

Reframing Consular Diplomacy Mobility, Protection and the State's Duty of Care Abroad

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Abstract

While traditional diplomacy usually projects a state's interests abroad, global mobility has inverted this geography. Host-countries now enforce their borders internally, displacing the social costs onto sending-state missions. The result is a move away from abstract representation towards an operational model in which managing transnational vulnerability becomes part of the diplomatic core. Specifically, this systemic shift has reshaped the nature of consular work, contributing to one of the least examined developments in contemporary diplomacy: the evolution of consular affairs into consular diplomacy. Using the Romanian consular missions in the United Kingdom as its empirical case, the article traces this shift through population mobility, the widening expectation of the state's duty of care abroad, and the asymmetric redistribution of protection responsibilities between receiving and sending states. Drawing on critical border studies, street-level bureaucracy, and the distinction between performativity and performance in diplomacy, it shows consular missions operating as sites of triage within an inverted geography of protection, absorbing the humanitarian burdens that receiving-state enforcement displaces back across the borders. Recognising consular work as diplomacy is analytically necessary but insufficient on its own. Unless the tension between duty of care and operational constraint is confronted, this elevation risks producing the appearance of protection without its substance.

Keywords: consular diplomacy, Romania, United Kingdom, performativity and performance in diplomacy, street-level bureaucracy, critical border studies.

¹ This publication draws exclusively on open-source materials. The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution.

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INTRODUCTION

Consular work has long occupied an ambiguous position within diplomatic practice. Routinely positioned beneath the more prestigious tasks of political representation, negotiation, and strategic communication, consular services have been treated as the administrative backbone of foreign missions rather than as instruments of diplomacy in their own right. Career-minded diplomats have traditionally viewed consular posts with disdain (Leira and Neumann, 2011), considering them peripheral to the diplomatic core. Yet this separation and its attendant hierarchy are no longer tenable. For states with large diasporas abroad, consular services are no longer ancillary; the consular office is now the primary place where the relationship between a state and its citizens is built and tested.

The term *consular diplomacy* is borrowed from the work of Okano-Heijmans (2011) who originally introduced the concept to capture two developments: the inter-state negotiation of consular assistance frameworks, and the high-profile individual cases drawing in senior political attention. The high-volume routine she set to one side as “common consular affairs”, namely the administrative bulk of consular assistance dispatched through standard procedure and partner agencies, is evaluated as being analytically distinct from diplomacy in the classical sense. However, this article argues that, for states with large and settled diasporas, this residual category has itself become part of the diplomatic core.

Developing Okano-Heijmans’s distinction requires a measure for what makes an activity diplomatic at all. This article uses a functional one drawing from the classical diplomatic theory which identifies three constitutive elements for an activity to be considered diplomatic: representing a polity’s interests to the institutions of another, communicating and negotiating across that boundary, and managing the relationship and its public narrative over time (Jönsson and Hall, 2005; Sharp, 2009). The arguments that follow apply this test to routine consular work by analysing each configuration of care and control typologies against this criterion. The claim that consular affairs have advanced into consular diplomacy rests on that reading rather than on the political charge of individual cases. However, the two are not unrelated: any routine case can escalate into the politicised case Okano-Heijmans describes, drawing media and ministerial attention. This latent *ex ante* potential in the ordinary caseload is a further reason her boundary cannot hold anymore.

This article argues that this transformation is driven by three converging forces: global mobility and the growing complexity of diaspora populations, the expansion of a *duty of care* redefining what states owe their nationals overseas, and the redistribution of protection responsibilities within an asymmetric international system. It also identifies a less examined shift in the *directionality* of protection itself, in which sending-state missions are mobilised not only to protect nationals *from* the receiving state but to help fit them *into* it.

Three analytical frameworks run through the article. First, the concept of inverted geographies of protection, developed from critical border studies, captures how receiving-state enforcement displaces humanitarian burdens onto sending-state missions (Bigo, 2002; Andersson, 2014). Second, street-level bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 1980; Alpes and Spire, 2014) explains how consular officials exercise discretion under ambiguity, devising protection in the gaps between formal institutional mandates. Third, the performativity–performance distinction tests whether consular elevation produces institutional impact or symbolic reassurance (Goffman, 1959; Young, 1994; Marin, 2026).

