

# ASSESSING THE ROLE OF HONORARY CONSULS IN PROMOTING ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY

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**Abstract.** Despite the ongoing debate within the scientific community and the absence of consensus on their role and status, the proliferation of honorary consulates remains unabated. In fact, there has been a consistent and gradual increase in the establishment of these consulates over the past several decades. The institution of honorary consulate has been consistently regarded as a valuable asset within the architecture of foreign relations, despite not receiving the same degree of institutional recognition as the career consulate. To the present day, certain states continue to exhibit reluctance towards the establishment of this type of consulates, citing concerns related to, for instance, the loyalty to the country that appointed the honorary consuls. Moreover, although certain scientific articles emphasise their role and significance, quantitative research employing statistical and econometric methods to evaluate the impact of economic diplomacy on trade or investments frequently excludes honorary consulates from their models. Such research focuses on actors such as diplomatic missions. It is evident that there is a correlation between honorary consulates and economic and commercial activities; however, the question remains as to what extent this correlation is indeed a cause of tangible impact. The present article thus examines the evolving role of honorary consuls, with particular attention to their contribution to trade facilitation, the attraction of investments, and the promotion of national companies. These activities are encompassed within the spectrum of economic diplomacy. The present study adopts a literature review as its methodological approach, reviewing the extant literature on the topic of honorary consulates. The primary objective is to undertake a thorough examination of the extant literature pertinent to the subject, with a view to elucidating the contribution of these actors to the practice of economic diplomacy. The findings indicate that the establishment of honorary consulates is of particular benefit to small states, as it facilitates the enhancement of bilateral relations. Despite ongoing debates and reluctance to establish honorary consulates, this paper argues that the institution remains a relevant instrument of diplomacy, particularly for states with limited resources. Given the limited academic engagement with this topic, this review maps the existing research and provides a foundation for further empirical and theoretical studies into the evolving role of honorary consulates in contemporary international economic relations.

**Keywords:** economic diplomacy, honorary consulates, foreign trade, investments.

**JEL Classification:** F10, F50

## 1. Introduction

The continuous increase in international trade and investment has further increased the importance of economic diplomacy in both practical application and academic research (Rose, 2005; Moons & Bergeijk, 2016; Chatterjee, 2020). Nowadays, scholars are focusing on the contributions of a wider range of actors to economic diplomacy. This represents a shift away from the traditional state-centred approach (Okano-Heijmans, 2011) towards analysing the influence of economic diplomacy on trade, investment and the internationalisation of companies (Rose, 2005; Moons & Bergeijk, 2016; Kunychka et al., 2023). Among the

contributions of various state and non-state actors to economic diplomacy, the role of honorary consuls is evident.

The institution of the honorary consul can be traced back to the ancient Greek practice of the *proxenos* (Dela, 2015), a status conferred upon individuals from foreign political communities who facilitated diplomatic and commercial interactions in the region (Mack, 2016). Honorary consuls have historically been recognised as valuable assets in foreign relations, playing a role in political engagement and economic and cultural collaboration. As Feys (2007) noted, these individuals were predominantly drawn from the

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merchant class and received no fixed salary. Instead, they sustained themselves primarily through commercial profits derived from specific designated services. It is widely acknowledged that they excel in cultivating positive relationships with the local authorities. They are also distinguished by their extensive command of local linguistic and cultural expertise, as well as their profound, long-term understanding of the area they serve. These attributes guarantee that their responsibilities are executed with dignity, competence and efficiency (Stringer, 2011). In the aftermath of the Second World War, the diplomatic service, in collaboration with the diaspora leaders, has been instrumental in perpetuating the non-recognition of Soviet annexation in Lithuania. This strategy serves as a symbol of hope for the restoration of independence (Skirius, 2018) and the preservation of ongoing statehood (Petraityte-Briediene, 2021). Subsequently, the role of honorary consulates in fostering business and economic relations has become increasingly emphasised and recognised. Indeed, in certain instances, honorary consulates may serve as the sole form of diplomatic representation for a foreign state (Malone, 2013).

However, unlike the career consular service, the institution of the honorary consular service has not received widespread acknowledgement since its establishment (Lee & Quigley, 2008). This is because it has been overshadowed by ongoing controversies that continue to this day. For example, the issue of loyalty is a recognised controversy in the diplomatic landscape surrounding this institution (Lee & Quigley, 2008; Dela, 2015). This is because honorary consuls usually serve as representatives of a foreign country in which they continue to reside and carry out their primary professional activities, while also holding citizenship of their own country (Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, 1963).

