Enhanced inter-parliamentary cooperation through modern technology

Report and recommendations of the working group to update the Guidelines for Inter-parliamentary Cooperation in the EU, amended in light of the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

1. The EU Speakers' Conference in Vienna, April 2019, requested the Finnish Presidency to organise a working group to put forward a proposal for an update to the 2008 Guidelines for Interparliamentary Cooperation in the European Union. The working group was also asked to report on the subject of better use of modern means of communication to facilitate inter-parliamentary cooperation.

2. The working group gathered 55 officials of 34 Parliaments or Chambers. It met once in Helsinki with 27 participants, and otherwise finalised its report by electronic means.

3. An initial survey of the EU Parliaments indicated that Parliaments and Chambers varied greatly as concerns their technical equipment and their approach to introducing new technologies. On the other hand, the working group identified ways to swiftly introduce technical enhancements to existing inter-parliamentary procedures.

4. The working group decided not to recommend specific technical solutions, as these would involve proprietary technologies and questions that must be decided through public procurement procedures in each parliament. In addition, the continued rapid evolution of the ICT sector would mean that specific technical suggestions quickly become obsolete.

5. The working group presented its findings at the Meeting of the Secretaries General of the EU-Parliaments in Helsinki (26-27 January 2020). Its proposal could not, however, be adopted at the Helsinki EU Speakers' Conference in May 2020, which had to be cancelled following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. The Finnish parliament therefore asked the German Presidency of the Speakers' Conference to carry forward this document to the Berlin meeting of the Speakers in May 2021.

6. In light of the recent experiences of this COVID-19 pandemic, it has however become clear that technical solutions not only propose a useful tool to enhance existing physical conferences, but may furthermore become an indispensable means of inter-parliamentary communication and cooperation in times where physical meetings are impossible. Therefore, the German Presidency, in agreement with the Finnish head of the working group, has recognized the need to amend this report in accordance with the lessons learned during the pandemic. Prior to its submission to the Speakers' Conference, the report was presented

for consideration to the national parliaments and discussed at the Meeting of the Secretaries General of the EU-Parliaments held virtually from Berlin on 29 March 2021.

Inter-parliamentary conferences should be enhanced by technology

7. The working group agreed that, for established inter-parliamentary conferences, such as the EU Speakers' Conference, the meeting of Secretaries General, COSAC, the permanent thematic conferences, etc., meeting physically in a specific location is valuable in itself. Conferences provide opportunities for interaction and networking among members of parliaments beyond what happens in the conference hall. There is no substitute for personal contacts by elected politicians in order to exchange views and clarify political positions. If however challenges arise that do not allow meeting in person, it should be considered whether inter-parliamentary conferences should take place in alternative formats in order to prevent postponement or cancellation. Meetings via video-conferencing could also be a valuable complement to and enhancement of inter-parliamentary cooperation, and provide among others additional formats at lower cost.

8. Modern conference technology offers many possible enhancements:
   8.1 Keynote speakers and experts, who are otherwise difficult to recruit, can appear before the conferences from their home bases and can also participate in exchanges with conference participants.
   8.2 Video streaming makes it possible to open inter-parliamentary conferences to a wide, general audience at limited cost. This obviously also means that MPs, who are unable to attend a conference, can follow its deliberations remotely.
   8.3 For large conferences, the introduction of video screens greatly enhances the experience of participants, by increasing visibility and by enabling the use of graphic presentations supporting the spoken word.
   8.4 Many parliaments have used interactive tools, such as moderated Twitter walls, to enhance the value of conferences.

9. The above mentioned technologies have already become commonplace. Experience has generally been positive. Lessons learnt, as identified by the working group before COVID-19, include the need for technical redundancy, i.e. the replicating of critical IT-systems as a backup plan to ensure the smooth running of the conference in the case of technical difficulty. The working group also observed that parliamentary conferences thrive on interaction. Where possible, interactive live conferencing is preferable to recorded statements by speakers, with no opportunity for questions.

