

Committee on Rules, Ethics and Immunities

Restricted

AS/RuI (2025) 13

24 June 2025

## Draft minutes of the Round Table on Strengthening Ethics and Integrity in Parliaments held on Monday 31 March 2025 in London<sup>1</sup>

**Background:** Corruption and a lack of adequate ethical standards pose a significant threat to democratic institutions, undermining public trust and impeding sustainable development. Recognising the importance of this challenge, PACE seeks to implement a comprehensive project to enhance ethical standards within the Parliamentary Assembly and across parliaments in the member states.

This event aimed to discuss the different measures in place in **national parliaments** to prevent, detect and investigate a lack of adequate ethical standards, including instances of corruption, and how these measures can be improved. It highlighted the **importance of Codes of Conducts** for parliamentarians, and the ways to effectively implement and enforce them.

9:15

Opening by **Daniel Greenberg CB**, Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards of the House of Commons

**Mr Greenberg** welcomed delegates and the organising committee to the House of Commons for the round table on Strengthening Ethics and Integrity in Parliaments, co-organised by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the UK Parliament. He underlined the importance of addressing one of the most urgent issues of our time, the strengthening of ethics and integrity in parliaments, at a time when trust in parliaments and parliamentarians is arguably at an all-time low. The primary challenge for parliaments around the world was that **discussions took place against an unprecedented background of rhetoric and verbal conflict**. Discussion in parliament was supposed to take place in respect of the seven Nolan principles, the principles of standards in public life, Openness, Accountability, Honesty, Integrity, Selflessness, Objectivity and Leadership. **Parliaments must be spaces of honest, respectful, and constructive dialogue that can serve as a model for society**. There's a strong desire among the public, especially youth, for politicians to lead ethically and use dialogue to build rather than destroy. The focus of the current discussions was on reinforcing the ethical foundations of parliaments, ensuring they operate under clear, enforceable principles of public life, distinguishing them from the harmful discourse seen online.

He finally underlined that **an institution was not to be judged by its occasional scandals, but by the methods and success with which it met them and learnt from them**. An institution without scandals was either fit for purpose or rotten to the core, but nobody could tell which.

9:30-10:45

**PANEL 1: Importance of Codes of Conduct: best practice and case studies**

*This panel explored the role of codes of conduct and ethical standards in fostering integrity and accountability in parliaments. Experts and practitioners discussed best practices in **designing** and **updating** codes of ethical standards, ensuring they remained relevant and effective. The discussion also featured **case studies** of national parliaments illustrating the impact of effective and enforced ethical standards on parliamentary behaviour, public trust, and institutional credibility.*

**Moderated by: Ms Ariane Mignolet**, Secretary General of the *Réseau francophone d'éthique et de déontologie parlementaires* and Ethics Commissioner for members of the Quebec National Assembly

<sup>1</sup> Declassified by decision of the Committee on Rules, Ethics and Immunities at its meeting on 25 June 2025

Participants (in alphabetical order):

- **Ms Andrea Eriksson**, Head of Division PM 1 Remuneration of Members of the German Bundestag
- **Martin Jelley QPM DL**, House of Lords Commissioner for Standards
- **Mr David Meyer**, President of GRECO (Group of States against Corruption)
- **Mr Konstantine Vardzelashvili**, Head of Democratization Department OSCE-ODIHR

**Ms Mignolet** opened the first session, which focused on public integrity, a key pillar of democratic societies. Emphasising that integrity underpins public trust and good governance, she highlighted that codes of conduct are essential tools for guiding parliamentarians' behaviour. While such codes could not cover every ethical dilemma, they provided a foundation for ethical decision-making and accountability, helping to build citizens' confidence in institutions. Ms Mignolet introduced the panellists and gave the word to Ms Eriksson.

**Ms Eriksson** said that, in 2014, GRECO evaluated Germany and identified several areas for improvement. GRECO issued eight recommendations, particularly focusing on the need for better rules around the disclosure of conflicts of interest within Parliament and the provision of clear written guidance for members on how to identify and handle such conflicts. At that time, Germany's transparency system was part of the parliamentary Rules of Procedure and had not yet been enacted into law. GRECO also recommended strengthening the system of supervision for enforcing these rules. In 2023, Germany successfully concluded GRECO's IVth evaluation round, having implemented the required changes and expressed satisfaction with the results.

Regarding Germany's approach to parliamentary transparency and the enforcement of ethical rules, at the foundation was the principle that MPs held a free mandate, meaning they were allowed to engage in secondary activities outside their parliamentary work. However, they were strictly prohibited from receiving any benefits or income from third parties for performing their parliamentary duties, as they were already compensated by the state for that purpose.

