

Parliamentary diplomacy

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The role of the Assembly in the structure of the organisation of the Council of Europe is that of a deliberative body that gives opinions, makes recommendations and votes on resolutions. According to the rules of the organisation, draft resolutions and recommendations can be initiated by the Assembly, but then they have to go to the Committee of Ministers that decides about them in accordance with the national governments, delimits their budget and maintains control over their implementation.

However, the impact of the Parliamentary Assembly goes beyond the limited functions described above. I will analyse work in the Assembly here from the point of view of parliamentary diplomacy. The concept itself is not new, it is even used in public presentations of the organisation itself. The main idea is that the 572 Parliamentarians and substitutes from the forty member states can influence and change the political relations between the member countries through improving and establishing a different type of communication than the ministers and ambassadors can who officially represent their country. Parliamentarians are free to say whatever they want. In the committee of Ministers each member state has one vote, while in the Parliamentary Assembly the number of representatives and consequently of votes is determined by the size of the country. The largest number is eighteen, the smallest two. The success of the interactions between Parliamentarians of different countries is crucial to the general success of the diplomatic effort of the Council. Parliamentary diplomacy as a working mechanism has concrete limitations inside the Council of Europe and follows certain strategies that I will attempt to outline.

1. Language as an Instrument of Politics and Communication

The specifics of the influence of language on the interactions in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is that the Assembly is composed of people of different nationalities for whom certain languages are native and others common for communication in the assembly.

There are five working languages in the Parliamentary Assembly: English, French, German, Italian and Russian, what means that there are official translations of the Assembly's sessions into these languages. Consequently, the deputies whose native language is not among the above mentioned, have to chose one of them. The choice of language used is also a demonstration of geopolitical interests represented by the speaker and his country. Obviously, this choice is also limited by the kind of languages the Parliamentarian knows. The

"geopolitical choice" is especially evident in the example of representatives from countries of Eastern and Central Europe. For example, English is the language of choice for deputies from Moldavia, Slovakia, Croatia, Azerbaijan, Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary and Poland; French the one for deputies from Bulgaria and Romania; German for Macedonia.

The choice of the English language by the deputies of the new member-states can be explained as a demonstration of intentions to join to the "world community". The language is a symbol of neutrality and "internationality". The use of French by Bulgarian and Rumanian delegations demonstrates the traditional geopolitical orientation of these countries on France. But for our analysis the "non-choice" of Russian is more important. This is a demonstrative refusal of a political orientation on Russia. Only Ukrainian delegates use Russian during sessions, thereby demonstrating political solidarity and close relations with the Russian delegation.

In interviews with Russian Parliamentarians we were told that representatives from many countries speak Russian very well in informal contacts. One of them told us "All delegates from Baltic states speak Russian, especially if they need something from us". German Parliamentarians told us that they are sure that delegates from Eastern and Central Europe read all materials and documents in the Russian version because they know this language better than any other, but hide this fact during the sessions. This situation demonstrates the new political affiliations and stresses the end of political alliances with Russia.

Another interesting linguistic aspect of the study of the Assembly is the role of language as the mediator of communication. Researching this issue, we can observe two key factors of influence:

Firstly, language proficiency determines and restricts informal communications outside the very short and intensive sessions of the Assembly. As the time for discussion of every question on the program is limited, the mayor part of the discussions and the coordination of political positions happen through informal communication during brakes, meals and parties. Informal discussions, however, are only possible if there is a common language.

Secondly, without good knowledge of a language a person feels uncomfortable and "psychologically" comprehends his/her status as low, which is especially visible if communicating with a native-speaker. The last one always dominates in such a situation. This factor works during both plenary sessions and informal interactions. Significantly, during the summer session of 1998, for instance, the Turkish delegation used translators in the debate of the Kurdish problems. In certain situations during informal communication parliamentarians ask their colleagues to translate. After the end of the Committee's session for instance a Russian parliamentarian without knowledge of European languages asked a Slovak colleague to be mediator between her and the President (Chairperson) of the Committee.

2.Tensions between National, European, and Political Interests

The Council of Europe is based on the idea of forming a common European identity and

culture. Ideally the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council is not a place for defending national and political interests but a place to express European values and to form a European context. In order to weaken the feeling of national solidarity parliamentarians sit in alphabetical order during the plenary sessions.

However, it is obvious that the international Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is a forum of choice to express geopolitical interests of the countries. The question arises to what extent do parliamentarians see "European" interests in accordance with their specific national interests. One possible way to answer this question is to observe an identification with Europe as expressed in the speeches of the delegates. The analysis of debates shows that parliamentarians who represent so called "Western Europe", i.e. countries who are old members of the organisation, express their position in terms of "we, the Council", "we, Europe". They demonstrate their participation in the creation of a new Europe, in the forming of its image, and turn it from a geographical concept to a political reality.

