

Beyond Politics: Cultural Connections Among Mexico, Romania and Poland

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How can cultural diplomacy make a difference in Mexico's relations with Eastern Europe? Culture, understood in the broad sense of education, arts and science, may open channels of dialogue where economics and politics have failed or, at least, been insufficient. This new tendency in Mexican foreign relations has been generally favored by two types of circumstances: first, the political change from single-party societies, common to Mexico and all the Eastern European countries; second, the

opening of new diplomatic channels in globalization, based on image creation and international public relations.

THE CULTURAL PATH

People consider themselves different from each other because of their cultures; in this sense, culture is an effective and unique diplomatic tool to establish channels for dialogue and connect societies. Culture can work as a form of public diplomacy to promote national interests abroad. A wide variety of tools such as the media, cinema, books, shows, newsletters,

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Zamek Krolewski Castle, Poland.

conferences, educational cooperation and student exchange, to name just a few, can be used to approach people. Getting to know other cultures makes a more humane perception, sympathy and friendship among people possible. All these make cultural diplomacy a must.

Seen from the cultural point of view, scientific diplomacy is a step forward toward an open concept of the circulation of science and knowledge. Compared to political cooperation, scientific collaboration may be more stable, as scientists do not depend on reelection: they can afford to make long-term plans.

From this perspective, the recent agreement between the CISAN and two Eastern European institutions (the Faculty of Political Science in Bucharest, Romania, and the Institute

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of American Studies and Polish Diaspora in Krakow, Poland) re-launched academic diplomacy and demonstrated a relative decentralization of Mexican foreign policy.¹ Even though the cultural backgrounds of cooperation are quite different, these agreements have a common analytical denominator that situates culture in its rightful place: at the foundation of international relations.

COMPARATIVE BACKGROUND

Mexico's relations with Eastern Europe began toward the end of the nineteenth century and were formalized in the first quarter of the twentieth. Individuals citizens of both Poland and Romania, Karol Bieniewski and Doctor Ilarie Draghicescu, respectively, participated in the Mexican Revolution.

After the fall of communism and the two countries' entry into the European Union, Mexico has increased its cultural exchange and dialogue with both. While economic relations have not been completely satisfactory, there has been a reasonable amount of cultural exchange. A series of consultation mechanisms at the political and parliamentary levels have been established and bi- or trilateral cooperation in international organizations is particularly strong. Mutual visits have intensified since 2000 at a presidential and parliamentary level. A quick look at the history of links between Mexico with Romania and Poland offers a varied background for comparison (see table 1).

TABLE 1
DATA ON MEXICAN RELATIONS WITH ROMANIA AND POLAND

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Romania</i>	<i>Poland</i>
First diplomatic contacts	1880	1921
Start of official relations	1935-1936	1928-1929
Relations during World War II	Suspended 1941-1973	Continuous
Language/cultural background	Latin-Celtic	Slavic
Estimated number of residents in Mexico	300-400	3,000



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Romania is the only Latin country in Eastern Europe, surrounded by Slavic- and Hungarian-Finnish-speaking countries. It actually preserved its territory due to the language unity of its three provinces, during the centuries under Turkish, Russian or Austro-Hungarian influence. The Latin spirituality and other similarities with Mexico, such as a surprising resemblance in crafts, speak to a certain common cultural perspective of the world.

By comparison, relations between Mexico and Poland are marked by cultural differences, which does not necessarily mean that understanding between the Mexican and Polish people is hindered. On the contrary, there are almost ten times as many Polish residents in Mexico as Romanians. According to data from the Embassy of Poland, there are around 3,000 Poles living in Mexico. An estimate of the Jewish community in Mexico shows that around 15,000 of its total 50,000 members came from Poland, particularly during World War II.

MEXICO'S IMAGE IN ROMANIA

Compared to relations with Poland, public knowledge of Mexico in Romania goes back to the sixteenth century. At that time, Romanian readers were informed about the pre-Columbian world and its fascinating civilizations. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a series of manuscripts on pre-Columbian priests and cultures circulated in Romania. The capital of this world, Mexico City, was described as “a city built on a big island, in the middle of a lake, this being the biggest fortress of the New World. Many bridges facilitated communication and on the lake, where thousands of wooden boats circulated.”²

A paradisiacal view of this wonderful city was shown to the Romanian public, a Latin society under the Ottoman Empire at the time. The manuscripts, which may still be found in the Library of the Romanian Academy, describe the trips of Christopher Columbus, the conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés, and several other events in the hemisphere, such as the conquest of the Incan Empire.



