



Conférence européenne des **Présidentes et Présidents de Parlement**
European Conference of **Presidents of Parliament**

Athènes, 21-22 octobre 2021 / Athens, 21-22 October 2021



Meeting of the Secretaries General of Parliament
Friday 22 October 2021

Ms Despina Chatzivassiliou-Tsovilis, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, welcomed everyone to the European Conference of Presidents of Parliament and to Athens, her home city. It was an honour, pleasure and responsibility to welcome this Conference, co-organised with the Hellenic Parliament for the first time. She thanked the Secretary General of the Hellenic Parliament and his team wholeheartedly for their excellent co-organisation and hard work.

She introduced **Ms Valérie Clamer**, Head of the Table Office, Information Technologies and Events of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and also co-director of the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD). She also introduced **Ms Katrin Rührmann**, co-director of the ECPRD for the European Parliament.

Day one's debates were about how parliaments addressed the unprecedented, unexpected challenges that Covid-19 represented to the rights and freedoms of citizens and to democratic institutions. Speakers explained how, to face these challenges, parliaments had to ensure continuity of functioning, and how important it was to keep democratic scrutiny of the executive amidst unexpected circumstances. To continue fulfilling their democratic functions, parliaments had to adapt to a much unforeseen situation.

Covid-19 had changed lives in many respects and taught everyone to do things differently, by innovating and experimenting. Rather than looking into how things were managed, it was important to discuss what could be kept as future lessons which could be useful for parliaments and interparliamentary assemblies. A number of issues were identified in a background document which had been shared to delegates and could be talking points.

To start with, procedural changes: some parliaments had adopted general special arrangements for exceptional situations, others had made Covid specific adaptations of the rules. The Parliamentary Assembly had opted for a general special arrangement for a crisis situation, since the pandemic was an event that could occur again but other events could also occur in a different form.

Other issues which had to be faced in national parliaments and interparliamentary assemblies included the possible methods of remote operation, and to what extent these new technologies could be kept for the future; digitalisation and virtual parliamentary work, and how to balance the utility of remote operations and technologies, and the disadvantages of losing physical parliaments if virtual parliaments became more established; communication policies and relations with citizens, and to what extent parliamentary democracies were affected by pandemic-related adaptations.

Moreover, interparliamentary assemblies had had to face the specific challenge of observing elections in pandemic situations. She looked forward to the contributions of the Secretaries General of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and the PABSEC.

Mr Georgios Mylonakis, Secretary General of the Hellenic Parliament, said it was a great joy to welcome 36 Secretaries General of parliament, for the first time in Athens, the cradle of democracy, to exchange views and good practices irrespective of the unusual circumstances of the pandemic. 2021 was a key year for Greece since it marked 200 years of the Greek Revolution.

Social distancing and the need for virtual meetings to avoid meeting in closed spaces caused great turbulence for parliaments. These new circumstances required adjustments, and numerous different solutions were tried depending on a country or entity's needs or legal framework. Numerous pieces of legislation had been adopted under very extraordinary circumstances, including virtually and at a distance, thanks to upgraded systems to have virtual meetings. The Greek Parliament had adopted new rules and the entire framework

under which it operated, to be able to meet, draft and adopt legislation, had been changed. Discussions and activities could not take place face to face. Change and adaptation were needed.

The pandemic was thus an opportunity to revisit the way work was done, irrespective of the difficulties. New technologies were put in place: a new integrated system of safety and security, parliamentary networks, establishing new platforms for MPs to work via, putting together a system of registration and recording of these activities and meetings, since it was necessary to maintain a system which was transparent in nature.

Some of the new horizons that the pandemic opened, to consider looking at for the future, included the new systems adopted within parliaments, and to contemplate what policies existed to support those systems put in place.

Citizens had to feel safe in a period of great uncertainty such as these: Institutions had to be protected. Responses were needed for the fluctuating circumstances that prevailed. It was clear that the need to adopt emergency measures could not affect the overall functioning of administrations, structures, or entire democratic mechanisms and processes, whilst respecting the rule of law and the liberties and fundamental rights of citizens.

