



16 September 2016

**Draft minutes of the meeting of the Secretaries General of Parliament in Strasbourg,
16 September 2016**

Mr Sawicki, Chair, declared the meeting open at 8.35 am and welcomed the participants and the ECPRD's representatives. He recalled that the aim of this meeting was to gather information on the work of the Centre in the last two years and to take note of plans for the coming two years. This was a statutory obligation. The Chair added that it was, of course, possible to seize this opportunity to deal with other matters and in particular, as he had proposed in a letter in June, with the relationship between the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and national parliaments.

Ms Verger and Mr Schade, Co-Directors of the ECPRD, and Mr Hueschen and Mr de Buyer, the Secretaries of the ECPRD were also present on the platform.

1. Draft agenda

The draft agenda, which had been forwarded and distributed to all participants, **was adopted**.

2. Minutes of the meeting of 11 September 2014

As there were no written or oral comments, the minutes of the meeting held in Oslo on 11 September 2014, **were approved**.

3. Activity report of the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD) 2014-2015

Ms Verger, Co-Director of the ECPRD, apologised for the absence of the Secretary General of the European Parliament, Klaus Welle, who was abroad and had asked her to represent him. She expressed satisfaction with the excellent cooperation between the Centre and PACE, and in particular with her counterpart, Horst Schade, Co-Director of a Centre which some consider a success story of inter-parliamentary cooperation. She also wished to thank the two Co-Secretaries, Mr de Buyer and Mr Hueschen, who ensured the proper functioning of the Centre. A few figures showed this organisation's success: in 2015, it comprised 66 chambers from 54 countries and European parliamentary institutions, and its success was firstly due to the men and women who gave it an impetus in each and every national parliament, to the 114 correspondents and deputy correspondents, not forgetting the national experts who contributed to the formulation of replies and, of course, the Secretaries General who agreed to allocate the necessary human, and sometimes financial, resources to this task.

Ms Verger especially thanked the parliaments willing to host seminars, numbering six per year on average. She observed that the Centre, which has been in existence for the past 35 years, was all the more valuable given that, today more than ever, there was a need to exchange best practices and comparative data in a broad European framework. The two pillars of the ECPRD's activities continued to be, on the one hand, comparative requests, and on the other hand, seminars. Mention should be made of the following: concerning the former, in 2014 and 2015, parliaments submitted 555 comparative requests to the network, which gave 13 136 replies, that is to say, a slight increase over the figures for previous years; questions relating to the administration of parliaments came in first place, followed by questions on legal issues; there were slightly more questions on social policies and those relating to migration and urban policy were also on the increase due to current developments; 80% of the correspondents replied within the indicative deadline, give or take a few days; the reply rate per request remained around 67%, as some chambers were more active than others. The Co-Director pointed out that replies came faster when questions were sent only to a selection of countries.

She nonetheless conceded that it must be said that a degree of saturation had been reached in view of the correspondents' workload, and it was unlikely that the number of requests could continue to rise in the future. There had been some decrease in their number since the beginning of the summer, although there was no reason to consider that this was anything more than a short-term phenomenon.

Ms Verger noted a positive point: the requests were increasingly better prepared, the questions were precise and model answers were available. There had been a significant qualitative and quantitative improvement in the summaries, although language barriers hampered growth in their number, which was still to be desired.

Ms Verger referred the participants to the written report for more information on the 11 seminars which had taken place during the period under consideration and which had brought together 600 participants. She thanked the four coordinators who put a lot of work into organising such seminars. She stressed the need for national parliaments to be willing to host seminars, which was a very important means of taking "ownership" of the organisation.

Finally, she welcomed the constant updating of the website, notably thanks to the financial and human resources made available by the European Parliament. Most of the budget had been allocated to improving the available data on parliaments, with thematic sheets on each one of them which could be easily consulted.

Ms Verger concluded by stressing the need to develop the summaries of replies in future.

Ms Flossing (Sweden, Riksdagen) considered that the Centre's work was invaluable not only for parliaments but also for their secretariats. She approved the report and congratulated the ECPRD players on their work.

The Chair thanked all the Secretaries General who enabled their staff to contribute to this work.

Mr Hamilton (Netherlands, Senate) joined in the congratulations addressed to the Centre and considered that even if its natural interlocutors were the parliaments' secretariats, its activities could also be of interest to members of parliament. He wanted to know the official position on parliamentarians' participation in seminars.

