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Accountability Revisited: Parliamentary Perspectives on the Inter-Parliamentary Conference on Stability, Economic Coordination, and Governance

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Abstract

This article aims to verify whether, and to what extent, the Inter-Parliamentary Conference on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance (IPC SECG) has become an accountability enhancing arena through which domestic legislatures can better scrutinize the process of the European Semester. While there is a broad scholarship on the difficult institutionalization of the IPC SECG and controversies related to its operation, little has been said about its actual performance as an accountability enhancing platform, especially in the context of domestic interactions between parliaments and executives in the area of economic governance. Despite it being operational for several years, the scholarship lacks focus on the national parliaments' perspective with regard to this Conference's effectiveness. Against this background, drawing from comparative data obtained from questionnaires and interviews, this article addresses the above-mentioned aspects from an actor-oriented approach and delves deeper into parliamentary perceptions of the SECG Conference. Findings indicate that attendance at the SECG Conference by MPs has neither significantly affected their domestic parliamentary activity in the area of economic governance and budgetary policy, nor improved the existing domestic legislative-executive relationship in this context. The Conference's procedural weaknesses are only one part of the problem, another being the marginalized domestic position of parliaments in the European Semester procedure.

Keywords

accountability; European Semester; European Union; inter-parliamentary conferences; national parliaments

Issue

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1. Introduction

The emergence of a series of measures designed to tighten fiscal governance and national budgeting rules across EU Member States as a result of the economic and financial crises of 2008–2012 has undermined to some extent (Fasone, 2015), the basic powers of national parliaments—their prerogative to control the domestic budgetary process and to represent their constituents' interests during the coordination of economic policies (Crum, 2018; Jancic, 2017; Maatsch & Cooper, 2017). As explained in the Introduction to this issue (Woźniakowski et al., 2021), one example of such a measure is the procedure of the European Semester in which

Member States adjust their budgetary and economic policies to the objectives and principles established at the EU level. Although the Semester has not formally limited the budgetary powers of national parliaments, it has done so indirectly. First, the specific sequencing of the procedure has put pressure on national executives to deliver fast-track responses which has limited the time available for a genuine parliamentary debate. Second, the decision-making formula involving the exchange of a series of recommendations, guidelines, and reports between the Commission, the Council, and the Member States has made it difficult to locate the political source of responsibility for specific decisions. Third, the Commission has been given the opportunity

to sanction Member States more easily: If national governments fail to comply with Commission's fiscal recommendations, it may impose a financial penalty on them. According to the procedure of reverse qualified majority, the penalty imposed on a state is automatically accepted unless the EU Council rejects it by a majority vote.

Such state of affairs raises questions of democratic accountability of the EU economic governance in light of national parliaments retaining responsibility for adopting national budgets, setting taxation policies, and determining socio-economic priorities. In this context, the creation in 2013 of the Interparliamentary Conference on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance (IPC SECG) was supposed to strengthen parliamentary oversight in a field increasingly dominated by inter-governmentalism (Lupo & Griglio, 2018) and to reduce (at least to some extent) the information- and control-related asymmetries that have emerged, on the one hand, between governments directly participating in EU policy-making and MPs at home (cf. Kreilinger, 2018), and, on the other, between the European Parliament (EP) and the EU executive. In this vein, the setting-up of IPC SECG, legally prompted by Article 13 of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination, and Governance, can be therefore viewed as a sort of compensation for the objective loss of parliamentary control over the swiftly Europeanized area of economic and fiscal governance: principally as a platform for monitoring the European Semester (cf. Lupo & Griglio, 2018, p. 364).

Yet, literature to date reveals a mixed picture as to this IPC's capacity to enhance oversight and accountability of EU economic governance. Already in 2016, Fromage expressed skepticism as to its long-term effectiveness as a place to ensure democratic accountability, pointing to the varying levels of attendance, questions of euro ins' and outs' membership as well as the competitive relationship between national parliaments and the EP. From a comparative perspective, Cooper (2019, p. 147) has argued that out of the three IPCs functioning in the EU realm—i.e., COSAC, IPC for Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defense Policy (CFSP-CSDP), and IPC SECG—the latter is actually the weakest in terms of its capacity to act as an oversight body. In a more optimistic tone, however, Kreilinger (2018, p. 274) has held that:

If assessed by the objective set in its Rules of Procedure, according to which the IPC SECG “shall provide a framework for debate and exchange of information and best practices” and “contribute to ensuring democratic accountability in the area of economic governance and budgetary policy in the EU, particularly in the EMU” then the Conference actually does what it is supposed to do.