The representatives of the new national delegations formulate ideas in terms of "you, the Council" and "we, the country". They see the institution as having its own separate interests which may however influence their national positions. They understand the organisation as a place for solving national problems and as a mediator between them and other countries. Parliamentarians from the countries who are new members, see Europe as a reality which already exists objectively and which they cannot influence or change.

Of course, the identification with Europe or the delimitation from it depends on the context of the situation too. Obviously, defending national interests becomes more important for parliamentarians during discussions which are closely connected with political interests of their countries, but there are less direct and visible correlation with the topics of discussion. For instance, in the discussion of the problem of Kurdish minorities Turkey protected its own national (not organisational or pan-European) interests; so did Russia during the session discussing the results of its monitoring and Lithuania during the report of the monitoring committee.

However, the protection and lobbying of national interests show also in more hidden forms. Before the "Kurdish" session the Polish delegation had an informal meeting with the Turkish one, where something like an "informal agreement" was reached. Polish Parliamentarians promised Turkey support during the debates in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in case that Turkey supports Poland in all European organisations, making its chances to become a member of the NATO and other European institutions higher. Thus, we can see that these contacts are beyond the frames of organisational problematic and are closely connected with a general European geopolitical process.

Looking through such informal national alliances, in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe we can define the following alliances: between Baltic countries (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia), between East European countries looking for a maximum economic

integration with Western European countries and separation from the former "partner" - Russia. There is also a mutual support between Bulgaria and Greece based on their contradictions with Turkey and so forth. In general, the Parliamentary Assembly reflects these geopolitical tendencies.

However, the position of Parliamentarians can not only be interpreted in the frame of European or national interests. There is a third dimension - a political one. In order to develop a non-national European outlook, the formation of political groups has been encouraged and from 1964 onwards they were granted certain rights within the rules of Procedure. In the Parliamentary Assembly there are five official political groups and each representative from the national delegations is free to choose the group he/she wants to join. The groups formulate their own position on the discussed questions. In general, the role of political groups increased lately and, probably, it will continue to grow. For instance, the recently formed and politically important Monitoring Committee was constituted on the basis of political groups, and not on the national principle. The result of the choice became clear already during the first meetings of the Committee: the Socialists unsatisfied with the results of the monitoring report on Russia produced an additional report of their own. The Bureau of the Assembly, in order to escape possible rough comments of socialists during the session on this question, tried to let them speak up as little as possible.

During the interviews some Parliamentarians mentioned rumours that procedural changes are envisaged that would attribute time for speech on the basis of belonging to a political group and the number of members in it. Such change would be profitable for the Socialists and Social Democrats, which were the biggest political groups in the Parliamentary Assembly in June 1998. In general, the influence of Socialists is very significant in the Parliamentary Assembly currently. It is reflected in the general political position of the Assembly, in the choice of topics for discussion and in the sphere of interests of the organisation.

3. The Influence of Status for the Success of Parliamentary Diplomacy

The idea of the Parliamentary Diplomacy is based on the assumption that Parliamentarians, who take part in the Assembly's sessions, can influence the opinions of Parliamentarians in national Parliaments and their ability to influence the situation in their countries. Consequently, it is important who represents a country. If the delegation consists of influential deputies, the effectiveness of Parliamentary Diplomacy increases. Taking into consideration this fact we began to ask Parliamentarians about the importance of work in the Council of Europe for them and the political authorisation for their national delegations.

We can conclude that the status of parliamentarians - members of the delegations - is higher if the country is less integrated into Europe. Thus, members of the Russian delegation are the leaders of all political parties. Zyuganov and Zhirinovski are members of the Parliamentary Assembly. The members of the delegation understand work at the Assembly as very serious, important and time consuming. As Russian parliamentarians told us in the interviews, the participation in the Assembly brings good results. They can get there experience of problem solving, form a new political image of the country, break old stereotypes, and find moral

support for the reforms which are being conducted in the country.

A different idea of the effectiveness of the work in the Assembly have members from the Polish delegation, who see it as less politically important. The possible explanation is that this country is already more integrated into Europe. By the time of the research they expected the decision about an acceptance into NATO and the European Union. Membership in the organisation, according to their view, is a matter of political prestige but nothing very significant. Polish parliamentarians had difficulties of defining the effect of their work in the Assembly.

Representatives of the Austrian delegation expressed the idea of implementing values in the Council. They see themselves as the mentors for the new members whom they intend to teach democracy and market economic policy. They see the Council as a place not for constructing a new common Europe, but rather as a place for "tutorials" organised by "the West" for "the East".