



**Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments,
10 May 2021, Berlin**
Conclusions of the Presidency

I. Introductory remarks

The Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments took place on 10 May 2021 at the invitation of the President of the German Bundestag, Dr Wolfgang Schäuble, and the President of the Bundesrat, Dr Reiner Haseloff. For the first time, the event took the form of a video conference, as it was not possible to hold an attended event in view of the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 49 Speakers or their representatives from 45 chambers, comprising parliaments of EU member states, the European Parliament, parliaments of candidate countries and guest parliaments, took part in the video conference.

The conclusions of the Conference Presidency that are set out here have been coordinated with the other members of the Troika – Finland and Slovenia – and with the European Parliament. In the context of a video conference it was not possible to produce coordinated draft conclusions on the fringes of the Conference itself.

Europe in the pandemic

The Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments was held under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has persisted for more than a year. The measures taken to combat the pandemic have shown how vulnerable the freedoms of the internal market and the open borders in the European Union, that we have come to take for granted, have become. What is more, the challenges facing Europe, even without the grim backdrop of the pandemic, are of such great importance that the parliaments of the EU member states and the European Parliament must also play their part. Their mandate from the EU electorate authorises and indeed binds them to do so.

The Conference on the Future of Europe

The Presidency explicitly welcomes the fact that a joint European conference has been convened at this time of existential challenges to the European Union and its underlying values. The conference is to be wide-ranging, be willing to address controversial issues and involve as many people and initiatives as possible from the whole of the European Union in its discussions on the future of Europe. The conference will examine where and how the European Union and its institutions can and must develop further. In this way the Conference on the Future of Europe

can make an important contribution to renewing and consolidating the legitimisation of the European Union. The parliaments of the EU member states and the European Parliament, as the democratically legitimised representatives of the people, should aspire both in general and in the particular context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, to be major contributors to the pursuit of this goal.

II. The digital transition and the changing public sphere – danger and opportunities for representative democracy

With the digital transition, the 21st century also marks the dawning of a new age. The digital revolution is not only modernising technological processes, but is also changing human interaction to an unprecedented degree in almost every aspect of life.

The Presidency of the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments reaffirms emphatically that the common values on which the European Union is based, according to Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, namely respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, also apply without restriction in the digital world. They are the non-negotiable basis for the coexistence of the people of the European Union and the work of its political institutions.

A great contradiction of our age is that digitalisation on the one hand provides opportunities for free and wide-ranging discussion and participation for many people who previously had little or no chance to make their voices heard in the public debate while, on the other hand, we see new digital media being used to spread hatred, discrimination, falsehoods and conspiracy theories around the world. Public communication has been affected more than almost any other area by the changes resulting from the digital revolution. The opportunities and dangers of the digital transition therefore require specific answers if the liberal order based on the rule of law is to assert its proper validity in the digital world too.

Data protection and data sovereignty

The Presidency sees a significant danger in the growing commercialisation of public communication. The use of algorithms is increasingly depriving discussion participants of control over the dissemination and impact of their contributions. User data are becoming a commodity in global competition, a commodity that is being concentrated in the hands of fewer – and so all the more powerful – providers. Global standards and rules for public communication are determined by these providers.

Given the fundamental importance of public communication for democratic societies, it is of paramount importance, in the view of the Presidency, that there should be clear rules and legal bases for providers of digital platforms. These must guarantee freedom of expression, personality rights and respect for the human dignity of users and must penalise abuses and misconduct.

These rights also include data sovereignty in the sense of people's right to control the disclosure and use of their personal data. Because of the particular significance of algorithms and their influence on digital communication, there is a need to consider whether and to what extent their use should be subjected to binding transparency requirements, possibly extending to the full disclosure of algorithms. In view of the global activity and reach of digital platforms, international agreements would be the only way to achieve comprehensive protection and oversight. The European General Data Protection Regulation has defined key standards that are also of relevance to international providers accessing the large European internal market.

The Presidency emphatically supports the efforts to achieve digital sovereignty for Europe. These efforts should also include the development of a European cloud, in which the data of participating citizens would be securely stored in accordance with European law.

Radicalisation and threats to freedom of expression and human dignity

The Presidency sees a second danger in the threat to freedom of expression and in the loss of rationality in political polemics. The attention-gaining mechanisms of digital platforms are radically changing public communication. Complex facts and diverse ways of considering issues are reduced to a limited number of written characters. This fosters populist simplifications and conspiracy theories. The growth of anti-Semitism raises particular concern in this respect.