The European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD) had proven to be an extremely useful tool. The periodic reports drafted included topics such as the digital transition, safety and security in networks, all extremely useful information. It was a time for thinking out of the box and for being innovative. This was also an opportunity to share good practices and know-how.

Mr Gennady Golov, Secretary General of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, thanked the Greek hosts for their warm hospitality. The pandemic had been a challenge for everyone, for all of humanity, but this period had created opportunities too, to move forward in new directions and to continue the legislative work. It was absolutely necessary to move forward with digital technologies, to adopt them and to have a smooth transition.

This very serious period of the pandemic had tested citizens and parliamentarians. They had had to think in new and innovative ways to meet the challenges, as the digital format offered many opportunities. A number of innovative programmes had been adopted by the Council of the Russian Federation to facilitate their work and assist them in the digital transition and operate effectively. This had also happened in other sectors of the Russian economy, social activities, etc., to continue to function even at the height of the pandemic. A dedicated television channel had been set up to broadcast information on parliamentary proceedings; meetings had been held by videoconference, resulting in an increase of 22 meetings; a newsletter had also been disseminated on the website. At the same time, the digitalisation of legislative work had been developed. It was also important for co-operation with local and central authorities, as well as between citizens and local authorities, to be able to continue to offer services and to enable public administrations to continue to operate.

A number of different reports issued by the Council of the Russian Federation provided analyses of the various programmes adopted in the context of the digital transition and suggested improvements. The Council of the Russian Federation and the State Duma were able to continue their work with commissions, committees and working groups. Legislative work had proceeded smoothly. Plenary sittings had been held in physical presence while following a strict sanitary protocol.

Despite the significant restrictions, the work continued while at the same time absolutely respecting the protective measures which were currently in place within the administration and were recommended to the general public. Masks and social distancing were still part of the reality of the pandemic in Russia. At all plenary sittings of the Council of the Russian Federation, members and participants were tested and vaccinated. Vaccination was available to all, and was free of charge, although it continued to be a sensitive issue in the Federation.

In conclusion, he considered that the fight against the pandemic had been a valuable and effective experience.

Ms Yardena Meller- Horowitz, Secretary General of the Knesset of Israel, commented that the Israeli Parliament followed the national directives on Covid-19, changing the guidelines in the parliament as Covid-19 number of cases went up or down depending on the situation. The Knesset was kept open and was fully active throughout the worst days of the pandemic. Israel had issued a green pass system for vaccinated persons. Those people who chose not to be vaccinated – and who should not be forced – had to present an up-to-date PCR test or a lateral flow test, allowing them to do many of the activities allowed for green pass holders. Israel did not discriminate against anyone who chose not to be vaccinated. No one was able to enter

the Knesset building without a green pass or an up-to-date vaccine, even the booster, or an up-to-date PCR test. It was trusted that all parliamentarians were vaccinated or tested.

With regard to employees, the Knesset, like other civil service institutions, followed the directives of the Civil Service Commissioner and recommended that all employees be vaccinated. Any employee who chose not to be vaccinated could present a weekly PCR test. If possible, they could work remotely or flexitime. If that was not possible, they could use their holidays or take unpaid leave. They had not been suspended or fired, and their employment rights were not affected. Masks were still worn in public places on the assumption that the pandemic would not go away in the near future.

As the Knesset was committed to accessibility and transparency and had worked on improving this for several years, it was not a difficult transition to expand digitised services, such as Zoom. Technology solutions were provided for parliamentarians, employees and the public during the pandemic. This allowed all relevant stakeholders to take part in all aspects of the parliamentary process. The Knesset had expanded its accessibility and transparency and would continue to reach as many people as possible providing the same level of digital services alongside regular activities.

She emphasised plans to continue to preserve the Knesset's ability to maintain legislative activities, parliamentary oversight and public discourse, while preventing the spread of Covid-19 and protecting the health of everyone in parliamentary premises.

She was proud to say that not a single day of parliamentary activity had been lost owing to the incredible flexibility and willingness of staff and politicians to protect the democratic processes at all costs.

The functioning of the Knesset was designed to expand or restrict activities as needed, should another wave of the pandemic occur, which could be achieved with minimal disruption.