Germany's Code of Conduct for MPs, which was previously part of the Rules of Procedure, was formalised into law in 2021. This law covered two main topics: prohibitions and transparency obligations. Under the prohibitions, MPs might not accept payments for fulfilling their parliamentary duties, for giving speeches related to their mandate, or for representing third-party interests in exchange for payment. They were also barred from using their public office for private professional gain. Certain donations or benefits were permitted only within strict legal boundaries and must be reported if they exceeded €1,000 per month or €3,000 per year, in which case the information is published on the Bundestag's website. Regarding transparency, MPs were required to disclose the professional activities they engaged in during the two years prior to taking office, including any positions held on company boards, in institutions, or associations. They must also disclose all secondary activities and indicate whether they were paid for them. If they were paid, they must report the income amount, as well as any shareholdings over 5% and any income generated from those shares. Furthermore, any agreements with third parties for future employment or benefits must be reported. All this information was publicly available to ensure voters were fully informed about potential conflicts of interest. The information is reviewed by a division under the authority of the President of the Bundestag, which ensures compliance and publishes the disclosures. An electronic reporting system is currently being developed to simplify this process for both MPs and administrators. This system includes practical guidance and examples to help MPs understand their obligations.

When potential violations occur, the President of the Bundestag might initiate a sanction procedure. Minor infractions, such as delayed disclosures, typically resulted in a private admonishment. However, repeated or more serious violations were reviewed by the Bundestag's Presidium, and if a breach was confirmed, it was publicly reported in an official Bundestag document. In such cases, administrative fines might be imposed, and any unlawfully received benefits must be repaid to the federal budget.

Finally, the President of the Bundestag prepared an annual report at the beginning of each legislative term, outlining how well members have complied with the rules. This report was also published as an official document, contributing to the transparency and accountability of the German Parliament.

**Mr Jelley** listed some reasons why codes of conduct, ethical standards, and similar frameworks were needed. Codes promoted ethical behaviour, prevented conflicts of interest, ensured accountability, and could provide for enforcement mechanisms. They also improved public trust in institutions and ensured fairness and transparency. He then outlined how these codes came about in the UK. He pointed out how most parliaments have existed for many decades, even centuries, but, by contrast, their ethical codes were relatively recent. The UK, Wales and Northern Ireland introduced their codes in 1999, Scotland in 2000, and the House of Lords in 2009. **In the UK, the development of these codes was prompted by political scandals.** A major one was the "cash for questions" scandal in the mid-1990s, which seriously undermined public trust and arguably contributed to the fall of the government at the time. However, some good came out of it: the establishment of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, chaired by Lord Nolan, who developed seven key principles for public service and ethical behaviour. The committee also recommended the creation of formal codes of conduct and ethical frameworks for parliaments and public institutions. In 2009, the parliamentary expenses scandal led to the creation of IPSA, and it also triggered a strengthening of existing codes. So, in the UK at least, crises have often created the space and the political will for reform.

For codes of conduct to be effective, Commissioners needed to be free from political pressure and have the necessary skills and resources to fairly investigate allegations. These codes must also be "owned" by the parliament itself.

Leadership was also critical, as codes must be living documents, and they must be actively promoted and regularly refreshed. Everyone, from parliamentarians to speakers, party leaders, chief executives, and especially prime ministers and presidents, must play a role in upholding and modelling ethical standards. In terms of best practice, the House of Lords was currently about to launch a new version of our Code and Guide in the House of Lords. This was the 14th iteration, and it was a full reform led by its Conduct Committee. The result was a much more accessible code with clearer procedures for both complainants and members under investigation.

**Mr Meyer** thanked PACE for organising the round table and the UK Parliament for hosting, and underlined how important the topic of integrity of parliaments and parliamentarians was, as **there was always more to be done in partnership and collaboration, learning from one another** and continue the work that GRECO had been doing for many years.

The topic of parliamentary integrity was the focus of GRECO's IVth Evaluation Round. As part of that process, every national parliament was assessed. Each received a series of recommendations tailored to its specific circumstances, and GRECO had been following up on implementation ever since. The IVth round GRECO focused on codes of conduct and accompanying guidelines. Beyond codes, GRECO examined the full range of integrity risks faced by parliamentarians, including: lobbying and interactions with third parties; gifts and hospitality, transparency in legislative processes; declaration and disclosure of assets and interests; outside employment and secondary activities; supervision, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms. All essential components of a functioning integrity framework.

A code of conduct must be paired with transparency requirements, so the public can see what interests a parliamentarian may have, and effective enforcement, so that breaches could be investigated and sanctioned appropriately.

He also briefly touched on GRECO's work with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. In 2017, following serious allegations of corruption within PACE, GRECO conducted a review and issued recommendations in 12 areas. While some progress had been made since 2017, more work was needed to strengthen PACE's own integrity framework.

He concluded by saying that **integrity in parliament was not just about having the right documents in place. It was about culture, accountability, transparency, and enforcement, all working together.**

**Mr Vardzelashvili** thanked the Parliamentary Assembly for organising this important event, and the House of Commons for hosting. He underlined the importance to not only to support states in their efforts, but also to learn from their experiences. He underlined how timely and important the discussion was, especially in the context of increasingly worrying trends of democratic backsliding. The level of democracy experienced by the average global citizen had regressed to that of 1985. Authoritarianism was on the rise, particularly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and this was in part a reflection of the ongoing war on Ukraine. But perhaps, as we saw in the early 1990s, there may be hope that such negative trends can be reversed. That previous wave of democratisation led to the creation of institutions such as ODIHR.

