

The European Parliament's Parliamentary Diplomacy: Shaping EU Foreign Policy? The case of EU-Russia relations

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Abstract

The European Parliament (EP) has limited formal competence in the foreign policy of the European Union (EU). Nevertheless, arguing its direct democratic legitimacy, the EP has developed its own 'foreign policy'. It has enhanced its role in EU external relations in terms of 'parliamentary diplomacy' as well as traditional parliamentary oversight. However, this 'parliamentary diplomacy' has rarely been assessed in the literature. This thesis aims to evaluate the conditions under which the EP's 'parliamentary diplomacy' can shape EU foreign policy. EU-Russia relations during the sixth (2004-2009) and seventh (2009-2010) legislatures were chosen as a case study.

With a qualitative methodology mostly based on 24 interviews, five hypotheses are tested derived from Jupille and Capraso's four criteria of 'actorness' (autonomy, cohesion, autonomy and recognition). Hypothetically, the EP could shape EU foreign policy because it has authority in the sense of formal powers and democratic legitimacy, because of its cohesion, its autonomy and its recognition by the other actors (EU institutions, Member States and third countries). This thesis proposes an analysis of two sub-case studies of human rights in Russia and the Russian-Georgian conflict in addition to a specific assessment of the different channels used by the EP to shape EU foreign policy towards Russia.

Though more research would be needed before further generalization, the findings of this thesis are that the EP plays a limited role in shaping EU foreign policy toward Russia, as solely the first hypothesis is even partially proven. Though limited, the EP's formal powers, and especially its consent power, remain its most powerful tools, especially as the EP has developed informal means of control and influence 'under the shadow of assent' and control. On the other hand, parliamentary diplomacy is a complementary tool for the EP but has a limited potential for shaping EU foreign policy, as it mostly allows the parliamentarians to express their visions with foreign counterparts and to get information, and as it seems particularly difficult to put into practice with Russia. Third, the EP still lacks the cohesion necessary to shape EU foreign policy. The emergence of a common foreign policy culture among MEPs will be essential to increasing the EP's ability to push forward positive consensus. Fourth, the EP does act autonomously and has forged itself a specific identity focused on human rights, but this is also a source of weakness because autonomy has turned into isolation. Fifth, the EP is still not fully recognized as an actor shaping EU foreign policy notably because of its autonomous stance and its lack of formal powers.

This thesis therefore suggests that the EP to concentrate on developing its formal powers, on linking its informal means of influence to them and on fostering inter-institutional coordination. Finally, this thesis aims to shed new light on the issue of parliamentary involvement in foreign affairs and on the concept of "parliamentary diplomacy", for which a new definition is proposed.