

Meeting of the Secretaries General of the European Union Parliaments

Minutes of the videoconference on 6 February 2023

On Monday, 6 February 2023, the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic hosted a Meeting of the Secretaries General of the European Union Parliaments, which was held as a videoconference. The meeting was co-chaired by Mr Martin PLÍŠEK, Secretary General of the Chamber of Deputies and Mr Jiří KRBEC, Director of the Foreign Relations Department of the Senate.

The event was preceded by a Meeting of the Secretaries General Troika, attended by representatives from the Slovenian, Czech and Spanish parliaments, as well as from the European Parliament. The Troika members discussed relevant matters concerning the agendas of the Meeting of the Secretaries General, the Conference of Speakers of EU Parliaments, and IPEX related matters.

Opening of the session and welcoming addresses

The meeting was opened by Mr KRBEC who welcomed the participants and extended sincere apologies from the Senate's Secretary General, Ms Jana VOHRALÍKOVÁ, who could not attend the meeting as she was leaving her post to become the Head of the Office of the newly elected President of the Czech Republic, Mr Petr PAVEL. Mr KRBEC went on to introduce new Secretaries General, Mr Martin PLÍŠEK, Secretary General of the Czech Chamber of Deputies, Mr Alessandro CHIOCCHETTI, Secretary General of the European Parliament, Mr Michael SCHÄFER, Secretary General of the German Bundestag, Mr Fabrizio CASTALDI from the Italian Chamber of Deputies, Ms Monika KIRBIŠ ROJS from the Slovenian National Council and Mr Geert Jan HAMILTON from the Dutch House of Representatives.

The introduction was followed by welcoming addresses (videomessages) by leaders of both Chambers of the Czech Parliament. Mr Miloš VYSTRČIL, President of the Senate, who invited the participants to the Conference of Speakers to be held in Prague in April and reassured the Secretaries General that their remarks and suggestions regarding the programme of the Conference would be thoroughly taken into account. The Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Ms Markéta PEKAROVÁ ADAMOVÁ appreciated the work of Secretaries General of both Chambers of the Czech parliament during the Parliamentary Dimension of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, facing unprecedented security and economic challenges. As concerns the upcoming Conference of Speakers, she mentioned that a gathering of female Speakers was planned upon her invitation on the eve of the Conference.

Adoption of the agenda of the meeting

Mr PLÍŠEK began his intervention by presenting the draft agenda of the Secretaries General Meeting. The agenda included the traditional items of discussion on the draft programme of the Conference of Speakers, information on the activities of the IPEX platform and presentation of the Parliamentary Dimension of the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU, as well as items that the Czech Presidency considered important to deal with. This was, in particular, an exchange of experience as regards the involvement of parliamentary administrations in activities for promotion of democracy and the related presentation of the INTER PARES

project, in which most of the parliaments had been involved in some way. Furthermore, Mr PLÍŠEK stated that there would be an exchange of experience on the adoption of energy-saving measures in parliaments in the context of the energy crisis caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Since there were no objections, the programme was adopted.

Session I - Presentation of the draft programme of the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments

Mr KRBEC presented the draft programme of the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments (EUSC), which would be held on 24 and 25 April 2023 in Prague, pointing out that an event for female Speakers upon invitation of Ms Markéta PEKAROVÁ ADAMOVIČ was planned for 23 April. The EUSC would start by Meeting of the Troika (Slovenia, Czech Republic, Spain and the European Parliament) on 24 April at 11:30 am. The Czech Prime Minister, Mr Petr FIALA was expected to deliver one of the opening speeches, followed by the welcome addresses of both Speakers of the Czech Parliament. The first topic of the Conference would be “Russian aggression against Ukraine and the EU response in a broader geopolitical context which may cover broad range of issues like EU enlargement, energy security or post-war reconstruction”. The speech of the special guest, Ruslan STEFANCHUK, Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, was expected, with a hope to welcome the Ukrainian delegation in Prague in person. The first day of the Conference would be concluded by a gala dinner reception. On 25 April, the second session on the “Role of the EU in global cooperation of democracies and the issue of EU member states’ dependence on totalitarian regimes” had been scheduled. Again, this topic aimed to inspire participants to debate wide range of issues like information warfare, disinformation, security of supply chains, strategic autonomy etc. The meeting would be closed by adoption of final Conclusions drafted by the Presidency. The registration would be opened between 1 and 31 March. Finally, the Conference venue, Prague Congress Centre, was shortly presented, together with the information on Conference hotels.

