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## **Meeting of the Secretaries General of the national parliaments of the EU member states and the European Parliament**

### **Minutes of the video-conference on 29 March 2021**

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The meeting of the Secretaries General of the national parliaments of the EU member states and the European Parliament took place on 29 March 2021 in Berlin in a video-conference format.

In line with tradition, the Secretaries General of the Troika (Finland, Germany, Slovenia, European Parliament) met in advance to discuss the draft programme of the meeting of the Secretaries-General, IPEX-related issues and the draft agenda for the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments in May 2021.

The meeting of the Secretaries General was begun with a welcome address by the President of the German Bundestag, Dr Wolfgang SCHÄUBLE. In his address, Dr SCHÄUBLE introduced the topic to be debated in Session I of the upcoming Conference of Speakers, namely the impacts of digitalisation on democracy.

The Secretary General of the German Bundestag, Dr Lorenz MÜLLER, and the Secretary General of the Bundesrat, Dr Ute RETTLER, jointly opened the Meeting of the Secretaries General. Dr Lorenz MÜLLER explained the agenda of the virtual meeting, which was adopted unanimously.

#### **Session I: Presentation of the draft programme for the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments**

Dr Lorenz MÜLLER presented the draft programme for the virtual Conference of Speakers of European Union Parliaments, which is being held on 10 May 2021. He explained that the Conference would focus on the topic of “Digitalisation and the changing public sphere – risks and opportunities for representative democracy”. The meeting would begin with speeches by two renowned experts. Francesca BRIA, President of the Italian National Innovation Fund, had already confirmed her participation. In order to allow a spontaneous debate, requests for the floor would not be taken until during the Conference itself, Dr MÜLLER explained. In Session II, the adoption of two reports on interparliamentary cooperation was planned. At the end of the Conference, an opportunity would be provided for bilateral meetings talks in virtual breakout rooms.

Due to the digital format, conclusions drafted by the Presidency would, as an exception, be distributed after the Conference; the Presidency would coordinate these with the Troika.

Dr Harald DOSSI, Secretary General of the Austrian National Council, welcomed the proposed subject for the Conference of Speakers and announced that the President of the Austrian Council intended to bring up both the issue of physical safety of parliaments and the subject of combating cyber threats. Dr DOSSI also presented the “#WeRemember” campaign initiated by the World Jewish Congress and called for as many national parliaments as possible to get involved with the campaign in the context of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January 2022. He proposed the inclusion of a relevant passage in the conclusions of the Conference of Speakers.

The Secretary General of the European Parliament, Klaus WELLE, confirmed that there had already been an exchange between the Austrian National Council and the Speaker of the European Parliament on the “#WeRemember” campaign and expressed his support for the initiative.

Luigi GIANNITI, from the Italian Senate, expressed his support for the Austrian proposal. He called on the parliaments of the EU member states to help make the Conference on the Future of Europe as inclusive and participatory as possible.

Dr Lorenz MÜLLER announced that the German Bundestag would also be taking part in the “#WeRemember” campaign. The physical safety and digital security of parliaments would undoubtedly play a role in Session I in discussions on changes in the media sphere. With regard to the Conference on the Future of Europe and the stronger participation of young people in Europe, he expressed confidence that this aspect could be included in the context of the digitalisation aspect at the planned Conference.

### **Presentation of the parliamentary dimension of Portugal’s Presidency of the Council of the EU**

Albino DE AZEVEDO SOARES, Secretary General of the Portuguese Assembleia da República, presented the programme of the parliamentary dimension of Portugal’s Council Presidency.

The slogan of the Portuguese Presidency – “Time to Act” – should in retrospect perhaps have been “Time to Adapt”; parliaments’ capacity to adapt had been frequently called for during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the initial phase, it had been hoped that the pandemic would soon be over. This was quickly followed by a second phase, in which contingency plans had been made. The halfway point in the Presidency had now been reached. The Assembleia da República had launched its parliamentary dimension with an ambitious agenda. The intention had been to hold one interparliamentary event on average every 15 days.

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More than 40 video conferences had since been hosted, with participation by over 500 parliamentarians from across Europe, as well as a range of internationally renowned figures. The parliamentary dimension of the Portuguese Presidency had also aimed to share aspects of Portuguese culture with the European partners.