The argument also sits at the intersection of two literatures that have rarely met at this scale: migration diplomacy, which examines how states deploy mobility and diasporas as instruments of statecraft (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019), and diaspora governance, which examines how home states build institutions to manage populations abroad (Gamlen, 2014; Délano and Gamlen, 2014). Both have largely operated at the level of interstate negotiations, leaving the consular frontline, where that statecraft is transacted one citizen at a time, comparatively unexamined.

As consular diplomacy consolidates, it introduces a set of structural tensions. Framing consular work as diplomacy politicises protection, raises expectations beyond available resources, and erodes the distinction between *care and control*, with potentially adverse consequences for the nationals concerned.

HISTORICAL AND LEGAL FOUNDATIONS: THE VIENNA CONVENTION GAP

Consular activity grew out of practical responses to cross-border needs, long before it was tied to theories of state sovereignty. From the late medieval period, consuls were functional agents who protected merchants and trade routes (Leira and Neumann, 2011). It was only after the Napoleonic Wars that they were transformed into formal state representatives, eventually being integrated into unified foreign services by the early twentieth century.

The Vienna Convention on Consular Relations (1963) provided the legal framework for this role, focusing on practical, citizen-facing assistance. This differs from the 1961 Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which is more hierarchical and focused on state-to-state negotiation. While Article 36 of the 1963 Convention provides a protective shield for detained nationals, its scope is narrow. It was written for a world of episodic contact, being citizens in transit or brief legal difficulty, rather than for large, settled diaspora populations who are embedded in a host state's labour market and welfare system.

The rise of global mobility pushed consular work toward systematic rather than episodic intervention with the EU's free movement space providing the clearest illustration of this shift. Consulates no longer operate primarily as document-issuing offices; they function as crisis management centres, social referral points, and frontline agencies for the protection of vulnerable citizens.

THREE DRIVERS OF TRANSFORMATION

Three structural forces account for the transformation of consular work into consular diplomacy. They are analytically distinct but operationally entangled: each amplifies the effects of the others. In the Romanian–UK context, all three converged within a single decade. A succession of crises turned a gradual institutional evolution into an acute stress point.

The scale of diaspora mobility

Within the EU's free movement framework, the movement of citizens from newer member states generated consular demands that the Vienna Convention's institutional architecture was never designed to accommodate. For Romania, the UK represented a major destination for labour migration until Brexit. The 2021 UK Census identified around 539,000 Romanian-born residents in England and Wales (ONS, 2021), while the EU Settlement Scheme accounted for approximately 1,024,000 in the UK (Home Office, 2025a). Employment was concentrated in sectors such as agriculture, construction, food processing, and domestic work, all characterised by weaker regulatory oversight and heightened risks of exploitation (ONS, 2021).

A community of this size carries a wide range of vulnerability. Between 2013 and 2025, 3,061 Romanian nationals were referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as

potential victims of modern slavery and human trafficking, a steady pattern that held for thirteen years running (Home Office, 2013–2025). The balance between adults and children referred shifted over that time. By 2025 Romanian children referred to the NRM outnumbered Romanian adults, which points to a shift in exploitation typology that demands qualitatively different institutional responses from those the original consular mandate envisaged.

Trafficking, however, is just one layer of a broader vulnerability picture. According to the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN), Romanian nationals are consistently the largest non-UK rough sleeping group in London, accounting for 8.9% of all rough sleepers in 2024/25 (GLA, 2025). This population falls outside most formal protection pathways, and its destitution generates consular contact with no clear institutional response. Post Brexit, at the UK border, Romanian nationals account for approximately 29% of all EU nationals refused entry, amounting to around 5,600 individuals in the year ending September 2025, making Romania by far the most affected EU member state (Migration Observatory, 2026). Domestic violence, child protection referrals, and labour disputes in the informal economy further extend the caseload well beyond what any single institutional mandate was designed to absorb.

This vulnerability profile transforms the consular function both qualitatively and quantitatively. A diplomatic mission managing thousands of citizens across precarious labour conditions, with persistent and overlapping vulnerability, cannot be perceived anymore as a document-issuing office with an emergency capacity added on. To address these vulnerabilities effectively, it must develop early identification protocols, referral pathways across multiple systems, crisis capacity, and sustained operational relationships with host-state law enforcement and civil society.

