

IPEX Correspondents Meeting

22-23 November 2018, Tallinn

Overview

Training Sessions

On 22 November Mr Calin RACOTI (IPEX Information Officer) held two training sessions. One was aimed for new Correspondents and another one for experienced Correspondents.

Plenary Meeting and Working Groups

The Meeting was co-chaired by Ms Siiri SILLAJÕE and Ms Külli KAPPER

Morning Session:

Secretary General of the Estonian Parliament Mr Peep JAHILO gave a welcoming address to the participants. He started by quoting the IPEX Information officer who had said that IPEX has a brain and a soul, with the brain being “the artificial intelligence” or database, and the soul – the IPEX Correspondents. Both parts of IPEX, the brain and the soul, have to work and develop in synergy. He pointed out that over the last years, the role of national Parliaments in the European Union has changed mainly through the introduction of the subsidiarity control mechanism, which has turned national legislatures into European Union actors. And the national Parliaments in cooperation with the European Parliament have established a website (IPEX) for the inter-parliamentary information exchange and for the purpose of sharing information with the public on their activities as European Union actors. He said that IPEX should not be seen as merely a tool at the disposal of Parliaments; instead, we should see its benefits in light of democratic legitimacy and accountability. He also stressed the importance of improving cooperation at the level of parliamentary officials. Mr Jahilo gave a summary of the work of the IPEX Board in 2018. He concluded by saying that IPEX has been a successful and tangible project between the national Parliaments with the support of the European Parliament.

Intervention of Dr Katrin AUDEL from the Institute of Advanced Studies, Vienna. Dr AUDEL introduced the study “Europeanisation of National Parliaments in European Union Member States: Experiences and Best Practices”¹. The study looks at the changes that have taken place in national Parliaments since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty. There are added roles concerning Europol and Eurojust, and the inter-parliamentary cooperation is recognised formally; all this adds to national scrutiny and Political Dialogue. Dr AUDEL and her colleagues realised that the role of the national Parliaments on the European arena has changed. Most analyses focus on national scrutiny, comparing the systems and then developing the ideal roles for national Parliaments. The Lisbon Treaty changed that, and the role of national Parliaments has been expanded. They do not need national Governments in order to submit a reasoned opinion or send out Political Dialogue. On the other hand, this does not necessarily show that the Parliaments are making use of these opportunities. The study also looked at how Parliaments are using the new tools. Dr AUDEL then looked at parliamentary involvement within the national arena. For example, the involvement of sectoral committees has increased (mainstreaming). There are big differences between Parliaments in mandates given to the Governments. In some countries, the mandate is legally binding, in some it is politically binding. In some cases, the Parliament gives an opinion and the Government does

¹ https://reinhardbuetikofer.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Study_Europeanisation_June-2018.pdf

not have to take it into account. Another question is the timing of the involvement: whether it takes place as early as possible, or focuses on the final decision in the Council.

The study also looked at the scrutiny of the European Council meetings, and how the Parliaments are involved. The scrutiny can take place at the Committee or the Plenary level, or both. Also, scrutiny can be ex post, ex ante, or even both. Dr AUDEL then looked at how Parliaments are using the tools that the Lisbon Treaty has given them. One tool is reasoned opinions, but only three of these have led to yellow cards, which have been unsuccessful. Other main tools of inter-parliamentary cooperation are inter-parliamentary conferences, parliamentary representatives in Brussels, and Inter-Parliamentary EU information eXchange (IPEX).

After the presentation, several issues were raised. There was a question on how to increase the motivation of parliamentarians to become more active on the EU arena. Dr AUDEL explained that parliamentarians are generally motivated by two things: they want to have influence over policy and they want to be re-elected. Therefore, they must feel that they have some impact over policies, and yet voters are really not very interested in EU affairs. At the same time, during crises, the European issues have risen to the forefront.

Participants pointed out that the current Commission has issued less draft proposals than the previous Commission, which has resulted in fewer reasoned opinions and less Political Dialogue. Another possibility is that the Commission's proposals are better in quality and take into account what the national Parliaments have said in the past, and also look at the subsidiarity and proportionality. One other factor could be the response of the Commission when replying to the reasoned opinions. This has an effect on the Political Dialogue as well. The reason could also be the fact that in the majority Government systems, the Parliament does not wish to take a different approach from the Government. Sometimes parliamentarians do not see any added value in the issuing of reasoned opinions. The Monday Morning Meetings between national representatives of Parliaments was mentioned with respect to early warning system. It is a place where representatives can exchange information on several topics. The problems with the visibility of EU affairs was pointed out, as in some cases these are scheduled to be the last items on the plenary agenda. Another factor is that EU affairs do not engage the voters and therefore Members of Parliaments do not speak about these more.

Participants commented that it was impossible to compare the way the Parliaments consider the EU documents, as each system is different and there are also differences between the Chambers of the same Parliament. The differences include how the documents are dealt with (plenary or committee level) and also how big is the parliamentary staff or what their tasks are. Some staff members can have several roles/tasks.

The motivation of parliamentarians to get involved in European affairs was brought up. In recent years, Members of Parliament are more involved in European affairs as they realise the importance of discussing European legislative proposals earlier than before. Participants also pointed out that although public debate is important, the written procedures should not be underestimated. This gives Members of Parliament more information and also includes more details. The role of inter-parliamentary conferences in developing the cooperation between national Parliaments was mentioned.

