

Chapter 10

The Parliamentary Dimension of the Council Presidency

Kenneth Curmi

Context and Definition

Ask anyone about the European Union Presidency, and you are bound to be inundated with references to the executive. Indeed, at the very mention of the word “Presidency”, one imagines Ministers, cabinets and the Council of the European Union. Not surprisingly, given that the official name of the EU Presidency is the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.²⁹¹

One could say that the parliamentary dimension seeks to somewhat correct this by ensuring that the parliament of the Member State holding the Presidency plays an important role during this time. The parliamentary dimension also provides a chance for members of the executive and the European Commission to meet and discuss topics with parliamentarians.²⁹²

Given that the parliamentary institutions are the representatives of the people, the parliamentary dimension’s lack of exposure is an unfortunate reality, and is symptomatic of the strong emphasis generally afforded to the executive, and, in the European context, the Council, which contributes to an unhealthy shift of power towards the executive, effectively weakening the necessary democratic hinge of parliamentary oversight.²⁹³

The reality only adds to the irony, for the structure, process and objectives of the parliamentary dimension naturally overlap and reflect the executive

²⁹¹ A telling semantic that goes beyond mere semantics: there is a Parliamentary dimension to the Council Presidency, and not two distinct dimensions (Parliamentary and Council) to the EU Presidency. It also ties well with Czachór’s own third summarizing point of the history of European parliamentarism up to the Lisbon Treaty, which states that “the provisions of the treaties and political structure of the Community and European Union have minimized the role and significance of the national parliaments, emphasizing the legislative and decision-making positions of the Council of the European Union.” (Czachór (2013) p. 9) and shows that remnants of this phenomenon remain even post-Lisbon.

²⁹² As happened during the meetings organised by the Maltese Parliament, with a long list of high-profile speakers, including First Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans, Vice-President of the European Commission for the Euro and Social Dialogue Valdis Dombrovskis, President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini and Michel Barnier, the Chief Negotiator for Brexit negotiations with the UK, amongst others.

²⁹³ Czachór addresses this issue in his paper, pointing out the late response by national parliaments and the European Parliament.

dimension: the two are not competing spheres by nature, but rather, as should be expected, complementary parts to a greater whole.

In many ways, the parliamentary dimension mirrors the Council Presidency. Just as the latter, for instance, employs a collaborative structure comprised of three succeeding presidencies – “Member states holding the presidency work together closely in groups of three, called ‘trios’”²⁹⁴ – the parliamentary dimension has its own trio.²⁹⁵ On 20th April 2015, the Speakers of the Houses of the Parliament of The Netherlands, Slovakia and Malta, signed a declaration of cooperation between the three Parliaments for the period starting from January 2016 to June 2017 (the period of 18 months during which the three Member States would successively hold the Presidency).²⁹⁶ In it, they pledged to (a) ensure effective communication and co-ordination at political and official levels across the three Parliaments with regard to the conferences, programmes and other relevant parliamentary activities related to the respective Presidencies; (b) ensure effective coordination with regard to co-operation with the European Parliament on issues that touch upon the Presidency Trio; and (c) ensure coordination regarding the effective communication of the outcome of conferences and other parliamentary activities to European citizens.²⁹⁷

Meetings held during the Parliamentary Dimension

The parliamentary dimension’s main objective is to provide a meeting place where Members of the parliaments of the EU, including the European Parliament, can meet and discuss subjects of relevance to the Presidency’s priorities.

Just like the Presidency of the Council, the parliamentary dimension lasts for six months, during which a number of meetings are held in the country holding the Presidency and in Brussels. There is indeed a difference between the parliamentary dimension held during the first six months of the year and the one held in the last six, since some meetings are specific to one and are annually and exclusively held at the same time of year.

²⁹⁴ European Council web-page.

²⁹⁵ “The Trio, based on the principle of rotation, ensures continuity and consistency in the work of the Council of the EU. The Trio defines a general agenda and implements a joint programme, while each of its members, in a predetermined order, presides over the Council of the EU for a period of six months.” Parliament of Malta (2017b).