On the technical side, Portugal had decided to use the Interactio platform for the virtual meetings, since this platform had integrated interpretation functionalities and also because people were sufficiently familiar with its operation due to its use by the European Parliament.

Albino DE AZEVEDO SOARES assumed that, when the Portuguese Presidency ended on 30 June 2021, it would have been a wholly virtual presidency. In his view, it had become clear that video conferences had developed into an important additional instrument for interparliamentary cooperation. They could sensibly be used alongside traditional formats, though they would not be able to fully replace them. With a view to the upcoming Council presidencies of Slovenia and France, Mr de AZEVEDO SOARES said that his parliament would be happy to engage in an exchange of best practice in this respect.

## **Session II: IPEX**

Maija-Leena PAAVOLA, Secretary General of the Finnish Eduskunta, presented the IPEX Board's annual report on the work done over the preceding year. She said that this work had been mainly focused on implementation and consolidation. The European Parliament had contributed a great deal of manpower and money to achieving progress on developing a new website – IPEX v3. Since IPEX was a tool now used by all EU parliaments, the reliability of the new version needed to be checked by means of extensive tests before it could be officially launched. A debt of gratitude was owed to the European Parliament for its intensive work. Another major IPEX focal point had been governance issues: after the end of the first multiannual work programme last year, the IPEX Board had now successfully adopted a new Rolling Work Programme. It also had a three-year time span, but was to be updated every year and the longer-term goals reviewed annually.

Ms PAAVOLA also stressed the important role of the National Correspondents in connection with the upcoming launch of IPEX v3. Comprehensive training courses and the provision of ongoing training would be needed to ensure that the operation of the new platform could be continued following a successful launch. In advance of this, the National Correspondents would need to review the data updated in the new IPEX version in order to provide a solid base of data.

With a view to making IPEX better known, she stressed that IPEX should be more driven by the needs of users, in order to provide options tailored to those needs. She proposed that these needs should be surveyed. In addition, the work of the board had a strong technical focus, which ought to be reflected in the composition of the Board, she said.

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Dr Ute RETTLER emphasised that the new launch of IPEX could significantly enhance cooperation between the parliaments, as well as public perception of EU affairs work in the parliaments. She therefore thanked the Secretary General of the European Parliament, Klaus Welle, as well as his staff members Gérard Hilbert and Pekka Nurminen sincerely for their work.

Claes MÅRTENSSON, Deputy Secretary General of the Swedish Riksdag, also underlined the importance of IPEX. During the Finnish chairmanship, most of the work for the – hopefully imminent – launch of IPEX v3 had been completed, he said; he expressed his particular thanks and recognition to Secretary General Paavola and the head of the EU Secretariat, Peter Saramo, along with IPEX Information Officer Calin Racoti and Gérard Hilbert from the European Parliament. He stressed the role of the National Correspondents in making available reliable data and content. But, he pointed out, they needed sufficient time resources in order to do this. Finally, he gave his support to the suggestion by Secretary-General Paavola of surveying users' needs in order to improve IPEX.

Dr Ute RETTLER moved on to the adoption of the conclusions presented by the IPEX Board. They were adopted unanimously, with no votes against or abstentions. On the subject of nominations for the IPEX Board, Dr RETTLER thanked the parliaments for the letters of nomination already received and asked other parliaments wishing to nominate a member of the IPEX Board to pass on this information to the Finnish chairmanship.

With regard to the suggestion made by Ms Paavola in her letter for IPEX's procedural rules to be amended, the Secretaries General agreed that this proposal should be discussed by the IPEX Board to assess the need for such amendments. The Board should then present a report at the next meeting of the Secretaries General.

In conclusion, Dr Ute RETTLER thanked the IPEX Information Officer, Calin Racoti, for his valuable work, as well as the outgoing chair of the IPEX Board, Peter Saramo, for the excellent cooperation.

### **Session III: Response to the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic: Digitalisation of parliaments, cyber security and video conferences for interparliamentary cooperation**

In his introductory remarks, Dr Lorenz MÜLLER stressed that the coronavirus pandemic had provided an enormous boost to the digital transition. Against this background, IT security and overall system integrity were important in order to maintain public trust in the democratic process.