He described ODIHR's work, as they collaborated with a wide range of institutions, parliaments, the judiciary, executive bodies, local governments, anti-corruption agencies, national human rights institutions, and political parties. **Political**

**parties, in particular, were important partners, as they brought democratic values and standards into parliament, and it was important to support them in developing internal codes of conduct.** Recently, ODIHR had also been promoting the idea of **gender-sensitive codes of conduct**, including provisions addressing violence against women in politics.

In 2012, ODIHR conducted a foundational study on professional and ethical standards for parliamentarians, and in 2023, they published the **Public Ethics and Integrity Toolkit**, a comprehensive guide for parliaments, which includes both analysis and concrete examples of good practice. ODIHR was currently finalising two new publications, a **toolkit for political parties** and a publication on **parliamentary integrity frameworks**, highlighting the crucial role of ethics commissioners.

**In terms of form, some codes were highly prescriptive, while others were more aspirational. The best approach was to combine both, providing clear guidance on what was expected of MPs, while also setting out aspirational values.** The code should be concise, understandable, and supported by effective **implementation mechanisms**. As nothing undermined the rule of law and integrity more than having rules in place and seeing them violated on a daily basis.

Some recurring challenges were **the lack of political will**, lack of trust between political actors, and a fear that a strong code of conduct could be used against them. This was the reason why establishing inclusive working groups composed of members from both the majority and opposition helped ensure that the final document was owned by all, and that the code became a unifying, rather than a divisive, element.

**Ms Petra Bayr** asked what the pros and cons were of setting up ethical standards as a code or as a law.

**Ms Eriksson** referred to the German system and affirmed that in the end it was decided to opt for a law, because of how it was perceived by the public, as more robust and better enforceable.

**Mr Jelley** replied that from a practical standpoint, most of the cases involved relatively modest breaches. These typically concerned bullying, harassment, or occasionally sexual misconduct. These types of issues could often be more effectively handled through a code of conduct. When matters crossed over into potential criminal behaviour, they were referred to the police. However, if all of this were dealt with strictly under criminal law, a large proportion of these cases would fall outside the appropriate scope for law enforcement, as they were too minor.

**Mr Greenberg** added that law was something done to parliaments, whereas a code was something parliaments do to themselves. There was a crucial element of self-regulation in that distinction, of ownership and accountability. This is why both were needed, laws and codes.

**Mr Meyer** observed that the decision to regulate parliamentary behaviour through a code or through legislation depended on the national context, particularly the constitutional framework and the nature of parliamentary operations. He considered a code of conduct preferable, as it not only addressed legal obligations but also helped shape behaviour and reflect shared principles. He added that a code allowed for internal enforcement mechanisms that preserved parliamentary sovereignty and reduced reliance on external enforcement bodies. **While acknowledging the importance of legislation, he emphasised the code's flexibility and practical advantages.**

**Ms Mignolet** explained that in Quebec, the code of ethics and deontology was adopted in the form of a law. Despite its legal nature, enforcement remained the sole responsibility of her office within the Assembly, and did not involve the judicial system. She reported that the parliamentarians had taken full ownership of the law but acknowledged that revising it was more difficult than updating a code, as any amendments were subject to political negotiation and procedural constraints.

**Mr Gicquel** noted that the **choice between a code and a law needed not be exclusive**. In the French context, ethical provisions existed in both legal texts and internal parliamentary rules. Legal provisions tended to serve purposes of visibility and public accountability, whereas codes offered greater adaptability. He pointed out that some relevant rules were imposed by the executive, and that revising legislation tended to be politically sensitive. He also asked Ms Eriksson about the system of allowances for members of the German Bundestag.

**Ms Eriksson** replied that Bundestag members received a monthly lump-sum allowance of approximately €5,000, in addition to funds for staff support. She specified that there was no formal oversight of how this allowance was spent, and that scrutiny was primarily informal, coming from the media and the public.

**Mr Vucāns** reported that Latvia applied a hybrid system: key rules on anti-corruption and political financing were regulated by law, while the code of ethics formed part of the parliamentary rules of procedure. He explained that each case was examined by a commission, which determined the appropriate response depending on the nature of the violation.

**Mr Vardzelashvili** noted that **codes were generally easier to update** than laws, a feature recommended by GRECO through regular review. However, he stressed that **in certain countries, sanctions could only be imposed through legal instruments**. He added that some members of parliament favoured having rules embedded in law, as they perceived this as a safeguard against arbitrary or politically motivated application.

**Mr Meyer** underlined the need for training and confidential counselling, particularly for members entering politics from other professional backgrounds who may not be familiar with such procedures.

**Ms Castel** posed a series of questions, including whether participants' institutions cooperated with Courts of Auditors, whether GRECO evaluations were systematically published, and what measures existed for whistleblower protection.

**Mr Meyer** indicated that while most GRECO reports were published, a small number remained confidential due to the requirement of Member State consent. He confirmed that GRECO strongly advocates for automatic publication but could not impose it unilaterally.

**Mr Vlasenko** had earlier commented that Ukraine, as a relatively young democracy, tended to regulate extensively, producing a multitude of laws, codes, and implementation rules. He raised the issue of how traditional cultural practices, such as gift-giving, should be considered when designing ethical frameworks.

