



# CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: The profession of a few, the task of everyone





In a global scenario whose State and non-State actors are being reshaped, the role of diplomacy in establishing and improving the relations between countries has acquired a new dimension. With an in-depth cultural diplomacy, a concept little studied in Colombia so far, one can change the image and positioning of the country on an international level, argues Sandra Montoya, professor at the Faculty of Political Science, Government and International Relations at the Universidad del Rosario.



By: Juliana Vergara Agámez

Photos: Leonardo Parra, Alberto Sierra, Juan Ramírez

Let us go back, for a moment, to 1999. The president of the United States, Bill Clinton, dances to the rhythm of *vallenatos* (popular music from the Caribbean coast of Colombia) sung by a group of Colombian children in the White House and both in the U.S. and abroad, the press does not stop reporting on the event. That charming moment, with a touch of folklore and culture, makes the public acknowledge that Colombia is an ally, very close to the United States in the war against drugs and marks the start of the Plan Colombia. The scene therefore had a political and strategic importance whose real impact was not known at the time that it happened. None of it was accidental.

Cultural diplomacy is a subject Sandra Montoya Ruiz has analyzed during the past seven years: She is a professor at the Faculty of Political Science, Government and International Relations of the Universidad del Rosario and also studying for a doctorate in Political and International Studies. In her view, the importance of cultural diplomacy in Colombian foreign policy has grown in a slow and varied manner. This was shown by her study, which runs from 1991, with the establishment of the new Colombian Constitution, to 2014, the end of the first term of former president Juan Manuel Santos.

Its focal point are the strategies of cultural diplomacy in different countries, especially Latin America. In the case of Colombia, she proposes that the concept of a profound or in-depth cultural diplomacy be applied to the post-conflict stage of its current history. This field has been little explored in the country, which is why this political scientist highlights that “the power of culture to create and build relations of understanding in different scenarios is fundamental for analyzing the place it has secured in foreign policy, as a strategic tool.”

But what is cultural diplomacy? Clarifying that it is a recent concept, although it has been practiced for thousands of years, Montoya specifically defines it as “the set of actions which use attributes of the culture, ideas and customs [of a country] to wield a ‘soft power’ and reach objectives in a framework of respect for diversity and mutual understanding.” “Soft power” is understood to be the skill at obtaining what one wants by means of the attraction which lies in the culture, political ideals and foreign policies of countries. As Joseph Nye points out, this kind of power is based on persuasion – not manipulation or propaganda – and he finds that cultural diplomacy is one of the ways to deploy it to achieve the objectives of foreign policy.



← “When we leave the country, we are all natural ambassadors,” so that we have to act in a responsible way, remarks professor Sandra Montoya.

### Our wealth is here

Before becoming an academic, Sandra Montoya Ruiz held a number of posts in international cooperation organizations, the private and public sectors and social programs concerned with human rights, extreme poverty, food security, health, arbitration and peace-building. In the course of those jobs, she had the opportunity to become familiar with 27 of the country’s 32 Departments and came to some very interesting conclusions. One of them is that the foundation of the country’s cultural wealth is vast and marvelous, “but we haven’t given ourselves the chance to become familiar with its different regional expressions.”

In her view, it also involves questions about the inhabitants of the regions most affected by the armed conflict, who are still the subject of her current research. For example, how have they managed to survive in the midst of the conflict? Part of the answer lies in their music, dances and traditions, which have helped them to keep going, both in joyous and anguishing times. And they now represent opportunities for a satisfying life for children, youngsters and communities who have survived in the midst of the war.

Unlikely as it may seem, this is not a wholly unexplored path and there are examples which may be followed. In historical terms, culture (the different expressions of art, ideas and customs) has been an essential aid to bringing different human groups together and it has been successfully used by countries in very difficult situations. Germany is an example of that, due to the way it managed to resignify itself after the Second World War on the basis of its exact and social sciences, technology and education and thus managed to

win the respect of the world at the same time that, on an internal level, it committed itself to facing up to the troubled story of its recent past.

Those educational and cultural exchanges have played a leading role in Germany’s foreign policy and are synchronized with the activities of the agencies who are responsible for them, along with its ministries, universities, schools and German international non-governmental organizations. Likewise, one can see interesting cases along the same lines in Latin America, in Mexico and Brazil, for example, and in Asia, in Turkey, South Korea and China, among others.