The unrestricted, permanent and global presence of digital platforms, moreover, has greatly accelerated the pace of public debates. In the view of the Presidency, this tends to promote the entrenchment of people's own positions rather than constructive engagement with those of others and amplifies the emotionalisation of political debates. This is accompanied by a dramatic rise in aggressive behaviour in the form of hate speech, in which verbal attacks are made on other people and which more and more frequently evolves into 'hate crimes', threatening life and limb. Racist, anti-Semitic and Islamist invective find a ready audience on digital platforms, reaching deep into society and becoming a breeding ground for more violence and extremist terrorism. For this reason the Presidency vigorously emphasises the urgent duty of all parliaments to guarantee the freedom of discussion and of debaters as well as respect for the human dignity of every individual in digital media. This task cannot be delegated to platform providers.

Risk to parliaments and their members

The German Presidency notes with deep concern that members of parliaments and representatives of democratic institutions are being subjected to more and more frequent and increasingly dire threats in digital media. Politically motivated murders can often be traced back to radicalisation on the digital web. Now parliaments themselves have become the target, and calls are made online for intrusions into parliaments. The storming of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., highlighted how even such a great democracy, rooted in more than 200 years of history, is vulnerable and open to attack. Would-be copycats throughout Europe have taken encouragement from that riot. At the same time, parliamentary digital networks have come under attack, sometimes from foreign intelligence services. Attacks on cybersecurity and digital infrastructure

are increasingly compounded by online disinformation campaigns, thereby threatening the freedom of elections and indeed democratic states in general. Protecting digital networks from politically motivated cybercrime is a formidable challenge in the effort to safeguard democracies in the digital age.

The Presidency emphasises, however, that a critical appraisal of the new digital communication mechanisms should not lead us to confuse cause and effect. Political radicalisation, intimidation and threats against different-minded people, invective against minorities and ideologies based on conspiracy theories all exploit the new media but are not products thereof. Nevertheless, the new digital media do accelerate undesirable developments and greatly magnify their impact.

New forms of participation through digital technology

The new scope for civic participation in the digital age, however, also offers great opportunities. Thanks to new digital processes, people can bring their points of view and their expertise into political decision-making far more directly, in a much more targeted manner and much faster. Direct communication platforms also give parliaments at all levels the opportunity to involve citizens directly. That can increase trust in parliaments. Regardless of the new opportunities for digital participation, parliaments should aspire to represent their whole electorate in all its diversity. In the view of the Presidency, any existing distrust of politicians must not be further exacerbated by a digital divide. Access to digital communication has become a fundamental condition for universal participation in social and political life. This means that the use of digital media and devices must also be incorporated into the public education and training curriculum in schools, colleges, universities and workplaces.

The Presidency urges all parliaments at each and every tier of government in the EU to test digital dialogue formats, such as citizens' assemblies, in their areas of responsibility, using the entire spectrum of technological resources. Additional opportunities for public involvement can serve to strengthen representative democracy. Citizens' assemblies and other such formats, however, cannot replace the fundamental function of parliaments in representative democracies.

The Presidency therefore explicitly welcomes the fact that the Conference on the Future of Europe has set up its own multilingual digital platform to give people the opportunity to engage directly in the discussions on the future of Europe. The digital platform with its new technical tools can become a good example of digital technology developed in Europe which increases opportunities for public participation independently of commercial interests.

Parliaments and elections in the digital world

Parliaments themselves can also make their own processes more transparent and efficient with the aid of digital instruments and mechanisms. New options for digital elections and parliamentary votes are being developed in many countries – not least in the light of the COVID-19 experience – and will increase in importance for parliaments. In the view of the Presidency, the fact that the technology works should not be the sole criterion when determining whether to

use it. Elections are the main participative element in representative democracies. Accordingly, the principle of free and equal voting, regardless of voters' digital literacy levels, must apply to digital elections and votes. Parliaments must ensure, through their electoral laws, that digital elections are transparent, constantly verifiable, immune to cyber-attacks and manipulation and not subject to the commercialisation interests of digital providers. It must also be possible for independent courts to verify the legality and integrity of digital elections.