The expansion of the duty of care: crises, legal transformation, and the embassy–consulate gap

Melissen and Okano-Heijmans (2018) trace how the duty of care has been driven by the recurrence of international crises, such as terrorist attacks, pandemics, natural disasters, each of which raising the bar on what people expect their state to do for them abroad. For the Romanian missions in the UK, this dynamic was compressed into a single decade in which three overlapping crises redefining the consular function in real time, without corresponding increases in mandate or resources.

The 2016 Brexit referendum marked the first major rupture, triggering an initial rush among EU citizens to arrive in the UK to secure their legal status before the formal break in 2021. Free movement was replaced by the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS): a novel, digitally administered, deadline-driven regularisation process with no precedent in the bilateral relationship. The EU consular missions had no statutory function within the EUSS architecture, yet in practice became a primary node for information, referral, and crisis intervention. Nationals, many in vulnerable situations, low-literacy or digitally excluded circumstances, confronted a system that outsourced its complexity to civil society and digital self-service (Barnard and Costello, 2025).

Home Office data, based on unique applicants, puts the current Romanian EUSS population at approximately 1,024,000, of whom 340,080 remain on pre-settled status. Romania's refusal rate of approximately 17.5% substantially exceeds those of comparable EU member states and over 340,000 applications have been refused in total, each generating a potential consular caseload category (Home Office, 2025a).

The EUSS also changed the directionality of the consular function. The Vienna Convention (1963) builds protection around a sending-state logic, in which the mission looks after a national's interests against the administrative power of the receiving state, being in detention, in distress, or repatriation. The EUSS inverted this logic. For the first time at this scale, the EU consular network was asked, through outreach, information sessions, and document facilitation, to help their nationals *settle permanently in the receiving state's legal order*. In this case, the duty of care was discharged not by shielding nationals from the British state but by securing their place within it. It might be argued that escalating a delayed or refused application remains protection in the classic sense, but its practical effect was to help the individual secure registration within the host state's status regime. If the externalisation literature traces how receiving states project border functions outward (FitzGerald, 2019), the EUSS represents the mirror image: an inward mobilisation of the sending state's consular apparatus into the receiving state's settlement infrastructure (Gamlen, 2014).

COVID-19 struck before the EUSS transition was complete. In early 2020, more than 600,000 EU citizens were stranded abroad as global travel restrictions took effect, triggering what the International Centre for Migration Policy Development described as the largest repatriation operation in history, with national consular services stretched to the limit (ICMPD, 2020). In the UK, the Romanian Consulates closed in line with government restrictions, producing delays of several months in the processing of identity documents essential for EUSS

applications, a compounding effect in which one crisis directly obstructed the institutional response to another (Dolea, 2021). Romanian nationals employed in construction, hospitality, and tourism lost employment as the UK economy contracted, and the consulate's digital channels became the primary source of official information on travel rules, legal status, and employment rights, a communication function the institution had not been resourced to perform at scale (Dolea, 2021).

These crises exposed a structural tension within the diplomatic mission itself. The embassy and the consulates operate in different registers: the former oriented toward political representation and diaspora engagement at the level of community, narrative, and symbolic recognition; and the latter absorbing the operational consequences of that community's legal and social precarity. Romanian institutions of external representation have been characterised as often passive, with engagement focused on cultural events that remain largely inconsequential for those facing exploitation or status uncertainty (Martinescu, 2019). The consular network has been described as replicating a high power-distance relationship with its diasporic citizens, with institutional inertia persisting even as accelerated diaspora growth caused demand to exceed capacity by a substantial margin (Dolea, 2021). The embassy produces front-stage outputs, diplomatic events, community celebrations, parliamentary diaspora representation, all of which read instantly as evidence of state engagement. Meanwhile, the consulate performs backstage protection: identity verification for detained nationals, NRM referrals through various first responders, EUSS clarification, removal cooperation, managing cases in crisis.

The asymmetric redistribution of protection responsibilities

As receiving states internalise border control through increased policing and surveillance, and project it outward through visa regimes (Guild, 2009; Bigo, 2014; Aliverti, 2021), the humanitarian burdens are displaced onto sending states. In the Romanian–UK context, the missions operate within this displacement as both a protection actor and a compulsory participant in the UK's enforcement architecture. The public data on each register runs across more than a decade.

