



Meeting of the Secretaries General of Parliament Strasbourg - 25 October 2019

Draft minutes

Mr Sawicki, Chair, declared the meeting open at 8.35 am and welcomed the participants and the ECPRD's representatives, namely Ms Ruhrmann, Co-Director (European Parliament, EP), together with Mr Schade and Mr Buyer, Co-Director and Co-Secretary (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, PACE) respectively. He briefly outlined the ECPRD's history and the purpose of the meeting, which was to gather information on the ECPRD's work over the past three years (2016-2018) and take note of the priorities and programme for 2020 and 2021, together with the proposed amendments to the ECPRD Statutes. The Chair added that he wished to deal with other matters and in particular, as he had proposed in a letter in September 2019, possible measures to ensure better participation and greater involvement of parliamentarians in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

1. **Draft agenda**

The draft agenda **was adopted**.

2. **Minutes of the meeting of 16 September 2016**

The minutes **were approved**.

3. **Activity report of the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD), 2016-2018**

Mr Schade, Co-Director of the ECPRD (PACE), explained that the activity report covered a three-year period because the Conference of Presidents, and therefore the meeting of the Secretaries General, had been postponed for a year. He extended thanks to Ms Ruhrmann (EP), who had recently assumed her duties as Co-Director, and to Mr Nurminen (EP) for his assistance during the transition period, and expressed his satisfaction at the excellent co-operation with the European Parliament. He also thanked the two Co-Secretaries, Mr Ulrich Hüschen and Mr Yann de Buyer, who made sure that the Centre ran smoothly, and paid special tribute to Mr Hüschen, who would soon be retiring from his post. Particular thanks were due to the Secretaries General for agreeing to allocate human and financial resources to the ECPRD, and especially for hosting the seminars and annual conferences.

During the period under consideration, there had been over 300 comparative requests every year and, from 2017, over 7 000 replies a year. That 80% of these replies were provided within the deadline bore witness to the diligence and reliability of the staff concerned. These figures showed the success and strength of the ECPRD, which covered 67 chambers of 56 countries and European parliamentary institutions and 117 correspondents and deputy correspondents who assisted in making and replying to comparative requests.

In addition, between four and six seminars a year had been organised with support from parliaments and under the guidance of the four co-ordinators. The website was also vital to the functioning of the ECPRD; maintenance and technical developments were the province of Mr Hilbert from the European Parliament, to whom thanks were due.

The Chair in turn thanked the Secretaries General for their support for the correspondents and deputy correspondents and for hosting the seminars and the annual conference. The constantly growing number of requests was a sign of success sustaining parliamentary work.

Mr Stanton (United Kingdom, House of Commons) thanked and congratulated everybody involved in the running of the ECPRD and its website.

Mr Müller (Germany, Bundestag) acknowledged the bonds between the Bundestag and the ECPRD, whose services it used, in terms both of requests submitted and of replies provided. He was also pleased to have been able to meet all the correspondents at their annual conference in Berlin in early October 2019, where he had seen the degree of their commitment.

The Chair concluded this item by thanking the two Co-Directors and the two Co-Secretaries for their work and invited members to approve the report.

The ECPRD activity report for 2016-2018 was approved.

4. ECPRD priorities and programme for 2020-2021

Ms Ruhrmann, Co-Director of the ECPRD (EP), who had joined the ECPRD under a year ago, gave some details of her career in the European Parliament, where she was head of the Directorate for Relations with National Parliaments. She thanked Mr Nurminen for standing in between the departure of Ms Verger (the previous Co-Director for the European Parliament) and her appointment, together with Mr Schade.

The ECPRD was a valuable network that had been doing excellent work for over 40 years. It had become a recognised instrument of co-operation with national parliaments. The statutory meetings, annual conference and seminars formed the basic structure for effective functioning of the network. It was therefore important for national parliaments to continue providing support by hosting these events. On behalf of the two Co-Directors, she thanked the Secretaries General for their involvement in this respect and particularly those who had facilitated the holding of the most recent annual conferences in Strasbourg, Helsinki and Berlin and – for the 2020 annual conference, the North Macedonian Parliament – together with those who had already hosted a seminar or were going to do so.

The ECPRD was continually innovating, both through its website applications and also through a new initiative by the Co-ordinator for the Parliamentary Practice and Procedure area of interest: a **webinar** on data protection. It had been a good experience but was no substitute for a seminar.

The Co-Director, drawing attention to the excellent work done by the correspondents, often behind the scenes, thought that they deserved the support and gratitude of the Secretaries General. She also commended the work of the Co-Secretaries, particularly Mr Hüschen, who had been working full-time for the ECPRD, of which he was the linchpin. He would soon be retiring from his post, which he had held for over 11 years. She also thanked Mr Hilbert, the IT project manager for the Centre's website and its development.