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In his speech, Klaus WELLE set out the three priorities of the European Parliament in reacting to the pandemic. Firstly, the European Parliament had ensured the safety of Members and staff and facilitated remote working as far as possible. In addition, 10,000 hybrid computers had been procured to allow one-hundred per cent of staff with pre-existing medical conditions and ninety per cent of other staff to be able to work from home. Tests had also been made available and a dedicated vaccination centre recently set up.

Secondly, the European Parliament had concentrated on ensuring continuity of decision-making, without which the European Union would have been unable to decide on any of the important Covid-19 support measures. In order to facilitate communication, the decision had been taken to use an interpretation system developed by a newly established Baltic firm named Interactio and the European Parliament had been able to participate in the development of the system. One of the reasons for deciding against the market leader from the USA had been the EU's data protection rules. Over the previous 12 months, around 200,000 participants had been able to engage with each other via this platform. All committee meetings and group meetings, as well as votes in the committees and plenary, had taken place with direct interpretation using this platform (with 12-13 languages).

The European Parliament's third pillar had been that of "practical solidarity", allowing infrastructure which was unused during the pandemic to be made available to groups in need of assistance within local communities in Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg. In addition, the canteens had provided meals for particularly affected groups and the Members' Chauffeur Service had offered to transport medical equipment, as well as doctors and nurses, for hospitals in Brussels.

After the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, remote working was to be maintained as an option for staff. One to three days per week seemed likely. The advantages of hybrid participation in meetings by Members were also obvious, he said, because, for instance, this allowed greater presence in the constituencies. Parliamentary delegations, which traditionally only had one trip and one incoming visit per year, could maintain permanent contact with other parliamentarians, but also with civil society. The same could apply to cooperation between the European Parliament and the national parliaments, he added. And, finally, it was possible to organise brief interventions via video-conferences by experts who would not otherwise be available due to the long distance they would have to travel. Mr WELLE described the option of including more participants and viewers in virtual events as a key instrument in promoting greater participation of citizens, as well as specifically for the Conference on the Future of Europe. Naturally, he pointed out, questions regarding cybersecurity arose and the European Parliament would have to check that all data centres met the highest of security standards (Tier 4).

Dr Lorenz MÜLLER emphasised that the additional use of video conferences could boost the volume of internal exchanges. Another side-effect would be to enable people with family obligations to participate more in international discussion events.

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In her contribution Dr Ute RETTLER described the experiences that the Bundesrat had gathered from the use of video conferences during Germany's Presidency of the Council. At the start of the pandemic, the Bundesrat and Bundestag, like the entire public administration, had been lagging behind international companies and other entities in the installation and use of modern digital infrastructure. Strategies and practices of global enterprises, however, could not be taken over one-to-one. Public digital communication, most especially in democratic systems and societies, needed special rules relating to security, data privacy, transparency and, in particular, free accessibility. There were numerous platforms for video conferences, Dr RETTLER said, which could even be used in parallel in many cases, depending on the requirements and facilities of parliaments. There was no need to seek EU-wide agreement to adopt a particular system or platform. The decisive point was that the systems in use should be mutually compatible. The key word was interoperability.

One elementary point was cybersecurity, she emphasised. Attacks on the digital infrastructure of parliaments were not only a technical hazard but also jeopardised the institutions and democracy itself. Open platforms for video conferences were a sitting target for cyberattacks. For this reason the Bundesrat used a system developed by the BDBOS (Federal Agency for Public Safety Digital Radio) which took particular account of security requirements. If ever open platforms had to be used in particular cases, the Bundesrat equipped its staff with special devices that had no access to its internal network.

During Germany's Presidency of the Council of the EU, the Bundesrat's experience of using external service providers had been favourable. Particularly for the technical organisation of video conferences this approach had made it possible to benefit from the competence and flexibility that were available in the market.

Besides the practical technical considerations, Dr RETTLER said that legal issues were naturally of vital importance too when video conferences were used for parliamentary business in committee or in the Chamber. In particular, there was a need to examine what was possible and conceivable under the applicable rules, from parliamentary rules of procedure to national constitutions.