²⁹⁶ The declaration was signed by Mrs Ankie Broekers-Knol, President of the Senate of the Netherlands, Mrs Anouchka Van Miltenburg, Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Netherlands, Mr Peter Pellegrini, Speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and Dr Angelo Farrugia, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Parliament of Malta, meeting in the *Camera dei Deputati* in Rome before the start of the Conference of the Speakers of the European Union.

²⁹⁷ Staten-General, Národná Rada, Parlament ta’ Malta (2015).

Beginning with the meetings which are held in common, we find, most notably, the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union, better known as COSAC,²⁹⁸ which is held bi-annually (together with a meeting reserved solely to the Chairpersons of the Committees, also held bi-annually). COSAC was established in May 1989 in Madrid by the Speakers of the Parliaments of the EU Member States, with the first ever meeting taking place later that year in Paris. It has its own website,²⁹⁹ rules of procedure,³⁰⁰ modus operandi and secretariat.³⁰¹

Next up is the Inter-parliamentary Conference on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance in the European Union, which also meets bi-annually and “provides a framework for a debate and exchange of information and best practices in implementing the provisions of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union”.³⁰² Whereas the conference is held during each Presidency, the format differs slightly according to the period during which it is held: “In the first half of each calendar year, the Conference takes place in Brussels within the so-called European Parliamentary Week, and it is co-organized and co-chaired by the presiding national parliament and the European Parliament. In the second half of the calendar year, the Conference takes place in the Member State currently holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU and is chaired by the presiding parliament.”³⁰³

Another meeting which is held both in the first and second halves of the calendar year is the Inter-parliamentary Conference for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), which provides “a framework for the exchange of information and best practices in the area of CFSP and CSDP, to enable national Parliaments and the European Parliament to be fully informed when carrying out their respective roles in this policy area.”³⁰⁴

The meeting of Secretaries-General of the European Union Parliaments and the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments, which bring together the Speakers of the national parliaments of the Member States,

²⁹⁸ The acronym stands for: *Conférence des Organes Parlementaires Spécialisés dans les Affaires de l'Union des Parlements de l'Union Européenne*.

²⁹⁹ <http://www.cosac.eu/>

³⁰⁰ European Parliament (2011).

³⁰¹ This is composed of one Permanent Member, together with a member representing the European Parliament and a member from each of the Parliaments making up the Presidential Troika (not to be confused with the Trio). Thus, I am currently a member of the COSAC Secretariat, and will remain till the end of the Estonian Presidency, when I will be replaced by an Austrian member.

More information at COSAC (2018).

³⁰² Národná rada Slovenskej republiky (2016).

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ European Union (2012).

including the President of the European Parliament, are both held annually. The Conference meets in the *first* half of the year, but is organised by the parliament of the Member State holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union during the *second* half of previous the calendar year.³⁰⁵ It is a “forum for the exchange of opinions, information and experiences among the Speakers, on topics related to the role of parliaments and the organisation of parliamentary functions, as well as for the promotion of research activities and common action, also with respect to the forms and instruments of inter-parliamentary cooperation.”³⁰⁶

The Meeting of the Secretaries-General is “a preparatory stage to the Conference of Speakers of EU Parliaments. It elaborates the content and organization of the agenda of the Conference of Speakers and approves its underlying program framework.”³⁰⁷

To the above-mentioned meetings should be added a number of inter-parliamentary meetings and events, including bilateral visits, on topics chosen by the parliament of the Member State holding the Presidency.

Overview of Inter-parliamentary meetings held during the Parliamentary Dimension of the Maltese Presidency

During Malta’s six-month presidency of the Council of the European Union, five inter-parliamentary meetings were held under the parliamentary dimension. It is important to stress that objectives, results and achievements are harder to quantify when discussing the parliamentary dimension since it exists principally to provide a forum for debate and the exchange of best practices and ideas with the hope of influencing the executive. In the end, however, it is the latter which implements the priorities set by the Presidency.

Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC

The first inter-parliamentary meeting, inaugurating the parliamentary dimension of the presidency, was the Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC, held on 22nd–23rd January 2017 in Malta. It started with a meeting of COSAC’s Presidential Troika made up of the Chairpersons of the European Affairs Committee of the Maltese, Slovak and Estonian Parliaments, as well as the Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament.

The agenda of these Troika meetings usually consists of the adoption of the agenda of the meeting of the Presidential Troika; the approval of the draft

³⁰⁵ Conference of Speakers of EU Parliaments (2010).

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ Národná rada Slovenskej republiky (2017).

programme of the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC; the debate on the draft programme for the LVII COSAC; the approval of the outline of the Bi-annual Report of COSAC; as well as the presentation of the letters received by the Presidency and other business to be discussed.

The Troika meeting is in effect a limited and usually fairly brief meeting that presents the opportunity for the Chairs to discuss the meeting to be held the following day and ensure that any disputes are settled beforehand, especially with regard to certain procedural issues or special requests arising from letters previously sent to the Presidency or the Troika by other parliaments.

The meeting is also used to voice or lobby certain interests: during the debate on the draft programme for the LVII COSAC, for instance, the European Parliament Chair Ms Danuta HÜBNER suggested that a speaker from the European Parliament be invited to the debate on migration.³⁰⁸ More importantly, the Troika discusses the draft Conclusions and Contributions, as drafted by the Presidency, and agrees on a compromise text in response to any amendments received by Parliaments/Chambers which is then presented during the meeting the following day.

Letters received mostly consist of parliaments from non-EU Member States requesting participation at COSAC meetings, and parliamentarians of EU Member States requesting items to be put on the agenda. One particular letter, from Mr Vannino CHITI, former Vice President of the Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, asked for the organization of a visit for COSAC members to so-called hot-spots: places seriously affected by and struggling to cope with the effects of migration. This was the first of its kind, and a visit to Pozallo, Sicily, organised by the Italian Senate, eventually took place during the Maltese Presidency on 5th–6th May 2017. It is an example of concrete action arising from the parliamentary dimension of the Maltese presidency.

The following day saw the Chairpersons from all the European Affairs Committees of the participating parliaments get together for a whole day of discussions. The meeting was addressed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Hon. Angelo Farrugia, and the Chairman of the Parliament's Foreign and European Affairs Committee, the Hon. Luciano Busuttil. The meeting was divided in two sessions: the first session focussed on the priorities of the Maltese Presidency, and was addressed by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for European Affairs and Implementation of the Electoral Manifesto, Hon. Louis Grech, who referred to the challenges that the EU faced and the current times of uncertainty and noted that the Presidency theme was “rEUnion” with sustainability and restoring belief to the European project at its core; and the Minister for Tourism, Hon. Edward Zammit Lewis, who, inter alia, noted that the Maltese Presidency would

³⁰⁸ COSAC (2017a) p. 2.

contribute further to the Digital Single Market Strategy, making a specific reference to the creation of a Digital Tourism Network while also striving to manage the Union's external border better. This was met favourably by participants, who appreciated the fact that the Maltese Presidency had set migration high on its agenda.

The second session focussed on the European Commission Work Programme 2017,³⁰⁹ and was addressed by the First Vice-President of the European Commission, Mr Frans Timmermans. As is usual at these meetings, the sessions closed with a debate, whereas the Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Presiding Parliament gave the closing remarks. The discussion here centred around the issue of institutional cooperation when setting the EU's priorities, as well as the role national Parliaments had to play in this process. The EU's legislative priorities in 2017, as agreed to by the Presidents of the three institutions, focused on: tackling inequalities; providing security and addressing internal and external threats; supporting the digital single market; making the EU economy sustainable; and implementing the Energy Union Strategy. The benefits of identifying priorities listed in the CWP early on were noted by Mr Bastiaan VAN APELDOORN, Chairman of the Standing Committee on European Affairs of the Dutch Senate. Notwithstanding some reservations expressed by a few speakers, a number of Members welcomed the CWP's focus and ambition. Mr TIMMERMANS was critical with regard to the "green card" mechanism, and argued that this would go against existing treaty provisions and the respective institutional roles and competences assigned therein.

