Working with national parliaments on EU affairs

Survey of permanent representatives of national parliaments in the European Parliament

To complement the European Implementation Assessment, *Working with national parliaments on EU affairs*, prepared for the Committee on Constitutional Affairs' implementation report on implementation of the Treaty provisions on national parliaments, an anonymous survey was made of the permanent representatives of Member States' national parliaments in the European Parliament.

The survey was carried out between 23 August and 30 September 2017 by the Ex-Post Evaluation Unit of the Directorate for Impact Assessment and European Added Value, within the European Parliament’s Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services. It focused on the practical and administrative aspects of the permanent representatives' work. The replies received also included views on various possibilities for the European Parliament to move forward based on its institutional prerogatives.

This briefing presents and summarises the responses to the survey, and should be considered in conjunction with the above-mentioned European Implementation Assessment.

1. Introduction

Permanent representatives of Member States' national parliaments ('the representatives') have been hosted by the European Parliament since 1991, when the Danish Parliament (*Folketinget*) asked the European Parliament to house a representative posted in Brussels. The representatives are officials of Member States’ national parliaments and/or their individual chambers, for whom the European Parliament provides offices, meeting rooms and IT infrastructure. Their main task is to enhance two-way information exchange; they have an administrative role and they retain their neutrality.¹

The representatives act as liaison officers whose task is to strengthen horizontal and vertical interparliamentary cooperation within the European Union. They act as a network for the exchange of information, mainly on positions adopted by individual national parliaments/chambers on EU initiatives. Currently, there are approximately 50 civil servants from 41 parliamentary chambers who occupy 37 offices in Parliament’s Wiertz Building (WIE).² Some of the representatives from Member States with a bicameral

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² ibid.
system represent both parliamentary chambers.\(^3\) In addition to the Member States’ national parliaments/chambers, the Norwegian parliament (Stortinget) also has a representative.

Generally, the representatives are invited to committee meetings. They also maintain contacts with the secretariat to the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs and National Parliaments (COSAC), which also has its offices in the same building. A contact list of the representatives is published on the website of Parliament’s Directorate for Relations with National Parliaments.

2. Survey and methodology

For this EPRS survey, carried out between 23 August and 30 September 2017, the representatives (including from Norway) were asked 11 questions\(^4\) relating to the administrative arrangements for their work and their effectiveness for conducting their missions. The representatives were contacted via email and telephone, or personally, and were informed that their replies would be treated anonymously.

During the survey period, two national parliaments, one unicameral and one bicameral, did not have an appointed representative. In addition, during this period there was a change of two representatives from two different national parliaments/chambers. Out of the total of 36 potential replies, 31 were received, representing 89 % of possible respondents; 94 % of representatives responding filled in the questionnaire, while 6 % submitted general remarks and concerns based on the questions asked.

3. Analysis of the responses

The 11 questions were divided into three groups covering

- general issues and facilities;
- relations with Parliament's secretariat; and
- other issues.

In general, 85 % of respondents considered that the present function and role of the representatives within the structure of the European Parliament was satisfactory. Nonetheless, several respondents called for a more proactive approach from Parliament towards the representatives, for example, regarding the provision of information. The issue of visibility of the representatives, as well as possibilities for closer administrative links with the directorates-general providing the committee secretariats were also raised. Nine per cent of respondents preferred not to answer, stating as their reason that 'the roles of individual representatives might vary'. Six per cent of respondents considered the representatives' current role unsatisfactory and that the representatives should have greater exposure and influence. It was also suggested that the representatives should be perceived as more than simply liaison officers, since they can represent the positions of national parliaments.

The administrative facilities provided by Parliament to the representatives were considered very satisfactory (97 %).\(^5\) This included the technical support (72 %)\(^6\) and the location of the representatives in

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\(^3\) This is the case of Austria, Ireland, the Netherlands and Spain.

\(^4\) See Annex.

\(^5\) One representative did not provide an answer to this question (3 %).

\(^6\) Nine representatives were unable to provide an answer to this question (28 %).
the Wiertz building (approximately 91 %). Nonetheless, it was noted that in some regards the representatives are still treated as 'visiting guests' and have limited access to some of Parliament’s internal on-line tools, internal legal advice or to the European Schools. Further issues raised included the absence of seats assigned to the representatives in the plenary chamber, and being unable to lock their offices. With regard to the representatives’ location in the Wiertz building, it was noted that the COSAC secretariat should be sited on the same floor as the representatives.

