

# Connecting parliamentary and executive diplomacy at EU and Member State level

## SUMMARY

Parliaments are increasingly active in external policy, engaging in various ways with counterparts from third countries and other stakeholders. The European Parliament is very active in the field, having established complex networks of contacts and relations with other parliaments and international parliamentary assemblies. These are fostered through exchanges of views organised in committee and inter-parliamentary meetings with external partners, and through regular visits to third countries. Other areas of external activity range from electoral observation to conflict mediation in third countries.

In order to organise such activities, parliaments rely to a high degree on the support of the executive branch, particularly of the diplomatic service. This support usually covers organisational and logistic matters, and includes regular exchanges of information between the representatives of the two branches of power. This raises interesting questions about the added value of parliamentary diplomacy in relation to traditional state diplomacy, about governments' awareness and recognition of this added value, and about the scope for autonomous parliamentary action.

A comparison<sup>1</sup> between the EU level and selected Member States with regard to the executive's support for parliamentary diplomacy reveals that the executive, and particularly diplomatic services, provide a high degree of support. More unequal across countries on the other hand are efforts to coordinate their actions in pursuit of common policy objectives, while preserving their autonomy and distinct roles. Recognition of the added value of parliamentary diplomacy remains crucial in this respect. Parliamentary diplomacy has specific advantages in comparison with executive diplomacy, such as an increased flexibility in establishing contacts with various local stakeholders, as well as communicating with fewer constraints and on more sensitive issues.



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## EU parliamentary diplomacy

The European Parliament has broad and varying competences in external policies, ranging from formal powers to approve the European Union's international agreements and legislation with an external impact, to a merely consultative role on certain aspects of common foreign and security policy (CFSP). Over the years, in the exercise of these functions, Parliament has established a complex structure of activities with third countries and other external partners such as international organisations, which enable it to behave as a diplomatic actor in its own right.

Parliamentary actors, including national parliaments, as well as international parliamentary assemblies (of which the European Parliament (EP) is a prime example) are increasingly recognised as diplomatic and foreign policy actors in their own right. According to N. Bentzen and B. Immenkamp (2019),<sup>2</sup> while 'in the area of foreign policy and external action the EP's formal influence remains somewhat limited ... parliamentary bodies – such as standing committees, subcommittees, inter-parliamentary delegations, working groups – and individual Members, including the President, have sought informal ways of shaping policies and exerting influence, beyond the normative parliamentary powers granted by the treaties .... The EP has increasingly served as a vehicle for consultation with representatives of non-EU countries, international organisations, non-state actors and civil society.[...] The EP has become a respected and influential international actor over the years.' According to K. Raube, J. Wouters and M. Müftüler-Baç (2019),<sup>3</sup> bilateral and multilateral parliamentary diplomacy between the European Parliament and third countries and regions 'would not be seen as competing with, but rather as complementing the wider spectrum of EU's diplomatic activities'.

The European Parliament conducts a broad range of activities in non-EU countries that can be subsumed under the concept of parliamentary diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> A dense [network of parliamentary bodies](#) shape the European Parliament's diplomacy. Committees, delegations and inter-parliamentary delegations foster contacts with external partners and host numerous debates with foreign guests. For example, the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) regularly hosts speakers from third countries' parliaments and foreign ministers (39 foreign ministers in the last term). In addition, Parliament bodies with an external affairs remit organise regular visits to non-EU countries. Participation in international parliamentary assemblies is also important. Activities undertaken in relation to election observation have a definite diplomatic dimension, e.g. efforts to prevent electoral violence and conflict, both before and after elections. Parliament's mediation efforts with third countries have proven their worth in the western Balkans. Parliament's structured measures to help build the capacity of partner parliaments help to strengthen democracy in the world.

## Parliamentary visits and other missions outside the EU

This is the most classical and extensive form of parliamentary diplomacy taking place outside European Parliament places of work and is undertaken by the European Parliament on a large scale.

### European Parliament's president

According to Rule 22 of Parliament's Rules of Procedure, the president represents the European Parliament in international relations and visits third countries to meet with parliamentarians (MPs) and other high level politicians. For example, former President Antonio Tajani went on an [official visit to the US](#) in February 2019, where he met with US high officials, including the Congress speaker, and the secretaries-general of the United Nations and the Organisation of American States; another official visit took place to Niger in July 2018 to address irregular migration issues.

### Official delegation visits

In the European Parliament, there are currently **44 permanent delegations** – the same number as in the previous term (as established by a Parliament [decision of April 2019](#) endorsed by the Conference of Presidents (CoP) in July 2019) fostering relations with third countries, regions and international organisations. These '[embassies on the move](#)' (as they are called by a researcher on the topic) greatly contribute to Parliament's diplomatic role, by exchanging information and nurturing

closer relations with the parliaments of third countries. They organise regular inter-parliamentary meetings with MPs from the countries/regions they focus on, in alternating venues – in third countries and at the European Parliament's premises (Strasbourg or Brussels).

