Chapter 5

The International Role of the European Parliament’s Intergroups

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Introduction

In addition to its Committee on Foreign Affairs, the European Parliament utilizes other means to strengthen its international action with respect to current affairs. An international presence is part of the European Parliament’s identity, with its numerous delegations for relations with third countries or regions\(^1\) and the now well-established annual Sakharov Prize.\(^2\) At the same time, apart from its right of consent to international agreements, the European Parliament’s competences remain restricted because European Union (EU) foreign policy continues to be a quasi-exclusive prerogative of the EU member states.

Nevertheless, the European Parliament is important on the international scene, given that its elected members include former foreign or prime ministers with significant experience in world affairs. This demonstrates that the personal dimension of the work of the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) is essential when one wishes to analyse the external relations of the European Parliament.\(^3\) In any definition of parliamentary diplomacy, the role of individual parliamentarians is crucial, because their personal contacts are necessary to establish different channels, rather than in traditional diplomacy where any parliament has limited powers and resources. This is especially so in the context of the European Parliament.\(^4\) One way to analyse this personal dimension of parliamentarians’ work is to select prominent

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3. See the chapter by Luigi Gianniti and Nicola Lupo, ‘The Role of the European Parliament President in Parliamentary Diplomacy’ in this volume.
personalities. Another way, which this chapter follows, is to examine intergroups in the European Parliament as separate actors in parliamentary diplomacy activities, such as ‘dialogue, mediation and persuasion’.5

Topics addressed by intergroups are typically more concretely defined than those of committees or delegations, and are less directly linked to the EU agenda. In addition, the requirement of an agreement between at least three political groups (which is necessary for the creation a European Parliament intergroup), as well as a general limitation on the total number of such structures, show that the themes chosen are important and must attract the actual interest of a large number of MEPs.

The academic literature on intergroups and on the external dimension of their activities is rather limited.6 This chapter seeks to fill this gap and examines the official statements and intergroup documents to illustrate the role that they play in the European Parliament’s external action. First, this chapter defines what intergroups are and presents the historical development of their external functions. Second, it examines their role after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. It then analyses intergroup activities conducted during the eighth term of the European Parliament, along with examples from previous legislatures. This chapter shows that intergroups complement the external dimension of EU action. This is done by analysing the involvement of individual MEPs and civil-society associations, and determining whether any influence is traceable to the formal work of the European Parliament through its reports, resolutions, or parliamentary questions. Finally, the analysis examines the extent to which intergroups participate in the European Parliament’s international affairs.

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