



Conférence européenne des **Présidentes et Présidents de Parlement**
European Conference of **Presidents of Parliament**

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CONCLUSIONS OF THE CONFERENCE

presented by

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and

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The conference paid tribute to Sir David Amess, member of parliament of the United Kingdom, who was murdered on 15 October 2021 while holding a constituency surgery. The conference strongly supported the call made by the Rt Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle, Speaker of the House of Commons, for members of parliament to be kept safe and to continue to exercise their duties, to serve the citizens and engage with their constituents without giving in to fear.

We cannot let attacks stand in the way of democracy. People don't need to agree with each other, but we need more tolerance. We must unite in the defence of democracy and terrorism will not win.

Democracies facing the Covid-19 public health crisis: sharing experience and the way forward

The Covid-19 pandemic has been challenging for all our countries: we had not been faced with such a global public health crisis for a century. And the truth is: this crisis caught us unprepared. Even the Parliamentary Assembly, which had been calling for a reform of the World Health Organization and better pandemic preparedness following the H1N1 pandemic and the Ebola epidemics, could not have foreseen how much the functioning of our democracies would be impacted by this tiny coronavirus.

The pandemic forced Council of Europe member States to take extraordinary measures to protect the right to life and public health, with follow-on effects on human rights. Parliaments were often caught in a difficult situation: how could they fulfil their fundamental role of overseeing government actions, when, especially at the beginning of the crisis, parliaments could not even meet?

We have heard from a number of our parliaments how they were able to overcome obstacles, by ensuring that their parliaments could do their work – using technological solutions such as hybrid or virtual meetings, remote voting, or changing quorum requirements. Some of these measures have proven their worth and will indeed be continued after the pandemic has ended.

Where have our parliaments put a particular focus? We have heard about parliaments becoming an even “bigger nuisance than usual” in controlling government action: mitigating any risk of abuse of emergency powers by governments, and steering legislation in the right direction, by ensuring proportionality, non-discrimination, a limitation in time and scope of restrictive measures with an impact on human rights, and regular consultation of parliament, in line with the Council of Europe toolkit and the Assembly's recommendations. And yes, as parliamentarians we sometimes need to adopt unpopular measures, and find a delicate balance between competing rights.

We have also heard some promising practices for the way forward, for use both as the crisis continues and to address future such challenges:

- ensuring that the legal basis for introducing specific states of emergency is sound – before an emergency occurs;

- ensuring that vulnerable groups, such as women and children, are properly protected. A viral pandemic should not be allowed to end in a pandemic of violence;
- ensuring that discrimination and inequalities – which flourish in times of crisis – are avoided as much as possible, through targeted measures for vulnerable groups, and special attention when it comes to building back at the tail-end of the crisis. We need an inclusive, intersectional approach at every level of government, as well as in parliaments.

To sum up: after the crisis is before the crisis. We need to ensure national parliaments and interparliamentary assemblies alike are prepared for future crises and are prepared for the unexpected. These crises will come: they may not be of the same nature, and may be more linked to the climate crisis currently unfolding, but we need to future-proof our ways of working, so that parliaments are not side-lined in the next global emergency. We need to defend and develop democracy.

Multilateralism, international co-operation and solidarity must remain at the heart of anticipating and addressing future similar threats. Neither viruses nor floods, fire nor pollution respect national borders. We thus need full support to, but also reform of, multilateral organisations, as well as full support for international and human rights law. We need to develop resilience.

#EnvironmentRightNow: national parliaments and the right to a healthy and sustainable environment

With the climate crisis, we are facing a systemic danger testing our democracies, institutions and our capacity to develop “climate resilience”. The type of environmental upheaval we have witnessed this summer shows all too clearly that time is running out: we have no time left to lose in meeting this challenge, which poses a direct threat to health and well-being, and the stability of society as a whole.

The Parliamentary Assembly, in a rare show of unity, adopted seven reports on 29 September 2021, showing the way to the Committee of Ministers, member States, and national parliaments. The emphasis has been squarely on enshrining the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, right now in legally binding Council of Europe instruments, including an Additional Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights, an Additional Protocol to the European Social Charter, updated criminal law conventions and a “5P” convention: by **p**reventing and **p**rosecuting violations of the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and **p**rotecting the victims, the contracting States could adopt and implement state-wide “integrated **p**olicies” that are effective and offer a comprehensive response to environmental threats and technological hazards, involving **p**arliaments in holding governments to account on the effective implementation of environment-friendly pro-human rights policies.

As legislators, it is our role, and that of our parliaments, to act as guardians of democracy, human rights and rule of law also with regard to environmental rights. We hope that national parliaments will support these efforts, and ratify these legal instruments once drafted.

