

The financial management of visitor groups to the national parliaments

KEY FINDINGS

In most Member States, visitor' groups are not sponsored to visit the national parliament. A visit to the national parliament is free of charge, and all the costs related to the visit, for example travel costs, accommodation and local minor expenses, need to be paid by the visitors themselves.

Germany is the only country which has various kinds of programmes where visitors can be reimbursed. Members of Parliament can invite up to 200 people a year of which the travel costs are partially covered by the German Bundestag. There is also a programme which consists of more days for which all the costs related to travel and accommodation are covered by the German government. The German Bundesrat has a programme in which the 16 federal states can invite people for a visit of multiple days to Berlin. In this case the travel costs and accommodation are paid for by the Bundesrat. For all reimbursements, the rules apply that the receipts and underlying documents need to be provided to the Bundestag and Bundesrat after the visit. All documents and receipts are checked through an ex-post control.

The United Kingdom has a programme in which costs are reimbursed, and this programme is funded by the commercial tours of the parliament. In this case, it can be MPs, Peers or the House of Commons or Lords who can invite visitors who are eligible for reimbursement.

In Hungary, only schools can get reimbursement for their travel costs and the entry fee for the national parliament. All the receipts need to be provided to the visitor service of the parliament.

Some countries do have other schemes in which they provide coverage for schools or costs are covered by the MPs' own funds.

The Council of the EU does not sponsor visitor groups. All visits are requested by visitors themselves and they need to cover all the costs related to the visit themselves. The questions were also sent to the European Commission but no answer was received.

Introduction

The European Parliament is in the unique situation that it welcomes people from all 27 Member States and also from partner countries. There are different kind of visits possible which can be divided as follows: individual visitors, visitors' groups who request themselves access or are invited to pay a visit to the EP, and sponsored groups. There are different programmes through which groups can be sponsored. Groups can be invited by a Member of European Parliament (MEP), or by DG COMM as groups of opinion multipliers, EUROSCOLA, EUROMED-SCOLA and EURONEST-SCOLA programmes. In this briefing we focus mainly on the

programme under which MEPs can invite sponsored groups. In 2019, the EP welcomed 7,208 visitor groups on its premises¹. Out of the 7,208 groups, 2,075 were sponsored².

As the financial management of these sponsored visitors groups is quite complex, a questionnaire has been sent to the national parliaments to ask whether they sponsor visitor groups, and if so, how they deal with the financial management. This briefing describes the different ways the national parliaments deal with the financing of visitor groups. The most common reply of the national parliaments is that they do not sponsor visitor groups. The exceptions to this are Germany, the United Kingdom and Hungary. These countries will be discussed in the briefing below.

First an overview of the financial rules for visitor groups of the EP will be given. Second, the financial management of visitors groups in Germany, the UK and Hungary will be discussed. Third, some other examples of dealing with visitor groups in the national parliaments will be presented and finally the management of visitor groups in the Council.

The financial management of visitor groups in the European Parliament

This overview of the financial rules of visitor groups in the EP focuses on the sponsored visitor groups invited by MEPs. The rules for inviting and sponsoring of visitors' groups are explained in the 'rules governing the reception of groups of visitors and the EUROScola, EUROMED-SCOLA and EURONEST-SCOLA programmes'.³ The Bureau is responsible for the revision of the rules concerning visitors' groups. The last revision of the rules was in October 2016 which entered into force in January 2017. MEPs are allowed to sponsor up to 110 visitors per year. The MEPs can invite a maximum of 5 groups a year. Each group needs to have at least 10 visitors to receive financial compensation. The maximum number of participants depends on the availability of the rooms and seats on the public gallery. The MEPs are allowed to invite one visitor group per plenary session in Strasbourg and once a year one group for the plenary session in Brussels (this depends on availability of space because of limited amount of meeting rooms).⁴

