

Mission London: A Mini Handbook of Diplomatic Practice

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ABSTRACT

This contribution presents, analyzes and comments one of the best recent European novels on diplomacy *Mission London* by Alek Popov. The author sets in the fable diplomatic life at the Bulgarian Embassy in London in the mid-nineties of the previous century. In his interesting, satirical and dynamic novel he merges aspects of comedy, novel and criminal story, and offers a representative picture of diplomatic life in the receiving state. The novel includes the majority of most important diplomatic elements like: the arrival and beginning of the work of the new Ambassador, daily working rhythm, habits and psychology of diplomatic work, relations between diplomats and administrative-technical staff as well as with colleagues in the foreign ministry at home, international conferences, contacts with diaspora, and intrigues and connections with politicians at home. Hence we claim in this paper that the book presents a mini handbook of diplomatic practice. The novel is important, comprehensive and substantial contribution to understanding diplomacy, diplomats and their work, although some parts of the text contain certain exaggerations for the sake of the attractive style.

KEY WORDS: diplomacy, novels, mission, psychology

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POVZETEK

Prispevek predstavlja, analizira in komentira enega najboljših evropskih romanov o diplomaciji minulih let *Mission London*, bolgarskega avtorja Aleka Popova. Avtor dogajanje v romanu postavi na bolgarsko veleposlaništvo v Londonu v sredini 90. let prejšnjega stoletja. V zanimivi, satirični in napeti zgodbi poveže elemente komedije, romana, kriminalke in stke reprezentančno podobo delovanja diplomatov v državi sprejemnici. Prisotna je vrsta najpomembnejših diplomatskih elementov: prihod in nastop dela novega veleposlanika, delovni ritem, navade in psihologija diplomatskega dela, odnosi med diplomati in administrativno-tehničnim osebjem ter do kolegov na domačem zunanjem ministrstvu, mednarodne konference, stiki z diasporo in spletkarjenje ter zveze v domači politiki. Zaradi vsega navedenega v članku ugotavljamo, da je roman dejansko mini priročnik diplomatske prakse. Predstavlja pomemben, zaokrožen in tehten prispevek k poznavanju diplomacije, diplomatov in njihovega dela, čeprav je v tem smislu zaradi stilske učinkovitosti določene poudarke in navedbe treba vseeno jemati z rezervo.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: diplomacija, romani, poslanstvo, psihologija

INTRODUCTION

Among many ways to learn diplomacy studying novels that deal with diplomacy comes out as an useful example and practice. Hence we present, analyze and comment in this paper one of the recently most popular European novels from this area, namely Alek Popov's *Mission London*. Additionally, we compare diplomatic approach, experiences and lessons learned from that book with some of the classical handbook on diplomacy, like Berridge's *Diplomacy* (2015), Feltham's *Diplomatic Handbook* (1994), Nicolson's *Diplomacy* (1998) and Satow's *Guide to Diplomatic Practice* (1994). This means that we would try to understand *Mission London* as a mini handbook of diplomatic practice and will try to prove that point of view during the course of this paper. For this reason and since the author of this contribution²

² Further on: this author.

is also a career diplomat, we rely extensively on the method of observing with one's own participation, especially when commenting issues from his three decades long diplomatic practice. One should also mention that this paper is not an extended book review but presents a diplomatic analysis of the novel that deals with diplomacy.

With this in mind we add in this journal to a series of articles that deal with broadly known books on international relations and that significantly influence this field. In the case of the Popov's book it also goes well along with the main mission of this journal, namely to present and promote topics connected with the European perspective of the Balkan countries in general as well as with an aim to present and promote authors from this region.

MISSION LONDON AND ITS DIPLOMATIC UNDERSTANDING

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Diplomacy, "the most important institution of our society of states" (Berridge, 2015, 1), but also "that funny old trade" (Roberts, 2014, ix) is portrayed in Popov's book exactly between these two opposite, nevertheless complementary understandings, though the author includes in his novel many its additional nuances as well.