Ms Ute Rettler, Secretary General of the German Bundesrat, was delighted to be in Athens after 18 months without being able to meet in person, while interparliamentary work was very much dependent on direct exchanges and face-to-face conversations and discussions. As the Bundesrat was concerned, she highlighted three points with regard to the coronavirus crisis.

Firstly, throughout the pandemic, the Bundesrat was able to continue its activities in accordance with the rules that were in place. The committees were able to meet with a number of written requests that were sent and to prepare meetings that were held remotely, and the Federal Government was questioned about this. Plenary sittings were basically held in person and in the Bundesrat. This was in a special situation because each individual *Land* [federal region] was represented by one member to vote for their region. The Bundesrat in plenary session was therefore perfectly able to make decision.

Secondly, it was necessary to ensure that the technical equipment was as up-to-date as possible, and that IT equipment would be fully upgraded in the coming months and years. This would ensure remote and more flexible solutions. At the same time, by 2023, the Bundesrat would be upgrading two rooms, equipping them with modern video technology in which videoconferences could be held via different platforms. A third room would use a secure network of the Federation, offered by the parliament. A very central role would be played here with regard to security and protection of personal data. It was important for networks to be effective against cyberattacks and outside interference.

Her third point was that during the pandemic, the Bundesrat had good experience with remote work; even in difficult periods, they were able to work and in similar situations in the future, they would be able to work as well. A new remote working agreement was under discussion in the Bundesrat with the staff representatives, the aim of which would be to allow eligible employees to work part-time from home; this would also mean, in normal, non-pandemic times, greater flexibility at work for employees.

This issue could continue to be discussed on a regular basis in order to share experiences and offer the best possible solutions to parliaments.

Mr Philippe Delivet, Director of International relations and Protocol of the French Senate, thanked the Secretary General and the Greek colleagues for their wonderful hospitality. The French Senate, like other parliaments, had to make some practical changes regarding working procedures and organisational arrangements. The Senate was keen to continue its scrutiny activities but wanted to fully comply with sanitary rules and conditions.

The Constitutional Council had found that the exceptional conditions during the pandemic could not lead to a situation in which parliamentarians would be denied access to attend the debates in person in the Senate or the Assembly to move amendments or take part in votes. This meant that everyone was guaranteed equal treatment. No specific provisions were taken in the Senate in terms of voting arrangements, so voting continued to be held by show of hands on all bills.

Committee work was carried out by videoconference, which resulted in a rise in the number of meeting hours. But voting rights were granted only to parliamentarians who were physically present in the room. Videoconferences were, of course, an indispensable means of working, but it was not a panacea for all evils, certainly when it came to holding parliamentary debates, when direct contact with people in the room was necessary.

With regard to public sittings, access was regulated with the support of political groups. As pointed out by other parliaments, there were no hybrid public sittings, so all public sittings were held in person. No remote voting was held or set up either.

The Senate had also decided to end these exceptional arrangements on 1 November 2021 and to come back to a normal way of working, in full compliance with the health regulations in force. As of 1 November, parliamentarians would be expected to be physically present in the Chamber and committees could meet again in an in-person setting. This being said, videoconferencing and remote meetings could still be used in three different scenarios: meetings with rapporteurs, which were mainly of a technical nature and did not give rise to decisions, hearings of certain people which could be complicated if they had to go to Paris, and in some cases to replace travel.

The Senate had also developed arrangements with regard to the participation of citizens to strengthen the rights of petition and also opened up consultation platforms, for instance on the European perception and local and regional authorities.

Inter-parliamentary co-operation was very much affected by the pandemic. The Senate was not able to welcome delegations and experts were not able to travel; videoconferencing was a very efficient tool enabling parliaments to continue this co-operation during the pandemic. Although the normal way of working was being resumed, videoconferencing would ensure the continuation of co-operation agreements, as an effective and efficient way for parliaments to share their views on a number of different topics.

Ms Ruxandra Popa, Secretary General of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly thanked the Hellenic Parliament for organising and hosting the Conference and recognised the value of having the views of the Secretaries General present on interparliamentary activities.