In the subsequent debate, Mr Remco NEHMELMAN, Secretary General of the Dutch Senate, requested that the preliminary remark about the neutral position of the Dutch Parliament was included in the upcoming EUSC Conclusions, with reference to Article 5.1 of the Stockholm Guidelines. Mr Harald DOSSI, Secretary General of Austrian parliament, and Mr Adam NIEMCZEWSKI, Secretary General of the Polish Senate, expressed the interest of their respective Speakers, Mr Wolfgang SOBOTKA, Speaker of the Austrian National Council, and Mr Tomasz GRODZKI, Marshall of the Polish Senate, to deliver keynote speeches in Session II of the Conference. Finally, Ms Agnieszka KACZMARSKA, Secretary General of the Polish Sejm, indicated interest of Ms Elżbieta WITEK, Marshall of the Sejm, to deliver a keynote speech for Session I of the Conference.

Session II - Information exchange between the Parliaments

Part one - IPEX

Ms Zore TAVČAR, Secretary General of the Slovenian National Assembly, provided an overview of the work done by the Slovenian Chairmanship of the IPEX Board. She highlighted that the Slovenian Chairmanship focused on the implementation of tasks set up by the IPEX Rolling Work Program 2021-2023, raising awareness of the role of IPEX within interparliamentary cooperation and ensuring the technical accuracy, accessibility and reliability

of IPEX. She gave an overview of the IPEX meetings held during the Slovenian Chairmanship, including the National Correspondents meeting in Ljubljana at the end of October 2022. She briefly summarized the work done by working groups that had been active during their Chairmanship, i.e., Working Group on Content, Working Group on Promotion and Social Media, Working group on Training and two working groups outside the scope of the Rolling Work programme (Working Group on IPEX Guidelines and Steering Group for IPEX v3). Additionally, she mentioned the strengthening of cooperation with the Democracy Support Network and encouraged national Parliaments to update all relevant information and share it via IPEX website and network. Slovenian Chairmanship also invited the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina to join IPEX. Slovenian Chairmanship already received a Letter of Intent from the Parliament of Moldova to appoint their IPEX Correspondent. She also thanked the Portuguese Parliament for their willingness to organise the IPEX Users Conference in spring 2023.

Ms TAVČAR recalled that the need for the revision of IPEX Guidelines in relation to the launch of IPEX v3 and its new functionalities was mentioned in the IPEX Conclusions adopted by the Secretaries General in 2022. Slovenian Chairmanship took this task seriously and made it one of their priorities. Therefore, the Slovenian Chairmanship had set up the above-mentioned Working Group on IPEX Guidelines. After long and difficult discussions, the Working Group reached a consensus on a proposal for new IPEX Guidelines in December 2022. The proposal of the new IPEX Guidelines was endorsed by the IPEX Board in January 2023. Subsequently, she briefly presented the proposal for the revised IPEX Guidelines and asked for their approval.

Mr KRBEČ thanked all members of the Working Group on IPEX Guidelines for the job done. Since there were no objections from any chamber, the new IPEX Guidelines were approved. Subsequently, Ms TAVČAR presented the draft of IPEX Conclusions prepared by the Slovenian Chairmanship. No representatives from EU parliaments expressed the desire to join the IPEX Board and did not propose amendments to the IPEX Conclusions, meaning the IPEX Conclusions were adopted.