10. The working group notes that investments in conference technology support parliaments' efforts to interact with citizens, by opening many parliamentary meetings and events to a wider audience. Inter-parliamentary cooperation is an additional beneficiary of technical progress. For many parliaments, interaction with citizens may be a prime motive for investment, with inter-parliamentary cooperation an additional factor to consider in setting technical specifications.

11.   The procurement and use of technology is a matter for each parliament. However, the working group emphasized that the EUSC should encourage the use of technical enhancement and innovation whenever possible. In addition, the EUSC should promote the exchange of experience and mutual assistance so that the special requirements of inter-parliamentary cooperation can be taken into account when planning procurement of IT technology, with the aim of more interoperable technical tools.

12.   The working group notes that, for national Parliaments lacking teleconferencing tools and know-how, the European Parliament's Liaison Offices in the national capitals may be able to provide technical assistance in inter-parliamentary cooperation, in particular for contacts with the European Parliament. In this regard, it is also important to note the role that inter-parliamentary cooperation has played to assist parliaments so they can continue to operate through technology during the pandemic, e.g. by collating and sharing best practices, resources and technical tools.

13.   The working group observes that IPEX has become the webhost of the Speakers' Conference, COSAC and the permanent inter-parliamentary conferences. Over time, IPEX will become the repository of their documents and the "institutional memory" of inter-parliamentary cooperation in the EU. IPEX would provide a valuable additional service, if it could maintain up to date contact information for participants in all the inter-parliamentary functions that it serves.

Technology facilitates new forms of inter-parliamentary Cooperation

14.   The initial survey conducted by the working group revealed that several parliaments have used teleconferencing technology to open up new bilateral or multilateral contacts, e.g., between sector committees in two or more member states. Such cooperation, the working group stated, can be informal and ad hoc, for instance as webinars. The possibilities were deemed endless.

15.   The working group explained that while some parliaments invest in more sophisticated conference software than others, there are solutions on the market that permit communication between counterparts that do not have the same equipment. The current standard solution is for parliaments to link in to an internet-based virtual conference room that is compatible with the different technologies on the market. The technical interoperability of different systems means that there is no need for technical standardisation among parliaments. While technology allows a significant number of participants in a teleconference, experience before the pandemic showed that, to be truly interactive, teleconferences could accommodate a limited number (6 – 9) of participants. This assessment must be adapted in light of the pandemic, which has proved the feasibility of large-scale video-conferences and shown the need for more creative solutions.

16.   The working group observed that the office software installed in most personal computers already permits conferencing between small groups of people. This technology is even

now available to all at reasonable quality and negligible cost. Parliaments have already made many arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that they have gained significant knowledge and ownership of most readily available videoconferencing software. With proper attention to technical detail, there is no reason why technological advances should leave out any parliament because of lacking or incompatible equipment. This does not, however, mean that the large number of available platforms does not cause difficulties, prompting the call for a more interoperable approach and mutual assistance as described below.

Technology can lessen the burden of technical meetings

17.   While physical meetings should remain the rule for core inter-parliamentary conferences, the working group notes that there are other meetings that can usefully be replaced by technology. Many functions of inter-parliamentary cooperation require preparatory or administrative work. Examples of such work include approval of draft agendas, initial drafting of conclusions and the minutiae of administration. Because inter-parliamentary cooperation in the EU is open to all European parliaments, the number of participants at, and the time spent on, preparatory and administrative meetings may often be disproportionate to the agenda. For individual parliaments, it is a burden to have an official spend one or two working days (including travel time) to deal with routine, uncontentious issues.

18.   The working group believes that as far as practicable physical meetings should only be arranged when necessary, because of a legal obligation or because the issues to be resolved genuinely require negotiations in person. If not, draft agendas can be approved, texts can be revised and administrative decisions can be reached by technical means, such as exchanges of e-mails, teleconferencing or collaborative on-line workspaces. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, many examples have shown that effective, dynamic and cost-reducing methods are available to prepare and hold technical meetings. As all parliaments have had to adapt their own working methods, with staff and administration often working remotely and through online means, the tools and best practices developed during this period should offer guidance for inter-parliamentary cooperation as well.