In general, there is still a significant lack of understanding of the role and relevance of honorary consuls in today's diplomatic context. This is largely due to a noticeable absence of focused research and dedicated professional literature on this topic (Gruevski, 2019). The available theoretical and empirical literature on the role of honorary consuls within the realm of economic diplomacy is even more sparse. Furthermore, in empirical studies analysing the impact of diplomatic missions on trade or investment, authors often exclude honorary consuls (Rose, 2005; Gil et al., 2007; Pacheco & Matos, 2021). Against this backdrop, the present study aims to shed light on the role of honorary consuls in economic diplomacy.

## 2. Methodology

This paper focuses on the role of honorary consuls in economic diplomacy. Its primary aim is to provide

a thorough review of existing literature on the subject and explain the contribution of these individuals to economic diplomacy. This paper is based on the perspective that economic diplomacy encompasses commercial diplomacy (Chatterjee, 2020), a view that is supported by most studies (Visser, 2017).

The articles reviewed in this paper were selected from the following quality databases: Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Oxford Academic, Taylor & Francis and RePEC. The keywords used were "honorary consul/consuls" and "honorary consulate/consulates". A comprehensive review of pertinent articles and books, in addition to the provisions delineated in the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (1963), has been undertaken. This review offers a meticulous examination of the legal framework and scholarly perspectives on the subject.

The existing literature on the topic of honorary consuls and consulates is developing. For instance, a search in the Web of Science Core Collection database using the keyword "honorary consul" initially yielded 61 results, the majority of which were published after 2016, frequently in research areas such as history and literature (excluded from the present research) and international relations. Subsequent searches with the keywords "honorary consuls" and "honorary consulate/honorary consulates" yielded 41 and 40/16 results, respectively. However, a significant proportion of these entries were duplicates, or addressed topics unrelated to the focus of this research. This highlights the limited and scattered nature of the relevant academic literature on the subject. A total of seven papers were selected for review from the Web of Science database; however, the scope of the information they provided was also limited for the purposes of the present research. A comprehensive search of the ScienceDirect database yielded 585 results. However, the majority of these were in subject areas such as medicine and dentistry, which are not pertinent to this review. Only 15 articles were found in business, management and accounting, and only one of these was relevant to the current study. Furthermore, due to the paucity of literature on the subject, despite the intention to the contrary, it was not possible to limit the timeframe. Consequently, articles published between 2008 and 2024 have been included.

The present study aims to examine and respond to the following question: "What role do honorary consuls play in economic diplomacy?" In order to do so, the study will seek to expound the ways in which they influence this type of diplomacy, the contribution they make, and the ways in which, as actors, they shape economic diplomacy.

Nevertheless, the present study explores the role of honorary consuls in economic diplomacy. Consequently, the relevant papers have been reviewed, and, moreover, from the papers that explored the significance of consular roles, only the characteristics

and findings relevant to the present topic have been extracted.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1 The Mission of the Honorary Consul

The appointment of honorary consuls has been increasingly recognised as a means of providing essential support to traditional diplomatic and consular services, adding flexibility and value to international representation (Gruevski, 2019). Furthermore, it has been identified as an effective tool for the preservation of international relations (Stringer, 2011). Additionally, despite the contemporary emphasis on digital diplomacy, honorary consulates persist in offering a cost-effective and personalised approach to international engagement (Gruevski, 2019).

According to the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (VCCR) (1963), which codifies the official status of honorary consuls (Scott-Smith, 2017) and establishes a formal legal basis and overarching framework for consular relations (Stringer, 2011; Gruevski, 2019), the appointment of honorary consular officers is optional (Dela, 2015). This leaves it up to individual states to decide whether to nominate or accept them within their borders. The title of Honorary Consul indicates a strong affiliation with the sending country (Stringer, 2011), as well as a high level of social and/or professional standing in the host country. Potential candidates are expected to demonstrate exemplary moral character, and to occupy a prominent role in the local community.

In most cases, honorary consuls come from a business background (Lee & Quigley, 2008; Stringer, 2011; Malone, 2013) and hold well-acknowledged positions in the commercial, industrial or financial sectors (Stringer, 2011). They are often individuals of considerable financial standing (Studzienieck & Meyer, 2018). As they are usually professionals who are active in the host country's business sector, they carry out their consular duties alongside their main job and on a part-time basis (Lee & Quigley, 2008; Stringer, 2011). According to the VCCR (1963), their work is voluntary and they receive no financial compensation; official expenses are covered from their own funds. However, in some cases, they may receive funds (Berridge, 2010). Moreover, they are not entitled to the diplomatic immunities and privileges afforded to career diplomats (Stringer, 2011; Dela, 2015). They are granted fewer privileges primarily due to their narrower responsibilities (Berridge, 2010).

