



Meeting of the Secretaries General of Parliament Friday 29 September 2023

Mr Peter Finnegan, Clerk of the Dáil, welcomed everyone to the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament in Dublin. He expressed how honoured he was to welcome this Conference, with almost 422 delegates present and 59 delegations coming from 50 countries, and he underlined the importance of this meeting for Secretaries General, that allowed them to share their experiences and discuss the key issues that come under their direct responsibilities.

1. DRAFT AGENDA

The draft agenda was adopted.

2. MINUTES

The draft minutes of the meeting held in Athens on 22 October 2021 were approved.

3. RULES OF THE EUROPEAN CONFERENCE OF PRESIDENTS OF PARLIAMENT

Mr Peter Finnegan explained that the first proposed amendment to the rules aimed at updating the list of members of the Conference, particularly in view of the Council of Europe's decision to exclude the Russian Federation from its membership. Therefore, in the annex on "Speaking and seating arrangements", the Inter-parliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth of Independent States (IPA-CIS) should be removed from the list of invited members and the Latin American Parliament (Parlatino) should be added. The list of the languages of the Conference should also be changed accordingly.

The second amendment to the rules proposed a change in the text to allow a vice-president, designated to replace a Speaker or President not participating in the Conference, to have the right to speak. In the current version, the Rules stipulated that only Speakers and Presidents had the right to speak.

The proposals for updating the Rules of the Conference were approved.

4. STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE, INTEGRITY FRAMEWORK OF PARLIAMENTS

Ms Despina Chatzivassiliou-Tsovilis, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, thanked all the participants for attending and recalled that two years earlier, in Athens, the discussion verted on the lessons learned from the pandemic. She underlined how all Parliaments had shown the ability to adapt to the new situation at that time and could learn from that event.

Speaking on the topic of "Standards in public life, integrity framework of Parliaments", she underlined the importance of taking a closer look at the Codes of Conduct and integrity frameworks of Parliaments, as many of them had to face crises and scandals. She referred to the crisis that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe had to face in 2017, for which it established an independent external body into allegations of corruption (IBAC), which delivered results within a little more than a year. Since then, the Parliamentary Assembly had to review and strengthen the procedures and rules. Moreover, in 2021, the standards were updated to include different cases of harassment and to keep up with the changes in mentality and culture. In 2021, an explicit prohibition of sexism and sexual harassment, violence and misconduct was added, concerning both MPs and staff, with the introduction of a specific procedure in case of complains. This was very topical as, according to a study conducted by the IPU, 82% of female MPs interrogated declared to have been at least once victim of some form of sexual harassment.

The Parliamentary Assembly entrusted the enforcement of the standards to an internal body, the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs. It had also introduced the obligation of declaration of conflict of interest, even if there was still no verification mechanism for it. Lastly, the Secretary General pointed out that there was an ongoing discussion in the Assembly about the need for a register of lobbyists and NGOs.

Ms Ragna Árnadóttir, Secretary General of the Parliament of Iceland, underlined the relevance of the issue. A Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament was adopted by a parliamentary resolution in the Althingi in 2016, and specific provisions on sexual harassment and gender-based violence were added in 2018. The Code of Conduct defined guidelines for MPs and their expected behaviour as elected officials. Complaints were handled by the Speaker's Committee. MPs could not be sanctioned, but the Committee's opinions could be made public. She underlined that the process was lengthy, and could sometimes turn into a legal debate at times, and for this reason it was not suitable for handling #metoo cases that required an immediate reaction. Therefore, in May 2023 the Speakers' Committee had approved a strategy and an action plan to combat bullying, sexual harassment and gender-based violence, with a focus on prevention and training. They had also established a procedure in the event of an allegation against an MP, stating that complaints should be made to the President of Parliament or to the Secretary General, who would deal with them. It was also worth asking whether Members of Parliament could be exempted from liability on account of their special status. The university of Iceland had researched the question, and they had replied that MPs could not be exempted from responsibility. The Secretary General also pointed out that provisions in the field of labour protection still apply to the Parliament, as it was also a workplace. Finally, she recalled that institutions were required to address these issues and to ensure that the procedures were carried out in a confidential manner.

Mr Geert Jan Hamilton, Secretary General of the House of Representatives of the Netherlands, confirmed that the issue under discussion was very topical for the Dutch Parliament and informed that a code of conduct for Members of Parliament had been introduced some years earlier. It guaranteed some general principles, such as independence, and laid down rules on gifts, favours, outside activities and the use of information for personal interests. At the suggestion of GRECO, they had also set up a Board of Inquiry on Integrity, an independent three-member body to which any member of the public could lodge a complaint against an MP accused of breaching one of these rules. The committee had received hundreds of complaints, but only a few had been relevant and led to an investigation. There had been some rulings by the committee, followed by proposals for sanctions, and only once had the committee proposed the highest possible sanction, a four-week suspension. Finally, the Secretary General reported that there was a major ongoing debate about how to deal with unacceptable behaviour by MPs towards officials, such as bullying, as there was not yet a procedure in place.