In conclusion, Dr RETTLER pointed out that conference technology had succeeded in enabling interparliamentary work to continue in the past year in spite of the pandemic. Nevertheless, she added, it was scarcely a substitute for the benefits of personal encounters and direct exchanges.

Éric TAVERNIER, Secretary General of the French Senate, stated that it was absolutely essential in the present crisis to make more use of technological media, especially video conferences. Nevertheless, the French Senate took the view – as it had indicated in amendments to the Report on enhanced interparliamentary cooperation through modern technology – that meetings in person should remain the norm. Video conferences, Mr TAVERNIER said, should only be used as a potential additional instrument for preparatory meetings of officials and experts, for example. Political meetings and talks, such as conferences initiated by the Presidency and established conferences like COSAC, however, should be held as physical events unless it proved impossible to do so.

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Albino DE AZEVEDO SOARES said that the Portuguese Assembleia da República had never ceased its activity during the pandemic. To ensure that sittings were conducted safely, the number of plenary sittings had been cut and the number of Members attending them had been reduced, so that only the essential quorum of 50 Members were physically present and all the others could link in from their offices. Apart from questioning of government members and hearings in committees of inquiry, all hearings had been conducted as virtual events.

Agnieszka KACZMARSKA, Secretary General of the Polish Sejm, reported that an electronic information system and voting system had already existed in the Chamber of the Sejm and in its committee rooms before the outbreak of the pandemic. In addition, there had been a videoconferencing system, although it had been little used before the pandemic. The Rules of Procedure had been adapted to permit virtual sittings by means of electronic communication. To deal with the hundreds of votes that were conducted each day, a real-time voting system with a high level of security, data integrity and digital voting had been used. An average of about 75% of Members took part in virtual sittings, and for committee meetings the figure was about 72%. Most of the administrative staff, moreover, were able to work from home.

Silvia MIHALCEA, Deputy General Secretary of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies, described how the work of the Chamber had continued during lockdown with the aid of remote solutions. Amendment of the Rules of Procedure had been required for that purpose. Plenary sittings had been transmitted live on the parliamentary website, and Deputies had been able to cast their votes electronically or, in the case of committee meetings, by telephone. In plenary sittings, for which a hybrid format had been adopted, votes were counted by means of the electronic system in the Chamber and through the Deputies' tablets. Nevertheless, more than two thirds of all the Deputies had attended the parliamentary proceedings in person.

Claes MÅRTENSSON stated that the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) had been a major problem for interparliamentary cooperation. Personal data had to be dealt with in such a way that unauthorised use and data loss could not occur. Although it was permitted, subject to certain conditions, to use cloud services based outside the EU for video conferences, the *Schrems II* judgment of the European Court of Justice, which found the European Commission's Privacy Shield framework for the protection of personal data in the United States to be inadequate, made it doubtful whether a transmission of video conferences to the United States could take place in accordance with the GDPR. Since US companies were the market leaders in cloud services and conference systems, it was also highly probable that the processing of data by most videoconferencing companies was subject to US case law, which was not compatible with the GDPR. Alternative solutions involving transmission within the EU had to become available on the market, or else the GDPR would require further adaptation.

Raymond SCICLUNA, Clerk of the House in the Maltese House of Representatives, stated that parliamentary business in the House of Representatives had been continued during the pandemic

without too much difficulty and had been modified, for example through distance voting and remote participation in committee meetings. Conducting technical and specialised online meetings, he said, was a good idea for reasons of time and expense. But of course human interaction and informal exchanges were missing, he added, and these were mostly just as important as the meeting itself.

Remco NEHMELMAN, Secretary General of the Dutch Senate, reported that more than 500 digital committee meetings had been held there. While plenary sittings took place in person in a larger space, digital participation was available for Senators based in more distant parts of the country. These opportunities had made it easier for the Members of the First Chamber to keep performing their duties and to make their contribution to keeping the population safe.

Luigi GIANNITI said that it had been possible to conduct the bulk of the plenary and committee business in the Italian Senate and Chamber of Deputies with Members physically present. To that end, some Members had been accommodated in the public and press galleries, and the premises had been reorganised. Video conferences had only been used for hearings of experts and government ministers. As far as interparliamentary conferences were concerned, Mr GIANNITI shared the concern expressed by Éric TAVERNIER, recommending that interparliamentary conferences should, as a matter of principle, be physical meetings and that reliable rules should be created for situations in which virtual conferences were unavoidable. For hearings of experts, however, the video format was very important.