During the debate, Mr Fabrizio CASTALDI, Secretary General of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, thanked the Slovenian Chairmanship for its work and highlighted also the work done by the working groups. He also expressed the willingness of the Italian Chamber of Deputies to organise the next IPEX Users Conference in the year of 2024 and thanked the Portuguese Parliament for the organisation of the conference in the year of 2023. Mr Gert VAN DER BIESEN, Secretary General of the Belgian Senate, informed Secretaries General about the current situation regarding the financing of the IPEX Information Officer (IO). He pointed out that the total cost of the IO amounted approximately to 98.000 EUR in last year (2022) and thus approached the maximum amount of 100.000 EUR per year that had been set by the Secretaries General for financing the post of the IPEX Officer. According to the projection of the Belgian Senate, the cost of the IO for the year 2023 would exceed 107.000 EUR (amount without travel expenses) due to the high inflation and mandatory indexations of wages in Belgium which would be probably implemented. He, therefore, proposed that the Belgian Senate would send to all participating parliaments amended Letters of Intent for the years 2023 and 2024 with the new amount of 120.000 EUR that should cover the cost of the IO, including the travel costs.

In conclusion, Mr KRBEČ thanked the Slovenian Chairmanship for the excellent work done and the IPEX Officer, Mr Calin RACOTI, for his valuable contribution to the functioning of the IPEX platform.

Part two - Role of Parliaments in promoting parliamentary democracy in the world, INTER PARES project

Mr PLÍŠEK explained that this topic had been included on the agenda to encourage the involvement of parliamentary administrations in activities for promotion of democracy and thus to take advantage of the unique expertise that parliaments have to support parliamentary democracy in the world. These activities were becoming an integral part of the daily work of parliamentary administrations. The Office of the Chamber of Deputies attached great importance to them: The Chamber of Deputies itself was a beneficiary of parliamentary support projects in the 1990s as part of the political and economic transformation of Czechoslovakia and then, before 2004, as part of the Czech Republic's accession process to the European Union. These days, the Office of the Chamber of Deputies had expertise that had been recognised and appreciated by the main international actors in the field of parliamentary development cooperation. As the level of involvement had been growing, so did the need to coordinate activities with each other and to strengthen the exchange of information and best practices between parliaments to ensure that these activities were as effective as possible. In this context, the European Parliament's initiative to set up a network of EU parliamentary officials focused on activities for promotion of democracy and to dedicate space for information sharing on the IPEX platform was very welcomed.

According to Mr PLÍŠEK, the need to coordinate activities and share timely information was also evident in the context of the current efforts of EU parliaments to provide support to the Parliament of Ukraine. In September 2022, the Chamber of Deputies signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Parliament of Ukraine at the level of Speakers of Parliaments, committing to provide all available support to the Parliament of Ukraine. To date, experts from the Office of the Chamber of Deputies had already organised 6 webinars for the Parliament of Ukraine. In this context, efforts of parliaments of Austria and Croatia as regards consulting and sharing of information on the preparation of further activities for the Parliament of Ukraine were much appreciated.

A brief description of the INTER PARES project was presented by Mr Jonathan MURPHY, Head of the programme. The aim of the project, funded by the European Commission, was to support building stronger parliaments around the world by sharing the rich expertise of EU parliaments with their counterparts in the emerging democracies. The programme started in 2019. Currently, the second phase of the activities was running until the end of 2024. The co-operation, based on peer-to-peer approach, was taking part both on political and administrative level. So far, 23 EU parliaments had contributed to the project, helping 15 partner parliaments to develop new procedures, tools and practices.

Three case studies, showing how the peer-to-peer model works in practice, was offered by Ms Ingrid WALKER, INTER PARES Senior programme officer. First, she mentioned the partnership project between the Czech Parliamentary institute (Office of the Chamber of Deputies) and the National Assembly of Malawi, focused on budgetary oversight, research, communication and civic education. The second case study described partnership between the

National Assembly and the Senate of the Ivory Coast and parliaments of France, Sweden and Germany aimed at developing guidelines on evaluation of public policies, legislative drafting and the amendment procedure. Finally, the project of interparliamentary cooperation between the National Assembly of Malaysia and a larger group of EU parliaments (Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Ireland, Sweden and Italy) focused on gender specific law making was presented.