**Mr Meyer** clarified that the objective was not to prohibit gifts altogether, but to establish thresholds and ensure transparency to avoid any influence.

Responding to Ms Castel's question on whistleblower protection, **Mr Vardzelashvili** stated that legal protection for whistleblowers, including parliamentary staff and citizens, was systematically recommended, especially in cases involving serious misconduct.

**11:15-12:30**

## **PANEL 2: Implementation and enforcement: Models, practical examples and case studies**

*A code of conduct is only as effective as its implementation and enforcement mechanisms. This panel examined different models used by parliaments in Europe to uphold ethical standards, from **independent oversight bodies to internal disciplinary procedures**. Through practical examples and case studies, speakers highlighted **challenges and successes** in ensuring compliance, addressing breaches, and maintaining accountability.*

**Moderated by: Mr Christophe Brico**, Member of the National Council of Monaco and Member of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Participants (in alphabetical order):

- **Chief Justice Emeritus Joseph Azzopardi**, Commissioner for Standards in Public Life of the Maltese Parliament
- **Richard Lloyd OBE**, Chair of IPSA (Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority of the United Kingdom)
- **Mr Justice Garrett Sheehan**, Chairperson of the Standards in Public Office Commission of Ireland (SIPO)
- **Ms Marja Tuokila**, Counsel to the Legal Affairs Committee of the Finnish Parliament and GRECO evaluator

**Mr Brico** welcomed the participants, and he noted that his national parliament of Monaco, the smallest country in the world, was among the first legislatures to implement a comprehensive set of ethical rules, developed following GRECO's fourth evaluation round. He indicated that the panel would explore models, practical examples, and case studies. He explained that, even before formal rules were adopted, MPs voluntarily abstained from voting on matters in which they had a personal interest while disclosing the reason. He highlighted the value of codified rules, which he considered not

only as constraints but also as a protective measure for parliamentarians. He encouraged colleagues to view such rules as safeguards, reiterating that public trust was one of the most vital resources for any parliament.

**Ms Tuokila** explained that Finland's ethical framework had evolved significantly following GRECO's IVth evaluation round. She recalled that during the evaluation, Finland's framework was largely based on constitutional provisions, which covered MPs' independence, immunity, freedom of speech and conflict of interest, as well as rules of procedure concerning parliamentary organisation and various other relevant laws. At that time, voluntary practices existed regarding the declaration of outside ties and the acceptance of gifts. Although Finland believed its system was adequate, GRECO issued a number of recommendations, which came as a surprise. However, upon reflection, the Finnish Parliament found these recommendations to be well reasoned and proportionate and a unanimous decision was made to implement them before the start of the next electoral period. A high-level working group was established, consisting of both MPs and external experts, which put forward a set of proposals in 2014. They adopted a hybrid system, combining constitutional rules with legislation and soft law measures, allowing greater flexibility. In addition to changes in the Rules of Procedure, detailed and practical instructions were issued. Specific improvements were also made in line with GRECO's recommendations, including the clarification of **conflict-of-interest** rules, the establishment of a **public register for the declaration of private interests and gifts**, and the implementation of a system for **training and counselling** MPs on ethical matters. Reflecting on the success of the reform, she attributed it to several factors: the quality of the GRECO report, the constructive attitude of Parliament, the expertise of the working group, and the overall timing of the reform process.

**Mr Lloyd** thanked the participants and welcomed the guests to Westminster. He underscored the collaborative values of his organisation, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) and expressed support for ongoing **mechanisms to promote the exchange of good practices**. He provided an overview of IPSA, noting that it had a legislative mandate to develop, consult, publish, and enforce a scheme of rules for MPs. IPSA also provided training, counselling, and guidance, and to ensure transparency in how public funds were spent to support MPs' parliamentary activities. He explained that IPSA followed a principles-based system, based on the Nolan principles, with additional emphasis on ensuring that public funds were used solely for parliamentary purposes. Mr Lloyd noted that whilst most of the budget was allocated to staff salaries and office support, public perception often focused on the smaller proportion classified as expenses. He stressed the **importance of communication to clarify how public money was being used**.

He then described IPSA's approach to validation and auditing, especially for newly elected MPs and their staff. A team was in place to scrutinise expenditure, and transparency obligations included publishing detailed reports and maintaining records. He also explained that access to funding was conditional on compliance with certain requirements, such as the use of standard employment contracts and pension enrolment for MP staff. A compliance officer, independent from Parliament, was responsible for enforcement. This officer had powers to investigate, recover funds, impose penalties, and refer cases to the criminal justice system where necessary. Mr Lloyd recalled a recent case where an MP had been sentenced to prison for fraud, and he also mentioned a recent controversy involving an MP allegedly using public funds for pet accommodation, which, while minor in financial terms, illustrated how transparency can prompt public scrutiny and debate.

**Mr Azzopardi** described the Maltese Code of Ethics, which clearly prohibits ministers and parliamentary secretaries from engaging family members in their secretariat. The issue with a case they had was that it wasn't clear at the time of the appointment that they were already married. He then added that sometimes reports came from within the same party, as candidates from the same party often competed against one another for votes. So, it was possible that someone from within the same party made the report, and if the report was fact-based, it must be addressed.