Inter-parliamentary Conference on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union

The Inter-parliamentary Conference on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance in the European Union under Article 13 of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (TSCG), is organised jointly by the Presidency Parliament and the European Parliament, and is co-chaired by both. It was held in the European Parliament in Brussels within the framework of the European Parliamentary Week that took place between the 30th January–1st February 2017.

The Conference began with a plenary session on the Fiscal Compact, with the President of the European Parliament, Mr Antonio Tajani, and the Speaker of the House, Hon. Angelo Farrugia delivering opening statements. This was followed by another session dealing with the social dimension in the Economic and Monetary Union. An exchange of views took place in each session.

³⁰⁹ European Commission (2017).

The following day saw a further two plenary sessions, the first dealing with national reforms fostering sustainable growth and chaired by Hon. Silvio Schembri, Chair of the Economic and Financial Affairs Committee of the Maltese Parliament.

The last session focussed on the role of financial assistance programmes and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) in safeguarding the stability of the euro, and was co-chaired by Hon. Schembri and Mr Gualtieri, with keynote addresses delivered by Hon. Edward Scicluna, President of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council and Mr Klaus Regling, Managing Director of the ESM. Here it was argued that the project of the Euro had no recourse to institutional elements normally found in other federal currency structures, like the dollar, and the ESM therefore was vital in contributing to stability especially in its role in the broader European response to the financial crisis. It was also posited that structural reforms lead to growth and jobs, although within certain spheres, such as social policy, these were best pursued at a national level.

Meeting of the Chairpersons of the Committees on Social Affairs

The Meeting of the Chairpersons of the Committees on Social Affairs was held on 23rd–24th March 2017, though debating sessions were only held on the second day. The meeting was opened by the Speaker of the Maltese House of Representatives, and was followed by introductory remarks from the then Chairman of the Social Affairs Committee, Hon. Anthony Agius Decelis, and a speech by Ms Marianne Thyssen, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility.³¹⁰

The meeting itself was split into three sessions. The first session dealt with poverty and social exclusion and the way towards a more inclusive Europe. This item tied in with the second pillar of the Trio's work programme: "A Union that empowers and protects all its citizens".³¹¹

The second session was dedicated to an exchange of best practices on how to tackle social exclusion, whereas the third session focussed on the Europe 2020 policies and the way forward.

Meeting of the Chairpersons of Economic and Environmental Affairs Committees

The Meeting of the Chairpersons of Economic and Environmental Affairs Committees was held on 6th–7th April 2017. This meeting was also inaugurated by the Speaker of the House, followed by introductory remarks

³¹⁰ In the end, Commissioner Thyssen could not make it to the meeting, so a video message was played instead.

³¹¹ Council of the European Union (2015) p. 12.

from the Chairman of the Economic and Financial Affairs Committee, Hon. Silvio Schembri.

The meeting was once again split into three sessions, with the first session tackling the economic and social impact of climate change, thus tying in with the third pillar of the Presidential Trio programme.³¹² During this session, a suggestion was floated by Professor Simone Borg to establish an online forum bringing MPs and experts together, in order to share information, advice and best practices.

The second session addressed the financial aspects of climate change, and focussed on the financial and non-financial costs of addressing the phenomenon, while investigating the cost of inaction (i.e. doing nothing) as opposed to the financial investment necessary to finance climate action. There was general consensus that, despite the current financial environment, it was preferable to ensure that climate action be financed properly, as not doing so would result in future, and possibly significantly higher, costs.

The third session focused on non-state actors, and saw a Maltese company presenting their energy-efficient work related to design and engineering in the construction industry as a model of best practice. What is interesting to note is the academic involvement in this meeting, with most of the speakers hailing from university or industry, and NGOs. The inter-parliamentary meetings of the parliamentary dimension enable politicians to meet and discuss topical subjects with the people who are directly active and involved.

Inter-parliamentary Conference for the CFSP and CSDP

A more intense meeting was the Inter-parliamentary Conference for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), held on 26th–28th April 2017 in Malta, which saw three days of discussion on the state of play of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the European response to the instability and threats in the Southern Mediterranean and the Middle East and migration, amongst other topics.

