On the Normalization of Sub-State Diplomacy

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Received: 2 June 2009; revised: 25 October 2009; accepted: 30 November 2009

Summary
Against conventional approaches that tend to minimize the importance of sub-state diplomacy, this article argues that this reality is presently undergoing a process of legal and political normalization throughout the world and deserves greater attention from both diplomatic practitioners and experts. This process, which is embedded in wider structural transformations, is driven simultaneously by two competing forces that are present in virtually all states: first, international mobilization of sub-state governments themselves, since they increasingly pursue relevant political objectives in the international field through their own methods and instruments; and second, the various attempts to limit and control that activism deployed by central governments through various legal and political instruments. After a brief discussion on the notion of normalization in critical social theory and its validity for diplomatic studies, this article examines the normalization of sub-state diplomacy through four, closely interconnected conceptual lenses: normalization as generalization; normalization as regionalization; normalization as reflective adaptation; and, finally, normalization as contentious regulation. Normalization enables the diplomatic system to operate in an increasingly complex environment while simultaneously affirming its own hierarchical structure. The limits of that normalization process, as well as its wider implications for diplomatic theory and practice, are also discussed.

Keywords
diplomacy, sub-state, paradiplomacy, constituent units, foreign relations, normalization, international socialization

Introduction
Although rarely spectacular, neither in form nor content, the international activism of sub-state governments is rapidly growing across the world, discreetly transforming diplomatic routines and foreign policy machineries. The institutional contours and political relevance of that reality have been extensively studied over recent decades from the point of view of disciplines as diverse as international law,\(^1\)

\(^1\) See Luigi Di Marzo, Component Units of Federal States and International Agreements (Alphen aan den Rijn: Sijthoff & Nordhoff, 1980); Renaud J. Dehousse, Federalisme et relations internationales (Brussels: Bruylant, 1991); and Manuel Pérez-González (ed.), La acción exterior de los länder, regiones y comunidades autónomas (Oñati: IVAP-HAEE, 1994).
international relations and comparative politics, and international political economy. In contrast, specialists in diplomatic studies have only exceptionally considered sub-state interventions in the international realm as noteworthy. Reflecting on that situation in one of his innovative contributions to the field, and after careful examination of existing sub-state diplomatic activities in the Nordic space, Neumann convincingly pointed out that this issue deserves closer attention by practitioners or scholars concerned with coherence between diplomatic practices and conventional diplomatic discourses.

Literature on sub-state diplomacy has never attracted mainstream attention in diplomatic studies, nor in the field of international relations, but it has become the subject of intense scholarly debate. Initially, the most influential works were more descriptive than explanatory in content. They identified the many international strategies implemented by diverse sub-state governments in areas as diverse as foreign trade and investment, tourism promotion, environmental protection and human security, as well as in other social or cultural domains. However, in addition to these basically descriptive accounts, the most influential literature in the field has always concentrated specific attention on the way in which decentralization of international relations, as sub-state diplomacy implies, may affect conventional understanding of diplomacy as an exclusive dominion of sovereign states.

Following pioneering work in the field by Duchacek and Soldatos, this phenomenon has frequently been described as ‘paradiplomacy’. Although the conceptual validity of this notion has often been questioned, paradiplomacy can be defined in simple terms as:

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