



Focus

Parliament's Protocol Service - mission impossible?

There are not many places in the world where you find as many official invitees and working visitors as at the European Parliament. The EP often receives Heads of State during its plenary sessions and meeting rooms and corridors in Strasbourg and Brussels bustle with prime ministers, ministers, MPs and diplomats from all over the world. None of this would be possible without the EP's professional and well-oiled Protocol Service.

The Protocol Service helps the European Parliament President, MEPs, the Secretary General and other Parliament bodies on issues of protocol from official visits from Heads of State who are addressing the plenary, to working or courtesy visits and meetings of joint committees and delegations. The Service makes arrangements, with his office, for the President's official visits, and provides MEPs with visas for missions outside the EU.

The head of the Protocol Service, François Brunagel, has a team of 13 staff who divide their time between "meeting and greeting", drafting and arranging programmes, setting up and attending receptions, sorting out access to EP buildings, securing visas, planning menus, managing official gifts as well as dealing with finances.

In 2005 the Protocol Service received 113 visits (5 of them official), sent 8178 invitations and handled 980 requests for visas. Since the EU enlarged in 2004 to 25 countries and the number of MEPs grew from 626 to 732, the Parliament's external relations activities have increased considerably. The demand for visas has grown exponentially from a total of 571 in 2004, and the service has 2 people working almost full time on visas requests.

Red carpets not red faces

The most important events for the Protocol Service are the official visits by heads of state. Preparation and extreme precision is required. The guests and their delegations are collected at the airport by the Head of Protocol, accompanied by the police and officially welcomed by the President of the European Parliament at the entrance of the EP. And, of course, there must always be a red carpet. As an attentive host, the Parliament has to know a guest's food preferences, whether they smoke or not, even if they will use stairs or a lift.

The Protocol Service usually coordinates visits with the guest's protocol service months in advance. Unforeseen changes mostly concern timing or the composition of the delegation and are not very difficult to deal with. More complicated was the recent visit by the President of the Palestinian National Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. He came twice in two consecutive Strasbourg plenary sessions, since he had to disrupt his first visit because of a domestic crisis. Of course, the programme had to be repeated and the red carpet rolled out again.

The Parliament has to accommodate European and national protocol. At a national level the Head of State is the first protocol authority but according to the European Treaties the European Parliament is ranked the first institution of the EU, before the Council and the Commission. It means that its President precedes all the national and European authorities at European level. This might become difficult when several institutions are present. The institutions' heads of protocol therefore meet regularly to thrash out a common EU approach on certain issues like ceremony or, for example, making sure that the same flags (European or national) fly at half mast at the same time.

"Unofficial" visits, working visits, photo opportunities and courtesy calls mean less formality and less work for the Protocol Service, although the same courtesy and detailed attention has to be paid to every guest. Besides, the ministers of EU member states aren't formally guests, since they are representatives of the Council.

Gifts and presents

The days when sovereigns showered each other with precious presents are gone, but the gesture of gift exchange remains a symbol of friendship between people and countries. The exchange of presents is a reality of almost every official visit and it falls to the protocol service to organise. Gifts can go to heads of states or to drivers of the delegations, so they range from a humble pen or key ring to more prestigious gifts. Finding the balance can be difficult. Gifts from the President and the Chairs of delegations represent European unity and cultural diversity; still, they must be neutral in order not to upset national or religious sensitivities.

Every president of the EP adds his personal touch to gifts. Josep Borrell offers his counterparts a crystal cup created by a Barcelona artist with parts of the Charter of Fundamental Rights engraved on it. Books and scarves with reproductions of Spanish artist Joan Miró also feature among his gifts.

Unfortunately, there cannot be too much spontaneity in the gift-giving. Gifts are planned well ahead, as long public calls for tenders are required to acquire the future gifts of the EP. This means that Protocol Service has to plan 3-4 years in advance. A much reduced special budget for unexpected gifts leaves some room for manoeuvre.

The President and Chairs of delegations also receive gifts from foreign delegations, ranging from constitutions to paintings and statues, which belong to the Institution, and are often displayed in public areas of the Parliament.

And yes, gifts do get broken or even lost when travelling. Then a discreet communication with the protocol service of the other party helps to avoid misunderstandings. Not even the most scrupulous work by Protocol and Delegation staff can avert all mishaps. On one occasion a Chair of an EP delegation gave an empty box to a counterpart, as the medal fell out of the box during the trip!

Attention to detail and creativity count

Mr Brunagel is diplomatic enough to say that there are no difficult visitors, but there can be difficult situations. For example, the President of the EP was planning to present a piece of antique chinaware to US President Ronald Reagan. However, the US Security service wanted to examine the gift ahead of the ceremony, which was unacceptable to the EP President. Happily, the presidents managed to exchange gifts away from the eyes of American security service.

Every visitor is unique, and this has to be taken into account for visits to run smoothly. For example, the protocol services of monarchs are usually more rigid than others, says Mr Brunagel. Nevertheless, languages open doors, and attention to small details makes a real difference when dealing with any high-level guest. "If a President is known to like a specific whisky in a specific glass, paying attention to this will surely make his day," said Mr Brunagel.

The staff really has to be creative and able to improvise, for example cutting up towels and heating them in the microwave to provide wet hot napkins for a visitor, knowing where to find an extra pair of stockings or trying to keep visitors on track in the labyrinthine EP buildings in Strasbourg and Brussels. Cultural differences such as sense of time have to be taken into account. Some people drop their official agenda to catch up with an EU official who happens to be passing, or are keen to get some tourism in. But these are exceptions. "We haven't had diplomatic incidents so far," said Mr Brunagel.

But how do they manage it, this multitude of details? "A lot of it is customary rules, experience and common sense," Mr Brunagel explains. Though guide books on titles and etiquette exist, there is no rulebook for European etiquette - which varies from country to country. Mr Brunagel's team meets every half a year with heads of protocol of the Member States to discuss technical matters such as visas. Not every EU-Member has long established rules on protocol and the size of the Member States' diplomatic services varies greatly.