The NATO Parliamentary Assembly only resumed in-person activities in October 2021, with an annual session in Portugal two weeks earlier. She hoped that this represented a crossroads where in-person meetings could be held more frequently and where thoughts could be shared on how to adapt and adjust working methods for the future in order to learn from the health pandemic.

A number of arrangements had been set up. Firstly, virtual meetings would continue to broaden the scope of the activities they were trying to put in place, such as hosting and training new parliamentary delegations. The Bureau of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly could meet online rather than face-to-face. One of the challenges was to find the right balance between face-to-face and remote activities and meetings. Some may have felt that there were too many online meetings. She hoped that there would be no overreaction, or fatigue, as a result of too many online meetings, which did not allow for interaction between members, and an overload of activities and work.

Secondly, the annual session in Portugal had been held in hybrid mode, which she hoped would be an exception, since there was an additional cost for delegations hosting such meetings, and they did not offer the same quality as in-person meetings if the different interactions that might take place could be taken into account.

Finally, she addressed perceptions inside parliaments on interparliamentary co-operation. One fear or concern she had was that, for two years, there had been virtually no international activity and parliamentarians had not travelled, and, in resuming activities and travel, she wanted to know whether delegates thought there was reluctance to resume or revive these international activities, particularly in view of the media reaction it may cause.

The Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe said that finding the right balance between online meetings and face-to-face meetings was an issue which was also specific to interparliamentary assemblies, as there had certainly been an overreaction on their part with too many online meetings. She wondered whether the national assemblies had felt less of that problem. There was a state of shock at the beginning of the pandemic in societies that resulted in a slowdown in the activities of parliamentarians. But then national parliaments somehow resumed their normal functioning, while international organisations continued at the same pace, which may have been a bit stressful for parliamentarians.

Mr Harald Dossi, Secretary General of the Austrian Parliament, thanked the Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly and the Secretary General of the Hellenic Parliament for their preparation of the Conference. Neither of the two chambers of the Austrian Parliament, the Bundesrat and the Nationalrat, held online meetings during the pandemic, either in committee or in plenary, despite offers and proposals to do so. The various political groups wanted to continue physical meetings during the pandemic, as they felt that the immediacy of meetings was absolutely essential for political debate, an essential cornerstone of parliamentarianism.

Many technical and organisational measures and precautions were taken, particularly in committee meetings, to reduce the risk of infection to a minimum. There were more meetings than under normal circumstances due to the challenges of the pandemic. This was an additional challenge, as there was a limit to the number of people who could attend. It was very difficult, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, to motivate people to be physically present; quorums were difficult to achieve. Remote working was offered too.

A number of projects were under way in the field of digitisation which would lead to a paperless parliament in the future. This was a major development for the future. Other digital aspects would remain as well for example with respect to democratic development. They had worked very intensively in the realm of virtual guided tours of parliament and educational activities and programmes, which were adopted and embraced wholeheartedly by schools and the educational system as a whole. It was important to have these educational activities to strengthen and embolden democracy. The system made it more accessible, which meant that it was not necessary for schoolchildren or visitors to travel to Vienna. It was a great success.

In conclusion, there was a clear intention not to revert to the previous situation with regard to remote working, but to preserve it as another dimension of the work structure, as many colleagues had already mentioned.

Mr Bodo Bahr, Secretary General of the Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, welcomed the opportunity to take part in a revitalised “shoulder to shoulder” Conference; he would focus on international co-operation. At the last Conference, two years ago, he stated that there was a need to intensify coordination and co-operation among parliamentary organisations and assemblies, to increase participation, to increase the involvement of parliamentarians in international work and to increase the implementation of the results of co-operation. They worked in the same fields, had the same goals, and therefore much better opportunities to push from one delegation in one parliament but also with a combination of different delegations in different parliaments.

During the pandemic, it had been possible to realise that. Mutual participation and co-operation could have been enhanced through digital meetings. He admitted that this might have felt a little too much in terms of number of meetings, but it had opened the possibility of intensive participation in all interparliamentary assemblies.

He thought it was necessary to keep this in the future, as a benefit of the pandemic, despite the return to face-to-face meetings.

