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REPUBLIC OF AUSTRIA  
Parliament

# Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament

Virtual meeting, 19-20 August 2020  
In-person conference, 2021 in Vienna

## Panel discussion

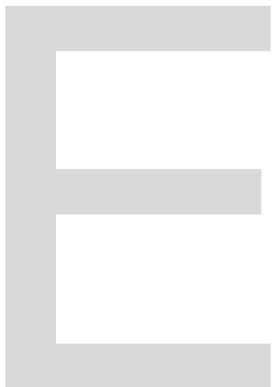
### *Stepping up parliamentary action: The climate change emergency*

Wednesday, 19 August 2020, 4.20-5.05 p.m.

#### Concept note

Almost five years ago, at the 2015 UN Climate Conference (COP 21), signatory countries to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted the Paris Agreement, setting out how they would implement their UNFCCC commitments after 2020. The main aim of the Paris Agreement is to strengthen the global response to climate change by “holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels”. The Paris Agreement entered into force in November 2016 and, for the first time, commits all nations to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects. It places special emphasis on enhanced support to developing countries in their effort to meet the Paris Agreement’s objectives. To date, 189 Parties have ratified the Paris Agreement, making it one of the UN treaties enjoying near universal acceptance among States, covering almost 90 per cent of global emissions.

Over the same time frame, the IPU has adopted a number of political pronouncements in support of strong action on climate change, the most recent being the resolution *Addressing climate change*, which Members unanimously adopted at the 141st IPU Assembly in Belgrade, Serbia, urging all Parties to implement the Paris Agreement and adhere to the provisions of the UNFCCC and the protocols and agreements under its aegis. The IPU Members’ strong interest in and support for the issue is also reflected in their adoption of a *Parliamentary action plan on climate change* in 2016, ensuring all efforts and measures are taken to establish a national legislative response to climate change that is consistent with national climate goals and the Paris Agreement. Moreover, climate change is included in Objective 7 of the IPU Strategy 2017–2021, which states that the IPU will continue to call upon parliaments to provide a comprehensive legislative response to climate change and to support the implementation of disaster risk reduction. Concrete examples include the increasing parliamentary involvement in the annual UN climate conferences and the IPU’s launch of a series of technical assistance workshops on climate change at the national level, tailored to the respective needs of its Members. These workshops provide advice and assistance regarding the conceptualization and implementation of climate change activities, including legislative efforts, access to regional and international platforms, the availability of tools, and a sound understanding of the science behind climate change.



Now, in 2020, we find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic and at the beginning of a global economic crisis, entailing serious social ramifications. According to researchers, in the short run, the crisis is having a positive impact on the climate. Air traffic, industry and other sectors that usually cause high CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have come to an almost complete stop. In the long run, however, there is a risk that – as was the case in previous economic crises – the measures to re-stimulate the economy will lead to even higher emissions than before the crisis. Another risk is that planned climate protection initiatives are being overshadowed, and that funds earmarked for climate protection will need to be used to rebuild and boost the economy after the crisis. We need to do our utmost to prevent such adverse effects to the environment.

At the same time, the crisis we are currently experiencing offers opportunities. We could evaluate the measures that have suddenly become necessary, and we could make them future standards, such as online meetings, teleworking arrangements, electronic medical prescriptions, etc. In this way, we could do away with an immense amount of air and individual traffic. Relying more on domestic, regional and local production could be another lesson learnt from the crisis, contributing to a more sustainable future for all. Last but not least, support measures for the economy, in particular the renewable energies and the electric mobility sectors, could be designed to be climate-friendly and sustainable.

To build back better, putting in place strong climate change and disaster risk management legislation, policies and resolutions remains important, yet turning States' pledges into near-term climate action is even more crucial. Scientists agree that 2019 was the second warmest year on record, and 2020 started out where 2019 left off. Since the 1980s, each decade has been warmer than the previous one. In fact, we are heading towards a temperature increase of 3 to 5°C by the end of the century. Moreover, the past year and decade have been characterized by retreating ice, record sea levels, increasing ocean heat and acidification, and extreme weather, affecting vulnerable countries and resulting in increased migration of islanders. These have combined to have major impacts on the health and well-being of current and future generations, and on our environment.

In light of this evidence, urgent action for people and the planet is needed, and, with the Paris Agreement calling upon signatory countries to submit this year revised or recommunicated national efforts – so-called nationally determined contributions (NDCs) – the time has come for Speakers, holding the highest office in their respective parliaments, and as political leaders in their own right, to assume their special responsibility to steer the debate on the climate emergency and to spark ambitious climate action within their parliaments and among their constituents and the wider public.

Strong parliamentary engagement in this respect is crucial. Current emission reductions under the NDCs need to be tripled to hold the global average temperature increase below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, and they need to be increased around fivefold to hold the increase below 1.5°C. In a bid to adhere to their commitments under the Paris Agreement, many countries have committed to increasing the ambition of their original NDCs, to deliver the necessary emission reductions, and many have already started to revisit their pledges.

For Speakers and their parliaments to play their part in this important process, to fully utilize their legislative, oversight and budgetary powers to make change happen, to redesign our economies to make them green, and to achieve the 1.5°C goal enshrined in the Paris Agreement, it is key that they are given the opportunity to discuss the development of a road map for the implementation of best practices, lessons learnt and readily available, concrete and cost-efficient solutions and ways to implement the Paris Agreement with renowned experts and among their peers.

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Guiding questions:

- 1) How can parliaments and parliamentarians best address the climate change challenge and help ensure the Paris Agreement's goals will be met, including their governments' efforts to step up their NDCs?
- 2) In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, how can parliamentarians ensure the continuation of meaningful climate action while taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the pandemic?

- 3) What are parliaments doing, or what could they be doing, to combat climate change with respect to education, the regulation of the private sector, the allocation of resources, and awareness-raising campaigns?
- 4) What regional and international cooperation tools and mechanisms for action are available to parliamentarians around the world, offering advice and financing with respect to their national climate change policies?
- 5) What can be done to support parliaments and parliamentarians in their crucial role to craft responses to the climate change challenge that are credible, manageable and popular, within current institutions and systems of governance?