The second group of questions concerned relations between the representatives and Parliament’s secretariat. Fifty-three per cent considered that there is no need for Parliament to change its general approach and policy on information for the representatives to be able to carry out their missions successfully. However, 38 % of respondents noted that there is a need for Parliament to change its approach. For example, they called for more direct, albeit informal, information exchange and for more proactivity from Parliament in providing information. This includes information on

- planning of inter-parliamentary committee meetings,
- institutional matters concerning the role of national parliaments,
- reports/summaries of committee meetings,
- tracking the priority files in the joint declaration,
- summaries of the outcome of Parliament’s Conference of Presidents, and
- EPRS publications.

More information on trilogue meetings was also requested and it was noted that Parliament should pay particular attention to mailing lists when sending documents to the representatives, since erroneous e-mail addresses are sometimes used, leading to delayed or missing information.

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7 One of the representatives was unable to answer this question (3 %) while two were not satisfied (6 %).
8 For example, Streamline and EP learning tools.
9 Three representatives did not provide an answer to this question (9 %).
As concerns the information policy of Parliament’s committees for the representatives, 53 % considered that there is a need to change the committees' approach, while 44 % of respondents were satisfied with the status quo.\(^\text{10}\) By way of example, the replies included suggestions for automatic or more proactive transmission of information by committees to the representatives, including the transmission of motions for resolutions to be adopted in plenary. They also included suggestions for improved follow-up to inter-parliamentary committee meetings (ICMs), by providing minutes or reports of such meetings. Numerous concerns about the current organisation of ICMs were also raised.\(^\text{11}\) Respondents also recommended that summaries of opinions from national parliaments were translated into English and made available to Parliament’s committees, together with the original language of those opinions.

In general, respondents were highly appreciative of the presence of committee secretariats during the representatives' regular meetings (at the representatives' request). Nonetheless, they called for more complete, structured and efficient information exchange with committees.

Regarding the approach and information policy of Parliament's political groups, 59 % of respondents deemed this satisfactory, while 25 % were not satisfied with the current situation.\(^\text{12}\) Despite the positive assessment of this relation, better information exchange and greater interaction between the representatives and Parliament’s political groups would be welcomed. The general access of representatives to Parliament’s secretariat, its committees and political groups was positively assessed by approximately 78 % of respondents. It was nevertheless pointed out that it could occasionally be difficult to identify correct contact points.\(^\text{13}\)

Forty-four per cent of respondents did not suggest any particular administrative improvements for strengthening the representatives' position,\(^\text{14}\) while 41 % raised several points that could improve their position and facilitate the representatives' mission. These points included, for instance, better promotion of

\(^{10}\) One representative did not provide an answer to this question (3 %).

\(^{11}\) As this particular issue raised several representatives’ comments, it is discussed further below.

\(^{12}\) Five representatives did not provide an answer to this question (16 %).

\(^{13}\) Only one representative did not consider the access to the EP secretariat, EP committees and EP political groups satisfactory (3 %), while in six cases no answer was provided (19 %).

\(^{14}\) Five representatives did not provide an answer to this question (15 %).
the representatives, as 'some MEPs or assistants do not know that this network even exists', or allowing the representatives to become a 'real' liaison point, so that 'all information sent to national parliaments was sent through their network'.

In terms of the current quality of inter-parliamentary exchange among the representatives themselves and between Parliament and national parliaments, 50% of respondents were satisfied, while 44% wanted to see improvements. For example, more regular exchanges of views between the representatives and Parliament’s stakeholders responsible for inter-parliamentary cooperation was suggested.

In addition to closed questions, the representatives were able to provide additional comments and concerns. The recurring points included:

1. **Planning and organisation of ICMs.** The overlapping of ICMs is of great concern, particularly in representations with only one representative, i.e. for a majority of representations. Because of that, it was 'logistically impossible' to have several ICMs at the same time and receive several delegations of members of national parliaments and manage them at the same time. It was also noted that overlapping ICMs often negatively influenced turnout.