The Deputy Speaker of the House, Hon. Ċensu Galea addressed the meeting followed by the Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Maltese House of Representatives, Hon. Luciano Busuttill, and the Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament, Mr David McAllister. The Maltese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Hon. George Vella, briefed participants on the state of play of the Neighbourhood Policy during the first session.

The second session dealt with instability and threats in Europe's neighbourhood.

³¹² *Ibid.* p. 15.

The third session was an eagerly awaited exchange of views on the priorities and strategies of the EU in the area of CFSP and CSDP with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Ms Federica Mogherini, following opening remarks by the Minister for Home Affairs and National Security of Malta, Hon. Carmelo Abela.

Three workshops were held in parallel on the final day: one on the EU's Migration Policy in 2017 and beyond; the second on fighting propaganda and information warfare; and the third on the European Defence Action Plan and EU-NATO relations.

The results of the workshop were presented in the last session, also adopting a set of conclusions which in its preamble regretted but respected the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union.

Amongst other things, the conclusions supported the establishment of a coordinated annual review on defence (CARD), as well as the strengthening of the EU's hard power, and suggested that the EU should significantly step up its cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries while also supporting the EU's stance vis-a-vis the "illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula" by Russia.³¹³ In its conclusions, the inter-parliamentary conference also condemned Russia for "vetoing numerous UN Security Council Resolutions on the conflict of Syria".³¹⁴

The IPC invited the United Nations to authorise the start of the third phase of operation EUNAVFOR MED – SOPHIA, though by November 2017 it was still reported that this was proving impossible.³¹⁵

With regard to migration, the IPC called for the establishment of a common European migration policy, and also welcomed the Malta Declaration,³¹⁶ as well as the intention of the Maltese Presidency to present concrete plans to the Council for its implementation.

Finally, with regard to the CSDP, both the intention to setup a Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)³¹⁷ and the publication of the European Defence Action Plan³¹⁸ were welcomed by the conference.

One notable fact about this meeting was the mix of civil servants and Members of Parliament during the workshops, which was intended to

³¹³ European Union (2017) pp. 3-4.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³¹⁵ Tardy, T. (2017).

³¹⁶ Council of the European Union (2017).

³¹⁷ European Council (2017).

³¹⁸ European Commission (2016).

facilitate an exchange of views and bridge the gap between policy and decision makers, and officials working on the ground.

Meeting of the LVII COSAC

The last meeting held during the parliamentary dimension of the Maltese presidency was the LVII COSAC Plenary, which was held on 28th–30th May 2017, and which brought together “chairpersons and members of the European affairs committees of national Parliaments of the European Union and observer countries, and members of the European Parliament”³¹⁹ to discuss various topics, including, amongst others, a rundown of the achievements of the Maltese presidency and the future of the European Union in the context of Brexit.

The Presidential Troika met on the first day to approve the agenda of the meeting, the programme of the Plenary, the presentation of the 27th Bi-annual Report, and the draft conclusions of the LVII COSAC, and discuss any other business. The Presidency also briefed the Troika on the correspondence received.

After a meeting of political groups, the COSAC meeting started on the second day with a welcome address from Speaker Farrugia, after which the agenda was adopted. The 27th Bi-annual Report of COSAC was presented by the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat. Later, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Malta, Hon. Vella, briefed participants on the work done and results achieved by the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union. He noted that a Migration Media Award had been established to recognize and reward journalistic pieces reporting on migration. The Presidency had also steered the EU toward considering the future of western Balkan countries, something which the Bulgarian Presidency subsequently followed up on. The Maltese Presidency had also prioritised the single market, and great progress in the involvement of consumers and the establishment of key consumer protections laws had been made.

The second session addressed the role of national parliaments in the future of the EU. The keynote speaker for this session was, once again, Mr Timmermans, together with the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Ms Mairead McGuinness, who called for deeper engagement between national Parliaments and national governments but also between the European Parliament and national Parliaments.