19.   The decision whether the agenda requires a physical meeting or can be dealt with by technical means is a judgement call within the discretion of each presidency, based, e.g. on the technical or political nature and relevance of the meeting. The working group would remind conveners that they have a duty to consider the cost and benefits of each format of meeting, including the role of parliaments in setting an example regarding sustainable working methods.

Questions of principle

20.   Technologically advanced inter-parliamentary cooperation should be subject to the same general principles as traditional, physical meetings. The European Parliament, Presidency parliaments and other conveners have the authority and the duty to decide the technical format of meetings. This involves ensuring that meetings are accessible to all, without any discrimination because of technical resources. Meetings must be adequately documented

and publicly reported on, irrespective of technical format. The technology used should be manageable to non-specialist users – who, especially after the current pandemic, may be assumed to possess the necessary, basic computer literacy. Considering the possible importance of video-conferences in the future it is important to guarantee that the procedures of inter-parliamentary cooperation are maintained when using video-conferencing and technical solutions.

Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic

21.   The experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic pointed out initial failings and weaknesses in the readiness of technological solutions, at a time where a coordinated EU-level response – including between the Parliaments of the European Union – was more urgent than ever. The disruptive nature of the current crisis offers an opportunity for greater innovation and dynamism. As European citizens look to the EU and their Parliaments for a coherent and transparent response, inter-parliamentary cooperation must make use of the rapidly changing digital technologies to ensure a sound framework for a democratic, inclusive and close dialogue

22.   Although in-parliament conferences cannot be simply replaced by technology, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that challenges may arise that make in-person meetings impossible, such as a global pandemic. Therefore, a reliable and agile alternative to in-person meetings should be readily available to prevent postponement or cancellation over an extended period of time. Where this is the case, the use of technologies should embody the same values of collaboration, inclusiveness, participation and openness that have been promoted through the tradition of inter-parliamentary conferences. Inter-parliamentary activity in itself should not be oversimplified and the traditional agenda of conferences should not be stripped down, irrespective of the chosen format for the conference. The use of technology should not minimize cooperation between parliaments, but instead lead to more channels for the collection and sharing of information on the European level.

23.   The current crisis has shown that a more wide-ranging reorganization of parliamentary conferences as video-conferences presents a significant challenge for both parliament IT departments and external suppliers. In order to promote a fast and reliable response in times of crisis, a robust and innovative IT strategy should therefore be developed and maintained in each parliament to ensure that the adequate technical infrastructure is ready for use. While a quick move to ICT solutions at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic was made possible by the considerable efforts among staff and members, training and skill deficits, as well as the reliance on a wide array of different video platform providers, posed an initial challenge. The interactive nature of inter-parliamentary conferences required the capacity to host a large number of participants simultaneously and to provide technical arrangements for interpretation in multiple languages, control by a moderator and synchronous broadband speed. In order to maintain inter-parliamentary cooperation in this and future crises, parliaments should therefore aim to adhere to minimal technology benchmarks, which should be tested and adapted regularly to comply with the rapid evolution of the ICT sector.

24.   Preference should be laid on software independent solutions in order to provide as much interoperability and compatibility as possible among parliaments. In addition, with special regard to hybrid conferences (participants present and online), hosts and participants should be duly briefed to correctly apply video-conferencing technologies.

25.   Furthermore, the increased reliance on remote solutions also raises the concern of security. Any use of ICT must be balanced with robust cybersecurity measures to safeguard it against attacks, breaches and risks to data and democratic processes. Security concerns may also arise in connection to the accountability of remote working and voting. Therefore, sufficient care should be given to maintain the traditional standards of accountability, participation and fairness.

26.   Apart from technical and security challenges, there are some legal aspects that have to be taken into account. For instance, the ICT solutions have to be in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Directive on Public Procurement. The objective of GDPR is to protect personal data in EU Member States and it is therefore crucial that technical suppliers at all levels are examined before using their technical services and/or platforms, in order to only transfer personal data to a third country on the condition that appropriate safeguards are provided.