On the enforcement side, convictions of Romanian nationals in England and Wales rose from 2,418 in 2008 to 9,330 in 2024, ranking Romania first or second among EU member states in every year of the series (Ministry of Justice, 2008–2024). In London, Romanian nationals

ranked first among EU member states for every year in which disaggregated data is available. Total returns of Romanian nationals from the UK peaked at 2,031 in 2016 and, while declining during the pandemic years, reached 1,391 by 2023, with enforced returns consistently outnumbering voluntary departures by a ratio of roughly three to one (Home Office, 2012–2023). Foreign national offender (FNO) returns hit 1,527 in 2023, the highest figure in the dataset. Since 2010, Romanian nationals have made up 18% of all FNO removals from the UK, the largest single-nationality share over the whole period (House of Commons Library, 2024). In the year ending September 2025, Romanian nationals were still among the top five nationalities for FNO returns (Home Office, 2025b).

Under international law and bilateral agreements, the consulate must provide the identity verification and travel documents (*laissez-passer*) that make these enforced removals possible, including for charter flights. Again, this is a function that a consulate cannot decline. It is also required, by its own mandate and the expectations of the Romanian state, to ensure that those same nationals receive consular access, legal information, and protection against mistreatment during detention and removal. Both functions flow from the same Vienna Convention framework; both are performed by the same institutional actors and engage the same population.

This dual function is not discharged by the consular sections in isolation. The contemporary diplomatic missions have evolved well beyond the embassy and consulate division around which the Vienna Conventions were built, absorbing specialised functional attachés whose mandates reach into domains the classical diplomatic and consular split never covered. Alongside the consular section, many Romanian missions now operate a home affairs attaché office (BAAI), responsible for law enforcement liaison, and a labour attaché, responsible for employment and social protection. The three sections report to different home ministries, the consular network to Foreign Affairs, the BAAI to Internal Affairs, and the labour attaché to Labour and Social Protection, and each carries a distinct institutional logic, oriented respectively toward assistance, toward policing, and toward labour rights. How they coordinate internally is what determines whether the mission responds to a vulnerable national in a joined-up way or in parallel silos, since the same person is frequently a consular case, a labour case, and an enforcement-cooperation case at once. It is within this differentiated structure, not in the consular section alone, that the asymmetry traced above is actually managed.

In these settings, the consular mission is not a passive recipient of displacement but an active co-producer of the enforcement outcomes it is also trying to mitigate. Pathways of

support within the receiving state are further complicated by the awareness among Romanian nationals, particularly those with irregular status or pending cases, that consular contact may intersect with enforcement action. Consular services are compelled to intervene where protection has been withdrawn, managing vulnerability without corresponding authority or resources. The result is an *inverted geography of protection* in which the diplomatic and consular missions operate less as an outward expression of sovereignty and more as a site of triage, processing both the victims and the offenders of the same mobility regime, often simultaneously.

THE DUTY OF CARE: THREE FRAMINGS

The *duty of care* in consular context is not a settled concept. Whether framed as a legal obligation under consular conventions, a political expectation driven by diaspora voting power, or a moral claim entrenched in citizenship itself, the answer determines the actual institutional framework. Each framing carries distinct implications for how consular capacity is built, how performance is evaluated, and where accountability lies.

In international law, consular assistance is largely permissive. Article 5 of the Vienna Convention lists functions the mission *may* perform, but those are not entitlements a citizen can demand. Consular assistance, the support of a national's case against another state, is codified by the International Law Commission (ILC) as a right of the state exercised at its discretion rather than a responsibility automatically owed to the citizen (International Law Commission, 2006, Art. 2). In this doctrine, associated with Vattel and later confirmed in *Mavrommatis*, harm suffered by a national abroad is treated as harm to the national state (Vattel, 1758; PCIJ, 1924; ILC, 2006). Vermeer-Künzli (2007) describes this as a legal fiction: the individual suffers the real harm, but international law locates the protected legal interest in the state.

Translated into consular practice, a legal framing of duty of care would require more than general assistance. It would require codified procedures: defined response timelines, documented referral pathways and auditable outcomes (Melissen and Okano-Heijmans, 2018; Crosbie, 2018). This framing requires sustained investment in systems rather than reliance on individual officials. In practice, few states have fully operationalised a legal duty of care for citizens abroad. The Vienna Convention provides a floor, not a ceiling, and most bilateral consular agreements remain aspirational rather than enforceable.