At the same time, Lupo and Griglio (2018, p. 369) have proposed conceptualizing the IPC SECG as “an instrumental dimension that could help... the EP and

national parliaments to strengthen their oversight capacity, in their respective sphere of action” and postulated that this Conference “should be brought back to traditional circuits of democratic accountability, respectively linking the European executive, as a whole, to the EP and each national government to its national parliament” (p. 367).

Against this background, this article's goal is to contribute to the debate on whether the IPC SECG has indeed become an accountability enhancing arena in EU economic governance and budgetary policies by focusing on the domestic oversight dimension. By applying the ‘dual’—as opposed to ‘joint’—scrutiny logic to study the IPCs (Cooper, 2019, pp. 145–146), this article probes whether, after over five years of operational experience (i.e., after adopting its Rules of Procedure), this IPC does in fact enhance the capacity of domestic legislatures to better scrutinize and control their executives in the process of the European Semester. By doing so, it casts light on whether IPC SECG attendance by MPs has had any impact on the existing domestic legislative-executive relationship. Since the literature to date lacks focus on national parliaments' perspective with regard to this IPC's purpose and effectiveness, this research offers an actor-oriented approach and delves deeper into the parliamentary experience, perceptions, and motivations behind attending this forum. This is achieved by drawing from original data obtained through interviews, questionnaires, and institutional documents.

This article is structured as follows: Based on existing literature and documents review, the next section lays down the analytical underpinnings of the undertaken query, problematizes the connection between inter-parliamentary cooperation and democratic accountability in the case of the IPC SECG and presents the research expectations. The two following sections verify empirically how national parliaments perceive and evaluate this IPC. Section 3 presents findings related to parliamentary perceptions of the IPC SECG from a cross-country questionnaire. Section 4 provides a more in-depth, comparative case study of the IPC SECG-related experience of the French and Polish parliaments—thus offering a more nuanced perspective of a Euro and non-Euro area country.

2. The Problematic Purpose of the IPC SECG in the Context of Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation

Some scholars identify inter-parliamentary cooperation as a potential remedy to the weaknesses of democratic accountability in the EU, arguing that it can be an added value in strengthening parliamentary scrutiny of EU affairs (Wouters & Raube, 2012). In this perspective, inter-parliamentary cooperation has been described as a “weapon of the weak” (Crum & Fossum, 2013) vis-à-vis executive actors and a kind of a “‘third way’ for democratic participation and legitimacy within the Union” between, on the one hand, the increase of the

powers of the EP and, on the other, the direct inclusion of national parliaments in the EU policy-making (Manzella, 2012, p.38). Inter-parliamentary cooperation has also become a component of theoretical conceptualizations capturing the EU-oriented transnational activity of national parliaments such as the “multi-level parliamentary field” (Crum & Fossum, 2009, p. 249) or, more recently, the “multi-arena playing field” (Auel & Neuhold, 2017, p. 1551). The latter views parliaments as ‘multi-arena players’ able to take on multiple roles and represent citizens at different fora, as well as those beyond the domestic realm. The novelty of this concept lies in the notion of ‘playerness’—as a metaphor of agency— which equips national parliaments with the capability to exert influence over the course of the European game (cf. Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2020).