Several European Parliament delegations participate in **international parliamentary assemblies**, namely the Delegation for relations with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the Delegation to the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly, the Delegation to the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly, the Delegation to the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, and the Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean.

The three **standing committees which focus on external relations** – the Committee for External Affairs (including its two subcommittees on Human Rights and on Security and Defence), the Committee on Development and the Committee on International Trade send frequent fact-finding missions to third countries. Ad hoc delegations to a third country can be set up 'in response to an unforeseen event of major political or legislative significance'. The Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Development coordinate the work of the ad hoc delegations falling within their respective remits, while the Committee on International Trade has to liaise with the relevant ad hoc delegations for the economic and trade aspects. Other Parliament committees can also propose to set up ad hoc delegations to international organisations and conferences, or to third countries, in order to meet with specialised counterparts on issues on the EU political agenda. All committees can undertake regular [missions](#) in principle only to candidate and European Economic Area (EEA) countries (in addition to EU Member States) if these are connected to their activity.

All parliamentary missions of standing and ad hoc delegations outside the EU have to be approved by the European Parliament governing bodies, according to the internal rules applicable in the European Parliament ([Implementing provisions governing the work of delegations and missions outside the European Union](#), as adopted by the Conference of Presidents (CoP) in October 2015).

External activities undertaken in the framework of election observation and democracy support, as well as mediation efforts are supervised by a specific group, named the **Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group** (DEG). For such parliamentary actions, the CoP adopted [additional specific provisions](#) in February 2019. While activities are decided and supervised by the DEG, they have to be agreed by the Conference of Presidents.

## MEPs' individual visits to third countries

MEPs also travel in connection with their parliamentary work to third countries (e.g. country rapporteurs, committee chairs and vice-chairs). When trips are of an official nature (endorsed by the relevant bodies), they enjoy financial and administrative support from the European Parliament. MEPs also undertake numerous individual visits<sup>5</sup> with political purposes in an autonomous way, without any Parliament backing. Such visits often represent a distinct form of parliamentary diplomacy potentially with an impact that can be positive or negative. In some cases, they may deliberately conflict with EU official policy and even undermine it: such as when some MEPs visited Crimea and observed the 2014 referendum. In other cases they have specific advantages that deserve recognition.<sup>6</sup> They can contribute to EU's overarching external policy objectives; e.g. when an MEP engages with human rights defenders or with civil society organisations on issues related to human rights, rule of law, anti-corruption efforts etc. MEPs can relay relevant messages after their visit back to the competent EU institutions. Higher flexibility in shaping their agenda and meeting local stakeholders is a distinct advantage, but such visits remain highly sensitive, and MEPs are expected to make clear they speak on their own behalf, not on that of the EU or EP (see Guidelines).

## Political groups' delegations

Political groups represented in the European Parliament can send their own delegations to third countries. To finance these, they use their own budgets. Approval of these missions is subject to the internal rules of the political group. Political groups are effective in reaching out to certain

stakeholders, particularly to sister political parties.<sup>7</sup> These missions act out of a sense of responsibility for the political family and have a more direct contact with and influence on sister parties in the third countries. They can also serve to maintain contact with political actors when official contacts between the European Parliament and parliamentary counterparts in a third country have been cut off, in response to a political crisis (e.g. with Russia, after the annexation of Crimea).

## Cooperation with the executive on parliamentary diplomacy

### A complex distribution of roles in external policies

On account of the European Union's complex institutional structure, and depending on the area of external policy, executive power in external policies resides with the Council or the European Commission. The Council has a double function – both legislative and executive – in external policies. It has decision-making power on all EU external policies. In several areas of external action, such as development and trade, it shares this power with Parliament. Such policies are implemented by the Commission. In the area of common foreign and security policy (CFSP), the Council decides alone and implements the policy together with the Member States and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP). Through its AFET committee in particular, Parliament exercises a scrutiny role on the CFSP and on common security and defence policy (CSDP). The High Representative is tasked with ensuring the consistency of EU's various external policies. The European External Action Service (EEAS) – the EU's diplomatic service (comprising headquarters in Brussels and EU delegations on the ground) – is responsible for conducting diplomatic activities on the EU's behalf. The EEAS is established and operates under the authority of the HR/VP, and its core mission is to assist the HR/VP. The EEAS can extend its cooperation and support to the other EU institutions, including the European Parliament, and benefit itself from cooperation and support from the other institutions and bodies. On the Parliament side, the AFET committee exercises an [oversight role](#) on the EEAS.