The visit takes up to three hours. The entire group needs to participate in the whole programme to be eligible to receive reimbursement. MEPs who have invited visitors' groups need to meet with their visitors. The financial contribution depends on the availability of funds and compliance with the rules. The financial contribution is intended as a partial coverage of the costs for the visit. Expenses that are partially financed are travel costs, accommodation and meal expenses plus local minor expenses. For the travel and accommodation costs supporting documents are necessary to establish the actual costs incurred. For the meal expenses and the local minor expenses a flat-rate basis is set and no supporting documents will be requested except in the case the costs exceed the reimbursement of EUR 40 per person. "The maximum financial contribution that a sponsored group may receive shall be calculated as follows: number of

¹ Information on the budgetary and the financial management of the European Parliament in 2019 and replies to the questionnaire in preparation for the EP discharge for 2019, p. 45.

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/215085/Decharge2019_Rep%20CONT%20Questionnaire%202019-for%20replies%20Full%20clean%20FINAL.pdf

² Information on the budgetary and the financial management of the European Parliament in 2019 and replies to the questionnaire in preparation for the EP discharge for 2019, p. 45.

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/215085/Decharge2019_Rep%20CONT%20Questionnaire%202019-for%20replies%20Full%20clean%20FINAL.pdf

³ Rules governing the reception of groups of visitors and the Euroscola, Euromed-scola and Euronest-scola programmes. https://epintranet.in.ep.europa.eu/files/live/sites/epintranet/files/meetings-events/visitors/rules/visitors-new-rules/revised-rules_en.pdf

⁴ Rules governing the reception of groups of visitors and the Euroscola, Euromed-scola and Euronest-scola programmes, article 2 p. 3-4. https://epintranet.in.ep.europa.eu/files/live/sites/epintranet/files/meetings-events/visitors/rules/visitors-new-rules/revised-rules_en.pdf

sponsored visitors present multiplied by aggregate entitlement to the three cost factors: travel (EUR 0.09 per kilometre), accommodation (EUR 60) and local minor expenses (EUR 40)”⁵.

The reimbursement for travel costs and accommodation are done by bank transfer. The meal expenses and local minor expenses can be paid through bank transfer or in cash. The reimbursement is made to the head of the group. A group may only receive reimbursement related to their visit of the EP. As said in the financial rules: “only a group’s expenditure incurred for the visit to the European Parliament shall be eligible expenditure. Any surplus shall be declared without prompting and paid back to the European Parliament”⁶. On the day of the visit, the head of the visitor group will sign a declaration. With this declaration the head of the group declares that they did not receive any other financial contribution except from the European Parliament. Within 30 days after the visit, the head of the groups needs to declare all actual eligible expenditure to the relevant European Parliament service according to Annex II of the financial rules. If this deadline is not met, the European Parliament has the right to withhold the reimbursement. The head of the group needs to pay back any surplus that may occur. All supporting documents must be kept for three years.⁷

The declarations are checked in an ex-post control but not the supporting documents. If there are doubts about the declarations, the underlying documents can be checked as well in the ex-post control. Besides checking all the declarations, there is an ex-post control in which all the underlying documents are checked on a sample basis.

Challenges of the financial management of visitor groups in the European Parliament

In reality, the implementation of the rules leads to some challenges. For example:

- There are limited visitors activities in Brussels that are part of the visit to the EP. A visit to the EP could also include the Parliamentarium and the House of European History however these options are suggested to the visitors but not included in the sponsored visit to the EP. It is up to the visitors themselves if they want to visit other EU institutions. Also, visits to monuments, museums or other institutions are not included in the visit.
- It is allowed to appoint a Accredited Parliamentary Assistant (APA) or local assistant to MEPs as head of the visitors’ groups.
- The heads of the group needs to be available for three years to answer to the ex-post control of the visit. They also need to keep the receipts for three years for the same purpose.
- Ex-post control is done on a sample basis and therefore not all the receipts and underlying documents are checked after a visit.