Mr Adam Niemczewski, Secretary General of the Polish Senate, began by thanking his Greek colleagues for organising that Conference and for giving them the opportunity to meet. The Polish Senate took many quick steps to prepare for digitisation and the use of commercial solutions on the market. They wanted to create a secure space and a safe system to prevent third parties from accessing their work. Access was granted only to parliamentarians, who could make amendments, vote and take the floor digitally at plenary sittings and committee meetings.

The Senate had managed to maintain its activity and held the same number of sittings as before the pandemic. They now hoped they were at the end of the pandemic. Fewer and fewer senators participated digitally, remotely, in plenary sittings: only 10 to 15%. However, committee meetings were still held remotely.

He thought that even after the pandemic, the remote mode was so convenient that it would still be used without the risk of Covid-19. However, plenary sessions were going to be held only in physical presence.

The pandemic also affected the work of Senate staff. The majority of their analysts were able to work remotely from home with the same efficiency as in the office.

Ms Maria João Costa, Secretary General of the Portuguese Parliament, expressed her gratitude to the Hellenic Parliament for its hospitality. Over the past 18 months, a number of steps had been taken to adjust parliamentary work to the requirements of preventing Covid-19 without compromising the capacity of the parliament to fulfil its competences and deliver the legislation that citizens particularly needed during those particular times.

Now that vaccination had allowed for some release of exceptional measures, the changes seemed to have been fully integrated in the parliament. On one hand, the digital circulation of documents contributed to the dematerialisation of parliamentary procedures, and it was now generally adopted. To strengthen good practices, the parliament was now testing a new solution for a document management system that would allow a paperless parliament in the near future. There were also plans for the dematerialisation of the legislative procedure itself.

On the other hand, the possibility to hold meetings remotely, either fully online or using a hybrid format, would continue to be a common practice, in particular in three areas: committee meetings, mainly with international guests, staff meetings and interparliamentary co-operation activities which could combine an online preparatory stage and follow-up activities which could include or not a working visit to another parliament.

In addition to these two aspects, a process of reflection had begun on working conditions in parliament. To this end, a questionnaire was sent to the staff to collect information on their work experience during the pandemic, focusing mainly on flexible working hours, logistics, teamwork, deadline accomplishment, difficulties and benefits of remote working and so on. Seventy percent of the parliament's staff answered the questionnaire. Preliminary results indicated that remote working had generally been very well accepted. Nevertheless, the majority of the replies showed that the staff would not be willing to work completely under a remote regime. Around 75% would prefer to have a hybrid system, teleworking on some days and being present in parliament on other days. The majority also considered that teleworking was an important measure to help conciliate private and professional life.

While it was fair to conclude that a mix of teleworking and face-to-face work was the way forward, it was also important to learn from the pandemic experience and to recognise that some parliamentary activities could not be done entirely from home.

The Portuguese Parliament was now preparing a remote working policy, a hybrid model that combined physical attendance and work from home. The goal was to address the staff's expectations while ensuring that parliament worked fully. The pandemic showed that working both from home and from the parliament was possible for a significant profile of functions and tasks. The challenge was going to be to tackle the risks associated with this new working environment and to make the best out of it.

Mr Asaf Hajiyev, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (PABSEC), congratulated the Hellenic Parliament for the excellent organisation of the Conference. The meeting of the Secretaries General was a working organ which allowed them to exchange opinions and to better identify how to move forward together in the future.

During the past two years, all PABSEC events were organised online. Of course, the pandemic completely changed their pace, because, from his point of view, it was difficult to replace face-to-face meetings. In any negative situation, one had to find some positive part to it and use it. The positive part was to use the opportunity to organise joint meetings between assemblies, parliaments and others. Their experience showed that it could really have a significant impact on their activity. Moreover, holding online meetings for joint events were cost-free, and resulted in savings in travel and accommodation costs. This undoubtedly contributed to increased interparliamentary co-operation.

PABSEC had organised several meetings of the Secretaries General in Istanbul. Because of the pandemic, it was not able to organise one, but was thinking about it for the future. The organisation of the annual General Assembly that was expected to take place in Romania from 23 to 25 November 2021 looked somewhat complicated. Delegations would be informed in due course.