2. **Quality of ICMs.** Respondents noted that ICMs often have unclear objectives and that they did not provide any, or only very limited, room for discussion. A limited presence of MEPs during these meetings (or on occasions a complete absence) while their national counterparts are present, was also considered very negative. A 'real' exchange of views between MEPs and members of national parliaments should be a sincere objective. Finally, it was pointed out that there is a lack of clarity on what happens to the input given by members of national parliaments during these meetings.

3. **A lack of or no follow-up to ICMs.** Respondents suggested that IMCs should have a follow-up by way of minutes or reports, with clearly stated positions of national parliaments and the European Parliament, and that the representatives should have the possibility to access such follow-up documents before they were finalised.

4. **More proactive and targeted provision of information by Parliament’s secretariat** should be enabled. Especially, if the information is on matters concerning national parliaments, including information on forthcoming ICMs and background documents on the subject and aim of those meetings.

5. **The need for closer cooperation with the representatives** was raised. Especially, in cases where members of national parliaments are invited to participate as keynote speakers in ICMs, including sending early invitations to ICMs and avoiding 'last minute' interventions that were not properly communicated to the national parliaments in question.

6. **A lack of follow-up on the contributions made by national parliaments through political dialogue** was also raised, as this follow-up could clarify how the national parliaments' opinions are taken into account in the daily work of Parliament’s committees.

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15 Two representatives did not provide an answer to this question (6%).
4. Conclusions

In general, the representatives of national parliaments seem to be satisfied overall with their presence and position in the structures of the European Parliament. Likewise, they seem mostly content with the facilities provided to them, with the technical support provided by Parliament and with access to Parliament's secretariat, its committees and political groups. However, views are more divided on the approach and information policy of Parliament's secretariat, committees and political groups. Considerable room for improvement is noted, mainly linked with the approach and information policy of Parliament's committees, as well as with various issues linked to inter-parliamentary committee meetings.

As the representatives are placed between national parliaments and the European Parliament, there is a clear perception of being able to make a positive impact on the strengthening of inter-parliamentary cooperation between these parliaments, with bilateral or multilateral exchanges of information. Since this is not the primary reason for Parliament hosting them, this may be overlooked as a resource to explore, and certainly to be acknowledged.

Just as national parliaments are willing to play a more active role in EU affairs and their participation is seen as positive, their permanent representatives hosted by the European Parliament are a resource that requires attention. Their position in Parliament is nowadays a given. The permanent representatives' wishes and suggestions for more proactive information flow, and promotion and usage of their network could be seen as a sign that there are further possibilities to explore, depending on the political will of Parliament, as well as of the national parliaments themselves.

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5. Annex – Questionnaire

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<th>General issues and facilities</th>
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| **1.** According to your opinion and in general terms, is the present function and role of the NP representatives within the structure of the EP, satisfactory enough?  
Yes - No  
- In both cases, please, briefly state your views: |
| **2.** Are the facilities provided to the NP representatives by the EP satisfactory enough?  
Yes - No  
- In both cases, please, briefly state your views: |
| **3.** More specifically, is the present position of the NP representatives in the WIE building satisfactory with regard to the work they have to carry out?  
Yes - No  
- If no, what should improve? |
| **4.** Is the technical support (for e.g. video conferencing) provided to the NP representatives by the EP Secretariat satisfactory?  
Yes - No  
- In both cases, please, briefly state your views: |

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<th>Relations with EP secretariat</th>
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| **5a) Is there a need to change the general approach and information policy of the EP Secretariat, so that the NP representatives can carry out their roles in a better way?  
Yes - No  
- If yes, what should change? |
| **5b) Is there a need to change the approach and information policy of the EP Committees, so that the NP representatives can carry out their roles in a better way?  
Yes - No  
- If yes, what should change? |
5c) Is there a need to change the approach and information policy of the EP Political Groups, so that the NP representatives can carry out their roles in a better way?  
Yes - No  
- If yes, what should change?

6. Do the NP representatives have a satisfactory access to the EP Secretariat, the EP Committees and the EP Political Groups?  
Yes - No  
- If no, what should change?

Other

7. Are there other administrative ways to strengthen the position of the NP representatives within the EP as a liaison and contact point between the EP and national parliaments?  
Yes - No  
- If yes, what are they?

8. Is the inter-parliamentary exchange among the NP representatives and between the EP and the national parliaments satisfactory?  
Yes - No  
- If no, what could improve such an exchange?

9. Any additional comments and concerns of NP representatives: