interviews was deemed to be a highly suitable method for gaining perspective on this matter. Semi-structured interviews answer the question “Why” rather than “How many” or “How much” and are particularly suitable for “studying people’s perceptions and opinions on complex or emotionally sensitive issues,” which career aspirations fall under.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, qualitative studies can provide “differentiation and intensification” in ways that are not necessarily achievable through quantitative studies by enabling the interviewer to “improvise follow-up questions based on participants’ responses.”<sup>68</sup> Given the highly personal nature of decisions to pursue a diplomatic career trajectory, such differentiation and intensification is critical to provide a clear understanding of their motivations. This differentiation and intensification can subsequently help to further refine the research question for future (possibly more quantitative) analysis on this subject.

We aimed to create a purposive sample of “informants” - that is, a sample with “characteristics of interest” but with “maximum variation.”<sup>69</sup> We also sought to view participants as *informants* rather than *respondents* who would inform us how things are defined and categorized rather than the other way around.<sup>70</sup> This supported the creation of our inductive research framework, which was informed primarily by the answers from the respondents over several analytical iterations and was supplemented by the understanding we gained inductively from our literature review. Our characteristics of interest were deemed to be individuals who currently have or had potential interest in pursuing a diplomatic career. Our sample was as follows. We interviewed twenty-four young people, including thirteen females and

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<sup>65</sup> Castro et al., *The Crisis in the State Department: We are losing our best and need to ask why*.

<sup>66</sup> Gaučaitė, “Nepotism and inequality plague Lithuania's diplomatic service – union rep.”

<sup>67</sup> Hanna Kallio, Anna-Maija Pietilä, Martin Johnson, and Mari Kangasniemi, “Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide,” *JAN* (2016): 2959; K. Louise Barriball and Alison While, “Collecting data using a semi-structured interview: a discussion paper,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 19 (1994): 328-335.

<sup>68</sup> Kallio et. al, “Systematic methodological review,” 2955.

<sup>69</sup> Fiona Fylan, “Semi-structured Interviewing” in *A Handbook of Research Methods for Clinical and Health Psychology*, ed. Jeremy Miles and Paul Gilbert (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 66.

<sup>70</sup> Fylan, “Semi-structured Interviewing,” 68; Margaret C. Harrell and Melissa A. Bradley, “Data Collection Methods; Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups,” RAND Corporation (2009): 4.

eleven males, from twelve different nationalities, sampled from both universities such as the Diplomatic Akademie Wien, George Washington University, Harvard University, SciencesPo, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and more. We then interviewed five professors of International Relations, Political Science, and Public Policy, four males and one female, from three different nationalities (Greek, Austrian, and German), from the Diplomatic Akademie Wien, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and Central European University. Finally, we interviewed four current diplomats, two females and one male, from three different nationalities (Greek, American, and Austrian). Approximately half of the interviews were conducted face-to-face or live on Zoom. The other half was conducted with participants answering in written form, largely due to time constraints on young people who were unable or unwilling due to personal circumstances to schedule formal live interviews with us. We recognize the limitations of our data sample and approach, as there could have been more variation in recruitment avenues, especially from the Global South, and written responses do not allow the same degree of spontaneity and follow-up as a spoken interaction. However, the sample size still provides a considerable wealth of information regarding personal motivations for going into the diplomatic service across several different nationalities. We preferred to have these written responses rather than none, and we consider the data to still be valid and purposive.

We then coded the data according to the inductive framework provided by Schmidt: categories were determined after an intensive and repeated reading of the material, then tested and revised.<sup>71</sup> Following this, all interviews were coded according to the analytical categories, and these were analyzed to point to possible relationships to be pursued in further analysis.<sup>72</sup> Finally, individual cases or quotes were selected for in-depth analysis, provided for in the next chapter of this paper. In other words, we did not begin with stringent, rigid categories, but allowed the participants to help inform us how motivations and deterrents for pursuing diplomatic careers should be coded instead. This process resulted in the emergence of “inductive abstract analytic categories” that helped provide insight into how individuals view the prospect of a diplomatic career and on how they choose their career trajectories more broadly.<sup>73</sup>

### Findings and Analysis

This section will present and comment upon the findings of the interviews and the survey conducted by the authors of this article.

Overall, we interviewed twenty-four young people, including thirteen females and eleven males, from twelve different nationalities; five professors of International Relations, Political Science, Public Policy, four males and one female, from three different nationalities; and four current diplomats, two females and one male, from three different nationalities.

#### I. Interest in Diplomatic Careers

Only three young people replied they were not interested in diplomacy. Based on the responses of those interested, we identified two trends on whether there was an ‘a-ha’ moment for their interest in becoming a diplomat. The first trend refers to character/personality. The decision to be a diplomat is presented more as a gradual process over time, with references to inimical personality traits combined with a feeling of ‘belonging’ to this profession and of wanting to serve their country. The second trend

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<sup>71</sup> Christine Schmidt, “The Analysis of Semi-structured Interviews” in *A Companion to Qualitative Research*, ed. Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardorff and Ines Steinke (London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2000), 253.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd., 2006), 15.

concerns experiences and circumstances, such as internships, studies, networking. The decision is presented more as an informed choice based on either first-hand experience or by gathering of information by third parties, mostly current diplomats and then proceeding with a judgement on whether this profession fits the person. It is interesting to note that some interviewees mentioned elements of both trends in their responses. To current diplomats and professors, we asked the respective question of whether they would suggest the diplomatic profession to their grandchildren. As for diplomats, one would absolutely recommend it, one would not recommend it, while the rest were unsure and replied that “it is based on the person we are talking about.”<sup>74</sup> Generally, we found that diplomats’ own experience within the respective diplomatic corps, and their satisfaction – or not – with it formed the response here. For example, a US diplomat was really satisfied throughout their career and, thus, would recommend it, while a Greek diplomat pointed out some deficiencies in the MFA system and, thus, was skeptical. As for professors, three would definitely recommend it and one would absolutely not recommend it. Their responses were again connected to their view of the profession; for example, the professor who would absolutely not recommend it was quite critical of the profession.

## II. Reasons for Choosing a Diplomatic Career and Alternative Career Preferences

Regarding the number one reason someone wants to become a diplomat, reasons mainstreaming in the responses included the challenging nature of the job and the variety it incorporates, the involvement in decision-making, the travelling and meeting new people and cultures part of the job (with the intercultural element being the most cited one), etc. Only few interviewees (6 out of 24 youth) mentioned the sense of purpose and the passion to serve their country, while all interviewed diplomats cited this reason. This latter point is really interesting as it is the representation of a country that differentiates the diplomatic profession from others in international affairs. And, surprisingly, the high remuneration of diplomats was mentioned only by one interviewee as an incentive. It shall also be mentioned that some interviewed youth mixed the concepts of national diplomats with officials of IOs, particularly the UN. But, referring to achieving global peace as a reason matches more to the latter job description, rather than the former.

Moving on, responses to the question on their alternative career preferences, all interviewees did not go far from the international affairs sector, citing consulting, IOs, international NGOs and advocacy, academia, and others. This proves the argument discussed above about the variety of international affairs and diplomacy-related jobs today. At this point, we find it crucial to comment upon professors’ responses. A German male professor at a top school for IR and diplomacy studies mentioned that “around  $\frac{2}{3}$  of our students go into the private sector, with the best students ending up in major consulting companies’ and that ‘around 20% of students are at least considering the diplomatic sector, but only a 10% would actually try it’;<sup>75</sup> a German male professor at a top school for public policy indicated that “diplomacy is not the most sought-after position of our students” and that students “often want to make a difference by going back to their countries, helping in NGOs, improving governance, and so on”;<sup>76</sup> and a Greek female professor at a top IR school argued that “about 50% of my students want to become diplomats or at least have this career option in mind” but underlined that not all would try the foreign service exam because

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with a diplomat, Online, December 03, 2022.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with a German IR professor, Online, December 09, 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with a German Public Policy professor, Vienna, Austria, December 16, 2022.

of its difficulty and would opt for careers in academia, or the international sector more broadly.<sup>77</sup> Therefore, our results indicate that among IR students, the foreign service is usually not the first professional choice, or at least that students have the international sector generally as their goal, leaving all relevant professional doors open.