Mr Elkhadi (Morocco, House of Representatives), speaking on behalf of the Moroccan Parliament, congratulated the ECPRD on its work. As a representative of a parliament enjoying partner for democracy status with the Council of Europe, he was in favour of closer collaboration with the Centre. Finally, he suggested that Morocco organise a seminar in 2017, in which other countries in the region could be involved.

Ms Verger indicated that, to the best of her knowledge, members of parliament had never taken part in the Centre's work. The participants could always report on their activities to members of parliament, but she feared that their presence in the Network would change its nature and open a Pandora's Box. She reiterated that the Centre encouraged collaboration between parliamentary staff. She looked forward to the prospect of seminars being hosted by the Moroccan Parliament.

The Chair was convinced that the presence of members of parliament would quickly politicise the Centre and the seminars, which would not be a positive step.

Concluding this agenda item, he warmly thanked the Co-Directors and Co-Secretaries for their operational contribution; he hoped that participants in the meeting would show their gratitude to the correspondents, as, since each replied to one questionnaire per day on average, they were truly the Centre's backbone; as for the Secretaries General, they should be thanked for, on one hand, allowing their staff to contribute and, on the other hand, agreeing to host and bear the costs of seminars in a period of budgetary restraint.

The ECPRD activity report for 2014-2015 was approved.

4. ECPRD priorities and programme for 2017-2018

Mr Schade, ECPRD Co-Director, firstly thanked the two Co-Secretaries, Ulrich Hueschen, the Centre's only full-time staff member, and Yann de Buyer.

He said the programme for the next two years was in line with what had been done in the past: meetings, notably of the Executive Committee, seminars and an annual conference.

He pointed out that the correspondents needed not only support from the Secretaries General, but also their gratitude. He also called on the participants to organise and host statutory meetings, or seminars, as the Centre needed the support of parliaments' administrations to fulfil its role, which was essential to the influence of parliament as an institution.

Mr Schade announced that the ECPRD would celebrate its fortieth anniversary from 19 to 21 October 2017 in a city which was symbolic both for the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly: Strasbourg.

He concluded by stressing the need to confirm the details of the programme with firm commitments from host countries. While welcoming Morocco's proposal, he was hoping for others.

Ms Meller-Horowitz (Israel, Knesset) announced that, subject to having knowledge of the themes, the Knesset would be happy to host seminars in Jerusalem.

Mr Iversen (Norway, Stortinget) stressed the crucial importance of the seminars for parliaments' administrations and pointed out that the Stortinget had just hosted a seminar on archives and research, which had been very well received by the participants. He said he was ready to host another seminar as of 2017 on information and communication technologies in parliaments.

Mr de Azevedo Soares (Portugal, Assembleia da Republica) indicated that the Portuguese Parliament had been contributing to the Centre's activities for many years, both by replying to requests for information (with a rate of nearly 98%) and by participating in seminars and meetings. He proposed to host a seminar on parliamentary procedures and practice in Lisbon in May 2017. The central theme could be oversight of government work.

He considered that the Centre was an essential forum enabling parliaments to exchange information and working methods in respect of their common problems.

Mr Dossi (Austria, Nationalrat), while also congratulating the Centre, pointed out that the Austrian Parliament had already suggested that the Executive Committee hold a meeting in Vienna in March 2017.

Mr Beamish (United Kingdom, House of Commons) shared Mr Schade's views on the gratitude owed to the correspondents. He thought, however, that exchanging comparative requests and organising seminars were a reward in itself.

Going back to the previous agenda item, he joined the other participants in calling for an increase in the number of summaries.

Mr Hérin (France, Senate) acknowledged that the French Senate's response rate to questionnaires was not 100% and announced that the two chambers of the French Parliament would host a conference of the correspondents on 17 and 18 November 2016, with a keynote debate on the theme of parliamentary assemblies' autonomy in Europe and also workshops.

Mr Risse (Germany, Bundestag) unhesitatingly declared that if parliaments had not had the ECPRD, they would have had to invent it! Regarding the programme for the coming two years, he hoped, without committing himself, to be able to host a meeting in Berlin.

Mr Schade welcomed the proposals to host meetings which had just been made. He was already aware of some of them, and if they did not appear in the draft report, it was because the Executive Committee had the final say on the timetable.

The ECPRD priorities and programme for 2017-2018 were approved.