Since diplomatic frame is defined by pursuing relations among states (also between states and international organizations) diplomats deal with elites and are also part of elites by themselves. At the same time, exercising protection of bodies of private and corporate law, what would mean dealing with consular protection of their citizens and their companies,³ diplomats also keep in touch with everyday lives of ordinary citizens, to say so. One could continue presenting the extension of diplomatic frame, what would only add to the complexity of diplomatic life and work. They,

³ In the Foreign and Commonwealth Office they call it Cinderella's work since it never stops and with each consular case, whatever the nature, the consul starts again from the scratch (comp. Edwards, 1994).

diplomats of all sorts (ambassadors, political diplomats, special attachés like military, commercial and others, consuls etc.) are in the midst of this complicated matrix of political and social relations. Hence, they have to be well educated and skilled, familiar with all possible kinds of political interests as well as with silly small troubles that people face while travelling abroad.⁴ Generally speaking, diplomats are not saved from anything that people face in their lives. This includes also crime, corruption, scandals, love and other intrigues as well as affaires. They have to deal with them, but are also part of some of these activities, since at the end of the day they are people and citizens like everybody else. But with the difference to the latter, a diplomat's stand is tense: "In his line of work, healthy nerves were like ropes for a mountaineer." (Popov, 2014,15)

Without going into the fable of *Mission London*, the book includes and deals with all these aspects of human life. However, for our analysis the most important is that this novel deals with diplomatic life as such – the episode starts with the arrival of Varadin Dimitrov, the new Bulgarian Ambassador to London in the middle of the 90s of the previous century and develops then accordingly along the path of his mission. One should also point out that – in spite of having the Bulgarian Embassy as the central focus⁵ – the story could be applicable to any Embassy as such. The profession has its own rules and ways of functioning and their nuances could be found everywhere in the diplomatic corps; they are universal. This fact adds to the importance of the novel and brings it to the level of the de facto mini diplomatic handbook as well.

There are many guides through the diplomatic work like Barston (2006), Berridge and James (2003), Petrič (2013), Sen (1988) and Watson (1991). Practically all of them include basic diplomatic topics like diplomacy, ministry of foreign affairs, diplomatic mission, protocol, bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and conferences. These are all areas that each diplomat has to be familiar with, regardless of the fact where he or she is employed

⁴ For concrete and detailed presentation of characteristics of a diplomat comp. Nicolson (1988, 55-67).

⁵ Alek Popov served during that time at the Bulgarian Embassy in London as cultural attaché.

within the ministry and posted abroad. We will analyze and comment Mission London and compare or back up with primarily four in the Introduction pointed out handbooks (but also with other references) through the following areas of diplomatic work: protocol and diplomatic events; professional atmosphere and diplomatic psychology; international conferences; connections and their settlement. We do not comment relations of diplomats with their diaspora; nevertheless they are an important part of diplomatic work and life as well as a part of the novels' story. With each comment we will try to find out if and how facts, descriptions and findings in the book go along with rules from basic diplomatic references.

PROTOCOL AND DIPLOMATIC EVENTS

The text starts already with an unusual breach of the diplomatic protocol.

The new Ambassador arrives to his posting two days before the announced arrival. So we do not learn how he was expected by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Protocol at the Airport. But we learn that he arrived to the Embassy with a taxi that was just leaving when the Embassy's cook opened the door to the newcomer: "Behind him, a black-cab was executing complicated manoeuvres to get out of the narrow little street." (Popov, 2014, 8). The description of the street tells us i.a. that the Embassy was not on a particularly prominent location. Of course, it's location that counts in diplomatic business, in diplomatic center like London in particular.

The person who was a "tall, gloomy gentleman, wearing a greenish raincoat, suitcase in hand, jutted from the doorstep" (*ibid*) and was received by the cook's question in Bulgarian when opening the door: "Who are you looking for?" (*ibid*) The stranger didn't allow himself to be disturbed: "I am the new Ambassador," he said, gazing at the bare feet (of the cook – M.J.). "And who are you?" (*ibid*) One could rather easily imagine what everything that fact meant and caused for the easygoing, uninterested at-

mosphere at the Residence and at the Embassy, where everybody was sure that the new boss is arriving not before than in two days.