During the debate that followed, many speakers emphasised the importance of involving national Parliaments in the EU decision-making process. The rapport with the citizen was also a recurring subject. Support for the “green”

³¹⁹ Parliament of Malta (2017).

card was also expressed by some participants, and several others expressed their dissatisfaction with what they deemed to be an early deadline set for feedback on the Commission's White Paper on the Future of the EU, to which Mr TIMMERMANS replied by assuring participants that the State of the Union address in autumn would not mark an end to the debate. Several speakers also addressed the "yellow" card raised in regard of the legislative proposal on the posting of workers.³²⁰

Brexit was discussed in the third session. The main speaker was Mr Michel Barnier, the Chief Negotiator for the Preparation and Conduct of the Negotiations with the United Kingdom, who reiterated the key role national Parliaments would play in forging unity of the EU 27 and, given that the new partnership would be a mixed agreement, referred to its ratification by national Parliaments. During the debate that followed, it transpired that transparency of negotiations was the biggest issue when it came to Brexit.

The Blue Economy and the EU Integrated Maritime Policy was the subject of the fourth session, which was addressed by Mr Karmenu Vella, the EU Commissioner for the Environment, Maritime Affairs and Fisheries.

As is usual at these conferences, a meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC was held at the end of the day.

Migration was the main topic on the second day and the assembly was addressed by Minister George Vella who welcomed the Malta Declaration, adopted at the Informal summit of EU heads of states or governments on 3rd February 2017, as a step toward disrupting the business models of smugglers and human traffickers. This was followed by an address from Ms Maite Pagazaurtundúa Ruiz, Member of the European Parliament, as well as by Mr Lucio Romano, Vice-Chair of the Committee on EU policies of the Italian Senate, who reported on the visit to the hotspot in Pozzallo, Sicily. Twenty-eight COSAC parliamentarians from 18 Member States had participated, in addition to 11 Italian MPs, a number of MEPS and representatives of four regional councils, while two other Parliaments were represented by their staff. The goal of the visit was to raise awareness and it also included a meeting with representatives of civil society held in Ragusa.

Many speakers welcomed the Malta Declaration and the general consensus was that the migratory and humanitarian crisis called for a European response based on solidarity. In this regard, Ms Katarina CSEFALVAYOVA, from the Slovak *Národná rada*, thanked Malta for having picked up on the notion of "effective solidarity" put forward by the Slovak Presidency. A number of speakers called for actions to disrupt business models of smugglers and traffickers in migrants, while several

³²⁰ European Commission (2016).

others stressed the need to differentiate between economic migrants and refugees.

The Presidency Encounters Turbulence

As the Presidency was coming to an end, a general election was announced and parliament was dissolved. This obviously had its implications on the running of the presidency, not least its parliamentary dimension: here, a peculiar situation cropped up just before the last meeting – the LVII COSAC – for the Maltese Parliament no longer had a European Affairs Committee Chairman.

This meant two things: firstly, there was no Chairman to preside over the meeting, and secondly, and as a result of not having a Maltese delegation present at the meeting, there could be no Contribution presented by the Presidency for adoption. As the Speaker of the House, who retains his position till the reconvening of Parliament, explained during the COSAC meeting itself, despite these exceptional circumstances, “the Maltese Parliament remained committed to its obligations arising from Malta’s EU Presidency”, and it was decided that the Speaker would chair the LVII COSAC, and, instead of a political contribution, following consultation with the Troika, the Presidency proposed the adoption of brief conclusions free from political statements.

Challenges faced during the Parliamentary Dimension of the Maltese Presidency

It should come as no surprise that a small Member State holding the EU Presidency for the first time faces particular challenges, mostly logistical in nature.

Finding a suitable venue for some of the meetings, proved to be a daunting task. Malta’s own Parliamentary chamber is understandably small, and whereas its infrastructure is adequate for day to day business, extraordinary meetings like the ones held during the Presidency need sizeable venues. In larger EU member states this is not an issue, as the meetings can be held in the national parliaments’ plenary hall. A meeting like the COSAC plenary involves upward of 250 participants, without counting auxiliary officials, caterers and interpreters.