Georgios MYLONAKIS, Secretary General of the Hellenic Parliament, stated that full use had been made of all technical options to guarantee the continuity of parliamentary work. Fifty per cent of the parliamentary staff, he said, had been working from home. Various networking links, vulnerability analyses and awareness-raising among staff were guaranteeing security and data protection. The Hellenic Parliament had likewise used conference systems such as WebEx to ensure the continuity of interparliamentary cooperation.

Summing up, Dr Lorenz MÜLLER said that a mixture of changes to rules of procedure, organisational preparations and vigorous expansion of technology had brought all parliaments through the first year of the pandemic.

#### **Session IV: Sustainability and climate-friendliness in parliamentary operations**

Claes MÅRTENSSON reported in his speech that the Administration of the Swedish Riksdag had been environmentally certified since 2009 with the environmental management standard ISO 14001. The objectives of the Riksdag Administration, he said, included reducing the amount of waste, reducing emissions of greenhouse gases, minimising the occurrence of hazardous substances and limiting its environmental impact through sustainable procurements. These objectives were achieved by means of the PDCA method – plan, do, check and act.



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Examples of measures taken, Mr MÅRTENSSON said, were the installation of a green roof on the East Wing of the Riksdag and connection with the City of Stockholm's district cooling network so as to phase out the use of refrigerants.

Official travel by air, he said, was no longer an option unless four hours or more would be saved by flying. Two-sided printing had been introduced as standard practice, and a carrier cycle had been acquired for transporting items over shorter distances between parliamentary properties.

Agnieszka KASZMASRSKA reported on the various measures taken in the Sejm. The legislative process was conducted on a paperless basis. Plastic bottles were not used at all in Parliament, and the canteen provided only eco-friendly packaging for takeaway food. The Sejm, moreover, had its own beehives and produced honey. LED lights were to be installed in all of the interior light fittings.

Marie HANSEN, Secretary General of the Danish Folketing, recounted that energy screening of all parliamentary buildings was being carried and that the entire lighting system was being switched to LEDs. Eco-friendly packaging was also used wherever possible. Ms HANSEN concluded by saying that the Folketing had a Sustainability Committee to keep a political eye on these matters too.

Dr Harald DOSSI explained that the Austrian Parliamentary Administration was aiming for EMAS certification by the summer of 2022. Parliamentary business, he said, was also to be conducted sustainably. Inclusiveness was practised, with accessibility for persons with disabilities both in buildings and on the parliamentary website. The Parliamentary Administration, said Dr DOSSI, was committed to achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda. Examples of measures that had already been taken or were in progress were the use of district heating and cooling for the parliamentary buildings, the digitisation of work processes, the provision of easy-to-understand and sign-language options on the website, health check-ups for staff, reintegration measures after long-term absence through illness, support for women and a gender equality policy and healthy eating options in the canteen.

Manuel CAVERO, General Secretary of the Spanish Senate, highlighted the green procurement policy of the Senate Administration and indicated that eco-friendliness and sustainability targets had been set and a report was drawn up on progress towards their achievement.

To conclude the discussion of this item, Dr Ute RETTLER presented a Presidency proposal that the topic of sustainability and climate-friendliness be discussed regularly at meetings of the Secretaries-General along with an exchange of information on new developments and sharing of recent experience. In this way, she said, they could learn together and take away ideas for their own parliamentary administrations. It was conceivable, said Dr RETTLER, that a Secretary General might deliver a presentation on best practices from his or her own Chamber at each future meeting. A brief summary could then be posted on the IPEX website. This might be a useful addition to the networks that already existed at the purely working level in particular specialised areas and provide the discussions with a framework befitting the size and importance of the task.

Finally, Dr RETTLER thanked Mr MÅRTENSSON for his valuable cooperation over the past years and wished him all the best for his new professional duties.