Diplomatic rules foresee the notification of arrival of not only the new Ambassador: “The head of the mission should, where possible, advise the Protocol Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs well in advance of the date, place and time of the intended arrival or final departure of any member of the staff of the mission or of their families.” (Feltham, 1994, 24). Why? The FCO (and any other Foreign Ministry) has to be informed with these facts to have the knowledge of the diplomats that serve in the receiving state. And this info is of special importance regarding the arrival of a new Ambassador: “On arrival at his post to take up his duties, a head of mission will be met by the Chief of Protocol (or his deputy).” (*ibid*)⁶ We do not know why H.E. Dimitrov skipped these honours, but in any case for a novel that is a good start that offers a joyful reading.

The most important duty of the new Ambassador is the presentation of credentials to the Head of State (Veljić, 2008,139-141). After this ceremony the Ambassador is enabled to carry out his/her duties in full terms. However nowadays the act of presenting the copies practically provides the Ambassador with the *de facto* full authority to represent the sending state: “Because a new head of mission has entered *fully* on his functions by presenting to the FCO, on his arrival, the working copies of his credentials, his call on the Queen to present the credentials themselves is in the nature of a symbolic last act of the arrival procedure rather than (as in many other countries) an essential first act.” (Feltham, 1994, 25)

For H.E. Ambassador Dimitrov and his staff the day of presentation of credentials was, however, a highly important act. But it also confirmed that the ceremony is purely symbolical and does not have much of practical influence, as already quoted above. The fact that he took part at huge international conference in London before presenting credentials, with his Prime Minister as a head of delegation proved the above explained.

⁶ Comp. also Veljić, 2008: 135-138.

However, “Today was a big day.” (Popov, 2014, 103) Of course: “The ceremony of the Presentation of the Letters of Accreditation. (...) Now Varadin incarnated the National ideal.” (*ibid*) Diplomatic rules and practice tell that a certain number of diplomats are allowed to accompany the Ambassador at the ceremony. For them this presents a highly ceremonial and important insight into heights of diplomatic life. But also a highly valuable opportunity to make contacts in high offices. Contacts provide diplomacy. In spite of everything H.E. Dimitrov did not allow anybody to accompany him: “There was no longer any doubt that they had been cut out of the ceremony, like an unwanted and embarrassing appendix.” (Popov, 2014, 105) The open carriage took their boss to the Buckingham Palace. When he was back after two hours, the Military Attaché, who was deeply disappointed and ashamed that even he was not allowed to accompany H.E. to the ceremony, noted the difference: “The instant he saw the Ambassador, Stanoicho said to himself: This is no longer the same man!” (Popov, 2014, 107) The reception that followed to celebrate the respected event, was chatty and colourfully mixed: “In the grand hall (of the Embassy – M.J.) , there were some twenty people gathered, chatting casually, glasses in hands – Foreign Offices clerks, diplomats from former allied states, representatives of the Bulgarian community and a few strange birds who had flown in somehow or other.” (*Ibid.*) Such reception is called “Vin d’honneur” and is an usual event organized immediately after the presentation for a smaller, carefully selected group of invitees (Veljić, 2008, 141).

Diplomats and ambassadors in particular, have to use each occasion to deepen friendly relations between the two concerned countries. For this they have to move around, they have to attend events. This is where glamour is housing and where ambassadors stand out. The whole outside world is full of envy because of this.

Soon after his arrival, Dimitrov had to participate at his first diplomatic event: “Are you going to attend the banquet tonight?” asked the secretary (Popov, 2014, 41). The question was a routine, formal one – how could he not? But she needed the exact answer to be able to reply to the invitation. By the rule, an invitation has

to be replied: most usual by confirmation or excuse (R.S.V.P.) or only in a case of not accepting (Regrets Only)⁷.