### III. Obstacles to Becoming a Diplomat

The next question concerned the biggest obstacle to becoming a diplomat. Two trends were detected again, the one referring to MFA-based reasons and the other to personal preferences. As for the former, the usually archaic structure of the MFA entrance exam/hiring process was the most cited element, with corruption, nepotism, bureaucracy being mentioned at least once by all interviewees, including current diplomats. Regarding entrance exams, most answers questioned their existing format, particularly on a lack of transparency and lack of touch with the modern labour market, and stressed the need for their reform. As for the latter, personal/family life concerns (spouse's job, children's education and social life, safety concerns, etc.) was the only cited element.

The majority of interviewees (23 out of 33) were not familiar with the term 'diplomatic shortage', but all interviewees could identify the idea behind it. When asked if they think that people today, especially youth, are less interested in becoming diplomats, six young people replied no and 10 yes (the rest did not provide a response), all diplomats but one said yes, and all professors but one said yes. A great number of the young interviewees, then, attributed the decreasing interest to (in order of times cited) the structure of the entrance exams, the existence of other international affairs-based jobs that 'produce' diplomacy to a certain extent, the lack of trust towards governmental institutions because of nepotism and corruption, and the increasing attention paid to work/life balance. One young person also mentioned the cutthroat atmosphere within the profession and the antagonism between colleagues as a demotivator, while three young people centred around youth's need for a more lucrative profession.<sup>78</sup> Those that denied the existence of a declining interest noted that young people, especially today, want to be involved in decision-making and to have a say in how the world they will inherit is, so being a diplomat is always an appealing profession to them.

As for the diplomats, a US female diplomat underlined that there are always enough people interested in the job, but did recognise that modern societal trends, such as work/life balance, might drive interest down.<sup>79</sup> The diplomats admitting a declining interest mentioned the exact same reasons as the youth interviewees, in the exact same order. But they all stressed specifically the existence of a crisis of values nowadays, mainly expressed via less trust in governmental institutions. Professors also cited the same reasons, but all mentioned work/life balance before anything else. On this point, a German public policy professor stressed especially the psychological cost of being a diplomat and how it renders it less appealing, as well as the ageism existing in some countries where there is an upper age limit for the entrance exam. It is interesting to see these reasons being replicated as drawbacks to the diplomatic profession and as demotivators, as predicted by existing literature as well. However, as mentioned above, one should not adopt a 'the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence' mentality; nepotism and inequalities exist in the private sector too, while not all private sector jobs are more lucrative, nor do

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with a Greek IR professor, Thessaloniki, Greece, February 08, 2023.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with a young person, Online, December 12, 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with a US diplomat, Online, December 04, 2022.

they always pay on a strictly merit-basis. Moreover, the advantages and disadvantages of the foreign service compared to the private sector are weighted differently by different people.

#### IV. Perception of the Trajectory of Diplomatic Institutions

Moving on, interviewed professors and diplomats were asked about how diplomacy has changed in the later years. Two trends were identified in their responses. The first indicated how diplomacy has indeed changed; being more open towards academia and vice-versa, being more politicized with political appointees' numbers on the rise, taking new forms, such as public or citizen diplomacy, and trying to be more diverse in its personnel, with people from different cultural, ethnic academic backgrounds. The second underlined that MFAs are slow or, in some cases, 'allergic' to change, especially vis-à-vis wider global changes. Characteristic examples are the technological revolution, with MFAs being extremely slow in becoming digital natives, the development of a multi-agent international environment, with MFAs less than willing to adapt to it, the persistence of gender inequality, particularly faced by women, with MFAs being poster children for lack of female representation. For one of the interviewed professors this is because of the path dependency under which MFAs operate, "with bureaucrats being used to doing things a certain way and not wanting to change that easily, while the old idea of what a diplomat is still present without necessarily being in touch with reality."<sup>80</sup> Overall, then, diplomacy can, has, and is changing with the times, with its actors, the MFAs, being rather slow in doing so. Thus, to those who would like to see more drastic changes, such a situation does not suffice and can indeed lead to a decrease in demand for the profession. Nevertheless, the interviewed youth all agreed that diplomacy remains indispensable and still relevant, with new forms constantly emerging, leading to a broader conceptualization of diplomacy that embraces technology, private sector and other actors, and individuals themselves.