Mr Bodo Bahr, Secretary General of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference (BSPC), thanked the hosts for hosting the Conference. He explained how the BSPC, with its 18 member parliaments and four parliamentary member organisations, had not included specific rules on parliamentarians in its Statute, as all member parliaments had such rules. However, due to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the BSPC had to update its previous rules of procedure and adopt new statutes and rules of procedure to regulate the ethical foundations and core principles of its cooperation. This was done in order to anchor the ethical foundations on clear values and to prevent the participation of members who violate the value-based principles. At the same time, they ensured that parliamentarians who violated these principles could be expelled.

The Secretary General then listed the BSPC's core principles of co-operation: democratic values, the rule of law, human rights, peaceful neighbourliness, respect for international law, a resilient civil society and robust NGOs. The BSPC and its members were convinced of the need to protect free and independent media, including the fight against disinformation and fake news; to support and strengthen democratic institutions in participating states; to improve dialogue between governments, parliaments and civil society; and to promote equal opportunities, gender equality and diversity in our societies. Members of the BSPC must adhere to the Foundations, Core Principles, Mission and Objectives of the BSPC, as set out in the BSPC Statutes and Rules of Procedure and other relevant documents, or they may be suspended from membership for an indefinite period by decision of the remaining members.

Ms Ruxandra Popa, Secretary General of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, asked those who had integrity frameworks and codes of conduct whether these rules also applied when MPs travelled

for official meetings and whether there were special provisions for these cases, especially in cases of sexual harassment.

Ms Chloe Mawson, Clerk Assistant of the House of Lords of the United Kingdom, described how Westminster decided to address the issue of sexual harassment in the wake of the #MeToo movement. The code in the House of Lords did not cover this type of behaviour. A working group was set up and an independent scheme (ICGS Scheme) was established, independent of Parliament, to deal with bullying, sexual harassment and misconduct, covering everyone working in Parliament. An independent helpline was set up and investigations were carried out by external investigators who reported to decision-makers in Parliament. The nature of the decision-maker depended on whether the person being investigated was an MP or a staff member, and they could recommend a sanction, up to and including expulsion. In the House of Lords, since the introduction of the system, three members had lost their right to sit permanently because of cases of sexual misconduct. She then clarified that the policy also applied to parliamentary travel. The ongoing question was how to change the culture to prevent misconduct, and to this end they had introduced specific training for staff and Members on the Code and ethical principles.

Mr Tom Goldsmith, Clerk of the House of Commons of the United Kingdom, pointed out that the regulatory landscape for Westminster MPs included rules on financial misconduct, which were regulated by the Standards Committee, which had the power to recommend sanctions to the House. He then commented on the complexity of the system and foresaw a future need for streamlining.

Ms Jacqueline Kucera, speaking on behalf of Mr Philippe Schwabe, Secretary General of the Swiss Federal Assembly, described the recent work done in Switzerland in the context of codes of conduct. In 2016, the Swiss parliamentary services had actively participated in GRECO's 4th round of evaluations, and in order to comply with GRECO's report, Switzerland had taken several measures. Firstly, the Parliament had discussed the establishment of an ethics body in 2021, which unfortunately had not been successful. Secondly, the Parliament had published a guide for all members on transparency obligations and the acceptance of gifts. She confirmed that these recommendations to MPs had had a good impact on transparency. A report on corruption awareness had been published and the Parliament's services had introduced a training course for everyone on these issues.

Ms Uršula Zore Tavčar, Secretary General of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia, thanked the hosts. She said that the Slovenian National Assembly had adopted a Code of Conduct two years earlier, after more than 10 years of discussions, thanks to GRECO's recommendations. The Code of Conduct was not punitive but mainly principle-based. After discussions with constitutional lawyers, they had realised that they could not approve sanctions unless they passed a law, and there was not enough willingness to pass a law at that time. The Code of Conduct placed emphasis on the President's Office discussing cases in camera. In some cases they had received a request to make the documentation public and this had a very negative effect as it led many MPs to drop cases of hate speech that they had brought, opting instead for an informal decision through discussions between the parties. With regard to cases of harassment of staff, she pointed out that no cases had been brought so far, but that there was still a need to address the issue. She then turned to the issue of lobbying, commenting that Slovenian MPs were required by law to report all their meetings with lobbyists to the Commission, and that they seemed to do this very diligently.