### **Reports on interparliamentary cooperation**

Dr Lorenz MÜLLER introduced two reports on interparliamentary cooperation that the German Presidency had taken over from the Finnish Presidency following the cancellation of the Helsinki conference in 2020. Both reports, Dr MÜLLER said, were the product of a working group established under Finnish chairmanship at the EU Speakers' Conference in Vienna in April 2019 and had already been presented at the Helsinki meeting of Secretaries-General in January 2020.

In the first of these reports, entitled *Enhanced inter-parliamentary cooperation through modern technology*, Dr MÜLLER said that the working group had dealt with the technical resources that could be used for interparliamentary conferences. At the same time, the experiences of the COVID crisis had led to a new approach to virtual conferences, and so the German Presidency had updated the report. In the coronavirus pandemic, video conferences and technological working methods had largely replaced physical meetings, which would otherwise have been cancelled because of the contact restrictions. But even beyond the special circumstances of the pandemic, the importance of the role of technological solutions in parliamentary cooperation had become evident.

For this reason, said Dr MÜLLER, the revised report highlighted means of sharing experience between parliaments and providing mutual support. One lesson that could be learned from the pandemic, he said, was how much importance was attached to better interoperability of conference systems, comprehensive IT strategies and the development of IT skills among all parliamentary staff and Members. In addition, there was a need to ensure robust cybersecurity and compliance with EU data-protection provisions. It was also important to stress, however, that physical conferences should not be replaced entirely by video conferences, a point that had been discussed earlier in the day.

Dr MÜLLER stated that the report had been coordinated with the parliaments at working level ahead of the meeting of Secretaries-General. Comments had been taken on board and amendments adopted, which augured well for a universally satisfactory outcome.

Éric TAVERNIER, referring to his earlier speech, stated that the established interparliamentary conferences as well as those conferences that had been initiated by the Presidency should be physical gatherings unless this were impossible for other reasons. That, he said, was why the French Senate had proposed a further amendment to the report.

Dr Lorenz MÜLLER pointed out that the amendment had been tabled at very short notice and so could not be taken into account at the present meeting. He therefore proposed that this point be discussed in detail at working level before the Speakers' Conference. Mr TAVERNIER expressed his agreement with this approach.

Dr MÜLLER noted that agreement had been duly reached on the Report on enhanced inter-parliamentary cooperation through modern technology, the only outstanding matter being a decision on Mr Tavernier's proposal on points 30.2 and 30.3.

Dr Lorenz MÜLLER also introduced the Report on updating the Guidelines on Inter-parliamentary Cooperation in the EU. The working group under Finnish chairmanship had updated the Guidelines on Inter-parliamentary Cooperation, which had last undergone revision in 2008. New formats had been included, such as the Inter-Parliamentary Conference for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy. The German Presidency, said Dr MÜLLER, had taken over the Finnish draft, which had already been presented in this form to the Secretaries-General in Helsinki in 2020, without amendment. Since there were no further interventions, the report was presented to the Speakers of the Parliaments for adoption at the Speakers' Conference in May 2021.

Dr Lorenz MÜLLER thanked the members of the working group that had met under Finnish chairmanship and extended special thanks to Mr Peter Saramo for his work on both reports.

### **Other business**

Under the agenda item "Any other business", Ms Uršula ZORE TAVČAR, Secretary General of the Slovenian National Assembly, reported on the forthcoming parliamentary dimension of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council, which was due to begin on 1 July 2021. In view of the present situation, she said, it was likely to prove impossible to hold all the scheduled meetings, such as the COSAC Chairpersons' Meeting, the IPC for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy and the IPC of 27 and 28 September 2021 on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance in the EU, as physical meetings in Ljubljana. The National Assembly hoped, however, to be able to hold at least the COSAC plenary meeting at the end of November 2021 as a physical event and to be able to welcome the Secretaries-General to Ljubljana in January 2022.

### **Closing remarks**

Dr Ute RETTLER noted that the reports and guidelines which had been adopted laid important foundations for future interparliamentary cooperation. She therefore expressed her thanks to all participants for their contributions to the drafting of the reports.

Dr Lorenz MÜLLER also thanked all the participants for the constructive discussions and remarked that this was the first meeting of Secretaries-General which he had attended as Secretary-General of the Bundestag. He conveyed the best wishes of his predecessor, Professor Horst Risse, to all their colleagues.