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Interparliamentary EU-information exchange (IPEX)

This memorandum gives a background to the work of IPEX. More detailed information can be found in the report from the IPEX working group to the Secretaries General of the European Union Parliaments (including the European Parliament) of June 4, 2002.

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Background

In a memorandum adopted by the Conference of European Union Speakers in Rome on 22-24 September 2000, the Speakers proposed measures to promote cooperation and the exchange of information between institutions and parliaments in the Union. The Speakers requested that the administrations of the respective parliaments should look closer into the matter. At a subsequent meeting in Stockholm in March 2001 between the Secretaries General of these parliaments, a working group was set up and was given the task to look into ways to promote closer links between European Union parliaments.

Objectives

The objective of IPEX is stated in the guidelines for Interparliamentary Cooperation in the EU, which were agreed upon by the Conference of Speakers in The Hague in 2004.

Section II – Framework:

IPEX

”The objective of IPEX...is to support interparliamentary cooperation in the European Union by providing a platform for the electronic exchange of EU-related information between parliaments in the Union including a calendar of meetings and forums for exchange of views on subsidiarity control. Each parliament/chamber has an IPEX correspondent to represent the parliament.”

In the conclusions from The Hague conference, it was also stressed that IPEX will serve as an important tool for the exchange of information, for example by directly distributing legislative proposals from the European Commission to the IPEX database.

Realisation

In the spring of 2002, a questionnaire was sent to all involved parliaments. The questionnaire dealt among other things with how the parliaments looked upon various aspects of the gathering and sharing of parliamentary information, such as the transposition of EU legislation into national law, and also what the respective parliaments’ views were on various technical solutions that could facilitate such gathering and sharing. The responses were very positive.

The current web site

A web site was introduced in the beginning of 2004. The current IPEX web

site resides on the ECPRD server¹. The site is a portal web site, i.e.; it comprises a number of relevant links to the web sites of those national parliaments that are part of the IPEX network. The links point to web pages that contain relevant information about EU matters and information about the Constitution, as well as relevant working procedures for the respective parliament. All EU parliaments but three² have linked information to the IPEX web site. A provisional calendar of meetings will soon be introduced at the site.

This site can be seen as the first step in establishing a more versatile web site, offering more information and – perhaps more importantly - more structured information.

A new web site

The next step is to launch a new web site, built around a database. The parliaments that take part in the IPEX network can then e.g. upload proposals from the European Commission. By assigning various status values to the documents, it will be possible for any country to follow the development of specific issues and also to keep track of the standpoint of other countries.

Of special interest are those issues that pertain to subsidiarity, and therefore must be dealt with rather swiftly. Such issues can easily be followed in the new system.

Current organisation of IPEX work

The IPEX steering group

At the above-mentioned Stockholm meeting, a working group was established to work with the requests of the Speakers. At present, the group consists of representatives from the parliaments of Denmark, France, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom³. The ECPRD and the COSAC Secretariat is invited as additional members. The group is chaired by the Secretary General of the Swedish Parliament, Mr Anders Forsberg.

The group has met several times and twice reported its work to the Secretaries General, most recently in June 2002, when the group presented its proposals for future cooperation between EU parliaments mainly in the field of electronic exchange of EU information. The Secretaries General have agreed that the activities should be pursued according to the proposals in the report. The Speakers and the Secretaries General have also been continuously informed about the status of the IPEX work.

¹ www.ecprd.org

² Cyprus, Malta and Greece

³ A representative from the Hungarian Parliament is invited to the Steering group meeting in November, being the host for the upcoming Speakers' Conference in 2005

The IPEX (technical) working group

A working group, consisting of staff from Denmark, Italy, Sweden and the ECPRD carries out the practical and concrete aspects of the work. The group acquired its present structure at the steering group meeting in London on 10-11 June 2004.

The primary task of the working group has been to further elaborate on the requirement specification for the new web site. This requirement specification was decided upon in principle by the steering group at its meeting in London and the working group started working with the specification immediately thereafter. It has had two meetings since then. At its latest meeting in October, the final details concerning the requirement specification were addressed. The purpose of that meeting was to be able to present a pilot installation for the steering group at its upcoming meeting in Brussels on 11-12 November.

IPEX correspondents

An essential element in keeping the IPEX idea vital is to decentralise the responsibility as much as possible. Data in the IPEX environment, and the contents of its databases, be it the quality or the quantity will only be as good as the participating parliaments allow it to be. The parliaments themselves decide what of their own material is published on the IPEX web site.

In order to avoid any duplication of work, be it sectional committees, COSAC, other interparliamentary bodies or fora etc, it is essential that the IPEX platform is used by all bodies involved in EU interparliamentary work,

In order to realise this vision, each parliament has appointed an IPEX correspondent. The function of the correspondent is to be responsible for the updating and the accuracy of the information of that country's data on the IPEX web site and to liase between the national parliament and the IPEX central support function (please see "Suggested administration of the site"). Each parliament decides of course about its own internal organisation.

Not only countries belonging to the European Union are involved in the IPEX network. Even acceding countries and candidate countries have been invited to appoint an IPEX correspondent, and all countries involved have shown a great interest with the result that 34 people from 27 countries are now listed as IPEX correspondents.

Suggested administration of the site

Realisation of the work – the Central Support function

Central Support is a function that is yet to find its final form and shape. The technical working group, when discussing this at its meeting in Brussels on 21 October, thought that in order to decentralise as much as possible, this work could be done on a rotating basis using staff from different

parliaments. Nothing was decided though, as it was felt that this was more of a steering group issue.

The basic reason for having this body is that someone probably has to oversee, support and maybe even correct some information in case erroneous data should be entered by mistake. Technical maintenance is another reason.

Clearly, the entering and updating of data, are tasks that must be kept very simple, and yet allow for data of a good quality to be entered.

Important success factors

We have identified three factors that we think are essential for the IPEX initiative to be successful:

- **Simplicity:** The work with the web site should not require any technical skills from the IPEX correspondent who updates it
- **Quality:** It is necessary that the data to be found on the site are absolutely correct and truly reflect the participating countries respective standpoints
- **Integrity:** Ensuring that data for a certain country can be changed only be the country in question

In addition, commitment from the national parliaments and from the IPEX correspondents will of course be factors that ultimately decide whether IPEX will be a success story or not.

Primary tasks

Some of the more important tasks for the IPEX project are:

- Exchange views on current EU issues
- Exchange information on the subsidiarity test
- Calendar of interparliamentary meetings
- A bulletin board

Exchange of information on EU issues and the subsidiarity control

The system will allow for exchange between parliaments of information on pending EU matters.

One such field of interest will be keeping track of subsidiarity issues, in particular those where national parliaments hold a different view than the European Commission. This is a task for which tools are to be developed within the IPEX web site. By an intuitive and easy-to-use scoreboard mechanism, it will be very easy to learn what issues are still open to subsidiarity consideration, and what standpoint a particular country has taken on a specific issue. A few symbols will reveal the status of a specific

legal act for a particular country.

To maintain integrity, each country will have access to an exclusive part of the database. The information in that part is maintained and updated by the country in question. That means that information about a country's position in a certain matter can only be put there at the will and at the action of that particular country.

Calendar

A calendar, listing EU interparliamentary conferences, for instance meetings of sectional committees and COSAC, as well as important events in the Union, for instance the dates for presentation of different EU working programmes, will also be maintained and published on the web site.

Bulletin board

To further widen the possibilities for an informal exchange of views between parliaments, a bulletin board will also be maintained, enabling parliamentary staff to send questions and/or comments to each other about current matters.