Ms Uršula Zore Tavčar, Secretary General of the Slovenian National Assembly, began by thanking, as everyone else had done, the organisers. She admitted that it was a bit like cultural shock to see friends and people after so many online meetings, even to sit next to each other.

The Slovenian Parliament had faced more or less the same challenges as all other parliaments. Teleworking was completely new and a new challenge, since it did not exist as a working method in the Slovenian Parliament before the pandemic. In less than a week, they had to organise their work procedures. Two days after the pandemic was declared in Slovenia, more than 70% of the staff members were working from home.

As parliamentarians decided that they would be going to the parliament and they would hold meetings and sittings in person, it was necessary to keep approximately 30% of the staff working on the parliamentary premises. Despite the fact that parliamentarians decided that the parliament should work and that there were no restrictions imposed on their work, a decision was made to amend the rules of procedure that allowed teleworking or remote meetings for parliamentarians in special circumstances. This allowed any MP under quarantine or suffering from Covid-19 to stay at home but, if their health permitted, to participate in meetings.

In less than a month last summer, together with the IT company, they developed a very special voting system that enabled MPs to virtually participate in plenary sittings and committee meetings and to vote. These votes were obtained in ten seconds, combining the results of those physically present in plenary and those working remotely. This system was actually quite unique and a very good system, very easy to use, which made it possible to work, and did not change anything for parliamentarians.

In a way, the Covid-19 pandemic had to be looked at also as a positive force. At least in parliaments, it had profoundly changed the way they worked. Changes were not always bad and could be seen as bringing something beneficial: a new force and a new way forward. The Slovenian Parliament would continue to use some of the changes that were adopted regarding teleworking and e-learning programmes in the same way as their Austrian colleagues. It was upon them to find a very good balance between online and virtual meetings and meetings in person. Online meetings allowed parliamentarians to meet in a very short timeframe, or allowed any parliamentarian who was prevented from travelling to attend a meeting. But in-person meetings were also very important. In the Slovenian Parliament, parliamentarians were looking forward to start going to the meetings in person again.

Mr Genci Gjonçaj, Secretary General of the Parliament of Albania, also welcomed the opportunity to meet together at that conference. Whether big or small, all parliaments had the same needs almost everywhere. While the pandemic was a calamity, it had provided valuable lessons for their future work.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Albanian Parliament adapted its rules and procedures with regard to online meetings of committees. Technology had provided the solutions, and an infrastructure was created for the committees so that people could work online and from home. A system was put in place for the plenary session where parliamentarians did not need to be physically present all the time, but in limited numbers.

Transparency was crucial in this regard. When an activity closed, a new window of information had to be opened for people and society. For example, meetings of committees, bureaux and conferences were broadcast live. Using social media platforms such as Facebook proved very easy, even though they never thought they could be used as a transparency tool. There were more views via this platform.

Since school and university visits could not take place during the pandemic, the Albanian Parliament also organised virtual tours for them. He agreed with what had been said by other speakers. Parliaments, large or small, had the same needs everywhere.

Mr Joachim Rücker representative of the German Bundestag, conveyed the best wishes of Dr Lorenz Müller, Secretary General of the German Bundestag, who apologized for not being able to attend the Conference, as he was very involved in the preparation of the new German Bundestag due to be constituted on 26 October 2021, following the latest elections.

He was sharing today what steps the Bundestag took during the pandemic, what lessons were learned, and what could be taken into account in future planning. During the pandemic the Bundestag held its plenary sessions in physical presence, with social distance applied between parliamentarians and increased spacing. Internal regulations were changed to reduce the quorum of those present in the Chamber from 50% to 25%. Virtual or hybrid plenary sessions were envisaged at the time, but from a political perspective no clear decision had been reached on this yet.

The committees, as mentioned by other speakers, met and made decisions within the Bundestag. Electronic communications were also used. Committee meetings and public hearings were also held in hybrid format, and meetings rooms were equipped with additional cameras and IT equipment.

On 26 October 2021, the new Bundestag would be constituted and a new president elected. New internal regulations would be drafted and approved, with a view on whether to keep these new changes.