Neamt Monastery, Romania.

In the seventeenth century, maize was introduced to the Romanian territories, which soon became a power in its cultivation, turning into the world's seventh largest producer. In the nineteenth century, further information on Mexico was introduced by journals such as *Albina Romaneasca* (The Romanian Bee) with articles on Mexican crafts; the same journal also published a translation of the work “Mexico and the Mexicans” by Madame Calderón de la Barca, as well as a scientific work on the discovery of the Cacahuamilpa Caverns.

During Mexico's war against French intervention, several Romanian soldiers participated with the French army sent by Napoleon to help Maximilian. A Romanian doctor, Ilarie Mitrea, was in charge of the organization of the sanitary services of several imperial guards. Once in a prison in the hands of Benito Juárez's troops, he treated and cured several Mexican soldiers. In 1867, he finally passed over to the Mexican side and started working on Mexico's east coast as a health inspector.

In 1935, Professor Dimitrie Draghicescu was named extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador of Romania in Mexico, so that July 20, 1935 may be considered the date official relations between Romania and Mexico were established. One year later, Mexico sent Vicente Veloz González to Romania as extraordinary and plenipotentiary minister. Bilateral relations were suspended in 1941, when Romania took the side of the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis in World War II. Re-



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lations were finally reestablished in 1973, but suspended again from 1989 to 1995 when Mexico closed its diplomatic mission in Bucharest for budget reasons. At present, embassies in both countries center their activities on cultural diplomacy.

MEXICAN SUPPORT FOR THE POLISH PEOPLE

Relations between Mexico and Poland were built in a context of historical asymmetry. In the nineteenth century, while Mexico was still a colony, the Polish state was already being created. Afterwards, when Mexico had become independent, Poland found itself under foreign occupation. When the Mexican Revolution was over, Mexico and Poland coincided on a more symmetrical historical path, as both entered into a process of economic reconstruction.

Poland's first political contact with Mexico was in 1921 by the Prince Albert Radziwill, who at that time was the honorary chancellor of the Polish legation in Washington. Over the next two years, both countries showed great interest in formalizing diplomatic and consular relations.

During the Nazi occupation of Poland, Mexico showed great sympathy and support for the Polish people. At the end of 1942, a camp for 1,500 Polish refugees—half of them children—was established in Santa Rosa, Guanajuato, and inaugurated by the president of the Council of Ministries of the Republic of Poland, General Wladyslaw Sikorski. Most of these refugees remained in Mexico for good. A second wave of Polish immigrants—this time smaller—arrived in Mexico during the communist period.

In 1945, Mexico was the first Latin American country to recognize the Provisional Government of National Union of Poland. In the following years, mutual formal visits of official delegations and commercial and artistic groups took place. In 1960, both countries upgraded their diplomatic representations to embassies. Consequently, in the 1970s and 1980s, officials from both governments established permanent contact and opened new channels for cooperation by signing several agreements, mostly of a cultural and educational nature.

After the fall of communism, relations have moved into a new stage, more open and based on similarities between the democratic political systems of Poland and Mexico. Many visits have been paid, including the participation of Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski at the third Summit of Heads of State and Government of the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean which took place on May 28, 2004 in the city of Guadalajara.

At present, there is an important amount of economic and political exchange between the two countries, as well as notable cooperation inside international organizations, fundamentally the UN, based on similar perspectives and ideologies.

TOWARD A NEW DIPLOMACY

Since the fall of communism, relations between Mexico and the Eastern European countries changed substantially due to market openings and access to the European Union. While economic relations were left to intermediation by the European Union, cultural relations were left decentralized subject to each country's creativity and choice. Therefore, the new agreements between Mexico and Eastern European educational and cultural institutions create a new setting for cooperation, almost unknown before the 1990s due to the communist systems' closed borders. With the new communications technologies, academic exchange enjoys enormous opportunities that may always become marvelous projects of mutual understanding not only for the three countries dealt with here, but for the world as an immensely varied cultural mix. **MM**

NOTES

¹ The two memoranda of understanding include clauses for short studies, teaching, consulting visits; scientific meetings, seminars, courses; exchange of scientific information, reports and publications; exchange of undergraduate, master's and doctoral students; and joint study programs, among others.

² "Rumania-México, Amistad y Cooperación," available at <http://www.rumania.org.mx/rel.htm>.

FURTHER READING

- Arroyo Pichardo, G., *La evolución de las relaciones entre México y Rumania en el contexto internacional del siglo XX* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1981).
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