Secondly, under a political framing, the duty of care is defined by its visibility. Where a diaspora is large enough to weigh on national elections, consular protection becomes electorally legible, and there is an incentive to make it visible (Burean and Popp, 2015). Events, statements, and community engagements are immediately legible in digital public spheres. The slower work of protection, building referral pathways, influencing host-state practice and securing fair treatment for their nationals, develops mostly out of the public view (Marin, 2026). The political reading of the duty to care therefore rewards symbolic reassurance over substantive protection (Edelman, 1964), and measures success by what an audience perception rather than by what a citizen receives.

Finally, a moral reading calls for capacity that holds over time. It says that citizenship creates an unconditional obligation of care, whatever the law has codified and whatever the political calculation might be. It is the most demanding of the three to resource, because it is the only one that gives no basis for rationing. The moral reading is also where the duty of care is most exposed, in a way Okano-Heijmans (2011) anticipated when she questioned whether states extend assistance “too far” and whether perpetrators attract attention disproportionate to victims. The consular missions confront this within a single caseload. The trafficking victim and the foreign national offender awaiting removal are both citizens, and a duty grounded in citizenship alone owes them the same access, information, and protection. An unconditional duty cannot, by its own logic, rank the victim above the offender; yet the political and moral reading of protection pulls constantly toward exactly this ranking. The mission therefore manages not only scarcity of resources but also a legitimacy problem: the point at which care for the individual citizen and the public standing of the diaspora come apart. It is here that this analysis moves past Okano-Heijmans, who named the tension but located it in media pressure rather than in the structure of the obligation itself.

Most states navigate between all three framings, applying whichever is most appropriate at a given moment. The oscillation is not random: it tracks the visibility register. When a crisis is public, the moral framing is invoked. When resources are constrained, the legal minimum is cited. When a case breaks into media coverage, the political reading takes over. The effect is institutional inconsistency, which prevents the systematic integration of the duty of care into the sending state’s broader policy framework.

CARE AND CONTROL: A TYPOLOGY

Within the Romanian–UK consular context, the tension between care and control manifests in three distinct operational forms, each documented in the public record and requiring a different institutional response.

The first configuration is enforcement co-production. Within the Romanian–UK bilateral relationship, the consulate officials become the operational link for enforced removal: identity verification, emergency travel documents, laissez-passer documentation for charter flights, and coordination with Home Office Immigration Enforcement. This is a function that, under the international and bilateral framework, cannot be declined by the Romanian representatives.

This creates a difficult institutional tension: the consular officer involved in coordinating removal may also be the first official contact for a national in immigration custody who alleges mistreatment. The dual loyalty this generates cannot be resolved by protocol: it requires ongoing discretionary judgment under time pressure and often incomplete information. This is what Lipsky's framework identifies as the defining condition of street-level bureaucracy, operating here not within one jurisdiction but across two (Lipsky, 1980). With over 1,500 FNO returns in 2023 alone (Home Office, 2012–2023; House of Commons Library, 2024), enforcement co-production becomes a core operational load for Romanian consular missions. Measured against the standard set out in the introduction, this configuration is diplomatic in its negotiating element. The mission engages another state's enforcement system over the terms of removal in individual cases, as well as strategically, at the policy level which governs the removal processes.

The second is narrative asymmetry in bilateral cooperation. Operation Golf, conducted between 2008 and 2010 by the Metropolitan Police and the Romanian National Police is the clearest case. It was presented as a landmark Joint Investigation Team, the first of its kind in the EU under the European framework (Europol, 2011), and targeted a network suspected of trafficking Romanian children into the United Kingdom for forced begging and theft (Anti-Slavery International, 2010). The operation led to arrests in both countries and placed children under protection. Its wider significance, however, lay in the way investigative intelligence moved beyond the justice system. Findings from the case, some linked to events before Romania's accession to the European Union, were taken up in parliamentary debate, tabloid coverage, and arguments over free movement, where they helped frame Romanian migration

as a crime problem (Fox, Moroşanu and Szilassy, 2012). These schemes rely on criminal records and intelligence supplied by sending states themselves through various channels of police and judicial cooperation. As a result, the mission's data becomes part of a system that sorts risk by nationality (Parmar, 2020). Its cooperation is then reinterpreted less as evidence of a commitment to protection than as confirmation of the community's criminality. Managing this asymmetry, therefore, becomes a diplomatic function. The mission must sustain law enforcement cooperation while also managing the institutional response to the narratives developed around the undesirable face of migration. This configuration also meets the third element of the diplomatic criterion most directly. Defending the standing of the sending state and its diaspora before the receiving state's institutions and publics is representation in the classical sense, carried out beyond the consulate's own walls.

