

Meeting of the Secretaries General of the European Union Parliaments

Helsinki, 26–27 January 2020

Minutes

The meeting of the Secretaries General of the European Union Parliaments took place on 26–27 January 2020 in Helsinki, at the Finnish Eduskunta (Parliament of Finland).

As per tradition, the meeting of the Presidential Troika (Austria, Finland, Germany, European Parliament) took place ahead of the general meeting on Sunday, 26 January. 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.

The meeting of the Secretaries General of EU parliaments took place at the annex building of the Finnish Eduskunta and was opened by Ms Maija-Leena PAAVOLA, Secretary General of the Finnish Eduskunta. Mr Matti VANHANEN, Speaker of the Finnish Eduskunta, delivered a welcome address in which he referred to the planned Conference on the Future of Europe and underlined that it was necessary to appropriately reflect political diversity in the Member States for the Conference to yield results. Mr VANHANEN stressed the importance of ensuring a strong role for national Parliaments and establishing clear objectives. Mr VANHANEN welcomed Speakers and Secretaries General to Helsinki to the Conference of Speakers of EU Parliaments later in May.

A moment of silence was held to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust at the occasion of 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi German Concentration and Extermination Camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Ms Maija-Leena PAAVOLA discussed some practical matters and gave instructions for signing up for debate through the electronic system.

Mr Remco NEHMELMAN, Secretary General of the Dutch Eerste Kamer, requested the topic of artificial intelligence to be discussed in the future meetings of the Secretaries General for the benefit of sharing best practices.

Mr Horst RISSE, Secretary General of the German Bundestag, drew attention to the planned discussion on the Conference on the Future of Europe and expressed hope for a lively discussion.

The agenda of the Meeting was approved without further comments.

1. Session I: Presentation of the draft programme of the conference of Speakers of the EU Parliaments

Mr PAAVOLA proceeded to present the draft programme of the Conference of Speakers of EU Parliaments (EUSC), which would take place on 18-19 May 2020 at the Marina Congress Centre, close to the South Harbour.

Mr Claes MÅRTENSSON, Deputy Secretary General of the Swedish Riksdag suggested adding benchmarking to the agenda of the EUSC that would allow an exchange views on the role of Speakers/Presidents of the Parliaments and facilitate an exchange of best practices on parliamentary rules and procedures. Mr MÅRTENSSON further suggested extending the time allocated to the debate on the current state of inter-parliamentary cooperation in the EU and proposed a new format for the EUSC in which Speakers/Presidents would exchange views in small groups. Summary of the discussions could be then presented in the plenary. Mr MÅRTENSSON further suggested one day of the EUSC could be devoted to policies while the other would be committed to discussing best practices. Finally, Mr MÅRTENSSON noted that the seating arrangements at the EUSC in Vienna were appreciated.

Mr Jean-Louis SCHROEDT-GIRARD, Secretary General of the French Sénat, noted the subjects on the agenda of the EUSC were all relevant: the MFF, the Green Deal and Conference on the Future of Europe. In connection to the fourth topic on the agenda – the Emerging Global Dispensation and the Return of Realpolitik - what role for EU Parliaments? – Mr SCHROEDT-GIRARD suggested discussing national Parliaments' involvement in the negotiations on the future relationship with the UK.

Mr Luigi GIANNITI, Head of European Affairs Office of the Italian Senato della Repubblica, stated that the Speaker of the Italian Senato della Repubblica wished to intervene during the first day of the EUSC in Helsinki. Mr GIANNITI further referred to the welcome address of Mr Matti VANHANEN, Speaker of the Finnish Eduskunta, and stressed the experience of the Convention on the Future of the EU should not be repeated in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

2. Presentation of parliamentary events during the Croatian EU Council Presidency

Speaker: Ms Andrea HALAMBEK, Director of the Office for International and European Affairs of the Croatian Parliament

Ms Andrea HALAMBEK, Director of the Office for International and European Affairs of the Croatian Parliament, presented the parliamentary dimension of the Croatian EU Council Presidency. Ms HALAMBEK's presentation outlined the main elements of the Croatian Presidency, titled 1) A Europe that develops, 2) A Europe that connects, 3) A Europe that protects and 4) An influential Europe.