### Cooperation with the executive with regard to parliamentary missions outside the EU

For the organisation of parliamentary missions to third countries, the EEAS headquarters and EU delegations are the main interlocutors, while the Commission (particularly the relevant Directorates-General (DGs) for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO) and Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (NEAR)) also plays a role, particularly in providing relevant information. The Lisbon Treaty provides for enhanced communication and cooperation between the HR/VP and the Council on one hand, and Parliament, on the other, in the area of CFSP. Article 36 of the Treaty on European Union requires the HR/VP to consult Parliament regularly on the principal aspects of and choices made under the CFSP and to inform Parliament of the policy's evolution. The [2010 High Representative's declaration of political accountability](#) further strengthened this right of Parliament to be informed and consulted about CFSP and CSDP. The declaration provided, inter alia, for the following measures (that are relevant to parliamentary diplomacy):

- It reaffirms the right of Parliament's 'special committee' to have access to confidential information regarding CFSP and CSDP, on the basis of the [Interinstitutional Agreement of 20 November 2002 between the European Parliament and the Council concerning access by the European Parliament to sensitive information of the Council in the field of CSDP](#);
- It provides for exchanges of views with heads of mission, heads of delegation and other senior EU officials during Parliament committee meetings and hearings;
- It mandates the HR/VP to appear before Parliament at least twice a year to report on the current state of affairs regarding the CFSP/CSDP and to answer questions.

Part of the EU diplomatic service's brief is to provide other EU institutions with support. Article 5(7) of the [Decision establishing the EEAS](#) (2010/427/EU) states that 'Union Delegations shall have the capacity to respond to the needs of other institutions of the Union, in particular the European Parliament, in their contacts with the international organisations or third countries to which the Delegations are accredited'. Starting from this provision, the EEAS jointly with Parliament staff drafted 'Guidelines for visits by the European Parliament delegations' (also referred to as 'Guidelines') in July 2015. These guidelines were endorsed through an exchange of letters between then Parliament President Martin Schulz and HR/VP Federica Mogherini later in 2015. The guidelines draw a practically important distinction between official and unofficial/private visits of MEPs. Official visits are those agreed by Parliament's governing bodies – CoP/Bureau or the president. **Only official visits** are entitled to fully fledged support from the EEAS, as described below. Visits of political groups led by a political group chair, even if they are not strictly speaking official, are entitled to similar support. **Unofficial and private visits** of MEPs cannot expect fully fledged support from the EEAS/EUDs. Support is provided only in exceptional cases, following an assessment of the visit's purpose and connection with parliamentary activity. Independently of the level of support provided, organisers of unofficial visits should inform the EUD of the visit's purpose and programme and any element that may impact EU relations with the country. Importantly, the Guidelines also state that MEPs should make clear they speak in their own name, and not on behalf of the EU or Parliament when making statements and meeting with authorities. The limitation of EEAS/EUDs support for official parliamentary visits is justified through capacity constraints, and a concern to ensure consistent EU positions and activities – official Parliament delegations are expected to represent the official Parliament position (e.g. as expressed in resolutions).

In cases of **official visits** as defined above, the Parliament side must inform the EEAS/EUD about the visit and the planned programme as soon as it has decided on the visit. Before taking the decision on planning a visit, it can also benefit from advice from the EEAS headquarters. The EUD provides comprehensive support for the organisation of official visits, including with respect to the preparation of the programme, contacts with national authorities, suggestions of EU projects to visit, etc. At the start of the mission, the EUD organises a briefing session with the EU ambassador and in many cases also with the ambassadors of EU Member States present in the third country. It is an opportunity to discuss the EU official position and possible messages to the interlocutors in the host country. The support to be provided by the EUD covers many practical issues: such as translation and interpretation, and logistical support organising a press conference. Cooperation on security issues is also vital to the success of parliamentary missions. The EEAS provides the security assessment, the EUD offers security arrangements on the ground, but the decision always resides with the Parliament's governing bodies, as Parliament bears ultimate responsibility for the safety of its Members. This well-structured and regular cooperation with respect to parliamentary visits gives testimony to the fact that the EEAS headquarters and EUDs have come to see supporting parliamentary visits as part of their core mission and that they are well aware of its added value.