The third typology, administrative co-production, operates alongside the previous ones. Where enforcement co-production mobilises the mission for removals, administrative co-production rallies it on behalf of settlement. As discussed in the previous sections, the EUSS provides a unique case-study: the consular networks were integrated, without formal legal function, into the receiving state's regularisation regime, providing the document facilitation and community reach that made the programme viable for a population in the excess of one million. Read against the diplomacy principles, administrative co-production satisfies its first element: the mission represented its nationals' interests inside the receiving state's legal order, negotiating their incorporation into a status regime the sending state did not design and could not amend.

Beneath all three dimensions runs a single constraint: selective protection under resource constraint. The mission and its consular officers cannot match limited institutional capacity to indefinite need. In practice, nationals who are institutionally visible, or whose cases map onto established referral pathways, receive more effective intervention. Those who are in irregular immigration situations, or whose cases involve intersecting vulnerabilities, trafficking combined with criminality, destitution combined with pending deportation, are harder to assist and more likely to fall through the gaps. NGOs, outsourced service providers, and diaspora community organisations already fill protection gaps that consular missions cannot cover (Melissen and Okano-Heijmans, 2018).

These three configurations operate simultaneously and reinforce each other. Enforcement and administrative co-production shape how host-state institutions perceive the mission, as a partner in both the removal and the incorporation of its nationals, and narrative

asymmetry sets the political conditions within which all operate. Each demands a different response: accountability protocols, explicit disclosure of the sending-state involvement in receiving-state regularisation regimes, and narrative management.

There is also an accountability question that runs across all three: if protection is co-produced with NGOs, outsourced providers, and host-state institutions, who bears responsibility when it fails? Under current arrangements, this question has no satisfactory answer. What remains is a system that holds together through personal relationships and could break down just when institutional capacity is most needed (Lipsky, 1980; Melissen and Okano-Heijmans, 2018).

PERFORMATIVITY AND THE RISK OF ELEVATION

When consular work is described as diplomacy, it enters a more public register. Citizens expect the state to appear not only in official statements, visits, and community events, but at the counter, in the prison, in the hospital, on the phone with a distressed family, and in the meeting where a vulnerable person needs referral to the right service. The risk is a gap between what the consulate projects and what the consulate has in terms of staff, training, and authority to deliver. This is where performativity begins: protection becomes visible as a claim before it exists as a reliable system.

This dynamic has been present in the diplomacy literature for some time, although it has not always been described in performative terms. Okano-Heijmans (2011) had already shown how governments upgrade consular services for two different reasons. One is defensive: ministries strengthen consular work to protect themselves from criticism by citizens, parliament, and the media when things go wrong abroad. The other is offensive: governments use consular activity to show domestic audiences a responsive and caring state. The second use places consular work on the front stage turning assistance into something to display. Applied to diplomacy, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework helps explain why visibility matters. It distinguishes the front office, where institutions perform legitimacy through visible interaction, from the back office, where the practical work of protection takes place, often beyond public scrutiny.

Young's (1994) taxonomy of outputs, outcomes, and impact further structures this evaluation. In diplomatic-consular terms, outputs are the immediate, quantifiable products of their activity: joint statements, official visits, community events, documents issued, cases

resolved. These are tangible and documentable, and their high visibility makes them vulnerable to substitution for performance itself. Outcomes are what those outputs are supposed to produce: policy adjustments, activated cooperation mechanisms, improved service delivery, reduced vulnerability. Impact is the furthest reach: systemic transformation, durable institutional alignment, sustained improvement in the relationship between the state and its citizens abroad. Evaluating impact in diplomacy remains difficult given its indirect causation and extended time horizons (Tallberg, 2009; Cull, 2010).