Mr Philippe Delivet, Director of International Relations and Protocol at the French Senate, explained that in France there were two different levels of regulation of MPs' behaviour. A 2013 law had established the High Authority for Transparency in Public Life as an independent body that could request information from the financial authorities and publish opinions and advice. At the beginning of each parliamentary term, MPs must submit a declaration of their assets to the High Authority, which was published online; they could be prosecuted if they had failed to do so. In addition, in 2009 the Parliament set up an Ethics Committee, a collegial, pluralist body with significant investigative powers, to ensure compliance with the ethical rules. An ethics guide was made available and distributed to all senators, who must declare any trips financed by an external body and any gifts of more than 150 euros. There were also sanctions for cases of bullying and harassment. A special unit had been set up to receive complaints of bullying and harassment; the President of the Senate could also refer the matter to the Ethics Committee, which could conduct an investigation and decide what action to take. Finally, he stressed that labour laws also applied to parliamentarians.

Ms Tassoula Jeronymides, Secretary General of the House of Representatives of Cyprus, explained that a set of ethical rules had always been included in the Rules of Procedure, but it was only in 2021, following GRECO's recommendations, that a specific Code of Ethics had been

introduced, covering the issues of misconduct, inappropriate behaviour and the acceptance of gifts. There was no separate provision on sexist behaviour. She then explained that the procedures were very complex and that there was a need for simplification. A request could be made to the President, or an ad hoc committee and decisions would be published on a public website. There were also other laws on whistleblowers, declaration of assets and the establishment of an independent anti-corruption authority. Stricter sanctions for MPs were under discussion. The House of Representatives was in the process of organising seminars and counselling for MPs.

Mr Federico Silvio Toniato, Deputy Secretary General of the Italian Senate, explained that in Italy, as in France, there were different levels of regulation, the level of ordinary legislation and that of internal regulations. Internal regulations could only be amended by a qualified majority, and with an amendment it was possible to introduce a code of ethics. The code, the sanctions and the prevention mechanisms had been harmonised for both chambers. In the event of abuse of office, the President was the driving force and the Bureau, made up of the four Vice-Presidents, the investigating body. Another investigative body was the College of Quaestors, which had to hear the MP concerned. In addition, MPs and members of the government must submit information on their assets and update it every year. He then explained that in Italy there was an independent anti-corruption body, a committee against racism and discrimination, and there was also an anti-mafia parliamentary committee that issued reports before every local and national election, with a preventive list of people deemed unacceptable as candidates.

Ms Fabrizia Bientinesi, Secretary of the Italian Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, speaking on behalf of Mr Fabrizio Castaldi, Secretary General of the Chamber of Deputies of Italy, pointed out that since 2016 the Chamber of Deputies had a Code of Conduct based on the principles of impartiality and prohibition of any financial interest, which meant that deputies could not derive any financial benefit from their political activity and had to declare all conflicts of interest and assets. The Chamber also had a system of sanctions and a limit of €250 on gifts received. The possibility of including a reference to the code of conduct and its binding nature in the Rules of Procedure was under discussion.

Mr Albino de Azevedo Soares, Secretary General of the Portuguese Parliament, explained that in recent years the Portuguese Parliament had strengthened the ethical standards governing the work of MPs to ensure that they respected the principles of independence and the pursuit of the public interest. MPs were required to declare their assets and private and financial interests when they take office, which had been scrutinised by parliamentary control mechanisms and the Constitutional Court. However, in 2019, Parliament adopted a new Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament, which set out a new range of duties and established the obligation to refuse gifts, hospitality or any other advantage that could be seen as a reward for an act, omission, vote or influence on a decision. It also established the duty to conduct parliamentary business with institutional loyalty and courtesy, in particular by refraining from any conduct likely to discredit the parliamentary institution. The Parliament also established a permanent parliamentary committee to monitor transparency and ethics among MPs. Finally, he underlined that the development of the current rules was still an ongoing debate as society increasingly demanded more transparency and political accountability.

Mr Talip Uzun, Secretary General of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, explained that the Grand National Assembly followed the principles of integrity and accountability. The Rules of Procedure set out the Parliament's Code of Conduct for Members and provided for sanctions in the event of breaches, which in serious cases could lead to the loss of parliamentary membership. He underlined how the use of social media posed a reputational risk as it was not yet regulated and made MPs more visible. Finally, he pointed out that higher ethical standards require stronger co-operation between democratic institutions.

Ms Kristina Svartz, Deputy Secretary General of the Swedish Parliament, spoke about the Code of Conduct for Members of the Riksdag, which had been adopted by the Speaker, Deputy Speaker and party group leaders, who were responsible for upholding its principles. She explained that the code consisted of four areas: conflicts of interest, bribery, gifts and the register of financial interests. With the growing importance of transparency, the register had gone from voluntary to compulsory. The Riksdag had provided training and advice on sexual harassment in the administration to give party group secretariats the necessary knowledge to deal with such cases.