Responsibility and remembrance

Even in the digital age, Europe remains bound by fundamental values such as respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights and minority rights. This commitment is the collective product of many generations' experiences of war, dictatorship and division but also a heritage of the human struggle for freedom, democracy and peace.

Berlin today is the symbol of a Europe that has found its freedom again and overcome its division, just as the Berlin Wall symbolised the division of Europe for many years. Right next to the former Wall, the Bundestag on the west side and the Bundesrat on the east side have their present-day seats in historic buildings. A Europe of freedom, peace and justice is therefore an immediately visible commitment for the Members of the Bundestag and of the Bundesrat.

Located between the Bundestag and Bundesrat buildings are the memorial to the members of the Sinti and Roma peoples who were murdered under the National Socialist regime and the memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe, the victims of the genocide known throughout the world by the names of Holocaust and Shoah. Auschwitz, the German concentration and extermination camp in occupied Poland, has given the crimes a focal point and a name. The date on which the Auschwitz camp was liberated in 1945, the 27th of January, is the day of commemoration for the victims of the Holocaust or Shoah in countless places throughout Europe. The German Presidency reveres the memory of the victims of National Socialist genocide, acknowledging Germany's historical guilt. Remembrance will always remain one of Germany's foremost moral duties.

The German Presidency, for its own part and on behalf of all of the parliamentary Speakers, therefore welcomes the proposal made by Wolfgang Sobotka, President of the Austrian National Council, that the EU Parliaments join the #We Remember campaign of the World Jewish Congress and UNESCO in memory of the millions of victims of the Shoah and support its aims of coming out publicly, online and offline, against every type of hatred, invective and anti-Semitism and resolutely stating the case for democracy and pluralism. In this context, the national parliaments of the EU member states and the European Parliament are invited, notwithstanding their own activities for International Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January 2022, to send a common signal by taking part in the #We Remember campaign of the World Jewish Congress and UNESCO.

III. Reports on interparliamentary cooperation

The Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments adopted the new **Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation guidelines**. The Presidency records its thanks to the preceding Finnish Presidency for producing the report of the working group on updating the existing guidelines. It commends the revised guidelines as a visible sign of the considerably increased importance of interparliamentary cooperation in the EU and the role of the joint conferences of the parliaments of the EU member states and the European Parliament.

The Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments adopted the **Report on enhanced interparliamentary cooperation through modern technology**. The report essentially builds on the preliminary work performed by the working group under the Finnish Presidency. The experience gathered during the coronavirus pandemic, however, led to a new practice in the form of video conferences, which was taken into account in the revised report. During the pandemic it has become evident that digital technology, and video conferences in particular, can make a decisive contribution to the continuation of interparliamentary cooperation for as long as attended events are rendered impossible by travel and contact restrictions. In addition, digital formats are an effective, dynamic, cost-cutting and environment-friendly addition when it comes to preparing for interparliamentary cooperation meetings.

The Presidency emphasises specifically that the traditional standards of interparliamentary cooperation, such as equal participation for all, continuing recognition of the same linguistic diversity in conference language regimes and transparency of communication with the public, must also be guaranteed for digital events. Both now and in the future, physical conferences should only be replaced by video conferences if it is impossible to hold an attended event. The value of personal encounter and direct personal exchanges is of prime importance, particularly in the context of interparliamentary cooperation.

IV. IPEX Conclusions

The Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments noted with approval the **IPEX Conclusions** presented by the IPEX Board; these had been adopted at the meeting of the Secretaries-General of the European Union Parliaments on 29 March 2021

The Presidency thanked the outgoing Finnish Chair of the IPEX Board for the drafting of the new rolling Work Programme for 2021-2024 and for monitoring and supporting the launch of the revised IPEX v3 website.

On behalf of all the Speakers of the parliaments of EU member states, the German Presidency thanks the European Parliament for the extraordinary financial, technical and human resources that it makes available for the operation and continuing development of IPEX. Further thanks go

to the Belgian Senate for its willingness to continue formally employing the IPEX Information Officer.

The President commends the work that has been performed to date for the new version of the IPEX homepage and the new IPEX presence on social networks and regards these as important contributions to establishing IPEX as the main platform for digital exchanges among the parliaments of the EU member states and between them and the European Parliament and to making IPEX visible to a wider circle of users and so increasing the overall transparency of interparliamentary cooperation.