## Complementarity of EU parliamentary and executive diplomacy

In practice, cooperation between MEPs<sup>8</sup> and EU diplomats is used as an important channel for synchronising and complementing messages, in order to promote EU policy objectives. Any synchronisation remains informal however, and MEPs preserve their autonomy to defend positions that may not be fully aligned with EU's official policy as implemented by the EUDs. To avoid any confusion and unintended merging of positions, the 'Guidelines' provide that 'It should however be made clear that the EP delegation, speaks on behalf of the EP, and not on behalf of the EU'. In cases when Parliament delegations address more sensitive issues (e.g. on human rights in highly problematic countries where authorities refuse to engage with the EU in a genuine dialogue), parliamentary diplomacy can be perceived by executive diplomats either as a disturbing factor that risks undermining relations with national authorities, or as providing important added value.

The added value of parliamentary diplomacy has multiple dimensions. It is widely acknowledged that MEPs can address more sensitive issues (such as human rights violations) and make public statements on these, open avenues for communication with local partners and engage more directly with political partners, which may otherwise not be possible for traditional executive diplomats. Silent parliamentary diplomacy can help solve political crises in third countries, and make electoral processes smoother. Parliament delegation visits are also an opportunity to gather information about EU-funded projects and meet the beneficiaries of EU assistance to third countries, enabling Parliament to exercise its oversight function with respect to EU external financing instruments. Parliamentary diplomacy can provide important support in difficult international negotiations (e.g. on climate change).<sup>9</sup> Exchanges of views with newly appointed heads of delegation and EU special representatives (EUSRs) in compliance with the HR/VP's declaration on political accountability, as well as the regular meetings organised with EU ambassadors and EUSRs in Parliament are a good opportunity to raise their awareness of the added value of parliamentary diplomacy and the complementarity between executive and parliamentary diplomacy.

Parliament delegations participating in international parliamentary assemblies are less reliant on the EUDs for organisational matters, since the respective assembly or the host country takes care of some of these. Such frameworks also enable MEPs to conduct more autonomous diplomatic activities that are not necessarily seen as an extension of EU official policy. For example, the [ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly](#)<sup>10</sup> (the oldest and biggest such joint body) regularly sets up exploratory or fact-finding missions, composed of an equal number of MEPs and ACP MPs. They enable its members to be in direct contact with the situation on the ground in the ACP countries and to help find ways out of political deadlocks. The most recent one was deployed in spring 2019 to [Togo](#) to help with finding a way out of the political crisis.

#### **Challenges faced by EU executive-parliamentary cooperation in relation to parliamentary diplomacy**

The substantial practical cooperation and the constant flow of information between the EP and the executive branch, particularly the diplomatic service, opens the space for informal synchronisation of messages and positions with external partners. However, the **separation of powers and the distinct role of the different institutions** have to be preserved. The added value of parliamentary diplomacy resides in the capacity of parliamentary delegations to articulate distinct positions and undertake autonomous action.

**Parliamentary diplomacy may sometimes pose an excessive burden on MEPs.**<sup>11</sup> Parliamentary diplomacy requires substantial resources and time, given the need to travel to remote places. The multiplication of competent bodies and relevant activities can make it very difficult for MEPs to attend all the delegations to which they belong and other inter-parliamentary meetings. The EP calendar, which reserves certain weeks for external activities, compounds this problem as delegation and committee foreign trips often clash. Weak MEP attendance can however decrease credibility in the eyes of external partners and sometimes even render impossible the holding of certain meetings because of insufficient quorums.<sup>12</sup> This multiplication of activities also stretches the resources of the EEAS and EUD (particularly when they have to deal with simultaneous visits by different parliamentary delegations), as they have their own capacity constraints.

Parliaments are naturally characterised by a plurality of points of view and their members have the right to act independently and express themselves freely and so is the case in the EP. Assuring the **coherence of the positions** expressed by various members of EP official delegations is not always an easy task. Some members may choose to express personal points of view or to defend party-political or even national lines, which are not necessarily concordant with the EP official position (such as expressed in resolutions) and the EU policy on the matter. Such conduct can also make EUDs' relations with national authorities more difficult. This issue may also affect certain individual visits. For this reason, the implementing provisions governing the work of delegations and missions outside the European Union adopted by the CoP require delegation members to respect certain rules, including an obligation to make clear when they express a personal position or a position on behalf of their political group, and for statements made by speakers appointed by delegations to speak during a meeting to represent the views and positions adopted by the EP in its resolutions. For electoral observation missions, a strict code of conduct for MEPs<sup>13</sup> has been established in order to preserve trust.

## Cooperation with the executive in other areas of parliamentary diplomacy: election observation, mediation and capacity building

### Election observation

The European Parliament is an internationally recognised election observation actor. Parliament's election observation delegations are embedded either in EU electoral observation missions (EOMs) or in the international election observation missions (IEOMs) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) depending on the geographical area. The ODIHR observes elections in the OSCE region, while EU EOMs go to the rest of the world.