27.   Inter-parliamentary cooperation would not have been possible throughout the pandemic without large-scale video-conferences. It is therefore important that in times of crisis, new ways are found to apply the same standards of openness, interactivity and collaboration to large video-conferences, for all participating parliaments. A pragmatic and solution-oriented approach is necessary.

28.   Experience of inter-parliamentary conferences during the pandemic showed that the use of interoperable and downward compatible video-conferencing tools or more compatibility between the existing solutions might have proven more efficient. Mutual assistance for videoconferencing between the national Parliaments and the European Parliament could help strengthening inter-parliamentary cooperation as well as Europe's digital sovereignty, especially in light of the current CJUE rulings on the GDPR.

Recommendations

29.   The working group and the German Presidency propose that the EU Speakers' Conference adopts the following recommendations:

EUSC Recommendations on enhancing inter-parliamentary cooperation through technology

30.   The Conference of Speakers of European Union Parliaments

   30.1   Notes that conferences and meetings of parliaments are a core function of inter-parliamentary cooperation, for which technology offers an enhancement.

30.2   Notes that there can be no question of replacing the inter-parliamentary conferences established as the permanent framework by Article 2 of the Guidelines for Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation in the EU, unless it is impossible to organize a physical meeting; in that case, technology can offer a reliable and valid alternative.

30.3   Considers that, for the other conferences, meetings via video-conferencing and hybrid meetings (a mix of physical and remote meetings) can be a valuable complement to and enhancement of inter-parliamentary cooperation, and can provide among other things additional formats at lower cost.

30.4   Observes that video-conferencing, when appropriate, provides an opportunity to diminish the carbon footprint of meetings, thereby helping to reach Europe's sustainability and climate targets.

30.5   Observes that technology permits the replacement of some non-core meetings, e.g., for preparatory and administrative purposes and of officials, by teleconferencing, through collaborative workspaces or other technical means. For these meetings, the EUSC encourages parliaments to consider the option of dispensing with physical meetings when their purpose can be achieved without travel.

30.6   Encourages parliaments to facilitate inter-parliamentary video-conferences through mutual assistance and close IT-technical cooperation to make video-conferences more efficient and a predictable instrument for the future, while at the same time strengthening Europe's digital sovereignty and resilience, and upholding EU data protection regulations.

30.7   Encourages parliaments to develop a strategic awareness of how digital tools and services can improve parliamentary work and make parliaments more open, accessible and accountable.

30.8   Notes that where technologies are used to replace or enhance meetings, they should embody the same values of collaboration, inclusiveness, participation and openness that have traditionally characterized inter-parliamentary conferences, including the language arrangements.

30.9   Encourages parliaments, when planning ICT procurement, to consider the requirements of inter-parliamentary communication and the aim of strengthening Europe's digital sovereignty and resilience as a factor when setting specifications, also in light of the General Data Protection Regulation.

30.10   Encourages parliaments organising inter-parliamentary conferences to make these accessible to the public and to parliaments via video streaming or similar means whenever possible.

30.11   Notes that technologies already available to most parliaments, and in the European Parliament's Liaison Offices in the national capitals, provide a useful and cost-effective resource for inter-parliamentary cooperation, e.g. through smaller scale meetings or webinars on particular subjects, and encourages parliaments to make the maximum use of technologies already at their disposal.

30.12   Acknowledges that IT solutions offer an agile approach and flexible possibilities to not only enhance, but where necessary replace meetings and therefore notes that appropriate tools should be readily available to maintain or promote inter-parliamentary cooperation, with respect for the autonomy of each house regarding the choice of its own digital tools and in compliance with national and European rules on public procurement. Preference should be laid on software independent solutions in order to provide as much interoperability and compatibility as possible among parliaments.

30.13   Notes that Presidencies and conveners are responsible for determining the format and technical arrangement of inter-parliamentary events while also ensuring that all meetings are held in an open and transparent format with clearly defined and stated outputs.

30.14   Notes the importance of data protection and cybersecurity of videoconferencing tools and other IT-solutions, strong end-to-end encryption and conformity with EU data protection regulations, especially in light of the CJEU ruling in Schrems II.

30.15   Encourages IPEX to further develop its function as document repository for permanent parliamentary conferences in the EU.