The Chair thanked the European Parliament and its Secretary General for financing the Centre, in particular by providing the staff and financial resources enabling it to function. Regarding the 2020-2021 programme of seminars and meetings, he reminded the meeting that it was to be found on the last page of the document. It had not been fully completed, and he extended thanks in advance to any parliaments that still wished to become involved and host a meeting or seminar. The activity report listed the seminars for the past three years, and their success could be seen from the number of participants (over 60 on average), with some areas (such as IT) being more popular than others.

Ms Rettler (Germany, Bundesrat) said that she was willing to host a seminar in Berlin in 2021 in the Economic and Budgetary Affairs area of interest.

Mr Mattsson (Sweden, Riksdag) noted his agreement with the draft priorities and programme and asked for more information on the webinar and new technology, particularly regarding what was expected of it (2020-2021 programme objectives, paragraph 7).

Mr Schade, ECPRD Co-Director, replied to the Swedish representative that the webinar had been a trial event. A webinar was effective if it was relatively short and had a limited number of participants. It was unsuitable for more than ten people and was no substitute for a real seminar.

The ECPRD priorities and programme for 2020-2021 were approved.

5. ECPRD Statutes

The Chair pointed out that any modification of the Statutes of the ECPRD had to be approved by the Secretaries General. The statutes had been adopted in 1996 and then amended in Tallinn in 2006 and in Strasbourg in 2012, with several important changes. The proposed new amendments concerned Articles 6 and 7. He gave the floor to the Mr Schade, Co-Director, to present them.

Mr Schade explained that the first amendment, which was technical, entailed moving a paragraph from Article 6 (Conference of Correspondents) to Article 7 (Executive Committee). The second, which was more substantive, concerned the number of terms of members elected to the Executive Committee. The current statutes did not provide for a limit. However, at a recent annual conference of correspondents, the delegates had wanted to see more frequent renewal and had suggested a maximum period of six years on the Executive Committee (two three-year terms) to allow more turnover.

The Chair said that the Executive Committee was composed of permanent members – two Co-Directors, two Co-Secretaries and five members elected by the Conference of Correspondents – who met twice a year and at the annual conference of correspondents.

Since there were no objections to the proposed changes, **the amendments to the Statutes were approved.**

6. How to ensure better participation and greater involvement of parliamentarians in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

The Chair introduced the background document prepared for the meeting and briefly explained the work and responsibilities of national members of parliament in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). The PACE, like other international assemblies, was having to tackle the issue of its members' participation and involvement. National members of parliament had a domestic obligation attaching to their primary mandate. This was a recognised and immutable fact. Occasionally, they might even be penalised for their international involvement by losing their seats or being criticised in the press. It was therefore a question of how to promote their participation and active involvement in the work of international assemblies.

Mr Bahr (Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference) acknowledged that parliamentarians' participation in international bodies was a problem that had existed for over 40 years. Domestic voters expected their members of parliament to deal with domestic issues first and foremost. As for international assemblies, he thought that closer co-operation and more synergy between them might lead parliamentarians to become more involved, citing the co-operation on oceans between the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Co-operation (PABSEC). Common causes such as the United Nations Agenda 2030 with its sustainable development goals (SDGs) could be a vehicle for greater involvement of parliamentarians, enabling them to put pressure on their national governments by using resolutions and other recommendations adopted by international bodies.

Mr Nehmelman (Netherlands, Senate) gave the example of the Netherlands Senate (Eerste Kamer), whose members were very active in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly and followed this up on the national level. After every part-session, a report on their activities was published on the Senate's website and on social media. The head of the delegation made a report to the Standing Committee on European Affairs. At this committee's

request, texts adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly were forwarded to all the Senate committees. The Justice Committee and the Home Affairs Committee, in particular, used the Assembly's work in their contacts with the government. This helped to make the parliamentarians' work more effective nationally and improve recognition of it internationally.

Mr Hajiyev (Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Co-operation) picked up on what Mr Bahr had said and came back to the excellent co-operation between the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Co-operation (PABSEC) and the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC). He thought that interparliamentary co-operation was very important. He cited the initiative taken by both assemblies and the OSCE Assembly for a joint meeting in Istanbul on a subject concerning the Black Sea region and Northern Europe: the Silk Road. He thus urged greater co-operation between international assemblies themselves.

Mr Dossi (Austria, Bundesrat) thought that there was no difficulty in finding members of parliament to participate in the Parliamentary Assembly's work but observed that, in the end, activities at international level were not really germane to the parliamentarians' work or to national priorities.

