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

Introduction

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.

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.

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

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

Inter-parliamentary conferences can't be replaced – but should be enhanced – by technology

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 can be no question of replacing inter-parliamentary conferences via technology.

Modern conference technology, however, offers many possible enhancements to existing conference formats:

- 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.

- 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.
- 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.
- Many parliaments have used interactive tools, such as moderated Twitter walls, to enhance the value of conferences.

The above technologies are already commonplace. Experience has generally been positive. Lessons learnt include the need for technical redundancy, i.e. having 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.

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, interactions with citizens may be a prime motive for investment, with inter-parliamentary cooperation an additional factor to consider in setting technical specifications.

The procurement and use of technology is a matter for each parliament. However, the working group feels that the EUSC should encourage the use of technical enhancements and innovations whenever possible.

The working group notes that, for national Parliaments lacking teleconferencing tools, the European Parliament's Liaison Offices in the national capitals may be able to provide technical assistance in interparliamentary cooperation, in particular for contacts with the European Parliament.

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

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 can be informal and *ad hoc*, for instance as webinars. The possibilities are endless.

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. This means that there is no need for technical standardisation among parliaments. While technology does not limit the number of participants in a teleconference, experience shows that, to be truly interactive, teleconferences can currently accommodate a limited number (6 – 9) of participants.

The working group observes 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. With proper attention to technical detail, there is no reason why technological advances should leave out any parliament because of lacking or incompatible equipment.

Technology can lessen the burden of technical meetings

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, usually by parliamentary officials. 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.

The working group believes that as far as practicable physical meetings of officials 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. The preparation of this report may serve as an example of collaborative working by technical means.

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. The working group would remind conveners that they do have a duty to consider the cost and benefits of each format of meeting.

Questions of principle

Technologically advanced inter-parliamentary cooperation is 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, irrespective of technical format. The technology used should be manageable to non-specialist users – who, in 2019, may be assumed to possess the necessary, basic computer literacy.

Recommendations

The working group proposes that the EU Speakers' Conference adopts the following recommendations:

EUSC Recommendations on enhancing inter-parliamentary cooperation through technology

The Conference of Speakers of European Union Parliaments

- Notes that conferences and meetings of parliaments are a core function of inter-parliamentary cooperation, to which technology offers an enhancement not a replacement.
- Encourages parliaments, when planning ICT procurement, to consider the requirements of inter-parliamentary communication as a factor when setting specifications.
- Encourages parliaments organising inter-parliamentary conferences to make these available to the public and to parliaments via video streaming or similar means whenever possible.
- 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 enhanced 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.

- 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.
- Encourages IPEX to develop its function as document repository for permanent parliamentary conferences in the EU.
- 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. The EUSC encourages parliaments to consider the option of dispensing with physical meetings when their purpose can be achieved without travel.