Visitor groups in the national parliaments

To get an overview of the financial management of visitor groups in national parliaments, we have sent a questionnaire through our European Center for Parliamentary Research Documentation (ECPRD) network. 40 answers were received before the deadline.⁸ Most countries indicated that the visit to the national

⁵ Rules governing the reception of groups of visitors and the Euroscola, Euromed-scola and Euronest-scola programmes, article 16 p. 12 https://epintranet.in.ep.europa.eu/files/live/sites/epintranet/files/meetings-events/visitors/rules/visitors-new-rules/revised-rules_en.pdf

⁶ Rules governing the reception of groups of visitors and the Euroscola, Euromed-scola and Euronest-scola programmes, article 20 p.13-14 https://epintranet.in.ep.europa.eu/files/live/sites/epintranet/files/meetings-events/visitors/rules/visitors-new-rules/revised-rules_en.pdf

⁷ Rules governing the reception of groups of visitors and the Euroscola, Euromed-scola and Euronest-scola programmes, article 20 p.13-14 https://epintranet.in.ep.europa.eu/files/live/sites/epintranet/files/meetings-events/visitors/rules/visitors-new-rules/revised-rules_en.pdf

⁸ The following parliaments responded to the questionnaire: Albania, Austria Bundesrat, Austria Nationalrat, Belgium House of Representatives, Belgium Senate, Canada, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France Senate, France National Assembly, Germany Bundesrat, Germany Bundestag, Greece, Hungary National Assembly, Ireland, Israel, Italy House of Representatives, Italy Senate, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland Senate, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain Senate, Sweden, Swiss, Turkey, United Kingdom House of Commons, United Kingdom House of Lords, United States EP office Washington.

parliament is free of charge. Most countries also stated that they do not reimburse travel costs or any other expenses incurred during the visit. These costs need to be covered by the visitors themselves. The exception to this are Germany, the United Kingdom and Hungary. Both chambers of the German parliament, the Bundestag and the Bundesrat, have different kind of programmes which sponsor visitor groups. These programmes will be discussed in the section below together with the financial management of these visits. The UK has a sponsored programme for visitors as well which is covered by the returns of the commercial visits. In Hungary an admission fee is charged to visit the National Assembly. There are schemes for reimbursement in Hungary which will be discussed below.

Germany

The German national parliament is divided in the Bundestag (German Federal Parliament - lower house of the German Parliament) and the Bundesrat (Federal Council of Germany - upper house of the German Parliament). Both houses have their own rules concerning visitor groups and the financial management of visitor groups.

Bundestag⁹

Within the Bundestag every Member of Parliament (MP) (709 MPs in the Bundestag) can invite up to a 100 visitors for the plenary sessions and 100 visitors for the so called information visits per year. In 2019 (and also in the years before), the MPs of the German Bundestag invited approximately 100.000 visitors of whom the travel costs were reimbursed. The total number of visitors invited under the constituent visits have not been recorded. The groups need to include at least 10 persons to be eligible for reimbursement. In addition to these 200 visitors, all MPs can invite during the winter months (November, December, January and February) 30 visitors for a plenary session together with an information presentation. The visit in the winter months consists of attending a plenary debate or an information presentation and a talk with the MP and a free meal in the restaurant for visitors of the German Bundestag. These visits are organised by the visitor service of the German Bundestag. Besides these two programmes for visitors, each MP can use the programme of the Press and Information Office of the German government three times a year to invite 50 citizens who are interested in politics. This visit is fully funded and takes up to several days in Berlin. The only point on the programme that is organised by the visitor service of the German Bundestag is the participation in a plenary session. The reimbursement of this programme is done by the Press and Information Office of the government. The Bundestag is not financially involved in this programme.

The visitors receive a supplement for their travel costs to lower the amount of the actual travel expenses. The costs reimbursed depends on the means of transportation and the distance travelled. The total reimbursement therefore varies correspondingly. To receive this supplement the visitors need to show their receipt of the travel costs incurred. The following travel costs are reimbursed depending on the means of transportation: when traveling by train the price of the cheapest second class group ticket is reimbursed. When traveling by bus, the costs are reimbursed at a rate of EUR 0.04 per kilometre per person. There is a deduction from the total travel costs of the visitor of EUR 10 per person.