Election observation is the area where cooperation between Parliament and the EEAS is most structured, with both institutions conducting election observation activities that are well integrated with each other in several ways. First, the EU chief observer (head of the EU delegation) is always an MEP, appointed by the HR/VP based on a DEG recommendation. The Parliament delegation, composed of several MEPs (usually seven), is a short-term mission, within the EU's longer-term mission in the country. It arrives in the country two or three days before elections and conducts its own electoral observation activities in close coordination with the long-term EOM. Its chair (an MEP with experience in the area) presents its findings at a joint press conference with the chief observer. Despite this tight integration in the framework of long-term missions, according to Parliament's implementing provisions on democracy support and election observation activities, 'Parliament shall always maintain its independence of judgement and its capacity to act as a political institution'.

In line with the 2010 HR/VP declaration of political accountability, the Parliament is consulted regularly by the HR/VP on the selection of priority countries for long-term EU election observation missions and for the appointment of chief observers for those missions. DEG's meetings serve as a forum for exchanging views with the HR/VP on this issue and on other elections related aspects. The DEG also organises regular exchanges of views (often via videoconference) with the EU delegations in countries where elections are to be observed or have been observed by the EU, in order either to prepare the election observation or to assure follow-up. The EEAS headquarters organise regular meetings with the chief observer to prepare the EOMs and the follow-up missions.

Parliament also conducts autonomous activities throughout the electoral cycle, aiming to reinforce a country's capacity to conduct free and fair elections, including various dialogues with MPs and other stakeholders, and assistance to parliaments to modify the relevant legislation. The added value of these activities has been [recognised](#): 'The EP is well-positioned to be effective in promoting the implementation of EOM recommendations, complementary to EEAS activities, given the political weight of the institution and its Members, its experience of legislative development'.

### Conflict mediation

One new area of parliamentary diplomacy in which Parliament has become increasingly active is **mediation**. Momentum for developing this new type of activity originated in Parliament's close cooperation with the European Commission. In 2010, individual MEPs tried to mediate between the main Albanian political parties in response to a political crisis in Tirana, but their efforts received no formal Parliament endorsement or support and the mission was not considered to have achieved a break-through.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the involvement of MEPs in North Macedonia in 2015 was more extensive, more formalised, fully supported by a new structure in Parliament's secretariat and undertaken in close cooperation with the Commission. This ultimately secured its success.<sup>15</sup> Three MEPs from Parliament's three main political groups got involved following a request from then EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn.<sup>16</sup> While initially their mission was unofficial, in May 2015 a procedure to formalise the mission was launched in Parliament and institutional and financial support was provided in full by internal Parliament resources and a new Mediation and Dialogue Support Service.<sup>17</sup> Since then, Parliament has sought to make conflict mediation a permanent part

of its external activities, setting up a special administrative unit and establishing the Jean Monnet Dialogue for peace and democracy – an instrument and methodology that brings together political actors from third countries in a process facilitated by Parliament to find mediated solutions to crises.

In its [March 2019 resolution](#) on building EU capacity on conflict prevention and mediation, Parliament recommends extending EU action in the area of conflict prevention and mediation, including enhancing the EU's institutional capacities for conflict prevention and mediation. For example, it invites the EEAS and the Commission's services dealing with external action to present a yearly report to Parliament on the progress made in implementing EU policy commitments in the area.

When it comes to **mediation activities**,<sup>18</sup> Parliament's approach is to strengthen the overall EU approach in coherence with other institutional actors while not demanding executive resources, as this is more autonomous Parliament action, being done mainly on Parliament's initiative. In the case of Ukraine and North Macedonia, Parliament adopted an inclusive approach, bringing together all relevant stakeholders including other EU institutions. This approach had important spill-over effects encouraging the other EU institutions to extend their own action in the area. In practice, the Commission (DG NEAR) and the Commissioner are Parliament's main interlocutors. The EU delegations and ambassadors are also important interlocutors for preparing the mission on the ground, as well as for follow-up. Before the launch of any mediation or 'Jean Monnet Dialogue', communication is important with thorough consultations across the institutions and with EU delegations. Various interinstitutional contacts have been used to encourage such dialogue, while the decision to launch a dialogue rests with the Parliament's DEG and Conference of Presidents.

### Capacity-building with partner parliaments

The European Parliament provides technical and capacity-building assistance for parliaments in third countries so as to strengthen their institutional capacity, and to support democracy in general in the world. This activity is based on priorities established by the DEG, taking into account Parliament resolutions and the recommendations of EU EOMs. This type of activity involves parliamentarians and staff from the European Parliament and partner countries' parliaments. The European Parliament is highly autonomous in organising such action, relying to a lesser extent on the EUDs or the EEAS. [External research](#) commissioned by Parliament has found out that 'Overall the EP's capacity-building efforts have demonstrated good coordination, especially within the EP and with other EU institutions, such as EEAS and the Commission, including the Directorate-General on European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and the Directorate-General on International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO)'.