Ms Eva ÖSTLUND, INTER PARES Senior parliamentary advisor, explained, in her brief presentation, the possibilities for the national Parliaments to get involved in the project, which just started its second phase. Calls for partnerships were being launched at the moment. Parliaments were free to choose the area of policy in which they would like to share the knowledge. The administration and logistics were provided by INTER PARES, which also covered all direct costs of the partnership.

In the debate, the participants highly appreciated the INTER PARES project, briefly described the involvement of their respective chambers in particular partnerships and declared their preparedness to continue their support of an active involvement in the project. Namely, they valued the logistic and financial support enabling the parliaments, even those with limited administrative and budgetary resources, to take part in the project. In the world where majority of people did not live in a democratic system, it was extremely important to foster activities to support countries undergoing democratic transition. After all, it was not only the addressees of this assistance but also the EU parliaments themselves who benefited from these exchanges. Finally, the delegations called for better co-ordination of the project to avoid overlaps and duplications.

Session III – Energy Crisis: Impact on activities of Parliaments, energy saving measures, exchange of experience and best practices

Mr PLÍŠEK started the exchange of best practices on this topic by mentioning specific measures adopted by the Office of the Chamber of Deputies to reduce energy consumption of parliamentary buildings to cope with severe impact of the energy crisis: replacement of conventional light bulbs by LED lights, installing of less energy consuming appliances; installing of movement sensors in toilets and corridors, introduction of special working rules (home offices), shortening of daily regime for heating, reduction of temperatures in all types of premises, raising of temperatures of central air-conditioning, reduction of temperature in water heaters in toilets and kitchens; employees have been asked to switch off all appliances when leaving the offices.

Mr CHIOCCETTI confirmed, as a newly appointed Secretary General of the European Parliament, his willingness to continue good co-operation with the national Parliaments and strengthen it even further. In his keynote speech, he described measures adopted in the European Parliament to reduce energy consumption. The energy bills in the EP nearly quadrupled in 2022. To overcome this situation, the EP Bureau adopted two sets of energy-saving measures in May and October 2022, aimed at decreasing the indoor lighting, reducing the exterior illumination of buildings, lowering the maximum heating to 19 °C, raising minimum cooling temperature to 25 °C, turning off heating as of Thursday evening, optimising of energy consumption equipment (air filters), increasing the temperature for IT server rooms from 16 to 20 °C. These measures did not affect the EP's activities. The MEPs showed a high

degree of acceptance of these measures, although complaints about low temperature occasionally occurred. The reduction of CO₂ emissions amounted to about 4 000 tons. In budgetary terms, the reduction in energy consumption was 14,8% which corresponds to about 3.4 mil. EUR of cost savings in 2022. The electricity consumption alone decreased by 6,5% in the period between May and December 2022, compared to the same period in 2021. The gas consumption decreased by 47%. The EP was then working on turning these immediate measures into medium and long-term ones. For instance, the lighting was replaced by LED technology. The Renovation Master Plan was being prepared to move towards energy efficient and zero emission buildings, which would mean a complete refurbishing of some of the buildings in the possession of the EP, in order to meet the standard. At the annual meeting of the Environmental exchange network of the national Parliaments in June 2022, an exchange of views on energy savings revealed that administrations of the national Parliaments had adopted very similar measures on energy savings. These efforts were not only immediately triggered by energy crisis, but also showed the EP's willingness to reduce the consumption to meet the environmental goals, to reduce its environmental footprint.