Ms HALAMBEK announced that the Croatian Parliament would organise itself or co-organise with the European Parliament five events. Ms HALAMBEK noted that a letter co-signed by a majority of Parliaments was sent to the Presidents of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the President-in-office of the General Affairs Council on the involvement of national Parliaments in the Conference on the Future of Europe. In concluding, Ms HALAMBEK thanked the Finnish and the Romanian Presidencies for their work and cooperation and assured their support for the coming Presidencies.

Following the speech, a video about Croatia's Presidency was presented.

3. European Parliament after European Elections

Speaker: Mr Klaus WELLE, Secretary General of the European Parliament

Mr Klaus WELLE, Secretary General of the European Parliament, began his address by pointing out that participation in the European elections of 2019 increased by 8 percentage points, or by 35 million votes, compared to the previous elections, this being the first time voter turnout in the elections increased rather than decreased since 1979. Mr WELLE noted that this was likely partly because of several important issues being on the political agenda, but also because of stronger civil society engagement and better use of technology that allowed direct contacts with citizens. Mr WELLE said that in these elections policy concerns were shared beyond state borders, with social security featuring prominently in Central and Eastern Europe, climate change in the North, Germany and France, and immigration being a highly salient issue in several countries.

Mr WELLE underlined that much in the same way as in 2014, the current European Commission was elected based on its political programme that had been negotiated together with the European Parliament. Mr WELLE emphasised that there was a strong institutional stability in the European Parliament and a stronger willingness to cooperate among the EU institutions than before. According to Mr WELLE the European Parliament had also become more similar to national Parliaments with its recognised right to initiative and a stronger role in agenda setting. Mr WELLE said the elections had confirmed that the EU was a bicameral structure, whose source of legitimacy was based on the states on the one hand and citizens on the other. Finally, Mr WELLE underscored the need to develop more strategic forward-looking planning in the EU, better and smarter use of different instruments and systematically improving the EU at all levels.

4. The Conference on the Future of Europe

Speaker: Prof. Dr. Horst RISSE, Secretary General of the German Bundestag

Mr Horst RISSE, Secretary General of the German Bundestag, opened his address by noting that the Conference on the Future Europe, foreseen to be launched in May 2020 and to run for two years, could introduce the broadest ever involvement of citizens in the history of European integration. Mr RISSE underlined that the Conference was both a chance and a challenge and explained that at the heart of the debate was the question of how much change was desired or

required. Noting that the idea for the Conference was born from many factors, such as the repeated criticism for democratic deficit, lack of legislative progress in the Council and new challenges, Mr RISSE stressed that a new balance had to be found. Mr RISSE underlined that the Conference could provide a framework and grassroots support for the EU to adapt to the challenges it was facing.

Mr RISSE argued that the success of the Conference depended on the form it would assume. In this respect, Mr RISSE underlined that the planned bottom-up approach was welcome but raised questions of legitimacy and could result in a distorted picture of the reality on the ground. Mr RISSE underlined that the structure of public participation should therefore be carefully designed and managed to ensure the credibility of the consultation process. Against this background, Mr RISSE underscored that national Parliaments, as the primary source for legitimacy in the EU, should play an appropriate role as the interface between citizens and EU institutions. Finally, Mr RISSE stressed the importance of ensuring sufficient participation of national Parliaments, which would allow taking into account the views of the opposition in each Member State.

In the ensuing debate, four speakers took the floor.