## Executive-parliamentary cooperation in EU Member States

Parliamentary diplomacy is a growing field of activity for national parliaments of EU Member States. There is a trend<sup>19</sup> for all parliaments to participate more actively in international parliamentary organisations and to develop multilateral and bilateral cooperation with other parliaments. Parliamentary diplomacy is perceived as increasing the legitimacy and democratic accountability of a country's foreign policy; it is politically more representative because it includes opposition parties. The 'parliamentisation' of external policy is an adequate way to respond to globalisation, increased interdependence and international institution building. To tackle the specific challenges posed by these trends, deputies need to experience the political, economic and social reality in third countries directly.<sup>20</sup> One newer field of activity for EU national parliaments is represented by the Inter-Parliamentary Conference (IPC) on CFSP and CSDP, between the European Parliament and national parliaments, which takes place twice a year. The IPC meetings, which were launched in 2012, constitute a forum for exchanging information between members of national parliament and MEPs.

### Delegation visits

A comparative analysis of bodies from various Member States' parliaments (both upper and lower chambers) conducting parliamentary visits and participating in international organisations and

meetings reveals a relatively similar structure. Bodies conducting such activities include a committee on foreign affairs, a committee on European affairs, delegations to international parliamentary assemblies, bilateral or multilateral cooperation and friendship groups with other parliaments, as well as all committees insofar as they focus on external issues. The speakers of parliamentary chambers can also play a prominent role in parliamentary diplomacy, including through foreign trips. To give an idea of the extent of parliamentary international cooperation, the French Senate has 80 bilateral and regional friendship groups, the German Bundestag has 47 bilateral and multilateral parliamentary friendship groups; the Austrian parliament has 47 bilateral parliamentary groups, the Swedish Riksdag has 40 parliamentary friendship associations and international networks, etc. The activities conducted by such bodies abroad need to be approved by the governing bodies of parliaments (speakers and/or bureaus, etc.). Their composition takes into account the distribution of seats by political groups as well as the special interests and the relevant competences of the deputies (e.g. in the German Bundestag, [French Chamber of Deputies](#)).

Parliamentary delegations visiting other countries usually receive full support from their ministry of foreign affairs (MFA) and local embassy. This includes briefings and advice by the MFA and embassies on the situation on the ground, information about local stakeholders to meet, and organisational support, including setting the agenda, making contacts, logistics, etc. The practice is quite similar across EU countries. While the government's duty to inform and consult the parliament appropriately on foreign policy is enshrined in law, support with respect to parliamentary foreign visits is generally provided based on existing practice and on a case by case basis.<sup>21</sup> Assistance is usually provided following a formal request addressed by the parliament (speaker, bureau) to the MFA. Some MFAs (e.g. Germany, Sweden) have issued internal guidance documents on the kind of assistance to be provided to their MPs and, in at least one case, to national MEPs. Such documents are usually not public.

## Individual foreign trips by parliamentarians

Individual MPs also undertake official visits but the extent of this activity varies from one parliament to another. The demarcation between individual MPs' official and unofficial trips (but connected with parliamentary activity) is crucial for determining the level of support MPs are entitled to receive from their own institution and their governments/embassies. In certain cases, there is however a need to clarify this distinction.<sup>22</sup> Individual MPs travelling abroad generally receive support from their government and embassy, but it is difficult to make any generalisation on the type of this support across EU Member States. While the level of support for individual official visits is generally lower than for official delegations, some foreign services support such visits to the greatest extent possible<sup>23</sup>. Support is usually provided on a more ad hoc basis, at the express request of the MP – particularly in cases when the visit has a political purpose, but is not officially authorised.

### **Individual official trips of German deputies**

The German Bundestag (lower chamber of the German Federal Parliament) publishes regular detailed reports on its members' visits abroad. The latest available [report](#) (covering the period October 2015 - September 2017) states that 1 275 official visits abroad took place in the respective period. The bulk of the official trips are individual visits (almost two thirds with 825 individual visits). Individual official visits are those undertaken by one or two deputies, while official delegation visits include at least three deputies. Both require the approval of the speaker of the chamber, but the former also have to be analysed and discussed in the bureau, while individual visits have to be agreed by the chair of the competent committee and by the chair of the political group of the travelling member(s). The report explicitly acknowledges the added value of individual foreign trips, which are primarily aimed at gaining information and exchanging experience and opinions; they serve to strengthen deputies' oversight and control over government; and are often the only way to obtain information that is as direct and unfiltered as possible about the political, economic and social situation in the country visited. Such trips often provide deputies with the opportunity to accompany the German president, chancellor or other members of the government on their missions abroad.