The problematic nature of IPCs as a component of ‘multi-arena playing field’ lies in the fact that contrary to arenas such as scrutiny of national governments, the Early Warning Mechanism for subsidiarity control, or the Political Dialogue with the European Commission, IPCs do not provide an explicit channel of influence on, or control over, the EU policy-making process but rather serve as platforms of dialogue and information exchange (see, for an overview, Fasone & Lupo, 2016). It is through these parliamentary activities—rather than their direct impact—that IPCs endow parliaments with additional resources to exert influence over EU affairs. In this sense, Cooper (2016, 2017) argues that IPCs such as COSAC or the IPC CFSP-CSDP allow legislatures to better perform their control functions vis-à-vis EU institutions, as well as national governments’ conduct of EU affairs. Other scholars also agree that IPCs’ leverage lies in strengthening the capacity of parliaments to fulfil their oversight function over the executives, thus improving the democratic legitimacy of the EU (Wouters & Raube, 2012). Another problematic issue is whether IPCs (should) have a legitimate role in the direct control of the EU executive, thus acting as collective ‘oversight bodies’ together with the EP, or whether they (should) rather enhance individual capacities of the participating legislatures to hold their respective executives accountable (cf. Cooper, 2019). In this respect, Fromage (2018, pp. 14–15) observes that:

Although IPCs should not serve to hold the Commission or any other body to account, they perform their function more modestly, by allowing for the exchange of information and best practices among parliaments which national parliaments and the EP will, in turn, be able to use individually in their domestic scrutiny exercise.

Certain novelty in this context was an introduction in 2017 of a new type of IPC, namely the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group of Europol which—unlike the other two Conferences—has been endowed with a formal mandate to exercise joint scrutiny of an EU agency (for more on this see Cooper, 2018).

Parliamentary expectations regarding the purpose of the IPC SECG were already contradictory at the stage of its institutionalization. While the French and Lithuanian parliaments proposed that the IPC should exercise an oversight function with respect to EU economic and fiscal policy, the German Bundestag and EP envisaged it as a mere discussion forum, possibly enabling national parliaments to scrutinize one another’s economic and budgetary plans (Cooper, 2016). The final version of the SECG IPC Rules of Procedure agreed in Luxembourg in 2015 represents some sort of compromise between these contrasting positions by stating that the body:

Shall provide a framework for debate and exchange of information and best practices in implementing the provisions of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination, and Governance in order to strengthen cooperation between national parliaments and the EP and contribute to ensuring democratic accountability in the area of economic governance and budgetary policy in the EU. (German Bundestag, 2015)

From a formal point of view, it is therefore neither a strictly supervisory body nor a mere discussion forum. Yet, unlike in the case of COSAC or the IPC CFSP-CSDP, this IPC’s formal standing explicitly refers to the accountability relationship (cf. Fromage, 2018). Moreover, in a broader institutional framework, the Regulation 1175/2011 forming part of the so-called Six-Pack, which complements the IPC-related provision of Art. 13 of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination, and Governance, states that national parliaments “should be duly involved in the European Semester—in the preparation of stability and convergence programs as well as national reform programs (NRP)—in order to increase the transparency and ownership of, and accountability for, the decisions taken.” In other words, formal provisions for parliamentary involvement in the post-crisis EU governance architecture assume that inter-parliamentary cooperation should constitute an accountability enhancing element in the areas of economic and fiscal policies.

2.1. Theoretical Expectations

In line with the principal-agent theory applied to study legislative-executive relations (inter alia Strøm, 2000), national parliaments—as principals—should have the right to demand information from the governments (as agents), influence their decisions and, if necessary, impose sanctions. There is also agreement in the literature that one of the most important reasons for losing control over an agent is information asymmetry in favour of the agent (Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991; Lupia, 2003). As observed by, inter alia, Benz (2001), in the area of European affairs, there is a much higher level of information asymmetry between the government and the parliament than in most areas of national policy, which

significantly limits the ability to exercise supervision and enforce control. The abovementioned specificity of the decision-making within the European Semester and the privileged position of executive actors makes it even more difficult for national parliaments to obtain independent information and appropriate expertise to properly assess the validity of their governments' policy. Against this background, the setting up of the IPC SECG was supposed to compensate for the aforementioned asymmetry and loss of parliamentary control over the area of economic governance and budgetary policy in the EU (cf. Lupo & Griglio, 2018, p. 364).

While the Rules of Procedure of IPC SECG are not clear as to how this democratic accountability should be achieved—whether by providing a joint oversight body or by enhancing the NP's and EP's respective capacities to exercise control of their executives—this article follows the 'dual scrutiny' model described by Cooper (2019) where national parliaments perform their democratic function on an individual basis within their respective national contexts. It, therefore, assumes that even if the IPC SECG functions (only) as a 'discussion forum,' the exchange of information and best practices within its remit should help national legislatures carry out their respective oversight functions vis-à-vis their own governments (cf. Cooper, 2019). Taking into account that Art. 3 of the IPC's Rules of Procedure states that it shall convene at least twice a year, in coordination with the cycle of the European Semester, it is further expected that parliamentary participation in this IPC should specifically contribute to better oversight of the Semester procedures.