The reimbursement is executed by the administration of the Bundestag. The receipts for the travel costs are requested at the beginning of the visit by the visitor service of the Bundestag. The head of the group needs to ask for reimbursement and the payment is made by the visitor service. When a claim for reimbursement is made, all supporting documents have to be handed in. The claim can only be made after the visit. The receipts of the travel costs are mandatory to be eligible for reimbursement. The visitor service checks all the

⁹ All the information below is based on the answer to the questionnaire and the answers to the follow-up questions of the questionnaire to the German Bundestag.

receipts of the travel costs and, after approval of the documents, pays the travel costs to the visitor groups. Only the travel costs are reimbursed by the German Bundestag.

In 2019, the Bundestag received over 2.3 million visitors. The various visitor options are organised by the visitor service of the German Bundestag, which has 55 employees. In addition to these employees, there are freelance employees for the guided tours and students and temporary staff for visitor care. There are no statistics available on the cost of the number of staff in comparison to the different kind of visitor groups. Also, there is no information available on the actual costs incurred for personnel and administration according to the different types of visits.

Bundesrat¹⁰

The German Bundesrat has a budget item called “cost contributions for visitor groups” which is part of the federal budget of the Federal Republic of Germany. Based on this budget item, the Bundesrat partly covers the travel expenses of groups of pupils, students and young people who visit the Bundesrat as part of civic education. The amount of the contribution granted to each group is calculated on the basis of a directive of the Bundesrat administration. The subsidies are awarded in accordance with the available budget, taking into account fixed quotas for each of the 16 German federal states. If there are more applications than budgetary funds, a random generator will decide who can visit the Bundesrat. The calculation of the travel expenses subsidy is based on national travel costs per kilometre per person for the journey from the place of origin to Berlin and back. The reimbursement is independent of the means of transport actually used. The contribution is only meant to cover part of the travel costs. Applications for travel expenses subsidies can be submitted every year in September for the following year. Students who have been granted a subsidy to their travel expenses are obliged to pay a visit to at least one other institution offering a civic education programme. For example the German Bundestag, the memorial of the Berlin Wall, the Foundation of the Murdered Jews of Europe or the former East German Prison Hohenschönhausen.

Besides the above mentioned visitor scheme, each of the 16 federal states can invite three groups of a maximum of 50 visitors to Berlin each year. The Bundesrat covers all travel expenses and, depending on the travel distance, two or three nights of hotel accommodation in advance of the visit. All groups participate in a three or four days visitor programme in Berlin which includes all relevant federal and political institutions.

Every interested citizen can contact the Bundesrat visitor service and request a guided tour of the building, a presentation on the tasks and functions of the Bundesrat or a visit to a plenary session. All these options are free of charge. In this programme, no travel costs or accommodation are covered.

The budget item “cost contributions for visitor groups” is managed by the Bundesrat visitor service. All the receipts for the travel expenses and accommodation have to be presented by every group in an ex-post control. Pupils and student groups have to pay the travel expenses themselves first and are later reimbursed. The refund is only paid when they can provide evidence that during their stay in Berlin they have at least visit one other institution that is offering a civic education programme.

The United Kingdom¹¹

Visits to the Houses of Parliament are possible through different kind of programmes. One of the programmes is the democratic access tours. Parliament’s visitor services team delivers free democratic access tours of parliament (formerly known as Members’ Tours) to around 130 000 UK constituents every year. These tours are booked and sponsored by MPs, Peers and staff of the House of Commons, Lords and Digital Service at grade A and above. Tours are free of charge and open to UK residents. An expert guide will

¹⁰ All the information below is based on the answer to the questionnaire and the answers to the follow-up questions of the questionnaire to the German Bundesrat.

¹¹ All the information below is based on the answer to the questionnaire and the answers to the follow-up questions of the questionnaire to the United Kingdom House of Commons.

accompany visitors on the 75-minute tour that describes how the business and traditions of both Houses contribute to the day to day workings of the UK parliament. The visitor tour route includes the Chambers of both Houses. A group can have maximum 25 people per guide.