Ms Agnieszka KACZMARSKA, Secretary General of the Polish Sejm, underlined that the aim of the Conference should be bringing the EU closer to its citizens, to identify issues that engage citizens and to look for tools that enhance democratic legitimacy of the EU. Ms KACZMARSKA suggested that national Parliaments, as equally responsible for shaping the future of the EU, should be fully involved in the process, including in the governance structure of the Conference. Ms KACZMARSKA underlined that citizens wished to be involved but often felt their actions had no impact. To reconcile the situation, Ms KACZMARSKA suggested that the social contract should be renewed, citizens given a sense of security and an opportunity to voice their concerns.

Mr Jean-Louis SCHROEDT-GIRARD, Secretary General of the French Sénat, introduced two forms of direct democracy that had been implemented recently in the Sénat. A new digital citizen consultation system provided a platform to engage directly with local counselors and another platform, created a year before, allowed petitions to be submitted online.

Ms Andrea HALAMBEK, Director of the Office for International and European Affairs of the Croatian Parliament, referred to the recent letter sent from national Parliaments to the three EU institutions concerning the structure of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Mr Luigi GIANNITI, Head of European Affairs Office of the Italian Senato della Repubblica, recalled the experience from the Convention on the Future of the EU and acknowledged that there was consensus on the strong role for the national Parliaments in the Conference. Mr GIANNITI further suggested that making better use of existing digital platforms, such as IPEX, could contribute to better dialogue with citizens.

5. Session II: IPEX related issues

Speaker: Harald DOSSI, Secretary General of the Austrian Parliament

Mr Harald DOSSI, Secretary General of the Austrian Parliament, started his statement by noting that the beginning of the 2020 marked the 25th anniversary of the accession of Austria, together with Finland and Sweden, to the EU, which moved Austria geographically from the border of Europe to the centre of Europe. Mr DOSSI stated that the last decades and particularly the years succeeding the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, had seen impressive development in the Europeanisation of national Parliaments. According to Mr DOSSI, IPEX had a fundamental role in this process serving as an instrument for exchanging information, fostering inter-parliamentary cooperation and enhancing visibility of the national Parliaments' activities in European policymaking.

Mr DOSSI noted that the launch of the new IPEX website would mark a turning point in the development of the platform and expressed gratitude to the European Parliament for financing the new website. Mr DOSSI also drew attention to the new social media pilot project that had been introduced to make use of news and information that the national Parliaments produced and encouraged the Parliaments to follow the new account on Twitter (@IPEXEU, #IPEXEU). Finally, Mr DOSSI underscored the importance of recognising the important work of the IPEX Correspondents in the functioning and promotion of the IPEX and called for ensuring sufficient resources for the Correspondents to fulfil their tasks.

In conclusion, Mr DOSSI recalled the mandate given by the Speakers' Conference to develop IPEX as a "one-stop shop" for inter-parliamentary exchange in EU affairs and expressed hope this work would continue. Mr DOSSI thanked the Parliaments for their commitment to IPEX and especially the Finnish colleagues for the good cooperation.

Ms Maija-Leena PAAVOLA, Secretary General of the Finnish Eduskunta, noted that additional costs were expected due to the upcoming technical development of the IPEX and because of the foreseen review of the contractual salary of the IPEX Information Officer in 2021. Ms PAAVOLA proposed that the IPEX's budget ceiling be increased from the current 80.000 to 100.000 euros and the decision is recorded in the IPEX Conclusions as an added paragraph, subject to a confirmation by email by 7 February 2020.

Mr Claes MÅRTENSSON, Deputy Secretary General of the Swedish Riksdag, expressed his support to the amendment.

Ms Aude BORNENS, Head of the Secretariat of the Committee on European Affairs of the French Sénat, suggested that the news section of the IPEX website should be developed further to encourage submitting documents in French.

Ms PAAVOLA noted the IPEX Conclusions including the amendment on the funding of IPEX as approved, with the provisions agreed.