5. National parliaments and the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly: modalities for cooperation

The Chair said he wanted the exchange of views on modalities for cooperation between national parliaments and PACE to constitute an opportunity for the participants to suggest improvements. He considered that participation in the work of the Parliamentary Assembly had been problematic for a long time, with members of parliament tending to give priority to their national chamber. Another obstacle was conflicting schedules between national and international assemblies. He considered, however, that the regular consultation between three of these assemblies, NATO, OSCE and PACE, was already a first step forward. That said, the issue was trickier for national parliaments which, outside ordinary sessions, could be obliged to hold extraordinary sessions according to the political situation. This made it difficult for them to establish a stable provisional timetable. Mr Sawicki nonetheless hoped that the international assemblies' timetables would be better taken into consideration at national level.

He admitted that, for its part, PACE could perhaps improve its communication with the national parliaments. He even wondered whether they were interested in the Parliamentary Assembly's work and whether resolutions adopted by the latter were effectively implemented.

Mr Hamilton assured the Chair that PACE's work was held in high regard in the Dutch Senate, that parliamentarians' absence to sit in an international assembly was considered legitimate and that the internal organisation of debates took into account the international timetables.

He moreover pointed out that, on its return from Strasbourg, the parliamentary delegation made a report to the Foreign Affairs Committee, which was published on the Senate's website. As for European matters, and notably the Council of Europe's proposals, they were regularly debated.

Lastly, he considered that this Conference showed that the Council of Europe was more necessary today than it had been at certain times in the past.

Mr Hérin indicated that, under their chamber's rules of procedure, the senators who were members of the French delegation were required to draw up a report after each PACE part session and that the Committee on European Affairs, like its counterpart in the National Assembly, met with the head of the French delegation at least once a year. Reports drawn up by the Parliamentary Assembly were sent to the relevant committees. Moreover, the two chambers of the French Parliament hosted PACE committee meetings. Lastly, the Senate website reported on the Parliamentary Assembly's work.

Mr Hajiyev (Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation) suggested that the Presidents and Secretaries General of parliaments meet every year at regional level in order to strengthen their cooperation.

Mr Montella (OSCE Parliamentary Assembly) welcomed the cooperation between the PACE, NATO and OSCE parliamentary assemblies in observing elections and avoiding overlapping of meetings. He stressed that this cooperation improved the service provided to members of parliament and, through them, to the public.

Mr Iversen said Norway was unquestionably interested in the Parliamentary Assembly's work, as its delegation's high participation rate in the debates showed. He made the following comments: the resolutions and minutes of the sessions were forwarded to the relevant committees; the Minister of Foreign Affairs received the delegation each year, and it presented a report on its activities in plenary session, followed by a debate.

Ms Pētersone (Latvia, Saeima) confirmed that, since 1990, the Latvian Parliament had been taking a considerable interest in the Parliamentary Assembly's work and that its decisions were closely monitored both at the committee level and in public sessions. She concluded by stating that the administration itself was endeavouring to raise even more awareness of PACE's activities.

The Chair considered that the comments which had just been made were very encouraging and replied to a number of questions or suggestions from the participants: the timetable for the PACE sessions could be consulted on the Assembly's website three years in advance, as, compared with the NATO or OSCE parliamentary assemblies, it had the advantage of having an assembly chamber permanently at its disposal; however, notably for reasons relating to hotel accommodation, there was coordination with the European Parliament; religious holidays were usually taken into consideration; dates for committee meetings were usually set by their chairs one year in advance. He seized this opportunity to thank the two chambers of the French Parliament which hosted several of these meetings.

In reply to Mr Hajiyev's statement, he mentioned the other opportunities for gatherings of the Secretaries General, notably during meetings organised by the IPU or the EU member States, not forgetting informal meetings. He thought it would be difficult to do more, due to everyone's many commitments.

Mr Sawicki hoped parliamentarians would not be criticised for their absences due to participation in international meetings, nor indeed penalised when choosing candidates for national elections, as was the case in some countries.

He regretted that an English newspaper had recently published a list of members of the Parliamentary Assembly with their travelling costs without taking into account the purpose of their journeys. He asked his colleagues to consider the case for replying to this type of criticism of parliamentarians' work at the international level, and the best way of doing so.

In conclusion, he thanked the Secretaries General for their efforts to facilitate and promote the work of members of parliament in international assemblies.

In the absence of any other business, the meeting rose at 9.55 am.