Applied to the consular context, this taxonomy reveals a specific institutional problem. Official evaluations operate predominantly at the level of outputs: processing times, documents issued, case resolution rates. These indicators measure administrative efficiency but fail to capture institutional effectiveness, understood as the strategic management of citizen vulnerability. Consular performance requires different capacities: early identification of vulnerable populations, referral mechanisms with local authorities and civil society, crisis intervention protocols, and operational partnerships with host-state institutions (Marin, 2026). Measured by outputs alone, a mission that processes documents rapidly and resolves cases quickly may still fail to systematically address the vulnerability of their diaspora.

This is where the elevation of consular work becomes risky. It makes sense to recognise consular work as diplomacy, both analytically and practically. Yet recognition also raises expectations. A consular mission designated as a diplomatic actor is subject to heightened public expectation. If that designation is not accompanied by resourcing, professionalisation, evaluation frameworks calibrated to outcomes and impact rather than outputs, it produces a credibility deficit.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND EVALUATION

The institutional implications of considering consular work as a form of diplomacy extend to at least three areas: resource allocation, professional development, and performance evaluation.

Consular resources have often reflected established administrative arrangements and diplomatic structures rather than the changing scale and complexity of citizen needs abroad. For states with large diasporas, matching the allocation of resources with the size, distribution, and vulnerability profiles of their overseas populations would give resourcing a defensible basis. In this context, specialised functions such as police liaison officers and labour attachés

are increasingly integral to international practice and should be placed and mandated alongside the consular functions.

In terms of training, addressing complex situations often demands competencies that extend beyond the administrative remit of taking applications for travel documents. They require skills in crisis intervention, trauma-informed assistance, granular knowledge of the host state's legal and social frameworks, and the development of standards to provide an end-to-end service for vulnerable nationals. The scope of consular responsibilities is widening, and professional development frameworks should reflect the wider range of skills necessary for effective consular practice.

Finally, approaches to evaluation should move beyond counting services delivered towards a broader understanding of outcomes and impact. Alongside administrative indicators, this may include assessing the effectiveness of partnerships with civil society actors and the referral pathways they support, as well as examining the longer-term effects of interventions on the social welfare of diaspora communities. This approach would give a fuller account of how consular services contribute to the state's wider duty of care towards its citizens abroad.

CONCLUSION

The core argument of this article is that the protective mandate of consular work has changed direction. The Vienna regime has imagined the consul as a shield between the citizen and the receiving state. The Romanian consular missions in the UK spent the past decade performing functions the Convention never anticipated. They helped a population in excess of one million through the host state's settlement scheme, documented the removal of thousands more, and handled trafficking referrals, rough-sleeping cases, and border refusals that the UK's enforcement and labour regimes pushed back across the sending-state line. Absorbing the burden of those displaced under these circumstances is the inverted geography of protection. The mission no longer simply projects sovereignty outward. It manages the effects of another state's border regime on its own citizens. This shift in the direction of protection is what makes consular work a distinct mode of diplomacy.

Consular protection cannot be treated as routine service delivery. The duty of care remains unsettled between legal obligation, political expectation, and moral claim according to context. Protection is co-produced daily with actors the sending state does not control: host-state police, local authorities, NGOs, lawyers, shelters, interpreters, and private providers. Yet

the dominant evaluation model still counts visible outputs, especially documents issued, while the early identification of vulnerability and the prevention of harm remain harder to capture. A diplomacy working under these conditions is not a lesser form of political diplomacy. It is a distinct diplomatic practice located at the intersection of citizenship, mobility, vulnerability, and state responsibility.

The direction of travel is clear and unlikely to be reversed. Diaspora mobility, rising expectations of care, and the transfer of protection responsibilities onto sending states are structural developments. The question is whether states will resource, staff, train, and evaluate consular work as the diplomatic function it has become or continue to treat it as administrative overhead while expecting it to absorb crises of protection.

For that reason, the elevation argued for here must be earned through reform rather than mere declaration. If we raise the status of the consular work without fixing chronic underfunding, we risk creating "performativity". The state's claim to protect its citizens abroad often depends in practice on collaborations with actors outside its authority, including host-state agencies, NGOs, lawyers, shelters, interpreters, and private providers. For states whose standing is tied to the welfare of their people abroad, consular diplomacy is no longer a peripheral service. It is one of the clearest tests of contemporary statecraft.

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