And in addition comes also a personal feeling of importance and pride: "... he was eager to do a quick round of High Society." (Popov, 2014, 42) Quite natural, logic and human, isn't it. The impression got stronger and the expectation was confirmed when he noticed his name: "... 'Ambassador, Bulgaria' – that gave him a pleasant tingling sensation." (Popov, 2014, 44) But soon these feelings started to disappear: "The invitation was enigmatically laconic." (Popov, 2014, 43) and hardly told him anything. The title of the lecture was even less telling: "The new challenges facing the steady development of Europe." (*ibid*) The diplomatic jargon? Absences of content? Pure routine? He was also new and didn't know anybody: "Down the whole length of that long table, he could not see a single familiar face, not a single familiar voice rang in his ear. He was completely alone." (Popov, 2014, 44) So no wonder the following question soon emerged in his brain: "What on earth am I doing here?"⁸ (*ibid*) But with an instinct of a routine guy he adapted himself rather quickly to the situation: "Despite the helpless condition of his mind, he made sure the look on his face remained that of an attentive listener until the end, when he enthusiastically joined the chorus applause." (Popov, 2014, 46) Yet, how to make a contact?⁹ Sometimes it goes by itself: "... at which point a gentleman flumped his large body down in the empty seat next to his (...) 'Mr. Varadin Dimitrov!? Nice to meet you!¹⁰ Dean Carver, M.P.' He offered his hand." (Popov, 2014, 45) Towards the end of a day, as the evening develops, H.E. is already in fully professional routine: "Varadin's brain was feverishly trying to process all this information and was struggling to put it into a report format." (Popov, 2014, 47) Reporting is the essential part of diplomat's work: diplomats observe and report, if we simplify functions of the diplomatic mission (Feltham, 1994, 3).

⁷ Comp. any basic handbook on protocol, like Jazbec (2009), Mikolić (1995) and Trajkovski (1990).

⁸ Here the German translation sounds much more persuasively: "Was, zum Teufel, habe ich hier verloren?" (Popov, 2008, 57)

⁹ Comp. Veljić, 2008, 141-142.

¹⁰ It's worth noticing that the guest did not address him as Ambassador, Excellency or similar, but only with the surname.

And so he found himself in the middle of the diplomatic merry go round: “His events for this day: ”A lunch in the French Embassy awaited him and he expected it to be formal and cold because of the well-known dislike of the French for anyone who did not speak their language. In the afternoon he had to see a line clerks in the Foreign Office. In the evening he had to attend a reception at the Carlton for some occasion his brain categorically refused to retain” (Popov, 2014, 72) At the same time that much about the well-known diplomatic leisure and glamour.

Among such regular hum drum, though important one, some special tasks stand out. To improve his country’s image in the eyes of the highest officials as well as of public opinion of the receiving state was his utmost duty: “The Embassy is not actively engaged in building Bulgaria’s new image. We are lacking contacts at a high level.” (Popov, 2014, 25). According to the spirit of time, he gets in contact with a PR Agency, which director pays him a visit at the Embassy. Dimitrov points out immediately the importance of contacts, in particular of those not so formal ones: “The possibility of less formal ways of communicating has always interested me,’ the Ambassador added. ‘Sometimes such connections turn out to be far more fruitful than official ones.” (Popov, 2014, 79) What is important for our analysis is the fact how fast H.E. is adapting to communication style of his business: “I assume that is not cheap?” Varadin narrowed his eyes, amazed at his own audacity.” (Popov, 2014, 80) The discussion continues well and results throughout the story in a project that however fails completely as far as better image of the sending state is concerned, what nobody notices, since that home country is far away and reporting is not always accurate.

PROFESSIONAL ATMOSPHERE AND DIPLOMATIC PSYCHOLOGY

General picture of diplomatic life is that they enjoy being outside, on the posting, and that they hate to come back, although they all know very well the limitation of their terms and what follows necessarily.