In Germany, the pandemic demonstrated no clear need to replace in-person meetings with virtual meetings entirely. It was therefore necessary to continue to provide for flexible arrangements in the new internal regulations. External guest speakers would still be able to make use of IT to continue to connect to meetings. This could also apply to public hearings requiring a larger number of participants.

During the pandemic, the Bundestag stepped up its digitisation work and promoted remote work. Employees were equipped with up-to-date laptops and moved to docking stations. In fact, videoconferencing technology used throughout the Bundestag was almost taken for granted now.

Since August 2021, it had been possible to conclude an agreement on flexible work at home for up to two days per week, which was suitable for the tasks actually performed by the persons concerned. This was a step in the right direction, and a decision welcomed by employers.

Mr Roberto Montella, Secretary General of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, referred to the speech by Ms Ruxandra Popa, who had mostly covered the same points, since the parliamentary assemblies shared similar experiences, for example with regard to online meetings.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly had been more active during the pandemic. He described a dual situation in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, with online statutory meetings and in-person meetings such as election observation meetings, which never ceased. For example, 100 members had gone to the United States; 100 members were currently in Uzbekistan; and these in-person election observation missions continued. Members thus still continued to meet each other and travel to different theatres in the OSCE region.

A challenge was the plethora of activities that took place outside the normal statutory meetings. The usual activities of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly until five or six years ago consisted of statutory meetings, election observation missions and occasional visits by the President. He had a hyperactive urge to do more, which led to the creation of other special committees to deal with issues such as the fight against terrorism, migration, climate change, etc.

Many members participating in the activities of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly wanted to be involved not only in committees but also in field activities, which in their case amounted to creating a Parliamentary Assembly where many statutory meetings became regular in-person meetings, to which were added, even more, a set of activities for the President, 15 special representatives, and ad hoc committees on different issues.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's dilemma was about what it had become: was it a classic parliamentary assembly with regular meetings and sometimes election observation missions, or one with daily activities with members deployed in the field?

The increase in the activities of the members of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, which he had encouraged, necessitated greater demands on national parliamentary resources. He took responsibility for having triggered these activities, but he also pointed out that they were at a conjecture in giving priority where they could add value. He apologised for using the resources of parliaments for non-statutory activities but said that not all activities initiated by members were those that the Secretariat actually supported. This was a dilemma between what the members needed to do, where the Secretariat could see writing a report as more effective than making two visits. Managing parliamentarians' expectations and being realistic about added value and prioritisation of activities was a challenge for a parliamentary assembly.

Ms Agnieszka Kaczmarek, Secretary General of the Sejm of Poland, started by thanking the Hellenic Parliament for the wonderful organisation of the Conference. As a complement to the speech by her colleague from the Polish Senate, she underlined that both chambers, both chancelleries of the Polish Parliament operated on a similar basis. For the first time, already on 27 March 2020, the Sejm was the first in Europe to hold full deliberations remotely.

At the same time, unlike the Senate, in the midst of the pandemic that they were still facing, from 16 June 2021 they regularly held Sejm deliberations and committee meetings in the traditional way, on site at the parliament.

Ms Despina Chatzivassiliou-Tsovilis, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, reported on the experience of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. At the time the pandemic started, the Assembly, led by her predecessor, Mr Wojciech Sawicki, reacted swiftly. It decided to cancel its plenary sessions, and a new system based on the new technologies available was put in place as early as April 2020 to allow committees and the Standing Committee to meet remotely online. In January 2021, the Assembly had its first ever plenary session in hybrid mode. Eighty parliamentarians were physically present in January. Their number went up to 101 in April, 180 in June, and 210 in September. Combined with remote participation, the Assembly had reached higher levels than before the pandemic.

The pandemic had made parliamentarians' wish to meet and exchange even stronger. During the pandemic, the overwhelming majority of parliamentarians had repeatedly called for a return to face-to-face meetings. For them there was no substitute for physical meetings.

However, there might be a risk to turn some meetings definitely online for budgetary reasons, especially for international parliamentary assemblies but also in some national parliaments. For some parliamentarians who had to travel from their constituencies, paying travel costs might be an issue.

Election observation was an activity that allowed some parliamentarians to still meet while committee meetings were held remotely. Although they were enthusiastic about being able to travel and observe elections, the organisation of these missions proved extremely challenging under the conditions of the pandemic.