Mr Asaf Hajiyevev, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (PABSEC), underlined the importance of this biennial Conference for the exchange of views and best practices and suggested that the meeting should be held annually to better reflect the

rapidly changing conditions. In this context and given the increasing strategic importance of the Black Sea, he suggested that next year's meeting be held in Istanbul.

Ms Kristina Háfoss, Secretary General of the Nordic Council, thanked the Irish Parliament for the invitation and for choosing such interesting topics for discussion. She then spoke about the role of the Nordic Council: an inter-parliamentary co-operation between the eight Nordic Parliaments of Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland, with a total of 87 elected parliamentarians who meet 5 times a year. She explained that since the parliamentarians represented their respective national parliaments, they were covered by their parliaments' codes of conduct even when they were in the Nordic Council.

Ms Despina Chatzivassiliou-Tsovilis, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, thanked colleagues for their interventions and welcomed Mr Viacheslav Shtuchnyi, Secretary General of the Parliament of Ukraine, praising his work in keeping the Parliament functioning under wartime conditions.

Mr Martin Groves, Clerk of the Seanad of the Republic of Ireland, summarised the interventions, noting that there was a clear consensus that standards of behaviour were under some pressure and that there was a growing need for ethical frameworks. The interventions did not only refer to financial interests, but also put a strong emphasis on the issues of bullying, sexual harassment and misconduct. Although parliaments could not define the drivers of such behaviour, it was important that institutions were aware of it and acted on it. There was agreement that parliamentarians and officials should be subject to these codes, including when travelling on official business. Reference was made to the need for a change of culture, including through informal means. There was also agreement on the need to defend our fundamental values and protect the integrity of parliamentary institutions. Parliaments had shown the ability to adapt to different circumstances during the pandemic, and this could also apply to updating standards. There was no single solution to this issue and the wide range of approaches shown by parliaments reflected the differences between our cultures. He concluded by highlighting the important role that Secretaries General could play in promoting progress in this area.

5. ACTIVITY REPORT OF THE EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR PARLIAMENTARY RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION (ECPRD), 2022-2023

Ms Valerie Clamer, Head of the Table Office, Information Technologies and Events of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Co-Director of the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation, presented the ECPRD annual report prepared by the Executive Board. The ECPRD was the only interparliamentary research body at European level, with over 130 correspondents from different parliamentary bodies across Europe. The network was very attractive and many parliaments had expressed interest in joining the Centre. The ECPRD allowed parliaments to make enquiries of other parliaments for their own use and was therefore a unique collection of legal information. During the pandemic, the ECPRD was very proactive in helping parliaments share best practices and adapt their procedures, and a great deal of data was collected and shared through the website. The ECPRD also organised seminars on topics of interest for the future of parliaments. On the topic of ethics and integrity frameworks, she invited everyone to read the summaries of national parliaments collected by the ECPRD.

In view of the growing number of requests, the ECPRD Executive Committee regularly discussed optimising the work of the Network by modernising its website in order to improve the availability of the information collected. This was a top priority for the coming years, along with the dissemination of summaries that could be immediately accessed by parliaments.

The activity report included a list of all the seminars, some 20, which had been organised by the correspondents and thematic coordinators over the previous two years, mainly remotely, and which had been very successful. She then thanked the British Parliament for hosting a conference this year and the Armenian Parliament for hosting the previous year's event. Finally, she called on the Secretaries General to continue to support the activities of the ECPRD, in particular the organisation of seminars.

6. ECPRD PRIORITIES AND PROGRAMME FOR 2024-2025

Mr Jesus Gomez, acting Director for Relations with National Parliaments of the European Parliament, Co-Director of the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD), emphasised the relevance of the role of Secretaries General in supporting

the ECPRD network. He then listed the critical priorities for the period 2024-2025:

- Active engagement: encourage the active collaboration throughout the network, appointing a dedicated correspondent to support the involvement.
- Information exchange: intensify the network commitment to sharing best practises and expertise. This was a priority because of the constantly increasing number of requests. In 2023 the network expected to receive a record number of 400 requests.
- Capacity building: continue the organization of seminars on issues of parliamentary interest. In this context, he invited interested Parliaments to volunteer to host one of the eight annual ECPRD meetings.
- Emphasize efficient resource use: in the following years the network would optimize its resources and avoid duplications, ensuring its sustainability.

Finally, he reaffirmed the ECPRD's commitment to foster deeper co-operation among parliaments, and underlined how the support of Secretaries General was essential to achieve the proposed objectives.

The ECPRD activity report and the priorities document were approved.

7. OTHER BUSINESS

None.

Ms Despina Chatzivassiliou-Tsovilis, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, informed the participants that the next meeting of Secretaries General of Parliaments would take place in Strasbourg in 2025, and that proposals could also be put forward for a meeting in 2024. She concluded by thanking the Irish Parliament for its hospitality and the excellent organisation of the event.