As a matter of fact one could make a diplomatic matrix that would clearly show these relations, hesitations and challenges. Its elements would be: a) posting abroad as a reward, deserved goal or routine issue, but in any case a highly aspired one; b) leaving home after finished term, definitely known, but highly undesirable act, that the majority tries to avoid or at least postpone; c) relation between diplomats and administrative-technical staff at the embassy as a pretty much tricky and subordinated one; d) relations among diplomats according to strict hierarchy as a steel rule of diplomatic service;¹¹ e) relation between the team abroad on the posting and in the foreign ministry at home; f) the exclusive top role of H.E. the Ambassador that has so called absolute power and rule within the Embassy (practically everybody dislikes him/her, but cooperates for targeted interests, basically always calculating). So the matrix is a highly dynamic one, full of ever changing alliances and connections.

Varadin learned a great impression of that fuzz already at his arrival and after the encounter with the cook: “The Ambassador looked on with a poisoned face.” (Popov, 2014, 9) It looked like as if this would be an indication of the first and right impression that followed the next day when the newly arrived had his first day in office. It started with the morning meeting with the whole staff: “It was soon after 10 p.m. The presidential chair was still empty. At a reasonable distance of a few empty chairs, the diplomats were sat with open pads, pens at the ready. The technical staff had crammed themselves at the other end of the table – the driver, the accountant, the radioman, the cook and the housekeeper.” (Popov, 2014, 23) H.E. took his time: “Let them wait, let them tremble!” (Popov, 2014, 24) His opening speech though confirmed extremely reserved approach of diplomats: “The diplomats were so frightened and overburdened by the system, that they dared not make any independent decision.” (Popov, 2014, 25) And since “[P]anic appeared on the faces of the diplomats.” (Popov, 2014, 26), it was natural that “[T]he technical staff observed the inquisition maliciously.” (*ibid*) So it was only the sec-

¹¹ There are the following diplomatic ranks within the diplomatic mission: Minister Plenipotentiary, Minister Counsellor, Counsellor, First Secretary, Second Secretary, Third Secretary. Service and special attachés are usually placed immediately after Counsellors. (Feltham, 1994, 31.)

retary Tania Vandova that provided the answer. But why? For this reason: “Her mandate was coming to an end during the summer, so she did not have much to lose.” (*ibid*) The meeting continued in such somber mood, what H.E. interpreted it as a good management sign for him: “His gaze slid across the faces of the staff, but it only found downcast eyes. A good sign. He was doing well. A guilty employee was a good employee.” (Popov, 2014, 28) Towards the end, however the guiltiness shifted to the other end of the table: “After a while he said, “The windows are not clean,” with a deep sigh. The faces of the diplomats showed some relief at the expense of those of the technical staff.” (*ibid*)

There was somebody who was missing at the meeting: second secretary Kishev. That fact hardly paid off for him. He was namely doing with the case of Mrs. Pezantova. Varadin, of course, was not informed about this till the due moment during the course of the meeting (which solemn atmosphere is already quite known to the reader): “Who is dealing with this?” he enquired coldly. “Kishev!” they all chorused.” (Popov, 2014, 26) It’s always, by the rule, better to be there, at least to be able to defend oneself, if not in any other way then just with physical presence. In spite of risking to be called to the Ambassador’s office (what goes in particular for the administrative and technical staff): “The cook sat in front of the office for a few minutes, then he stood up, paced a little and stopped next to the window. He was nervous. He had no idea as to why the Ambassador wanted to see him, but from long experience could guess that it would not be nice.” (Popov, 2014, 153) Well, there is at least one of the very few points that homogenizes the whole Embassy staff in the relation towards H.E.: “Does anyone else know what is she doing?” he asked quickly, then thought to himself, in answer, of course they know! I’m always the last to be told!” (Popov, 2014, 183)

Kishev’s case also illustrates the relation with the foreign ministry back home: “And what was waiting for him back home? That, no one could say. Much water had passed under many bridges during those two years. The government had changed; people he had done favours for and who had supported him had been thrown out of the Ministry; new and hungry people had re-

placed them and were certain to be making their own arrangements for him. “ (Popov, 2014, 16) Change is the only firm aspect of this profession and demands much energy and skill from its holders. What could illustrate the relation: one can not get away from issues back home; normally. They haunt you for four years and then you are there where you started: in the Foreign Ministry, beginning everything again. Time and again.