Honorary consulates generally have two primary responsibilities: fostering economic, scientific and cultural ties between states, particularly through promoting bilateral trade, and safeguarding the interests of their sending country and its nationals

(Grasis, 2019). Although the activities of honorary consuls worldwide are guided by broadly aligned objectives, their specific mandate can differ based on the strategic interests of the sending state. Their responsibilities can vary widely, ranging from those comparable to a career counsellor to more limited functions that are sometimes mostly symbolic (Dela, 2015). Therefore, their individual duties may be tailored to reflect the priorities of the appointing state, but they may also be influenced by historical ties. For example, the appointment of a Russian honorary consul in Greenland is intended to enhance Russian–Greenlandic co-operation in areas such as commercial fishing and cultural relations, which are rooted in their shared Inuit heritage (Klausen, 2024). In contrast, a British honorary consul in Thailand may handle a significant number of consular cases each year, many of which involve legal, immigration, or administrative issues faced by British citizens living abroad. This highlights the important role that honorary consuls play in protecting and supporting British nationals overseas (Howard, 2009).

With the advancement of globalisation and regionalisation, economic opportunities for bilateral co-operation are increasingly being found beyond the capital cities where embassies are based (Gruevski, 2019). These opportunities are being found in large, wealthy cities, with border towns being an exception (Studzienieck & Meyer, 2018). In the same view, Okano-Heijmans (2013) emphasises that small diplomatic posts spread across a host country are regarded as budget-friendly and necessary complements to the embassies established in foreign capitals across the globe. Berridge (2010) also supports the assessment that the establishment of an honorary consulate for diplomatic purposes has the potential to reduce costs and may serve a similar function to a career consulate, especially in cases where the closure of an existing embassy is necessitated by economic constraints.

#### 3.2 The Impact on Economic Diplomacy

The relationship between honorary consuls and trade cannot be disregarded, as these officials have historically played a role in fostering commercial relationships and supporting local entrepreneurs. They have engaged in both political and economic networking (Peternel & Gress, 2020). In Britain, individuals currently designated as honorary consuls were initially titled consular or commercial agents (Berridge, 2010). In his paper on the activities of the honorary consul of Lithuania in Boston from 1939 to 1971, Skirius (2016) revealed that as large quantities of meat and dairy products entered the USA market, the need to distribute goods among Lithuanian emigrants emerged. In this context, honorary consulates were regarded as ideal agents for the promotion,



advertisement and business development of these goods. Gruevski (2019) shares this opinion, arguing that honorary consuls play an important role in promoting business co-operation, exports and foreign investment, while enhancing the effectiveness of diplomatic representations and supporting the rights and interests of representatives from the sending state. They also offer valuable connections across different sectors in the host country. Therefore, an honorary consul – typically an unpaid entrepreneur or public servant with strong ties to the represented country – offers significant advantages (Grasis, 2019). As Studzienieck and Meyer (2018) also emphasise, the establishment of a wide network of consular posts brought considerable advantages to the state they represented. These advantages included the opportunity for states to expand their presence at low cost, as well as to gain political capital and economic value.

Although they are not focused on traditional consular duties, their role, particularly when working with entrepreneurs, has been instrumental in building and nurturing successful business initiatives (Grasis, 2019) and driving future economic growth and cross-border partnerships. Following the Vienna Conference in 1963, the international practice of appointing honorary consuls has grown, with many countries using them as a strategic tool to strengthen diplomatic representation (Berridge, 2010; Gruevski, 2019). The USSR, for instance, perceived such individuals as mostly foreign agents and therefore declined to appoint them, perceiving them as having little practical need (Berridge, 2010). Dela (2015) also confirmed that although many former socialist states, including Poland, initially did not make use of it, the Polish state currently maintains a significant number of honorary consular offices abroad, while hosting numerous such posts from other countries within its territory. In the case of Poland, Studzienieck and Meyer (2018) also observed that both the number and the significance of these phenomena are increasing.

#### 4. Findings

The broad intensification of international diplomatic activities, notably within the domain of trade and investment, has reinforced the consul's role as a pivotal actor in contemporary diplomatic engagement (Stringer, 2011).

The majority of studies conclude that honorary consulates have a positive impact on the sending state (Studzienieck & Meyer, 2018). In their study of business-to-business marketing values and knowledge systems in India and their impact, Ellis et al. (2012) acknowledged the significance of honorary consuls in providing a comprehensive perspective on relationship management practices. This is due to the consuls' extensive experience in supporting companies and

their ability to offer insights informed by their long-term involvement. In their paper, Studzienieck and Meyer (2018) refer to the broader consular corps, encompassing not only career consulates, but also honorary consulates. They support the understanding that these have a positive social and economic impact on the national citizen. It is evident that the honorary consul institution has considerable potential, capabilities and a unique cost-efficiency ratio. Gruevski (2019) posits that the establishment of a structured honorary consul programme would be of particular value for small states. In their case, such a programme could create opportunities to enhance presence and strengthen bilateral relations, thereby serving their strategic interests.

