

Democracy Support and the European Parliament

Written by Giuliano Guidi Braga

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GIULIANO GUIDI BRAGA, OCT 13 2024

Deemed by the European Union's (EU) institutional structure and the literature as a moral tribune, the European Parliament takes the reigns of democracy as a referential point when developing an international presence via its parliamentary diplomacy. Placed as the major representative of democracy in the EU apparatus due to its direct elections, the Parliament produces resolutions on a plethora of international issues, including the state of democracy. Despite the effort of producing resolutions, organizing electoral observation missions and awarding democratic leaderships, approaches on democracy support in the EU still maintain the focus on the other institutions and overlook the role of the Parliament on the matter. This short and quick piece aims to shed some light on the ongoing actions of the Parliament as a democracy promoter.

Filled with an executive privilege, the analysis of foreign policy developments within the EU regard mainly the role of the coordination between member states through the Council, and the role of the Commission through the Lisbon created European External Action Service (EEAS). Seeing the Parliament as an institution that only begs for more formal participation while playing in the narrow lines of its foreign policy actions within the treaties, leads the reader to disregard a very rich dataset of documents produced by the Parliament on foreign policy. A sign of the dominance of this approach is the overlooking of the Parliament as a democracy supporter in cases outside of the EU. Analyses on EU democracy promotion consider decisions taken by the member-states or the Commission as the sole identity of such policy.

Scholars on EU policy and parliamentary studies have majestically dealt with the first gap on the disregard of the Parliament on Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). For example, one of the aims of literature on the Parliamentary Diplomacy of the Parliament is to shed some light on the issue, focusing the analyses on topics such as the participation of the Parliament in the CFSP and the inter-parliamentary relations with other regional parliaments. The challenge here remains to address the role of the Parliament as a democracy supporter and highlighting the instruments of democracy support can help visualize this point.

Within the bureaucracy of the European Parliament, when focusing on democracy support, it is important to highlight the role of the Democracy Support and Electoral Coordination Group (DEG) as a bureau to organize the works and the data on the state of democracy in the EU and beyond. Taking electoral democracy as a reference and developing a so-called comprehensive approach, the Parliament consolidates the issue as a significant area. To exemplify the democracy support by the Parliament, I highlight two instruments: the resolutions and the Sakharov Prize.

Resolutions are the main document produced by the meetings of the Parliament, being legally binding when approved by a majority of the MEPs. The richness in the texts of the resolutions provide a set of interesting and useful data for research. Analyzing which measures the MEPs decide to implement on a case is a way to trace their course of action regarding some issues. The content of the text can also bring some insightful data possibly highlighting a strategy of support or of naming and shaming. For democracy support, resolutions can point to the visions of the MEPs on the state of democracy in a country, which elements they consider to be problematic and which leaderships to be named and shamed or to be named and praised. Voting procedures for resolutions also crystalizes more data on political or national divisions over matters approved in the Parliament. Resolutions, for example, on the case of Venezuela, can also present a support of a decision on sanctions by the Council when a violation of democracy is identified by the Parliament.

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Complementing the resolutions, another instrument developed by the Parliament to declare an open support for democracy and, more specifically, to democratic leaderships is the Sakharov Prize. Not only the final choice of the laureate but also the shortlist of the three finalists to the prize state the positioning of the political groups on chosen democratic leaderships. The process involves a nomination of a candidate for the prize by each political group of the Parliament and the final voting requires the choice by all groups and the Parliament's president. Choosing the laureate also demonstrates how the state of democracy in the person's country is important for the Parliament and how the political coordination between groups minimally agree on the matter. Continuing the example of Venezuela, the democratic opposition was awarded on 2017 amidst the growing attention by the Parliament towards the country with the de-democratization of Maduro's government.

Some emblematic cases can serve as illustrations of the use of these instruments such as, apart from the beforementioned case of Venezuela, the case of Nicaragua and Bolivia bringing also some fruitful discussions on the employment of them. It is important to highlight that these are not the only instruments used by the Parliament but are only two of them. Others not contemplated in this piece regard the participation in Electoral Observation Missions and the budgetary influence within the EU. Resolutions, being the main legal tool of the Parliament, is the instrument with the biggest legal impact on the competencies of the Parliament according to the treaties of the EU. The case of the Sakharov Prize being considered a democracy support instrument can be the main contribution of this piece in terms of looking at a nomination and a laureate that represents a statement on the state of democracy in a country.

After this brief discussion on the two instruments of the European Parliament for democracy support, we can identify that the institution is active on the issue of democracy in the world. The reach of its actions can be limited by the dispositions in the treaties, but as the literature on parliamentary diplomacy highlights, the Parliament has been creative in developing instruments to send its message. Mainly through its resolutions, but also through other measures such as awarding the Sakharov Prize, the Parliament is sensitive to the comings and goings in democracy worldwide, paying particular attention to the rise of challengers and to the drivers of autocratization.

About the author:

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