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Parliamentary Diplomacy as a Helpful Instrument in Foreign Policy

Parliamentary Diplomacy is an important perspective and alternative form of diplomacy, even if not widely studied yet, developed lately by the increasing role of Parliaments and their enrollment in foreign affairs and international relations issues. In general these issues have been considered as an exclusive competence of Foreign Ministries and respective Ministers, including the main role of Prime Minister as the key political actor of the government or executive branch. At the same time, ambassadors or other forms of diplomacy as for example cultural diplomacy are considered the main instruments to develop and promote the international relations between countries. Nevertheless these facts, Parliaments represent a complex and diversified issues relating with the role they play in foreign issues. These competences give the Parliaments an important power in the process of diplomacy or foreign affairs. *Parliamentary diplomacy is the means by which two or more parliaments conduct an ongoing dialogue with regard to key international issues.*¹ Notwithstanding the definition above from AGORA (www.agora-parl.org) the leading global knowledge platform on parliamentary development, the Parliamentary Diplomacy is a more comprehensive issue, as was mentioned above, which includes other aspects as well.

Nowadays, in dealing with various global challenges, I'd like to see the role of Parliaments in the Foreign Policy issues in two fundamental aspects or instruments used by them:

First is related to what is named as **Institutional Diplomacy**. It's very important to emphasize the role of national parliaments during their cooperation process with other parliaments. This is included in the competences of the parliaments or to be more precise regulated through the different bilateral agreements. For example, the Parliament as the highest legislative institution has the right to ratify international treaties, hold important meetings with foreign specialist in different fields where the cooperation and the exchange of expertise is necessary, create mutual committees on specific agendas etc. The speaker of parliament participates in international meetings and conferences in which are discussed important issues. Another active part of parliamentary diplomacy is composed by the *Inter-Parliamentary Relations and Permanent or Temporary Delegations* at the international organizations which represent the Parliament in international relations. For example the Assembly of the Republic of Albania on its Internal Regulation, Article 7, points 3. and 4. regulates this issues as an exclusive competence of the Speaker of the Parliament in close cooperation with the Chairmen of Parliamentary Groups and the Secretariat on Foreign Relations. Albanian Parliament has permanent delegations in important international organizations such as: *European Parliament, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, NATO, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), Inter-Parliamentary Union, The Assembly of the Western European Union, Mediterranean Conference, Center European Initiative, The Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA) and Parliamentary Assembly of La Francophonie.*

¹ <http://www.agora-parl.org/resources/aoe/parliamentaryinstitution/parliamentary-diplomacy> - Paragraph 2, Sentence 1.

At the same time the Foreign Policy Committees which perform their activity within the Parliaments play an important role in their field of competences related to foreign policy, international relations and cooperation, as well as the implementation of international agreements. All these instruments and mechanisms give Parliaments and important role on foreign issues.

Second, in addition to the institutional competences mentioned above that a Parliament may use in the foreign policy sphere, the **diplomatic/lobbying** impact is very important as well. The latest example I can bring to the attention of readers is related with the role of Albanian Parliament (the Assembly of the Republic of Albania) by lobbying for the recognition of Kosovo state, even if many Albanian leaders state that this mission has to be taken by the respective Foreign Affairs Ministries and Ministers. Anyway the Foreign Policy Committee of the Parliament of Albania has tried to be present in all international institutions and levels where it is a member. An active campaign was followed previously by the Speaker of the Parliament to follow further the process of the recognition of the state of Kosovo. Assembly of the Republic of Albania has ratified on 10th May, 2007 – Declaration “On the Status of Kosovo”; 20th November, 2006 – Declaration of the Foreign Policy Committee “On Kosovo”; 21st November, 2005 – Resolution “On Kosovo”.

Following this practice, another important role of the Albanian Parliament in parliamentary diplomacy has been played lately by lobbying for the *status of candidate country*, after the negative decision received by the European Council in December 2013. Some meetings were taken by the Speaker of the Parliament in some of the skeptic European countries, even if the process of the status itself is related with the deep process of reforms in key areas as justice, public administration, economic development, fight against corruption etc. Very essential to be mentioned is the fact that Parliamentary Diplomacy is often accompanied in parallel with public diplomacy. Civil society plays as well an important role in shaping public opinion in countries where required knowledge and access can positively change the broad spectrum of political, economic and social.

It's obvious that the role of Parliaments in the foreign policy sphere is based on the tradition of the parliamentarianism in the respective country. It's very influenced as well by the political stability and the international position of the country in the international arena. Despite of this, Parliaments for all specific features mentioned above are an important instrument in the foreign policy in this globalized world. Especially I want to emphasize the fact that in countries such Albania, considered Parliamentary Republics the role of Parliaments is fundamental in topics such as: ratification of international agreements; representation of the country through the permanent or temporary delegations abroad; the power of the Parliaments to compose and ratify crucial laws in function of different reforms. Member of Parliaments can play an active role not just formally (participating in Parliamentary Committees), but by lobbying systematically on crucial issues of the country (i.e. the European integration of Albania and the Stabilization and Association Process-SAP) and by building-up mutual relations between countries and their representatives. It was notable what Barbara Prammer (President of the National Council of Austria) mentioned during a visit in Belgrade on 2009: *“I believe that contacts among parliamentarians are the next best alternative to direct people-to-people contacts”*.

Despite the fact that in many cases the Parliamentarians has to deal with their voters on domestic and local daily issues or policies and this may make international agenda on foreign issues difficult to be pursued, I think that the role and the participation of Parliaments in the process of diplomacy has to be promoted and encouraged.

I'd like to end this article with a citation from the adopted Resolution of The Second World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments held from September 7-9, 2005, at the UN's headquarters in New York, which was cited by Barbara Prammer as well during her addressing mentioned above: *“We underline that parliaments must be active in international affairs not only through inter-parliamentary cooperation and parliamentary diplomacy, but also by contributing to and monitoring international negotiations, overseeing the enforcement of what is adopted by governments, and ensuring national compliance with international norms and the rule of law. Similarly, parliament must be more vigilant in scrutinizing the activities of international organizations and providing input into their deliberations.”*