Mr Montella (OSCE Parliamentary Assembly) expressed his satisfaction at the excellent co-operation between the two assemblies (OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and PACE), particularly in the field of election observation. Over the past three years, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly had seen greater attendance of parliamentarians at statutory meetings as well as for activities on the sidelines of the sessions (relating to migration, counterterrorism, digital technology and Arctic issues) because of the Russian crisis at the PACE. Members of parliament appreciated discussing important subjects such as migration and terrorism-related issues, since they were more at liberty to do so in international bodies than at the domestic level. He questioned whether more international activities should be encouraged.

Mr Mattsson (Sweden, Riksdag) cited the example of the Riksdag. Every year the Swedish delegation submitted a report on the PACE's work to one of the committees. This committee then presented a report during the plenary session. This approach allowed discussion between members of the delegation and other colleagues on their work in international assemblies. He wondered whether the Parliamentary Assembly had already considered the possibility of shortening the part-sessions (dispensing with the Friday meeting, for example, which was less well attended). He would prefer shorter session weeks but more of them. Lastly, he added that national parliamentary sessions were held in the middle of the week. He therefore suggested holding international assembly meetings at the beginning or end of the week.

Mr Muller (Germany, Bundestag) said that the Bundestag considered that work at the international level was important for members of the German delegation, who were actually much in demand among the media and other colleagues in various committees. He acknowledged that the Parliamentary Assembly's work was not always properly appreciated, but he also stressed that civil society was increasingly seeking information about it.

Ms Arnadottir (Iceland, Althingi) admitted that her parliament was not always able to send full and substitute members to Strasbourg. However, she was seeing more involvement by members of the delegation, who were actively explaining their work in the Parliamentary Assembly, including on social media. They were considered specialists, and it was a political advantage for them. As a result, there was more pressure on the parliament to increase the budget for co-operation activities. She would like the speeches delivered by members of the delegation to be available online.

Mr Stanton (United Kingdom, House of Commons) also wanted the speeches made by UK members to be available immediately through the media. He also acknowledged that the Assembly's work was seldom in step with that of the House of Commons, barring a few exceptions such as the discussions on the Russian Federation. In other respects, UK members of parliament would support reducing the number of reports and targeting them more on Council of Europe priorities such as human rights.

Mr Schwab (Switzerland, National Council) said that Switzerland was on the right path, but he felt that the Assembly's work was too disparate and its activities ought to be refocused on its core mission. As for the proposal

to undertake more investigative reports, he believed that it was worth exploring, together with monitoring work to bolster international co-operation with national parliaments.

Mr Piazzi (Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean) echoed what had already been said. Relations between the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) and national parliaments were excellent. PAM had seen exponential growth in participation not only by national members of parliament but also by members of other international assemblies such as the European Parliament. Like other assemblies, PAM was contending with a budget problem, which meant that just one two-day meeting a year was possible. He said that PAM focused on a limited number of issues and had established close co-operation with the United Nations and the Security Council in particular. Members of the Assembly were much involved in United Nations work, particularly on counterterrorism. Other subjects of interest included PAM's support to certain parliaments (Libya) in response to a request from the Security Council and also standardisation of the terminology of national legislation on prosecution of acts of terrorism. PAM supported parliamentarians in raising the profile of their work at national level. Lastly, Mr Piazzi advocated greater co-operation between assemblies, given that national members of parliament in a number of countries participated in more than one international body.

The Chair thanked members for their comments and replied to a number of their questions and suggestions:

On the specific subject of international assemblies that shared the same members of parliament, he suggested greater co-operation and better co-ordination of activities as well as more synergy between them, citing the close co-operation that currently existed between the PACE, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

He thanked Sweden for the way in which its parliament reported on the work of the PACE.

As for how sessions were organised, he drew attention to the budgetary consequences for both international assemblies and national parliaments if the frequency of meetings was to be increased.

Regarding the proposal to dispense with the Friday sitting of the part-sessions, he explained that this point had already been raised a number of times and pointed out that this last sitting was necessary to accommodate the reports presented by members.

Mr Sawicki stressed that it should be borne in mind that the assemblies' "clients" were members of parliament, whose participation in these assemblies could sometimes cost them their seats.

He told the meeting that the Assembly website was evolving and new applications were being added, such as videos of speeches and a profile for each member (showing his or her work and votes), which could be downloaded on request.

As for cutting down on printed documents, he stated that considerable efforts had been made to this end. On the question of targeting work more effectively, he explained that the problem came from the members themselves, who often sought to broaden the scope of their investigations.

In conclusion, he briefly presented the handbook on *National Parliaments as Guarantors of Human Rights in Europe* published by the PACE, before thanking the Secretaries General for their support in facilitating the work of members of parliament in international assemblies.

The meeting rose at 9.55 am.