6. Session III: The current state of inter-parliamentary cooperation in the EU

Ms Maija-Leena PAAVOLA, Secretary General of the Finnish Eduskunta, opened the last session of the meeting by introducing the three documents that were to be presented to the

Conference of the Speakers of European Union Parliaments (EUSC) in Helsinki as requested by the EUSC in Vienna. The documents were Working Group's proposal for updated Guidelines for Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation in the EU; Working Group's report on Enhanced inter-parliamentary cooperation through modern technology; and Finnish Presidency's Note on the Interparliamentary Committee Meeting for the Evaluation of Eurojust. Ms PAAVOLA noted the Working Group had approved the two documents unanimously and no feedback had been put forth by the delegations on the Presidency's note on Eurojust that was circulated in November 2019.

Ms PAAVOLA then noted that the COSAC meeting in Helsinki had recorded that most Parliaments/Chambers were unsatisfied with the effectiveness of the Early Warning Mechanism foreseen in the Lisbon Treaty and the Political Dialogue instituted by the European Commission. While noting it was not known what caused this dissatisfaction, Ms PAAVOLA underlined there was nevertheless a clear demand for political dialogue, expressed by the large number of parliamentary opinions adopted every year. Ms PAAVOLA invited the delegations to present their opinion whether further action by parliamentary administrations was needed, or whether the matter should be left to the initiative of the Speakers' Conference and COSAC.

Ms PAAVOLA then referred to the secretariat function of the permanent inter-parliamentary conferences and asked delegations whether they supported the idea of setting up a Working Group to elaborate on the role and functioning of a joint secretariat and reviewing the current financing and recruitment arrangements of COSAC.

In the debate that followed, four delegates intervened.

Mr Claes MÅRTENSSON, Deputy Secretary General of the Swedish Riksdag, thanked the Finnish Presidency and the Working Group for producing the draft documents and suggested that a reference be made in the updated Guidelines to those inter-parliamentary meetings that were organised by the Presidency Parliament. Mr MÅRTENSSON further pointed out that uncertainties remained as regards to the Eurojust meeting, such as whether the concept of Inter-parliamentary Committee Meeting (ICM) was established in EU law and whether the concept referred to the ICM activities of the European Parliament. Mr MÅRTENSSON pointed out that the Eurojust Regulation only provided that the President of the Eurojust shall appear once a year to present the current activities of the Eurojust and its annual report, leaving room for other possible elements for inter-parliamentary evaluation, such as preparations of the yearly ICM and actions to follow-up on it and the options for internal debates and conclusions. Mr MÅRTENSSON stated it was not clear whether the European Parliament ICM was the right format for these activities and suggested setting up a dedicated Working Group at the EUSC in Helsinki to elaborate these questions further. A report by the Working Group could then be presented in the EUSC in Berlin in 2021.

Mr Jean-Luc LALA, Director of the European Affairs Department of the French Assemblée nationale, underlined the need to provide reliable information in both English and French and pointed out that the draft documents contained several translation errors. Mr LALA also commended the Finnish Presidency of the Council of the EU for its efforts to enhance legislative transparency and expressed hope that the future Presidencies would continue this work.

Mr Horst RISSE, Secretary General of the German Bundestag, recalled that the Bundestag had previously been against setting up additional secretariats for the permanent inter-parliamentary conferences and stated there likely was no necessity for setting up a Working Group to explore the matter further.

Mr Klaus WELLE, Secretary General of the European Parliament, expressed agreement with the position of the German Bundestag and said a well-established system existed to run the inter-parliamentary conferences. Consequently, while there might be other issues that could be looked at in COSAC, there was no need for a radical change.

In conclusion, Ms PAAVOLA stated that the Presidency would not propose setting up a Working Group on the role and functioning of a joint secretariat for the inter-parliamentary conferences. The three documents prepared by the Presidency and the Working Group would be put on the agenda of the EUSC in Helsinki.

In the closing remarks, Ms PAAVOLA thanked the delegates for the constructive debate and expressed gratitude to Mr Horst RISSE, Secretary General of the German Bundestag and to Mr Carsten U. LARSEN, Secretary General of the Danish Folketing, who were attending the Secretaries General meeting for the last time and wished them well.