Also H.E. was very well aware of all this: “Here was some crafty and cunning clerk, scrabbling to get out. That sensation was well known to him. He himself had scrabbled like mad to get out of his disconsolate office in the Ministry and knew that the result was worth the effort, and the very last drop of humiliation.¹² He had known that sweet stupor of victory, when the posting sleeps snugly in a pocket next to the passport and plane ticket.¹³ Then you stop caring all of a sudden, you relax and only move things from one side to another for an entire three years.”¹⁴ (Popov, 2014, 140) Nothing that would remember a diplomat about things back home was not appreciated: “They were sat fidgeting around the long empty table in the meeting room beneath the map of Bulgaria, with its cold pink and yellow colouring. Malicious tongues had it that the map had been put there not so much to arouse patriotic spasms in the employers, but to serve as a reminder of

¹² A good colleague and friend told once to this author that relations within hierarchy in their huge ministry rest on “humiliation and mistreatment”.

¹³ The plane ticket is a magic word and a diplomatic magic stick at the same time. This author remembers from the beginning of his career how one colleague was posted to Zimbabwe. She finished all the necessary procedures, picked up her plane ticket and after two days, while on the way to the airport, made a stop in the personnel department of the Foreign Ministry to take the diplomatic bag with her. When she appeared at the relevant personnel officer and told him why she dropped in, he responded to her that she will not leave anyway, because the decision was cancelled and that they are sending another one. She got furious, told him, don't you dare stop me and left. Since she already was in the possession of the flight ticket, nobody tried to stop her and she landed the next day in Harare and served her term. Another colleague of this author was even sent back when he was de facto boarding the plane. Such things happen because of the nature of this profession and its, often false image: serving abroad in world capitals, dealing with elites, attending cocktails, receptions and dinners, and enjoying life. That is why being posted abroad is sometimes interpreted almost like struggling for survival. But this author knows also a former ambassador in London who received that position through high connection, but resigned and returned home after two years since he did not want to wait on and on for delegations at airport.

¹⁴ From this philosophy stems the saying, which defines diplomacy as the activity of moving from empty to vacant.

where they came from and where they could be returning if they were not sufficiently careful.” (Popov, 2014, 22)

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES

Diplomats either participate at the conferences on behalf of their states or support high political representatives of their states at conferences. In both cases they have to be very well informed about all the necessary details, procedures, objectives and aims; in the latter, however, they have to offer all possible support to their superiors from the capitol. So they follow a common goal that lays at the core understanding of the conference diplomacy: “The object of conferences is to discuss problems and find solutions that are so far as possible acceptable to all participants, and this process is carried on by the traditional methods of diplomacy.” (Feltham, 1994, 147)¹⁵

Each conference brings together a huge number of people, either because of a big number of participating delegations or because delegations are big. In either cases diplomats that have to serve those delegations have to be well informed about the event, have to know all the details, organizational and substantial as well as they have to be well coordinated among them. For a small diplomatic team on the posting such event is always very stressful and demanding. In addition, the ambassador has to keep close to the head of delegation (in our case the Prime Minister), but again not too close. Ambassador Dimitrov “had cause to believe (he had half-heard it from somewhere) that this man was far from happy about his ambassadorial nomination.” (Popov, 2014, 85) But at the same time this was an opportunity: “On the other hand, like all true careerists, he felt a pathological attraction to people on position of power.” (*ibid*) Top politicians are very powerful and very sensitive and both aspects go along well. Also their staffers are the same. And one shall not forget his own team that is by definition envy because the ambassador is so close to the top person: “He also strained to keep an eye on his staff, who circled like hyenas around those currently in power, and were only waiting for the right moment to discredit him.” (Popov, 2014, 86).

¹⁵ Comp. also Berridge, 2015: 168-197.