Providing interpretation may also prove problematic. The COSAC rules of procedure, for instance, dictate that interpretation in all of the EU’s official languages be provided during the plenary meetings.

Size constraints proved particularly troublesome during the Meeting of the Chairpersons of Economic and Environmental Affairs Committees, as this basically incorporated two different committees (often with two different Chairpersons) but only two MPs per Parliament were invited. In the case of

bi-cameral chambers, the attendance was split (that is to say, an MP per chamber), and this could lead to problems since a chamber may have two different Chairpersons for the two Committees.³²¹ Indeed, in a few cases chambers insisted on and sought a special arrangement so that two members from the same chamber could attend. This can be seen in the final list of participants³²² where, for instance, the Belgian Senate had two Chairpersons attending, in addition to another Member from the Belgian House of Representatives.

Ironically however, there were far less challenges of a political nature³²³, as the realities of a small country were surprisingly perceived as an advantage, rather than a weakness. This is attested by a number of interventions. Ms Danielle Auroi, a Member of the French *Assemblée nationale* had “underlined that Malta as a Mediterranean multicultural country could bring EU Member States together and be a bridge with Africa and the Middle East”.³²⁴ This sentiment was echoed by Ms Gabriela CREȚU, a Member of the Romanian *Senat* who also “expressed [her] trust towards small Member States holding the Presidency”.³²⁵ Even the Conclusions of the LVII COSAC noted “the fruitful discussions held during the LVII COSAC and [thanked] the Maltese Presidency for putting on the agenda issues that are most relevant to the European Union at this critical juncture.”³²⁶

Indeed, given the relative freedom of choice of topics, which is after all the point behind the concept of a 6-month rotating presidency, even small countries (and small parliaments) can make a difference by choosing topics in which they have an intellectual or experiential advantage, a point eloquently surmised by Hon. Zammit Lewis during the COSAC Chairpersons meeting, who stressed that “the Maltese Presidency was well positioned to understand the real issues on migration.”³²⁷

Results of the Parliamentary Dimension of the Maltese Presidency

From the above overview of the inter-parliamentary meetings held within the parliamentary dimension, the observer can quickly gather that, despite the lack of PR, the parliamentary dimension is an important side of the Presidency that enables heavyweights in the policy and decision-making sphere, including and indeed most often from the executive, to meet and

³²¹ Indeed, this is usually the case, given that these two committees are usually at logger heads.

³²² Parliament of Malta (2017).

³²³ Apart from the special context in which the COSAC Plenary was held; see above on page 12.

³²⁴ COSAC (2017d) p. 5

³²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 4.

³²⁶ COSAC (2017e).

³²⁷ COSAC (2017b) p. 5.

engage in discussion in an open-forum environment enriched with input from experts and academia. That in itself is a remarkable achievement.

But despite the difficult if not impossible task of quantifying results from such inter-parliamentary fora, one can indeed find concrete results of the parliamentary dimension. The visit to the Hotspot of Pozzallo in Sicily, which happened on 5–6 May, and therefore during the Maltese Presidency, is one such example, for despite being mostly organised by the Italian Senate on the initiative of Senator Vannino Chiti, the idea was brought up at the COSAC meeting in Malta, and then formulated during a side meeting with the Chairperson of the Foreign and European Affairs Committee of Maltese House of Representatives, which supported the initiative in its capacity of Presidency Parliament, and indeed encouraged national parliaments and the European Parliament to participate.

One cannot fail to mention, of course, the conclusions drawn up following the meetings themselves, and whereas it is true that, given the nature of inter-parliamentary meetings, and the different realities that govern the oversight of the executive in different Member States, with the resultant different powers and mandates that parliaments have *vis-a-vis* the latter, these conclusions are not binding, they nevertheless serve two very important functions: (1) they steer local debates to ensure they reflect the European mood and what was agreed at European level; and (2) they serve as milestones enabling discussions to proceed smoothly from one Presidency to another, and ensure continuation by enabling Parliaments, especially those holding the Presidency, to pick up from where others have left off.

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