We all agree that parliaments need to take concrete and ambitious measures now. This is very encouraging. Some of the measures mentioned were particularly highlighted:

- improving national legal frameworks based on ambitious integrated policies, by conducting impact assessments of public policies, identifying national priorities, providing guidance in their implementation, and allocating sufficient resources when approving budgets;
- promoting ambitious and strengthened dialogue between the various parties involved at local, national, regional and international levels, including private stakeholders and especially companies; supporting emerging models of public participation and deliberation that complement and enrich parliamentary democracy; ensuring young people and children actively engage and participate in this process;
- building on a proper energy transition, “green” finance, and a circular economy, while preserving nature and biodiversity; responding to the climate crisis with adequate social rights protection in mind, especially for the most vulnerable, in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. This requires adapting the economic model and financial system to ensure that businesses live up to their responsibilities, and the ecological transition leaves no one behind – especially women, children, and climate refugees.

The link between human rights and the environment is evident to us all. We therefore welcome the Parliamentary Assembly’s intention to set up a parliamentary network in January 2022 to ensure the necessary political support and parliamentary input by representative democracy. This network will seek to inspire and follow the action taken by the national authorities to honour the strong commitments they have made vis-à-vis

the climate crisis, while fostering the mutual enrichment of ideas and setting up regular opportunities for parliamentarians in Europe and on other continents to pool their experience. It will serve as an essential link to national parliaments, and we are looking forward to parliaments and interparliamentary Assemblies appointing contact parliamentarians next year. We also noted with interest the idea put forward by our Georgian colleague to link up environmental committees across our national parliaments. Let's move forward together with young people, from policy to principle, and from responsibility to accountability.

The common future of all European citizens

The world is changing very quickly due to a combination of processes that impact on each other: globalisation, digital technologies, climate change, and Covid-19 amongst other things. As elected representatives of more than 830 million Europeans, we should not be passive witnesses to these monumental changes. We should demonstrate leadership and master them so as to lay down the building blocks of the future that our citizens want.

The discussion on the third theme highlighted the centrality of values. The rapidity of the changes that our societies are experiencing should not affect the foundations of the European construction, namely the respect and the promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. On the contrary, it is exactly during this period in which certainties are faltering and the risk of inward-looking approaches is higher, that we should remind ourselves where we come from and why we decided to set out on this course. In 1949, following the bloodshed of the Second World War, Europeans chose human rights, democracy and the rule of law as the best way to achieve durable peace and prosperity. More than 70 years later, these values, which are articulated in the European Convention on Human Rights and embedded in the Constitutions of all the 47 member States, still speak to the heart of every European and should continue to be the foundations of our common future. The great diversity of Europeans is their richness. Their values are their strength. As long as all Europeans share the same values, the Council of Europe is their common home, a place for dialogue without walls or dividing lines, whose importance is even greater in our times.

Several speakers expressed concerns about the backsliding of democracy, a trend which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. We should take action to avoid exceptional measures which were resorted to in an emergency situation becoming the norm. At the same time, we should listen to citizens' calls for a renewal of democracy, promoting education to democracy, giving citizens a greater say in political decision-making processes and having the courage to experiment with participatory and deliberative forms of democracy to complement and enrich the work of representative institutions, without replacing it. We should also build upon the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic, which acted as a catalyst for digital innovation, to modernise the public administration and make it more efficient and responsive to the citizens' needs.

To be fully responsive, national parliaments of Council of Europe member States should also be dynamic and forward-looking in catering for a new generation of rights that have come to the forefront in the past few years: the right to a healthy environment, the right to cybersecurity and the right to know, as opposed to the manipulation of the public opinion by malevolent actors through social media. The protection of these rights will condition the future of all Europeans.

Many of the challenges that confront European societies bypass national borders. This is why we support solidarity actions such as the purchase of vaccines by the European Union for the COVAX mechanism. The maintenance of peace and security, tackling climate change, managing migration flows, addressing growing inequalities, regulating artificial intelligence and the power of social media companies and, as we have seen over these two years, defeating a worldwide pandemic are daunting challenges of global dimensions. Solutions can be found only by overcoming national particularisms.

The common future of all European citizens depends also on the resolve and the capacity of the international community to reform multilateral institutions with a view to ensuring that they are fully representative, inclusive and can provide responses to global challenges that are timely, co-ordinated, rule-based and effective. Multilateralism, membership in international organisations and active engagement in international fora should be promoted as a means of achieving durable solutions to global challenges and secure peace and stability through dialogue and solidarity and respect for international law. Several speakers highlighted the importance for the Western Balkans to be given a concrete prospect of integration into the European Union, thus responding to their citizens' aspiration for greater prosperity and stronger democracies.

All Europeans should be part of this debate and, as their elected representatives, national parliaments have a key role to play in defining their countries' stance in this regard and formulate the way forward.

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