Considering that executive accountability vis-à-vis the parliament can be achieved only through appropriate scrutiny (exercised by information provision) that ultimately entails parliamentary sanctions on the executive (i.e., by use of a parliamentary prerogative to reject the budget), it is assumed, in line with Fromage (2018, pp. 14–15), that the exchange of information and best practices envisaged in the Rules of Procedure should, in effect, enhance parliamentary control over domestic executive decisions and activities within the European Semester. The remainder of this article attempts to verify whether this is the case.

3. Parliamentary Perceptions of the IPC SECG: A Cross-Country Overview

This section presents findings on parliamentary perceptions of the IPC SECG from a questionnaire conducted by the author among parliamentary chambers of EU member states between June and July 2019. The survey, whose general purpose was to address the question of whether national parliaments are 'multi-arena players' in the EU, included a section related to IPCs. The questions inquired about parliaments' motivations to participate in particular IPCs (including IPC SECG) as well as about their evaluation of their effectiveness as tools for enhancing parliamentary scrutiny of and influence on EU affairs. The survey was sent by email to all 39 EU national parliamentary chambers (excluding the British Houses of Parliaments) and generated 25 responses (response rate: 64%). It was addressed by the heads of EU affairs commissions' secretariats (Table 1).

Out of the 25 parliamentary chambers that responded to the survey, the highest number indicated that the main motivation behind attending the IPC SECG is the exchange of views and best practices (11) as well as networking with other national parliaments and/or representatives of EU institutions (9). Several chambers also pointed to other motives such as being able to voice their opinions at the transnational level (2) or the ability to build common parliamentary initiatives (2). These responses resonate with parliamentary feedback published in the 32nd COSAC Biannual report (2019), where the majority of national chambers also pointed to networking and exchange of views as the main contribution of inter-parliamentary cooperation to the good functioning of the EU. In my questionnaire, only one chamber linked participation in the IPC SECG to the accountability-enhancing function. In this context, the Hungarian representative stated that it allows national parliaments to exercise "oversight rights at the national level with respect to national governments, and at European level, with regard to European decision-making."

In terms of the effectiveness of this IPC as a platform through which national parliaments can play a more meaningful role in EU affairs, nine chambers assessed it as rather ineffective (Tweede Kaamer; Vouli ton Ellinon; Eduskunta; Saeima, Assemblée Nationale and Senát,

Table 1. Parliamentary chambers who addressed the questionnaire.

Name of parliamentary chamber

Austrian Nationalrat and Bundesrat; Belgian Chambre des représentants and Senat; Bulgarian Narodno Sabranie; Cypriot Vouli ton Antiprosopon; Czech Poslanecká sněmovna and Senat; Danish Folketing; Dutch Eerste and Tweede Kaamer; Finnish Eduskunta; French Assemblée Nationale and Senat; German Bundesrat; Greek Vouli ton Ellinon; Hungarian Országgyűlés; Italian Camera dei Deputati and Senato; Latvian Saeima; Polish Sejm and Senat; Portuguese Assembleia da República, Slovak Narodna Rada and Swedish Riksdag.

Note: The responses are not only representative geographically, but also in terms of the formal parliamentary strength in EU affairs, representing the strong chambers (Folketing, Eduskunta, Tweede Kaamer or Riksdag), moderately strong ones (Sejm, Poslanecká sněmovna or Assemblée Nationale) as well as weak parliaments (Assembleia da República, Vouli ton Ellinon or Chambre des représentants).

Poslanecká sněmovna and Senat, Polish Senat). In this respect, representative of the Assemblée Nationale—one of the most critical chambers—stated that “the Conference is not working as it should,” while a representative of Eduskunta stated that “there is no measurable impact of this body on policy, whereas networking and dialogue may generate invisible benefits.” This stance could be complemented with the more general opinion on IPCs as expressed by the Finnish chamber in the 32nd COSAC questionnaire (2019, Annex, pp. 75–76): “Conferences [IPCs] offer participants useful support in their work in their home parliament, but no conference can replace the work done in parliaments. No parliamentary conference is in itself capable of providing democratic scrutiny or legitimacy.”

In a similar vein, with regard to the potential oversight function which this IPC could (or should) enhance, the clerk from the Czech Senat—a chamber relatively active in EU affairs—observed in a response to the questionnaire:

In general, the IPC SECG is regarded as an opportunity to receive and exchange information and opinions, to see what is the general political climate across Member States and to get to know other participants....But the MPs, as well as members of parliamentary administration, are very sceptical regarding any legitimizing, scrutinizing, or policy-influencing role ascribed to this IPC. As opposed to COSAC, no relevant collective initiatives are coordinated there.

Similarly, a clerk from Poslanecká sněmovna observed that: “As there are no official outputs of the Conference (i.e., conclusions), it serves just as a discussion forum among MPs, with no political influence.” Three other chambers also pointed to a lack of written conclusions as the main weakness of the Conference (Sejm; Vouli ton Ellinon and Assemblée Nationale).

Although six chambers evaluated the SECG Conference positively (Austrian Nationalrat and Bundesrat; Vouli ton Antiprosopon; Országgyűlés; Italian Senato and Polish Sejm), only four of them referred to the IPC’s role in improving the scrutiny of the national executive (Senato) or the cycle of the European Semester (Senato, Országgyűlés and both Austrian chambers). In this respect, however, the Italian Senato finds all IPCs to be:

Extremely useful occasions for Senators to meet and exchange information on EU-related topics with their fellow MPs, both from the EP and from other Member States. Senators become more and more familiar with political dynamics underlying negotiations at the EU level. As a result, their cognitive baggage of participation in the European decision-making is enriched... also in the context of parliamentary control over the executive.

While it is difficult to interpret determinants of parliamentary perceptions without asking additional questions, some general observations as to the above findings can be drawn. It seems that chambers possessing relatively strong oversight powers in EU affairs are more critical of the IPC SECG (i.e., Finnish, Latvian, Dutch or Czech chambers). This might be caused by the fact that while they already possess good access to scrutiny documents and, in some cases, also the possibility to exert influence on the policy cycle within the European Semester, the additional channel of IPC SECG does not bring a significant added value to controlling the process. Having the ability to exert influence on the policy cycle may well be a factor, especially in the case of the Latvian Saeima, the only parliament that can vote on, and propose amendments to, the Stability and Convergence Program (EP, 2014). However, the case of Italian Senato seems to deviate from this explanation. As described by Capuano (2017), the chamber is formally involved in the process of the European Semester both as regards the scrutiny of Country Specific Recommendations as well as the National Reform Programs and Stability and Convergence Programs. Yet, it still appreciates the added value of IPC SECG as a Europeanizing and policy-learning platform for Senators. A factor that might explain this state of affairs is the Senato’s general support for cooperation with the EP and the belief that the system of IPCs mutually interconnects national parliaments and the EP, consequently reinforcing the democratic legitimacy of the European integration process (cf. Capuano, 2017, p. 134). On the contrary, the critical reception by the French parliament of IPC SECG, might be explained by its competitive approach to the relations with the EP combined with over-ambitious expectations with regard to endowing this IPC with genuine oversight functions at this stage of its institutionalization.

These interpretations could be better cross-checked and would be rendered more robust if all 25 chambers who participated in the questionnaire shared their views on the perceived effectiveness of the SECG Conference. Unfortunately, in case of 10 chambers (Austrian and German Bundesrat, Chambre des représentants, Narodno Sabranie, Folketing, Eerste Kaamer; Camera dei Deputati; Assembleia da República, Narodna Rada; Riksdag), the clerks declined to share their views seeing the question as either ‘too political’ or by stating that there was no official parliamentary position on the matter.

4. Polish and French Parliamentary Perspectives on the IPC SECG

In this section, the survey’s findings are complemented with a more in-depth comparative case study of the Polish and French lower chambers’ experience with the IPC SECG. As well as delving deeper into parliamentary perceptions, a major objective of this comparison is to verify whether, in the domestic dimension, participation

in the IPC SECG in any way enhances the national parliaments' respective capacities to exercise control of their executives in the process of European Semester. Following the 'dual scrutiny' model of Cooper (2019) it is assumed that even if IPC SECG functions (only) as a 'discussion forum' (as opposed to a 'joint oversight body'), the exchange of information and best practices within its remit should help national legislatures to carry out their respective oversight functions vis-à-vis their governments, as well as enhance parliamentary control over executive decisions within the European Semester.

The case selection of the Sejm and the Assemblée Nationale allows this research to account for IPC SECG-related experience of a euro and non-euro area parliament. In this context, we should expect that parliaments of euro countries are more motivated to scrutinize the Semester as the process has greater implications for national budgetary policy (cf. Rasmussen, 2018). The two chambers also differ regarding their formal institutional strength in EU affairs. Winzen (2012) classifies the French chamber as considerably weaker in terms of government control (1.17/3) and Karlas (2012) in terms of influence mechanisms (1.5/3) and their binding character (0/3) than the Polish one (2/3, 3/3, and 1.5/3, respectively). While the French parliament does not possess the right to dictate a mandate to a minister in the EU Council and resolutions issued by parliamentary commissions for EU affairs (EAC) are not formally binding, the Polish scrutiny model contains elements of a mandating system where an opinion of the Sejm EAC should form the basis of the government's position in the EU (cf. Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2020). In line with what was said above, the weaker position of the French Assemblée is expected to make the chamber more willing to use the IPC SECG as leverage to enhance its oversight of the executive in the sphere of economic governance. Moreover, it is important to underline that, contrary to the Polish Sejm, the Assemblée Nationale acts as an 'expert' in the European Semester. It invests a great deal of effort in gathering information and stimulating internal debate on this topic by issuing numerous communications and reports related to the annual growth survey, the Country Specific Recommendations, or the European Commission's opinion on the national draft budget (cf. Kreilinger, 2019). Such a stance further boosts the expectation that participation in the IPC SECG would be used by the MPs to increase parliamentary leverage in this area.

The data presented below are a result of a series of semi-structured interviews (both direct as well as phone-based) with clerks from the French and Polish EAC and public finances commissions (PFC) conducted between March 2019 and October 2020, as well as the analyses of parliamentary minutes.

4.1. Participation and Evaluation

In both countries, it is the EAC—as the main actor in EU scrutiny—which coordinates parliamentary participation

in the IPC SECG. Judging by MPs attendance, it can be said that both chambers value the IPC as an important inter-parliamentary venue. While the size of delegations is not defined in the IPC Rules of Procedure, Assemblée Nationale usually sends the greatest number of teams, composed of four to five MPs: two from the finance committee and two or three from the EAC (interview, March 18, 2019). The Sejm has always sent three MPs coming from EAC, PFC, and economy and development commission (EDC)—matching the level of its Belgian and Dutch counterparts. MPs are usually accompanied by clerks from the corresponding commissions' secretariats (interview, July 19, 2019).

The Assemblée Nationale, as a chamber that played the protagonist role in lobbying for the establishment of the IPC SECG, is also one of the most vocal critics of its functioning. The conducted interviews and analysis of parliamentary minutes point to several reasons. The general disappointment with the IPC is that it does not fulfil the purpose foreseen by its Rules of Procedure, namely enhancing the democratic accountability of the EU fiscal governance through proper scrutiny of the European Semester (interview, March 18, 2019). In this context, representatives of the Assemblée, including both the MPs and administrative clerks, complain about the timing of the IPC, the overly broad scope of its topics as well as its composition. With regard to the first two issues, the chairwoman of the EAC, Sabine Thillaye, postulated during the EAC session in October 2019 that the first-semester meeting of the IPC, traditionally organized within the European Parliamentary Week at the EP, should be convened at a later date: Between the publication of the Commission's Country Specific Recommendations and their examination by the EU Council, which takes place in July. In her view, the current habit of holding the Conference at the beginning of the year limits the debate to general considerations about the EU's economic conditions and growth prospects. Thillaye also postulated that the second-semester meeting organized by the Presidency parliament should be devoted to an exchange of information on the budgetary guidelines adopted by Member States in their draft budgetary plans rather than theoretical exchanges on the economic situation of the EU and the policy pursued within the Eurozone. Finally, she expressed her dissatisfaction with the fact that the IPC does not adopt any conclusions or recommendations. As regards the IPC's composition, Thillaye pointed to the lack of a specific format for the euro area MPs as one of the main weaknesses (Assemblée Nationale, 2019). In the same vein, the head of the EAC secretariat regretted that the IPC has not become a "genuine Eurozone chamber (as originally proposed by France) but includes MPs from all Member States" (interview, March 18, 2019).