## Other areas of parliamentary diplomacy

Some European parliaments are active in newer areas of parliamentary diplomacy beyond visits abroad and participation in international parliamentary assemblies. The [French National Assembly](#) undertakes election observation in third countries at the request of the authorities of the country concerned, provided the elections are expected to be free and subject to the rule of universal suffrage and that the possibility of monitoring voting operations without constraint is guaranteed. The favourable opinion of the MFA is needed, which points to the need for executive-parliamentary coordination in this field. Other national parliaments take part in election observation only in the framework of international missions such as the OSCE or Council of Europe (e.g. [Austrian parliament](#), German Bundestag).

An example of capacity-building efforts is the [Spanish Congress](#) of Deputies. It has been participating for years in **international cooperation activities** aimed at institutional strengthening mainly of Latin American countries, particularly in the parliamentary sphere, offering Spanish experience and the political and technical contributions that are required at any given time.

## Synergies in national executive and parliamentary diplomacy

EU governments seem to value parliamentary diplomacy and are aware of its added value. There is a growing trend to involve parliaments in foreign policy, particularly in specific areas (i.e. international climate negotiations – French parliament) and also to invite them to accompany ministers on visits abroad. The separation of powers however prevents the government from making any formal request to the parliament to support government external policies or from trying to coordinate their policies too closely. The executive and the legislative branches have their autonomy and distinct roles in foreign affairs. It is also difficult to involve parliamentary delegations in external government policy because opposition groups would not necessarily feel bound by it. Informally however, there is scope to exploit the complementarity and added value of parliamentary diplomacy in order to create significant synergies. In some EU Member States though there is scope to improve the recognition and use of this potential by governments. Regular meetings between the MFA and MPs are a good opportunity to identify common priorities for external activities and to align parliaments' agendas.<sup>24</sup>

Parliamentary diplomacy can also reflect political splits with governments and lead to a problematic fragmentation of foreign policy among parliamentary and government actors acting in an uncoordinated fashion. For example, parliamentary diplomacy conducted by the Slovakian parliament's speaker towards Russia stands in [stark contrast](#) with official government policy, reflecting party-political divergences.

## Conclusions

Parliamentary diplomacy is a growing area of activity at both EU and Member State level. It has undoubtedly added value in relation to classical executive diplomacy: it increases the democratic legitimacy of external policies by reinforcing parliaments' oversight powers (through the direct collection of information on the ground) and by including a broad spectrum of political forces. Being free of some of the constraints of classical diplomacy, it enables more direct contacts with various stakeholders, opening new channels of communication, and the transmission of more sensitive messages. Inter-parliamentary cooperation is crucial when it comes to responding to the challenges posed by increased interconnectedness and interdependence in today's world.

In this activity, parliaments rely to a considerable degree on the expertise and resources of governments and local embassies. At both EU and national levels, both executives and diplomatic services are committed to providing official delegations traveling abroad with extensive organisational and political support. Beyond purely technical aspects, this cooperation opens the way to synergies and better-aligned agendas, full upholding the autonomy of each branch of government.