Another programme is related to education and workshops. The education service runs a 'visit parliament' programme which gives approximately 45.000 students per year the chance to visit the Palace of Westminster. Visits are designed for students aged 7-18 and include an education tour followed by a workshop run by education service staff.

The last programme are the commercial tours. Visitors are charged for these tours. Within the commercial tours you have different kind of options. Option A is audio or guided, family tours which take place during designated periods outside of the sitting times of both Houses. Option B is one of the former tours mentioned plus afternoon tea. Table service afternoon tea in the Terrace Pavilion in the House of Commons can be added to certain audio and guided tours. Option C are guided tours in conjunction with events. Option D are speciality tours and private tours.

The democratic access tours and the commercial tours are managed and run by the visitors and retail services in the participation team. The income generated by the commercial tours covers the cost of the democratic access tours. The education service operates a transport subsidy scheme to give more students across the UK the opportunity to visit parliament. Depending on the location of the constituency, schools may be eligible for a subsidy to cover 50-75% of their travel costs. This only applies to visits booked through parliament's education service. All receipts are required before the subsidy is paid. Visitors are allowed to visit other institutions, monuments or museums without affecting qualification for financial support while in London, but only as the main purpose of the trip is to visit the parliament.

Hungary¹²

The Hungarian parliament is open to everybody to pay a visit. Individual visitors can buy tickets on the website of the parliament. Same-day tickets are available in limited numbers at the ticket office in the visitor centre. All procedures for visitor tickets are managed by the financial department of the Hungarian National Assembly.

The MPs of the Hungarian parliament can invite groups from their own constituency. These groups need to pay the group price which can be sponsored by the representatives. The MPs can invite Hungarian visitors to the plenary sessions as well and this is free of charge. A group is limited to a maximum of 75 people. The MPs have to pay a group price to the Hungarian National Assembly financial department if they have a group of visitors to the parliament building.

Hungarian school groups can visit the building free of charge and they can travel for free by train to Budapest with the confirmation of the parliament. The costs of the travel by train for all groups are reimbursed in this case. If the school groups travel to Budapest to visit the national parliament, they can visit any other monument and institution, but they need to manage and pay it themselves. Travel agencies are able to make reservations for their groups of visitors if they have a contract with the Hungarian National Assembly. Without a contract, they can buy tickets as individual visitors only.

Receipts and invoices are required for all expenses related to the visitor groups. The head of the visitor group needs to keep all the receipts and their own copy of the invoice and delivery note. The cashier at the ticket office has to keep the second copy of the invoice and delivery note and send it to the financial department.

¹² All the information below is based on the answer to the questionnaire and the answers to the follow-up questions of the questionnaire to the Hungarian national parliament.

Other programmes for visitors in the national parliaments¹³

Most of the respondents of the questionnaire stated that the national parliament does not sponsor visitor groups. All costs related to the visit of the national parliament are covered by the groups themselves. Some states replied that the national parliament does not sponsor visitor groups but that MPs could reimburse travel costs from their own envelope. Other countries stated that they make exemptions for schools or provide other kind of information visits if visitors are not able to cover the costs of the visit. Below, the various exemptions in the relevant countries are described.

The National Assembly of France does not reimburse visitor groups. Visitors are mostly covered by the structure they originate from, for example schools, structures for the elderly, political supporters and local politicians. The MPs can cover visitors expenses by their 'mandate costs' envelope (EUR 5373 per month). Since 1 January 2018, this envelope is no longer allocated automatically. It needs to be checked and there is now a maximum amount which is subject to checks by the ethics officer who must verify the situation of each of the 577 MPs in the course of five years of legislature. Therefore, this kind of financing must be thoroughly justified.

The Bundesrat (Federal Council - upper house of the Austrian parliament) of Austria has indicated that their Members can invite visitor groups and that the travel costs could be reimbursed. The Members of the Bundesrat get a reimbursement of their actual parliamentary expenses up to a certain amount. Receipts are required in every case. MPs of the Nationalrat (National Council) cannot invite sponsored groups.