In the Parliamentary Assembly, the lesson learned from this experience was the need to prioritise the development of new technologies and to turn the Assembly into what was called a paperless Assembly. That was a project that had started before the pandemic, but which they now had good reasons to push forward. For example, all members' initiatives – motions, declarations and amendments – would be signed, tabled and processed electronically online. The application being developed would also allow members, in the short term, to access to the calendar of sessions, meetings and events, as well as to committee documents, anywhere and at any time.

Hopefully, after January 2022, the Assembly would be able to return to purely face-to-face meetings and sessions. The challenge was to ensure that all delegations would be effectively able to travel and participate physically.

She underlined the most valuable role played by the ECPRD during the pandemic, whose database allowed parliaments to check how their counterparts were reacting.

Because she felt the need to continue the exchange of experiences on these issues and to devote more time to reflections, particularly on the help that new technologies could bring to the parliaments' mode of operation, for example in voting systems, she launched the proposal to hold another meeting next year in Strasbourg or in Paris. She would discuss with the European Parliament the possibility of carrying out this operation jointly, with a significant input from the ECPRD.

Ms Katrin Ruhrmann, Co-Director of the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD), presented the annual report that had been prepared by the executive board and was submitted to the Secretaries General for their approval. The final version was on the website.

The Covid-19 pandemic had also significantly impacted the work of the ECPRD, but since their information exchange had always been online, there were no disruptions caused in their activities nor big changes, except for, of course, physical meetings, seminars and executive committees that had to be organised remotely.

There had been some changes in the organisation of the ECPRD. Her colleague from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Mr Horst Schade, ECPRD co-director, retired in July 2020. She thanked him in the name of the ECPRD for all of his work. Since July 2021, Ms Valerie Clamer was appointed new co-director. At the level of the co-secretaries, Mr Ulrich Huschen retired and was replaced by Ms Christine Detourbet. Although she was completely new to the network, she managed to keep the network going through the difficult times of Covid-19. She kept up all contacts, managed the activities, and the very high number of requests that had to be dealt with. She thanked her very much for her work and for preparing the activity

report. On the sad side, she mentioned that they very sadly lost one of their colleagues on the executive committee, Mr Jan Henrik Pursiainen.

She thanked all the Secretaries General for their support, in particular for organising the annual conferences and the seminars, a full list of which they would find in the annex to the report.

Regarding the requests submitted by the national correspondents on behalf of their parliaments, they stayed on a high, more or less permanent level of 300 requests per year, with a high reply rate of 8 000. In 2020 they had 8 517 replies to 325 requests. The peak was actually in March 2020, mainly focussed on Covid measures. There was so much information that everything was gathered for the first time on a special page on the website for it to be easily accessible for everybody.

Regarding the timely arrival of replies, which was of course very important, they now had 68% that had arrived before the deadline, and 81% that arrived around five days after the deadline, which was still good. The reply rate remained stable during the height of the Covid-19, a period of intense network's activity. This was only the tip of the iceberg; a great deal of information was provided through bilateral exchanges. Overall, the growing success of the network was reflected in an increasing workload for correspondents.

The executive committee had launched two initiatives. One to increase and to promote the final summaries of replies, which gave a high added value. The other one was a guideline for requests. Both topics had been dealt with in specific working groups. In principle, those initiatives helped correspondents to deal with the high workload of requests and replies in the most efficient way. They indeed had some success because the final writing of summaries grew 41% during the current year compared to 25% during the past year.

She invited Secretaries General to look at the annual report for further information. It could be seen that it had been a very active period. The ECPRD had really demonstrated added value for all of the national parliaments, to exchange information and best practices very quickly in those stressful times of Covid-19. She hoped, on that basis, that the Secretaries General could give approval to the activity report.

Mr Georgios Mylonakis, Secretary General of the Hellenic Parliament, thanked all participants for a useful and fruitful discussion. All parliaments shared the same problems, but with a number of specificities depending on their situation. He hoped that in the near future they would be able to resume their activities without the current constraints that persisted.

He thanked the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for all the work done in organising the Conference, as well as all those involved and for their great dedication.