However, it has been observed that the majority of quantitative studies do not include honorary consulates in their analyses. For instance, Rose (2005) excluded honorary consulates from his quantitative model in his study on the relationship between foreign service and foreign trade. Rose's inclusion of embassies and career consulates, but not honorary ones, is indicative of a nuanced understanding of diplomatic representation. As this study was found to have stimulated research on this topic, it has been observed that subsequent studies have also excluded this type of consulate, with a small number of exceptions (Peternel & Gress, 2020; Raneta et al., 2023). For instance, in their study on the impact of regional export promotion in Spain, Gil et al. (2007) also excluded the honorary consulates from their variables, yet they did not provide an explanation for this decision. Pacheco and Matos' (2021) analysis of the impact of Portuguese diplomatic representations on trade did not include them. Moreover, researchers who incorporated honorary consulates have determined that these are statistically insignificant (Raneta et al., 2023) in the context of high-income and low and middle-income states.

In their quantitative study, Peternel and Gress (2020) incorporated the honorary consulates, concluding that there exists a positive correlation between Croatia's total exports and its GDP, distance, and the number of diplomatic staff employed. However, the authors did not provide any details concerning the role of honorary consuls in particular.

The role of honorary consuls is sometimes perceived as controversial, raising concerns about their loyalty to the appointing state (Lee & Quigley, 2008; Dela, 2015). This is because they represent a different country while maintaining citizenship of their own, and the majority also continue their main profession there. Regarding the potential for tension when establishing honorary consulates, governments feared exacerbating tensions within diaspora communities (Skirius, 2016). For example, initially, the Lithuanian government refrained from appointing honorary consuls to major emigration centres, concerned that

appointing ethnic Lithuanians might exacerbate divisions within the diaspora. However, appointing a non-Lithuanian might have been perceived as a sign of distrust between the Lithuanian authorities and the diaspora community (Skirius, 2016). Furthermore, as these individuals serve without receiving financial compensation, critics contend that their role may entail an exaggerated level of formality and a prioritisation of elevating their personal status, thereby concealing the economic benefits, potentially resulting in the neglect of their responsibilities (Dela, 2015). Concurrently, they have been the subject of criticism on the grounds of a perceived lack of professionalism, owing to the absence of specialised training for their roles (Dela, 2015). However, in the case of Malta, the government had planned to implement training programmes for its honorary consuls (Rana, 2011).

## 5. Conclusions

The evolution of economic diplomacy as a distinct branch of diplomatic practice is indicative of the growth of global commerce. In this evolving landscape, the role of honorary consuls is being debated, particularly as their number has been increasing in recent decades. The extant scientific literature pertaining to honorary consuls acknowledges their role within the overarching structure of diplomatic representation, recognising their importance and positive contributions to the advancement of the broader foreign policy objectives pursued by the country of appointment and the overall facilitation of diplomatic relations. However, this perspective is not universally accepted, and it is not without its controversies. One of the issues that has

been raised concerns the loyalty of honorary consuls. It is a common practice for these individuals to be appointed by a different country, and their activities are not typically remunerated. However, given that, in certain instances, they are constituents of the diaspora, this concern is mitigated. Despite their limited scope, they are also beneficiaries of certain privileges. It has been observed that the majority of quantitative studies either exclude them from their analyses or, when included, their impact is found to be insignificant.

This paper emphasises the necessity for empirical research to be conducted on the impact of honorary consuls, as this topic has not been sufficiently examined. The primary limitations of this paper are attributable to the paucity of extant literature, both theoretical and empirical. A further limitation is posed by the language barriers, as certain sources are not available in English and their translation using diverse translation tools may not be accurate. It is suggested that future research may concentrate on the empirical role of honorary consuls in facilitating foreign trade and investments, given that research in this field is still in its development stage. Therefore, this could involve quantitative analyses of trade volumes and investment flows, assessing the extent to which honorary consuls contribute to their growth, or qualitative research, such as interviews with honorary consuls and/or business sector representatives, to evaluate the role of honorary consulates in companies' market entry, export promotion and foreign investment attraction. Scholars and practitioners could benefit from valuable insights provided by systematic empirical analyses, which could guide approaches to the appointment, oversight and deployment of honorary consuls.

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