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- [Parliamentary Cooperation and Diplomacy in EU External Relations](#), edited by K. Raube, M. Müftüler-Baç, J. Wouters, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This briefing is based to a large extent on collective research undertaken by a team of experts from the External Policies Unit in EPRS. Besides the author of this briefing, the following experts were involved: J. Baeverstroem, N. Bentzen, B. Immenkamp, M. Latek, M. Nogaj, E. Pichon, E. Gomez Ramirez and B. Stanicek. The research was based on a series of interviews with several MEPs, with European Parliament and EEAS staff, as well as on information obtained from 12 national parliaments from bigger and smaller Member States from various geographical regions of the EU, namely Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Slovakia and Slovenia.
- <sup>2</sup> See 'Parliamentary Diplomacy: Democracy Support at the European Parliament: Dynamics and Transformations', B. Immenkamp and N. Bentzen, in O. Costa: *The European Parliament in Times of EU Crisis*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 413-437.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Introduction: a world of parliamentary relations? Parliamentary cooperation and diplomacy in EU external relations', K. Raube, J. Wouters and M. Müftüler-Baç, in [Parliamentary Cooperation and Diplomacy in EU External Relations](#), An Essential Companion, Leuven Global Governance series, ed. by K. Raube, M. Müftüler-Baç and J. Wouters, May 2019.
- <sup>4</sup> The concept of parliamentary diplomacy is used in this analysis in a broad sense, in line with the definition proposed by Frans W. Weisglas and Gonnje de Boerb (2007): 'Parliamentarians have for decades been present and active in the international arena. "Parliamentary diplomacy", however, has only quite recently become the common term used to describe the wide range of international activities undertaken by members of parliament in order to increase mutual understanding between countries, to improve scrutiny of government, to represent their people better, and to increase the democratic legitimacy of inter-governmental institutions.' ('Parliamentary Diplomacy', in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 2, 2007, pp. 93-99.
- <sup>5</sup> MEPs have a lump sum for travel that they can use for travelling in connection with their duties. Committee chairs and vice-chairs enjoy an additional lump sum for attending seminars and conferences. Parliament does not publish any comprehensive report on MEPs' individual trips, making it difficult to assess their extent and importance.
- <sup>6</sup> According to interviews with two MEPs involved in this kind of activity, carried out in April and June 2019 respectively.
- <sup>7</sup> This paragraph is based on a June 2019 interview with staff from one of Parliament's main political groups.
- <sup>8</sup> This section is based on interviews conducted from April to June 2019 with seven MEPs from the 8th legislature, who were strongly involved in this type of activity, with Parliament staff from DG EXPO and with EEAS staff responsible for relations with Parliament.
- <sup>9</sup> A July 2018 [Parliament resolution](#) on climate diplomacy 'highlights the vital role of parliamentary diplomacy in combating climate change; commits itself to making better use of its international role and its membership of international parliamentary networks, to stepping up climate activities within the work of its delegations as well as through delegation visits[...]'
- <sup>10</sup> According to the [Parliament's own rules](#) governing meetings of the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly and its bodies, 'the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA) and its bodies enjoy legal and operational independence'.
- <sup>11</sup> This phenomenon has been described as follows by researchers on the topic: '[...] it is important to point out some of the challenges that inter-parliamentary cooperation and diplomacy may face. The first is related to the overburdened agenda of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and national parliamentarians to attend and travel either across Europe or the world to attend the various meetings (Wouters and Raube 2016). There is a proliferation in the number and size of inter-parliamentary (IPC) meetings, as far as both standing bodies and ad hoc events are concerned. In research that was conducted earlier, a 'fatigue' of inter-parliamentary cooperation was clearly evident in that regard (Wouters et al. 2014). IPC fatigue may result in decreasing attendance rates, lack of preparation and debriefing by participating parliaments, etc.' (K. Raube, J. Wouters and M. Müftüler-Baç, 'Introduction: a world of parliamentary relations? Parliamentary cooperation and diplomacy in EU external relations', in *Parliamentary*

- Cooperation and Diplomacy in EU External Relations. An Essential Companion*, Leuven Global Governance series, May 2019, p.3).
- <sup>12</sup> Such as the meeting of the EU-ACP JPA Committee on Social Affairs and the Environment in March 2019 in Bucharest.
- <sup>13</sup> The relevant provisions are to be found in the document 'Implementing provisions on democracy support and election observation activities', and include recommendations such as 'Members shall refrain from publicly commenting on the organization of the elections, the candidates or political issues before the press conference at which the preliminary statement is issued'.
- <sup>14</sup> L. Redei, '[MEPs as Mediators: An Emerging Trend of Parliamentary Diplomacy?](#)', *Parliamentary Cooperation and Diplomacy in EU External Relations*, May 31, 2019.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>16</sup> He in fact made a public statement suggesting MEP involvement without consulting the MEPs first (see L. Redei (2019)).
- <sup>17</sup> Daan Fonck's PhD dissertation 'The emergence of the European Parliament as a diplomatic mediator: Conceptualising, exploring and explaining Parliamentary Diplomacy in EU Foreign Policy', Leuven, 2019, pp. 91-107.
- <sup>18</sup> This paragraph is based on an interview with a Parliament official responsible for conflict mediation in May 2019.
- <sup>19</sup> Unless otherwise indicated through links, this section is based mainly on answers received to a questionnaire sent to parliaments (lower and upper houses) in 12 Member States considered a representative sample given size, geographical location and geopolitical clout.
- <sup>20</sup> See German Bundestag, [Bericht über die internationalen Aktivitäten und Verpflichtungen des Deutschen Bundestages. Berichtszeitraum: 1. Oktober 2015 bis 30. September 2017](#), p. 2.
- <sup>21</sup> Based on the answers received from the national parliaments contacted, there is no formal framework or guidance on cooperation and support jointly agreed between the executive and the parliament such as is the case at EU level.
- <sup>22</sup> According to the answer by the Dutch Tweede Kamer.
- <sup>23</sup> e.g. in Belgium and Germany.
- <sup>24</sup> According to the answer provided by the Spanish Congress.

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