Having in mind this complex matrix of political, diplomatic and social relations one could agree with H.E.: “The task was daunting.” (*ibid*) No wonder he took the only possible approach in such situations: “Throughout these three days that were filled with general commotion, long speeches, exultation and not very well hidden disappointment, Varadin struggled merely to survive.” (Popov, 2014, 85) Since so many different persons attend them, conferences provide the venue and a social atmosphere to get in touch: “For Varadin, the Conference was an excuse to make official contacts at every possible level.” (Popov, 2014, 87) But of course, human memory (and diplomatic usefulness) has its limits: “Their names slipped out of his mind as easily as their visiting cards into his pocket.” (*ibid*) Next, since conferences are such huge and complex machinery, one must improvise from time to time to be able to survive: “At that exact moment, the Premier inclined his head towards Varadin and whispered, “Is my speech ready?” The Ambassador nodded instinctively.” (Popov, 2014, 89) Of course, it was not.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the speech was found, nobody from the delegation noticed anything and Ambassador survived: “He puffed out his chest and brushed off last traces of ill-humour and re-joined the delegation with the grace of a well-groomed lion.” (Popov, 2014, 93)

CONNECTIONS AND THEIR SETTLEMENT

Career diplomats, if they don't have bad luck or lack of ambition, are on the good way to become an ambassador sooner or later. For the sooner option connections do well, in particular those from politics or public figures. Dimitrov was not an exemption from the rule.

But as they say, there is no free lunch. It happened pretty soon after his arrival to the posting: “He was almost feeling at home (‘behind the big boss’ desk, in his armchair’ – M.J) when the red phone rang. He stared fearfully at it and picked up the receiver.” (Popov, 2014, 29). It was Mrs. Pezantova, an artist, whom he owed a big favour (“Devorina Pezantova was the wife of an influ-

¹⁶ “I gave it to someone to give to you, just a minute ago.” explains the Embassy's intern to the Counsellor when he asks for the speech (Popov, 2014: 89).

ential Bulgarian politician.” – Popov, 2014, 27). And she started to issue the bill: she expected an echoed charitable event with folk music for her publicity in the midst of London with jet set attending it. Her question was a straightforward one: “You haven’t forgotten about me, have you?” He sensed an edge of suspicion.” (Popov, 2014, 30) The answer from the newly arrived Ambassador is reassuring: “Leave it to me,” said Varadin authoritatively.” (Popov, 2014, 30) During the later course of events he manages to fulfill his debt and promise to her; however the story is full of complications, improvisations and luck. For the interested reader it makes an opportunity to get acquainted with many aspects of diplomats’ daily work, though presented in a satirical manner.

When she arrives to London, with her escort, half of the Embassy is at the Airport. But she goes directly to the Ambassador, practically ignoring the rest: “Devorina Pezantova coldly shook hand with the diplomats, decisively ignoring Kishev’s attempt to engage her in conversation.” (Popov, 2014, 175) She was highly pleased with the forthcoming event, in particular because of her competitors back home: “Christ! Kututcheva and Moustacheva will be so full of envy, they’ll explode!” she exclaimed.” (Popov, 2014, 176) On the very eve of the artistic event H.E. time and again shows how he mastered pragmatism. Faced with a strange installation that was to be – and indeed was – part of the event, he, without knowing what’s up, easily concludes: “The aesthetic side of the whole thing was of little interest to him. If Mrs. Pezantova said it was interesting, that was good for him.” (Popov, 2014, 181) With this he demonstrates his approach to work and pragmatism. One should get things over his shoulder, since there are always new on the way. A diplomat’s work is never done; it is almost like the assembly line in the Ford’s company. One should not lose much time on anything.

The visit of Mrs. Pezantova and her gala event, connected with crime, fake marketing and lots of improvisations, full of luck, clumsiness and caricature, present the peak of the whole story. But for H.E. it is important that everything ends well. That is the ambition of each Ambassador, him included. The final episode of her visit, at the departure at the airport tells everything from her

side: “Varadin and Pezantova were having a tête-à-tête, standing near the plate-glass wall overlooking the runway.” (Popov, 2014, 234) And next: “Good luck,” said Varadin and squeezed her hand lightly. “Thank you anyway, for everything you did for me. I won’t forget it,” she said instinctively replying to his gesture.” (Popov, 2014, 236) The departure, actually the very take off of the guest, is always a huge relaxation for the host, i.e. H.E.: “A wave of relief entered his chest, and his heart beat happily like a cat in front of a mousetrap. (...) He saw his whole four year mandate rolling in front of him like a golden silk carpet covering the mud of life underneath. I’ll buy myself a new car! The thought crossed his mind. Maybe a Saab or a Mercedes ...? He had not decided yet.”¹⁷ (Popov, 2014, 238)