**Mr Sheehan** addressed the challenge of persuading parliamentarians to respect each other and stressed the importance of leadership. He said that **leadership could play a more important role than codes, and that a responsible media was more effective in promoting good behaviour than legislation**.

**Mr Lloyd** underlined the importance of training and fostering an ethical culture in Parliaments. **IPSA had a digital system, supported by AI, that scanned proposed expenditures and automatically rejected things like alcohol and other clear red lines**, but the default mindset should have been: *Is this aligned with the rules? How would this look to the public? Would this stand up to scrutiny by a journalist?*

He explained that the UK had several parliamentary bodies: the Standards Committee, the Procedures Committee, the Administration Committee, and soon, an **Ethics and Integrity Commission**. These bodies inside and adjacent to Parliament helped bring to light behavioural or regulatory deficiencies.

**Ms Mignolet** explained that in Quebec, the Code included a **section on values and principles expected of MPs**. It included things such as wisdom and rigour in one's work. These principles were hard to enforce or sanction directly, but they helped Commissioners interpret the ethical provisions more broadly.

She then addressed the issue of weaponisation, Quebec's code was not just about checking expenses, it also covered conflicts of interest, and what was designed as a tool to build public trust and support MPs had, in some cases, become a sharp and dangerous weapon. This is **why the role of the Commissioner was often a very solitary role**, also because of the **pressure when deciding whether or not to open an investigation**.

**Mr Vardzelashvili** posed a question to Mr Sheehan on whether there was a confidentiality requirement when a case was brought before the Ethics Commission. To Ms Tuokila he asked if during the development of Finland's Code was there a particularly difficult or controversial issue in discussions with MPs.

And finally, he asked to everyone what could be done in principle to strengthen the institutional position of Commissioners, to protect them from external pressure and allow them to operate effectively, and if they collect or publish disaggregated statistics related to ethics cases.

**Mr Sheehan** replied that, in a recent case, unfortunately they did not have confidentiality in the complaint process. As, when the journalist who uncovered the issue filed a complaint, he publicly announced it. The complaint itself became damaging, regardless of the outcome, so they needed confidentiality. The Committee's work was confidential, of course, but the complainant could currently say whatever they want publicly.

**Ms Tuokila** replied that one of the most difficult issues for our working group was deciding how to implement the recommendations on codes of conduct, whether via soft-law instruments or binding legal provisions. Another tricky issue was the GRECO recommendation to require MPs to disclose not just their own outside ties, but also those of spouses and family members, as some felt it was intrusive and might deter people from entering politics. Opinions were split and eventually it was decided not to require disclosure of family members' information.

**Mr Lloyd** underlined how weaponization was an ongoing issue for IPSA, that's why they now published reports of expenditures that provide context, explaining why particular expenditures are necessary for democracy to function.

**Mr Lucks** highlighted that weaponization can work the other way around, when politicians implicated in corruption might try to discredit the ethics bodies themselves, and he asked how to ensure the legitimacy and integrity of these structures.

**Mr Azzopardi** agreed with Mr Lucks, and he mentioned a case where one minister launched a case against the Commissioner. He then replied on statistics, that all decisions were published online, in Maltese and sometimes English. They received complaints primarily from two sources: an independent candidate who frequently filed complaints, and members of the opposition.

**13:30-14:45**

### **PANEL 3: Building an ethical culture in Parliaments**

*Beyond formal rules and enforcement, a **strong ethical culture** is crucial for integrity in public institutions. This panel discussed strategies to foster ethical values among parliamentarians, staff, and political parties. Topics included training programmes, behavioural insights, support mechanisms, and the role of public engagement in strengthening ethical behaviour within legislative bodies. Speakers explored how **proactive measures, mentorship, and a culture of accountability** could contribute to a more ethical parliamentary environment.*

**Moderated by: Ms Estelle Martin**, Ethics Officer of the Council of Europe

Participants (in alphabetical order)

- **Daniel Greenberg CB**, Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards of the House of Commons
- **Mr Jean-Eric Gicquel**, Ethics Officer of the French National Assembly and President of the *Réseau francophone d'éthique et de déontologie parlementaires*

- **Mr Jānis Vucāns**, Chairman of the Mandate, Ethics and Submissions Committee in the Latvian parliament

**Ms Martin** welcomed participants to the third discussion of the day, to focus on ethical culture in Parliament. She expressed her pleasure at moderating the panel and introduced the theme by referencing earlier discussions from the morning session. According to her, much had been said earlier about rules, codes of conduct, and enforcement mechanisms. However, she indicated that the afternoon would involve a shift in perspective, from focusing on rules to focusing on behaviour. She acknowledged Mr Sheehan's morning remark that **one could not legislate people into good behaviour**, which she described as a useful transition to the current panel's topic. Ms Martin noted that while the term "ethical culture" had not been explicitly mentioned in the morning, it had nonetheless underpinned much of the discussion. Topics such as **extrinsic motivation** (e.g., sanctions), **intrinsic motivation** (e.g., social norms and traditions), and **behavioural capacity** (e.g., the difficulty of following numerous rules) had all been raised.