Ms Mercedes ARAUJO DÍAZ DE TÉRAN, Deputy Secretary General of the Spanish Congress of Deputies, draw attention to the fact that recent crises urged adoption of sometimes contradictory measures. As an example, she mentioned the requirements of ventilation during the Covid crisis on one side and the current energy saving imperative on the other. The national Parliaments had to find flexible solutions, which differed according to the geographic position, age of the parliamentary buildings etc. In the Spanish Congress of Deputies, audits of the energy consumption had been carried out in order to recommend the best practice to bring about the energy efficiency in buildings and facilities belonging to the Parliament. The systems to measure the consumption were being employed. Other measures ranged from waste management, sustainable parking, water efficiency to saving of electricity for lighting purposes (conventional bulbs being replaced by LED lights) and installing sensors enabling maximum use of day light. With any new equipment purchased, energy efficiency had to be guaranteed. To heat the water in the kitchens in the Congress of Deputies, infrastructure for ten solar panels had been installed. In supply contracts for gas and electricity, it had to be guaranteed that 100% of it was from renewable sources. According to the decree adopted by the Government in August 2022, it was not possible to use the air-conditioning to cool under 27 °C. In winter, it was not possible to heat the buildings over 19 °C. Mechanic ventilation system was being used, when appropriate. The reduction of consumption of electricity between June and December 2022 was 14,9%, compared to numbers of 2021, nevertheless, the spending increased by 7,3%, due to the increase of energy prices. The reduction of consumption of gas used for heating was for the same period 81,14%, compared to 2021. Spending for natural gas is 50,34%, despite the fact, that the price of natural gas had increased, too. It should be born in mind, though, that any energy saving measures bring about significant costs. It was necessary to create new habits aimed at sustainability.

The subsequent debate showed that the energy-saving measures adopted in the parliaments were to a high extent similar, including energy audits, deploying intelligent energy system solutions to control ventilation, cooling and lighting, using solar energy as much as possible. On the other hand, geographic and cultural specifics needed to be taken into account, including the rules on protection of architectural heritage. Personal responsibility of every user of parliamentary premises towards sustainable behaviour was being stressed. The energy consumption was reduced also by reducing the working hours and introduction of home office. Energy from

renewable sources was purchased. Windows were being replaced, where possible, using of natural ventilation was recommended. In many parliaments, the measures in question were adopted even before the energy crisis, in connections with general efforts towards environmental sustainability. The raising energy prices accelerated and intensified those steps.

Session IV – Presentation of the Parliamentary Dimension of the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU

Mr Ingvar MATTSON, Secretary General of the Swedish Parliament, started his presentation with a brief introduction of the Swedish Presidency priorities which were security, competitiveness, green and energy transition and democratic values and the rule of law. Sweden is hosting the EU Council Presidency for the third time. It was indisputable that Russia's war in Ukraine would continue to affect the political agenda of the SE PRES and the priorities must be considered against this backdrop. The novelty concerning the Parliamentary Dimension of the Swedish presidency was the Digital Inauguration Ceremony which took place from the initiative of the Speaker of the Swedish Parliament, Mr Andreas NORLÉN, on January 26. To this Ceremony, Speakers of national Parliaments/Chambers, the European Parliament, candidate countries and special guests were invited. The aim was to send a signal, that Parliamentary Dimension was an important part of the Presidency. Mr MATTSON expressed his hope that it could become a tradition. To conclude, the list of interparliamentary conferences organized during the Swedish Presidency was presented. Majority of the conferences would be organized in the premises of the Riksdag in Stockholm, one event, Conference on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance in the EU (SECG), would take place in co-operation with the European Parliament in Brussels. Besides the traditional formats (COSAC, JPSG on Europol, SECG, CFSP/CSDP meetings), there would be three thematic conferences on circular bioeconomy, future of energy supply and democracy in Europe.

Any other business and closing remarks

Mr SCHÄFER and Mr CHIOCCETTI presented the state of play of the work on the project of a common European Videoconferencing Platform for inter-parliamentary exchange, the idea that had originated in the German Bundestag and was largely endorsed by the Secretaries General during the Meeting of the Secretaries General in January 2022. In spring 2022, Bundestag together with the European Parliament and representatives from the national Parliaments set up a working group to assess the feasibility of this project. This working group developed a list of technical criteria for the platform. Another working group, established at the end of the year 2022, is currently assessing legal aspects of co-operation, including the possibility of joint procurement. The work should continue as it is expected to create economies of scale for all participating parliaments. It could pave the way for similar projects of common interest. Such a solution should not pre-empt the existing solutions, it was to be perceived as an additional option.

Mr Jiří KRBEC and Mr Martin PLÍŠEK thanked the participants for attending the meeting and having a constructive debate. They expressed their hope to meet in person at the Conference of speakers in Prague in April.