The Senate of Poland also answered that senators can invite groups to visit the parliament. There are no costs for the Senate connected to such a trip as it is organised by the senators themselves. The senators are not reimbursed for any costs related to the visitor groups by the senate. The expenses of the visitor groups are covered by the senators' own funds.

In the Czech Republic, when visitors are invited by MPs, these trips may be financed from the MPs representative fund. The parliament does not cover any costs of visitors.

Both national parliaments of Belgium replied that no sponsored visits are organised by the MPs or the parliaments. There is an exception to this rule though when costs are reimbursed: The twice a year Remembrance Day (8 May and 11 November) when the Speaker invites schools (one from each province) and on Kings Day (15 November) when adult participants are invited to a reception. In all these cases travel costs are reimbursed. Invoices are always required for the reimbursement of travel costs.

The parliament of Israel does not cover costs of visitor groups. However, there is a programme if a group is unable to cover the costs of transportation from their location. The Knesset (parliament) visitors centre offers to send guides from the centre to the location of the group to provide various experiential activities related to the Knesset.

The parliament of Sweden does not reimburse visitor groups but makes an exception for schools. Schools that have booked a "study visit" for upper secondary school have the opportunity to apply for a travel allowance. Prior to the start of each school term, schools may apply for travel allowances via the Riksdag (parliament) website. A travel allowance may be granted for travel costs exceeding SEK 250 (EUR 24,38) per student. The costs over SEK 250 (EUR 24,38) per student are reimbursed. A travel allowance is only granted for the cheapest means of transportation. An applicant entitled to a travel allowance may also be eligible to an allowance for accommodation (a maximum of SEK 100 (EUR 9,75) excluding VAT per student). The budget

¹³ All the information below is based on the answer to the questionnaire and the answers to the follow-up questions of the questionnaire to the French national assembly, the Austrian Nationalrat, the Polish Senate, the Czech national parliament, the Belgian national parliaments, the Israeli Knesset, the Swedish national parliament, the EP office in Washington.

of the Riksdag administration for travel allowances in 2020 is SEK 3.5 million (EUR 341.340). The department for visits, education and events, part of the Riksdag administration's communication division, manages the travel allowances. The school must submit a document that states the travel cost and, where applicable, the overnight cost in order to receive the travel and accommodation allowance. The documentation must be submitted to the Riksdag administration no later than 30 days after the visit. It is allowed to visit other institutions. However, the group needs to be able to prove that the trip has not been extended and thus become more expensive due to the fact that they have booked complementary activities.

The United States Congress does not cover costs for visitor groups. All tours in the Congress are free of charge. Every year the US Congress receives 3 to 5 million people.

Other European Union Institutions

To understand how the financial management of visitor groups is dealt with in the other institutions of the EU, we asked the Council and the European Commission to answer some questions. It is important to keep in mind that the Council and the EC receive a lot less visitors than the EP. The EC has not responded to the questions.

The Council¹⁴

Within the Council, visitors are not invited. All the organised visits are requested by the visitors themselves. Visitors are also not sponsored by the Council. The Council does work together with other institutions concerning visitors and there are ongoing efforts to improve this cooperation in the future.

Conclusion

This briefing has shown that the majority of countries that responded to the ECPRD questionnaire do not sponsor visitor groups. Germany, the UK and Hungary are the exception in that they do have sponsored programmes in which sponsored groups are invited to visit the respective national parliament. However, these programmes mostly only cover (part of) the travel costs and in some cases, accommodation. A programme like that of the EP where MEPs invite groups that receive reimbursements of costs of travel, accommodation, meals and minor local expenses is unparalleled in the responding countries.

Recommendation

The programme of the German Press and Information Office could be an interesting model to suggest to the European Commission. This visit could aim at visiting several EU institutions to show the work the EU is doing in different fields. All the institutions would be responsible for the tour in their institution. It might be possible for the EC to invite a fixed quota of groups from every MS per year.

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