**Mr Greenberg** began by reflecting on the importance of promoting an ethical culture both internally and externally within Parliament. He explained that his approach as Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards had been grounded in visibility. He gave an example of cards distributed to Members, which included the Nolan Principles and a code linking to further guidance. His goal was to **make these principles omnipresent within Parliament**. Additionally, he had given induction talks to new MPs and their staff, where ethical culture was discussed as part of a broader message of respect for the rules, the code, and parliamentary officers. He made it clear that **his primary role was not punitive but supportive** and that he aimed to help MPs elevate ethical standards, rather than merely investigate breaches. He had also introduced a series of seminars, where MPs and their staff explored the Nolan Principles interactively rather than being lectured. These sessions, he noted, were highly engaging and had been delivered across the UK, including in constituencies.

Externally, Mr Greenberg had delivered talks in schools, universities, and professional forums in an effort to present Parliament as a space of high standards and integrity. He drew an analogy with professional regulatory bodies, such as the General Medical Council, whose primary role is seen as upholding standards—not just sanctioning wrongdoing. He argued that parliamentary standards should similarly be seen as a tool for inspiring trust, both within and outside Parliament. He also mentioned the use of published advice notes in response to frequently asked questions. These documents were made public, allowing Members and others to benefit from guidance openly rather than through private consultations. He concluded by reiterating that building an ethical culture was, in his view, essentially about making ethical standards visible, and about supporting Members in creating an atmosphere of pride and integrity.

**Mr Gicquel** began by thanking the organisers. He reflected that developing an ethical culture in Parliament was a long-term and complex process. In the French context, he explained, there was a distinction between ethics and what is referred to as "déontologie", professional standards. He argued that the heart of an ethical culture was self-reflection by MPs. Ethics, he said, was about asking oneself the right questions: *Am I allowed to do this? Is this a conflict of interest? Should I accept this gift? Is this expense legitimate?* He stated that ideally, the need for ethics officers would diminish over time, as Members learned to ask these questions independently. He outlined several challenges, starting with the fact that ethics officers often had to work with individuals who had been elected and therefore claimed democratic legitimacy, which made relationships potentially difficult. He pointed out that in France, the **National Assembly had an independent ethics officer, while the Senate handled ethical matters through a committee composed solely of elected senators**. This created two different institutional cultures regarding ethical oversight.

He explained that in his capacity as President of the Francophone Parliamentary Ethics Network, he had seen instances where parliaments had adopted codes of ethics proactively rather than in response to scandal. As an example, he cited the National Assembly of Côte d'Ivoire, which had created a code of ethics simply because it was now considered standard for a modern legislature. Mr Gicquel then described his own role in fostering ethical culture. He highlighted that he operated with a primarily preventive and advisory role and refrained from media engagement to avoid being politicised. He estimated that he personally handled around 25 requests per week, or 1,200 per year, mostly relating to expenses and conflicts of interest. He noted that Members had become accustomed to seeking his guidance before taking decisions, an indication that a culture of ethical self-questioning was beginning to take root.

**Ms Martin** emphasised the importance of asking the right questions and noted that both panellists had highlighted the value of providing clear answers to the public. She suggested that the work carried out by different actors should ultimately benefit the broader community and be used to support a cultural shift. She mentioned the example of



Switzerland, where MPs could interact with a chatbot capable of answering questions about parliamentary rules. She concluded that such tools were becoming increasingly widespread and worth further exploration.

**Mr Vucāns** expressed appreciation to the organisers and underscored the value of exchanging views on parliamentary diplomacy and ethics. He explained that although Latvia had adopted a law on lobbying in 2022, its full implementation required the establishment of a dedicated register. He also described the 2006 Code of Ethics for parliamentarians, which was added to the rules of procedure and contained 23 articles that closely resembled those presented in the Finnish report. He then highlighted several structural and cultural issues in Latvian parliamentary life. For instance, while secret ballots were once used to elect high-ranking officials, current rules required open voting, which he argued could result in pressure from party leadership rather than genuine personal choice. He noted that although this increased transparency, it could sometimes undermine individual autonomy. He also spoke about traditions of cooperation between ruling coalitions and opposition in the past, which were no longer maintained, partly due to the fragmentation of parliament into seven factions. Mr Vucāns further commented on the limitations of Latvia's party-list electoral system, pointing out a disconnect between voters and MPs. In his view, a mixed system, like that of Lithuania, might offer a better balance between party representation and local accountability. He added that Estonian law allowed MPs to simultaneously serve in local councils, a practice Latvia had abandoned after independence but which he felt deserved reconsideration. Linking this to broader questions of ethical culture, he asserted that communication was a key component of ethical behaviour.

**Ms Martin** thanked him for the examples and reflected on the **interplay between formal rules and informal social norms**. She suggested that **behavioural science** could help legislators anticipate and mitigate negative effects when designing, communicating, and enforcing ethical rules.

**Mr Vlasenko** contributed with reflections on the Ukrainian context, where the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption monitored conflicts of interest and asset declarations for all public officials, including MPs. However, he believed this body lacked the **specificity needed to effectively address parliamentary ethics**, as it treated all public servants alike without regard for the particularities of parliamentary work. He then noted that while the Parliament's Rules Committee dealt with ethical issues, its composition, dominated by the majority party, raised concerns about the political use of ethical oversight. He expressed interest in establishing an independent ethics officer for Parliament, so he asked for practical arguments to persuade MPs to support this initiative.