#### Conclusion

This section will firstly summarize the main findings of this article and will then proceed with some relevant recommendations.

Overall, there is adequate evidence to suggest there is a diplomatic shortage crisis worldwide; smaller and bigger, less and more powerful states alike are facing a decreased/decreasing interest in and/or resignations from their diplomatic corps. This article aimed to conceptualize and analyze the double-sided concept (supply-demand dynamics) of this diplomatic shortage and identify its driving factors. The literature review we conducted indicated that there are a variety of political/state-based, personal, and wider socio-cultural reasons driving this personnel crisis. While some of these factors have always been held against the diplomatic profession, it is interesting to note that the majority stems from modern developments in the international affairs job market, the worldwide and national economies, and from key changes in social preferences and priorities regarding work environments. By pursuing a qualitative research approach with a series of 33 inductively coded, semi-structured interviews of young people interested in diplomacy, current diplomats, and IR and Public Policy professors, this article tried to identify these elements in detail. The findings of our experiment corresponded to the existing scholarship's understanding. Yet, in our analysis we tried to categorize these driving factors in a more structured way, thus producing a road-map for future research on the topic, ideally based on a larger and more diverse sample of interviewees.

In trying to identify ways to address the driving factors of the diplomatic shortage, we believe that one element situated at the intersection of all of them is the need for changes within MFAs themselves, starting from their human resources departments. Reforming the diplomatic service hiring process should

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with a German IR professor, Online, December 09, 2022.

be the first step, and particularly adapting its content, both knowledge- and skills-wise, to the modern day international affairs environment, ensuring transparency, and avoiding opaqueness and nepotism. After all, proceeding with such steps will increase the quality of the corps and, thus, the efficiency of foreign policy implementation which should be the ultimate goal of every MFA. In addition, addressing questions of gender equality in the workplace, of merit-based promotions alongside criteria stemming from each government's foreign policy objectives, as well as addressing concerns over spouses' professional development should also be considered. And, as with the public sector in general, leaving bureaucratic modes of operation behind in the name of efficiency definitely constitutes a way to render the service more attractive. Furthermore, MFAs should also fully embrace modern socio-economic developments and technology more efficiently, as these are leading to momentous changes in the job market, but also in how diplomacy is produced (e.g., citizen diplomacy, online embassies, etc.). The advent of Generative AI and automation further threatens to change the landscape at a rapid pace. MFAs should therefore adapt their staffing demands to these new circumstances.

Importantly, potential candidates should not be left out of the 'need for change' discussion. In fact, it is crucial for them to understand the quintessential and unchangeable elements of the diplomatic profession and, particularly, the high level of responsibility and danger it bears, as well as its interconnectedness with politics and public administration. Indeed, diplomats serve their country and its interest, yet they are bound to the present government's political priorities. However, this should stop at the water's edge, that is, for example, at merit-based promotions instead of the mushrooming of political appointees, an open ear for career diplomats' professional opinion on any issue in order to fully utilise their expertise - irrespective of the policy eventually adopted on a ministerial level. Yet, in cases of complete ethical or political disagreement on behalf of a diplomat with a particular policy, resignation poses as the only option. And, turning to the profession's responsibility and danger aspect, potential candidates should understand that it can be ameliorated but not removed altogether, and that it exists in plenty of other IR jobs. Thus, as always, deciding to go into such a profession should be a deliberate and informed choice.

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