Not that her visit and the event was after all so complicated and a heavy task as an important state business. But it happened at the very beginning of his first ambassador’s term – not just everywhere, but in London. That is the diplomatic posting. Next, she came to settle the bill from her favour that enabled him to become the ambassador and he knew it: “She had played a more than significant role in his appointment. He owed her.” (Popov, 2014, 28) Additionally, her topic was not much of an artistic event. And from these points of view it was a challenge. And with them, diplomatic challenges, it is always like that: when you go through successfully, your reputation is built and carries you on, practically whatever happens later on. And the other way around: if you fail for whatever reason with your first important challenge as a new ambassador your reputation is also done – but a negative one. And you can hardly get rid of it, whatever your results later on. Varadin managed to succeed and that was it. So he did what a proper ambassador does: “He turned it (his mobile – M.J.) off. (...) He swallowed his lager in one go and ordered another one. “I’ll survive!” he said. “Whatever happens...” (Popov, 2014, 239). And he did: “Varadin Dimitrov finished his mandate without any particular accidents. (...) And when four years later they offered him the vacant diplomatic post (of an Ambassador – M.J.) in sunny Nigeria, he accepted it without any fuss.” (Popov, 2014, 296)

¹⁷ Interestingly enough, this author drove a Saab 9000 CD American version for some years during his diplomatic career.

A real, routine professional. But one has also to add: stress management provides the Ambassador.

CONCLUSION

An average diplomatic reader would say that this fable exaggerates. Perhaps yes. And would ask himself if it is either based on any true background at all or is it more or less a description of real story, of real events at the concerned Embassy of the referred country. However, neither of these two facts are important for this author. Perhaps they are important and above all interesting for the Bulgarian reader, who is eager and intrigued enough to guess the real facts behind it and to compare them with his political and diplomatic circumstances.

But the importance and the usefulness of this book rest in the fact that it brings diplomatic life closer to an interested reader. Its messages are important and add significantly to the process of uncovering diplomacy and diplomats as well as what they do, how and why. For this purpose this book is a real mini handbook of selected aspects of diplomatic practice. It offers a variety of insights, but also manages to present a rather rounded up general picture of diplomacy. One can learn from it useful hints, approaches and methods. From this point of view it is a useful and complementary contribution to the fond of novels that try to teach us diplomacy.

Diplomacy is, of course, much more and also much serious business, not only random chain of events that would at the end of the day do well for those involved. But spectacular elements and moments are part of the novel's attractiveness, and also not always absent from the diplomatic business. There is as well lots of coincidence in the life of diplomats, both for good and for bad. Mostly they go by unnoticed; if otherwise, they are soon forgotten in the heavy dynamics of daily work. Diplomats work a lot, since their working rhythm is defined primarily by outside events, like conferences, visits, meetings etc., what mostly they neither plan nor foresee. They have to adapt to and sometimes improvise, too. Mostly they manage to go along; sometimes they

need sarcasm and cynism to survive, also humor is good to get rid of stress. But basic relations remain as they are and as they are commented here.

With the regard to the novel concerned, one should also point out various meanings and possible interpretations of its core word “Mission”.

Diplomats have their mission, of course, each of them; some of them known, some of them hidden. Referring to the diplomatic practice and stemming from the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, mission is commonly used term for the diplomatic mission, i.e. Embassy or Permanent Mission to an international organization. Head of the mission is nowadays most commonly Ambassador. Each Ambassador has his/her own mission, too. Also Varadin did have it: her name was Mrs. Pezantova. Last but not least, also the author Popov had it.

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