Dr AUDEL reflected on the issues raised and thanked the participants for their insights that researches as outsiders cannot easily get. Some comparisons between Parliaments were made just because there are stark differences. Dr AUDEL sees the role of national Parliaments in EU affairs as the same as in national affairs. The functions are the same: debate, supervision, and influence over governmental policies. At the national level, there is also the power to legislate. That is why the study focuses on plenary debates in regards to the European Council. The written procedures and debates in committees are not discarded. Another important thing is communication, how an EU matter or any other matter is presented. It is important that the Parliaments are letting the citizens know what they are doing. The role of the plenary is crucial; it is easier to involve the plenary if the Parliament has to vote on a resolution in the plenary. Dr AUDEL agreed that the reasons why there are no

more yellow cards could be that the Commission has become better at explaining the subsidiarity of its legislative proposals and has issued less legislative proposals. Other factor could be that the coordination is difficult, since Members of Parliament are not looking at proposals from a very narrow legal perspective but have other issues as well. However, these issues are not the same for all the Parliaments and this makes the coordination difficult. It is worth noting that the reasoned opinions and Political Dialogue are reactive tools and the system is limited to the subsidiarity and legal issues. This makes the Green Card initiative a possible way forward. Maybe it would be the way to get parliamentary views across.

Working Groups

All the participants were split up in 3 workshops, everybody had a chance to participate in two workshops. The workshops dealt with these topics:

- Workshop 1: Enhancing the exchange of information between IPEX Correspondents
Chairs: Ms Katharina Stourzh and Mr Ilhan Ibram
- Workshop 2: Promoting and supporting the work of IPEX Correspondents
Chairs: Ms Luna Sadat and Mr Calin-Mihai Racoti
- Workshop 3: Social Media Strategy – ideas for the future
Chairs: Ms Tuula Zetterman and Mr Bruno A. Dias Pinheiro

Afternoon session

Ms Birgit von PFLUG presented the paper “Promotion of IPEX: Best practices and proposals”. It is based on a questionnaire and interventions by the IPEX Board and IPEX National Correspondents. Some things can be easily done and some things may take time, like writing articles in Wikipedia introducing IPEX in official languages. There already are articles in English and in French. IPEX could be linked to Parliaments' websites or intranet. Not all Parliaments have translated IPEX leaflets, which is a good tool to use at the training sessions or open house days. Some Parliaments offer regular trainings on IPEX for civil servants, Members of Parliament, assistants of political groups, some mention IPEX during their training on European issues. Some “how to use IPEX” videos will be made. Some were already made and shown to the IPEX Board. Making videos will be put on hold until the relaunch of the IPEX webpage. The IPEX front page will include a new frame containing information to share. There will be documents that Parliaments want to share, and which are not Reasoned Opinions. Sharing these documents on the front page would have an added value as very few would find those on National Parliaments' pages on IPEX. One other issue the working group raised was the visibility of IPEX in search engines. Unfortunately, IPEX is not visible, since it only comes up on the second or third page.

Overview of workshops

Ms Katharina STROUZH introduced Workshop 1: Enhancing the exchange of information between IPEX Correspondents. The topic is closely linked to Workshop 2 (Promoting and supporting the work of IPEX Correspondents). Participants discussed how to make IPEX more user friendly for Correspondents, more valuable and more up-to-date for all users, i.e. the academic world. One question raised was about exchanging information, and many suggested using some kind of chat app. However, there are some concerns in using apps, like data protection and whether people use official or private phones. Other suggestions were the e-mail and the use of IPEX forums. It is clear from discussions that there should be a tool that would allow the Correspondents to get in touch with each other. Another topic was how to improve the meetings of National Correspondents. The current format was deemed suitable. There was a suggestion that Correspondents' and users' meetings could be combined, where some sessions would involve everyone and some sessions would be for Correspondents only. There was also a suggestion to include a team building exercise. Another idea was to meet twice a year, the second meeting taking place in Brussels. The last topic was the national pages on the IPEX website and the importance of keeping those up to date.

Mr Bruno DIAS PINHEIRO introduced Workshop 3: Social Media Strategy. Discussion was based on a survey. 80 % of the respondents were from Parliaments who are active in social media. The two most popular social media channels are Twitter and Facebook. Quite a few respondents agreed that IPEX should have a social media approach, social media strategy, or social media guidelines. Some concerns were raised, like ownership of information, or what kind of information should be shared. There was a question on the target audience, and it was generally agreed that it should be the wider public. Some issues were raised regarding the changes to the web site and the potential costs and human resources needed. There were many questions that do not have answers today, but the idea is to forward those to the Board. On the positive side, it was suggested that social media could make IPEX more widely known.

Mr Calin-Mihai RACOTI introduced Workshop 2: Promoting and supporting the work of IPEX Correspondents. He thanked everybody who participated and worked along actively. The results and conclusions of Workshop 2 were very similar to Workshop 1.

Mr Jerry HILBERT gave an overview of the Working Group on “Improving the IPEX digital system”. The WG defined a number of topics in order to study how to improve the IPEX digital system. These were related to content, improving the search function, adding new conferences, improving ergonomics and navigation, and the remaining technical items. The WG organised a survey that the Correspondents have answered. These ideas will help to fine-tune various applications which might appear on the IPEX website in the future. Ideas were also collected at the last Users Conference and the Correspondents’ meeting last year. Currently, 30 ideas are being considered. When the evaluation is done, the report will be submitted to the Board, and if the Board approves the ideas and there are enough financial means for implementation, the changes will be made. We hope that the IPEX website will be more attractive as well as easier to use on mobile devices, and will have logical navigation. These changes may take time but we hope to show the planned changes at the next annual conference.