Finally, he raised the question of whether ethical oversight should extend to MPs' conduct outside Parliament, and where the line should be drawn between professional obligations and private life.

**Ms Castel** shared that in the Spanish upper chamber, parliamentarians were obliged to submit declarations of assets and interests upon taking and leaving office, and this information was made publicly accessible via the official journal and parliamentary website. She emphasized the importance of transparency as a preventive measure against corruption and noted that even intermediate asset changes during a term required reporting. She acknowledged the possibility of dishonesty in declarations in the Parliamentary Assembly but believed that cross-checking by tax authorities could mitigate this risk.

**Mr Brico** argued that the central issue was fostering a culture of ethics among the public. He noted that even if most parliamentarians acted ethically, public attention often focused on the minority who did not. He underlined that politicians' legitimacy depended heavily on public trust.

**Mr Greenberg** emphasized that politicians who breached ethical standards could quickly undermine decades of work. He advised showing politicians the **collective benefit of integrity**, whether in government or opposition. Regarding privacy, he stated that politicians were entitled to private lives, and he opposed overly intrusive asset disclosure practices, preferring codes of conduct focused on integrity.

**Mr Gicquel** provided two French examples to illustrate public concern over misuse of allowances. In one case, a parliamentarian reportedly used public funds to pay for dog care; in another, a Member allegedly bought drugs and was reimbursed through his parliamentary expenses. Although these incidents involved personal conduct, they raised ethical concerns due to the use of public money. Mr Gicquel stressed that these isolated cases often overshadowed years of serious work.

**Mr Meyer** shared an innovative practice in the Netherlands involving theatre-based role-playing to sensitise Members to ethical dilemmas. He suggested this method helped simulate real-world challenges and improve ethical reflexes.

**Mr Schennach** observed that public distrust in politicians stemmed not from ignorance of rules, but from a general scepticism toward the profession. He described Austria's approach, which included a multi-party parliamentary committee on incompatibility, required annual declarations of interests, and emphasised transparency. He shared a personal anecdote about a mayor who offered free medical services to retain public trust despite legal constraints, highlighting the importance of credibility.

Returning to the earlier question, **Mr Greenberg** argued that indifference and disengagement were more dangerous than public distrust. He warned that **politicians' comfort within their own circles blinded them to rising public apathy, which posed a threat to democracy and the rule of law.**

Finally, **Mr Vucāns** offered a concrete example of political leadership supporting ethical resolution in Latvia. He noted that maintaining multiple professional roles, as in his own case as a professor and researcher, could be compatible with public office—provided transparency was upheld and voters were informed.

**14:45-16:00**

**THE WAY FORWARD: a case for international networks of parliamentary Ethics Officers.**

*As ethical challenges in parliaments become increasingly complex, international cooperation can provide valuable support and shared expertise. This panel made the case for **establishing and strengthening networks of parliamentary ethics officers**. Discussions focused on how collaboration across the Council of Europe member states, and beyond, can enhance knowledge-sharing, provide peer support, and contribute to global efforts in strengthening integrity and good governance.*

**Moderated by: Ms Petra Bayr**, Member of the National Council of Austria and Member of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Participants (in alphabetical order)

- **Mr Jean-Eric Gicquel**, Ethics Officer of the French National Assembly and President of the *Réseau francophone d'éthique et de déontologie parlementaires*
- **Ms Ariane Mignolet**, Secretary General of the *Réseau francophone d'éthique et de déontologie parlementaires* and Ethics Commissioner for members of the Quebec National Assembly

**Ms Bayr** opened the final session by underlining the importance of discussing the way forward and reflecting on the ongoing work within parliamentary contexts. She noted that proposals such as networks of ethics officers would be desirable.

**Ms Mignolet** began by expressing gratitude for the opportunity to speak in such a symbolic venue as the House of Commons. She emphasised the common historical and value-based ties between Quebec and Europe. She noted that ethics in parliament depended heavily on perception, context, and culture, and therefore, no single regulatory model could be universally applied. Instead, she argued that the diversity of systems provided fertile ground for cooperation. She went on to present the French-speaking Parliamentary Network on Ethics, which she had presided over for four years and served as Secretary General since 2023. She explained that the network had been established to promote exchanges between French-speaking parliaments and other bodies interested in ethics.

**Ms Mignolet** explained that the network had grown quickly to about 20 members in three years, after which the focus shifted to consolidating operations and refining its institutional processes. The General Assembly of the network, composed of parliaments, independent bodies, and parliament-appointed individuals, served as a platform for diverse perspectives. She acknowledged that while the diversity was enriching, it also created challenges, particularly in reconciling the perspectives of those who monitored ethics and those subject to such monitoring. The network's membership spanned North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia-Pacific, and training sessions had revealed that ethical perceptions varied considerably across contexts.