### We are all ambassadors

One of the possibilities which cultural diplomacy offers is to explore a country’s local, regional and national cultural patrimony and find representative features of it which can lead to conversations and exchanges with the rest of the world. In that way, spaces are opened for communities and regions to participate in broad and concerted activities. The recognition of the country’s cultural diversity by its 1991 Constitution was the start of including other views of what being a Colombian means.

There thus changed the idea that diplomacy is the exclusive concern of chancelleries and ambassadors who take part in major international events and have their photos taken at cocktail parties. To resort to the power of culture is to wager

## COLOMBIAN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY 1991-2014



### Antecedents

Belisario Betancur was the first Colombian president who made agreements to display the country on an international level. These initiatives were continued by the presidents in office between 1990 and 2014.



### 1990-1994 (César Gaviria)

One cannot speak of an agenda of cultural diplomacy, but there were signs of a diversification of the agenda on foreign policy, with a stronger focus on Latin America, Europe and Asia.

What was known as the “*Apertura económica*”, the “opening-up” or liberalization of the economy, led to alliances with Mexico and Venezuela in the G3 and the Andean Community (the CAN). There was a boom in Latin Rock in the region, with the active participation of Colombian bands.

on the recovery of the value and ethical power of negotiation. This focus allows for the participation of a larger diversity of actors: From the traditional ones of the public sector to universities, academics, artists of all genres and athletes, reaching to the organized civil society and ordinary citizens.

But, as we know, there are also a number of stigmas which are difficult to challenge and are quickly noticed by Colombians when they travel abroad. As Montoya points out, “when we leave the country, we are all natural ambassadors,” so that we have to act in a responsible way. Similarly, the everyday activities of the inhabitants of every town and city in a country which is attracting more and more foreign tourists, students and investors are also important and can make a difference to the image of Colombia they retain.

On her recent visits to Europe, Montoya has been able to confirm that “we are not aware of the impression we make abroad,” especially with regard to the expectations of those, in foreign countries, who perceive a genuine wish for peace in Colombia, based on the central role of the victims and an acknowledgment of their rights. That is why it is important for the agenda of cultural diplomacy to be consistent with the country’s internal political agenda, since, while the former may be very sound, technically speaking, if it clashes with the reality of concerns like security and the defense of human rights, for example, it will not be effective nor will it obtain the expected results abroad.

Sandra Montoya is about to present these ideas, as well as the findings of her doctoral thesis, at the International Congress on Political Science, in Monterrey, Mexico, organized by the Latin American Association of Political Science (ALACIP) and the Mexican Political Science Association (AMECIP). At that event, she will discuss the experiences of three Latin American cases where cultural diplomacy was used to fight against stigmatization at the start of the challenging Post-Cold War period. ■

## A world of challenges and opportunities

Among the challenges faced by the State and the other actors who participate in cultural diplomacy, Montoya singles out the following:

- To investigate representative cultural initiatives, letting their different voices enrich the narrative.
- To compile the existing studies on diversity and identity.
- To consult with the regions and communities to find out their views of the proposals.
- To link the local, regional and national actors and the social, economic and cultural sectors.
- To reconnect with Colombians who live abroad, especially those working in the field of culture.
- To open spaces for training in cultural diplomacy for career diplomats.
- To link the results of academic studies with the challenges the country faces.
- To present constructive recommendations, with specific proposals.



### 1994-1998 (Ernesto Samper)

There was an effort at independence and the leverage of Colombians living abroad who act as natural ambassadors. The Movement of Non-Aligned Countries became an important scenario to give Colombia more visibility.



### 1998-2002 (Andrés Pastrana)

Failed peace talks with the FARC guerrilla (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*)  
Internationalization of the armed conflict and the war against narcotics-trafficking (*Plan Colombia*)  
The promotion of a new images of the country, linked to art and culture, and the recognition of the dignity of the communities hardest hit by the violence.



### 2002-2010 (Álvaro Uribe)

Continuity given to some aspects of the previous diplomacy and a shift to the technification of cultural diplomacy.  
A specific agenda for the promotion of Colombian culture  
The Minister of Culture, María Consuelo Araújo, becomes the Minister of Foreign Affairs.  
The creation of a very specific agenda for the images of Colombia which should be disseminated abroad.



### 2010-2014 (Juan Manuel Santos)

Acknowledgment of the armed conflict and peace talks with the FARC guerrilla.  
A technical platform and a leveraged agenda, with a coherent message.  
The outside world saw that there was a genuine determination to attain peace and the international community supported Colombia.  
A recognition of the value and power of the voices of the victims, by means of cultural and sports events and international exchanges.