**Ms Mignolet** outlined the network's four main objectives: **promoting experience-sharing** between members and contributing to the dissemination of best practices; **collecting and distributing information** on ethics-related organisations, through newsletters and the network's website and media activities; **promoting awareness and adoption** of ethical standards, including support for new codes. She referred to an example involving Côte d'Ivoire, where they supported the development of a draft code, **raising awareness and providing training**, often in partnership with

parliaments or other organisations. She concluded by emphasising **the importance of staying updated with evolving standards, societal expectations, and relevant literature, as ethical norms were constantly shifting.**

**Ms Bayr** asked whether using a single working language, such as French, was essential.

**Ms Mignolet** responded that while the French language had helped, she did not view it as a limitation. Each network, she said, was valid and could operate within different linguistic or institutional frameworks.

**Mr Gicquel** followed up by elaborating on a conceptual distinction between “ethics” and “deontology” in the French context. He explained **that ethics involved philosophical and moral principles such as integrity and objectivity, whereas deontology referred to legal rules, obligations and prohibitions.**

**Ms Bayr** asked what type of watchdog body was considered most effective in theory.

**Mr Gicquel** had explained that, in his view, the French public might be sceptical if ethical oversight in the Senate was conducted only by senators themselves, unlike in the National Assembly where an independent figure was involved. He believed that **having independent experts from outside Parliament offered better perspective and legitimacy.**

**Mr Sheehan** asked whether the 1,200 questions answered annually by the ethics body were confidential. He had then warned against overregulation, as it could lead to inefficiency and demoralisation. He therefore advised caution in imposing too many constraints on politicians.

**Mr Lucks** welcomed the various perspectives shared and stressed that fostering ethics in politics was not solely the task of ethics divisions or parliamentarians, but a shared responsibility of all politicians and society at large. He encouraged greater efforts to involve journalists, experts, and the general public in order to promote a broader ethical culture.

**Mr Sheehan** proposed **introducing a European scorecard to monitor parliamentary behaviour**, potentially offering an independent tool to encourage improved standards.

**Ms Mignolet** clarified that in Quebec, all advice and opinions given by the ethics commissioner were confidential. This confidentiality made it difficult to share jurisprudence or interpretations publicly. She had argued that confidentiality was necessary to ensure politicians felt comfortable providing full information when seeking advice. Regarding a European scorecard, she had noted that GRECO already served a similar function through tailored recommendations.

**Mr Gicquel** returned to the issue of the 1,200 replies, stating that most could be addressed by consulting a simple guide given to parliamentarians at the start of their mandate. He also addressed concerns about overly strict rules, reminding that MPs themselves were responsible for setting them. If some found the rules burdensome, they had the power to amend them. He concluded that clear division of responsibilities among various ethical authorities was essential.

**Mr Brico** responded to the scorecard proposal by affirming that GRECO offered a better alternative, as its recommendations were adapted to each national context and allowed for measurable compliance tracking.

**Mr Vardzelashvili** raised the question of what organisations like ODIHR could do to support ethical standards in parliaments. He referred to the idea that **ethical frameworks should be seen as an attribute of modern parliaments.**

**Ms Martin** reflected on Mr Lucks’ comments, posing the question of whether enough had been done to understand the root causes of public distrust in parliamentarians. She argued that it was essential not just to react to scandals but to **explore why trust eroded and what led to ethical violations.** She suggested that such reflection might help inform the role of external organisations.

**Mr Meyer** agreed with those who had praised GRECO’s work, especially in the IVth evaluation round. However, he pointed out some limitations. GRECO’s thematic rounds eventually concluded, and once the fourth round had closed, there would no longer be formal evaluations of parliaments. Some countries might complete the round without making significant progress on parliamentary ethics, so he asked participants to think about how to maintain the momentum beyond GRECO’s involvement. He also noted that GRECO did not facilitate cooperation among ethics officers and MPs, an aspect he felt was vital to continue progress. For him, GRECO’s work should be seen as a starting point rather than an endpoint in improving parliamentary ethics.

**Ms Bayr** thanked everyone for their participation and for the fruitful, concise exchanges. She noted the diversity of levels, backgrounds, and ideas among the participants, highlighting that robust ethical standards were fundamental to regaining public confidence. She mentioned that safeguarding democracy had been the topic of a recent Conference of Speakers and Presidents of Parliament in Strasbourg, underscoring its urgency.

She explained that clear ethical standards could prevent corruption, abuse of office, and protect MPs from improper influence. However, she emphasized that **ethical frameworks must be adapted to the specific legal and cultural context of each parliament**. Ms Bayr recalled the seven Nolan principles: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, honesty, accountability, openness, and stressed the priority of serving the public interest over personal or familial interests. Despite the variety of models and needs regarding ethics, she insisted on the **importance of identifying and promoting common core principles**.

Ms Bayr argued that systems should focus on fostering ethical behaviour proactively rather than reacting after breaches. Regarding **networks**, she acknowledged their usefulness for **learning, sharing best practices, and avoiding past mistakes**. She mentioned that the parliamentary assembly's Rules Committee provided a platform for debate and exchange, not only among MPs but also involving practitioners from various settings. She concluded by expressing her hope for further exchanges and debates, thanking the UK Parliament for their hospitality, the Rules Committee secretariat for their preparatory work, the interpreters, and all participants.