While the Sejm does not assess the IPC SECG as harshly as its French counterpart, none of the interviewed clerks referred to the forum's role in improving parliamentary oversight of the national executive, or the

European Semester in general. When asked about the main motivations of MPs behind attending the IPC, a clerk from the PFC who accompanies parliamentary delegations admitted:

MPs usually go because they can. It is more of a parliamentary tourism rather than essential policy-oriented experience. MPs want to get some international overview and go back to their region saying ‘I have just come back from Brussels...’ Yet, if I was to give you an official answer, the goal of attending SECG Conference would be information exchange—surely not improving the government oversight. (Interview, July 19, 2019)

According to the Polish interviewees, one of the main weaknesses of the IPC is the already mentioned overly general level of discussions and unnecessary repetition of debates on macro-economic strategies. While this quite superficial treatment of topics might aim at reducing the risk of potential conflicts over salient issues which might emerge among IPC participants, it also prevents the IPC from becoming a meaningful discussion forum focused on concrete policy aspects and their oversight (interview, July 19, 2019). In this regard, during the January 2019 IPC SECG meeting in Brussels, the chair of the Economy and Innovation Commission of the Polish Senat, Andrzej Stanisławek, proposed the setting up of an inter-parliamentary working group which would formulate concrete proposals to reform the IPC in order to increase its effectiveness (Sejm, 2019a). The Sejm, as does its French counterpart, views the adoption of written conclusions as a good idea and postulates that a presidency parliament hosting a meeting should at least prepare their draft for the IPC’s consideration (interview, July 9, 2019).

Another major shortcoming of the IPC SECG organized in the country holding the rotating presidency is the lack of simultaneous translation to languages other than English, French, and possibly that of the host country. As observed by a clerk attending this IPC, this leaves many MPs excluded from the discussions: “Let alone the oversight function, this technical obstacle results in the fact that even if MPs vaguely understand the contents of the speeches they are unable to comment or pose questions” (interview, July 19, 2019).

4.2. *The Missing Link*

When it comes to tracking the linkage between parliamentary participation in the IPC SECG and the domestic oversight of the European Semester or EU economic governance in general, the findings reveal a rather grim picture in both chambers. In the case of the Sejm, there is no official follow-up of these IPC meetings at home and delegation members—who are theoretically supposed to act as agents of their entire assembly—do not officially report back to their committees or the plenary. Short

reports prepared by clerks accompanying MPs at the IPC are more of a “bureaucratic requirement rather than an effect of the political interest of MPs” (interview, July 9, 2019). These reports, contrary to MPs communications, are available only to a narrow group of delegates and the Speaker of the House, and not publicly accessible online.

In institutional terms, there is no continuity of the discussion between the IPC SECG and EAC or other commissions’ meetings. The analysis of parliamentary minutes reveals that none of the commissions whose members attend the IPC discuss its agenda either *ex ante* or *ex post* (see e.g., Sejm, 2019b, 2019c). For example, in April 2019, a joint meeting of the Sejm EAC, PFC and EDC took place in order to hear the government’s briefing on the NRP to be submitted to the European Commission. The session was held around a month after the IPC SECG’s meeting in Brussels devoted to the assessment of the European Semester in economic policy coordination. During the domestic government debriefing, none of the three Sejm’s delegates who attended the IPC took the floor to raise any points or conduct any follow-up from the Brussels’ meeting. Strangely enough, MPs who posed questions to the ministers were in fact not the participants of the IPC SECG (Sejm, 2019b, p. 260).

The gathered data also reveal that participation in the IPC SECG has not influenced in any way the executive-legislative relationship in the area of fiscal and budgetary governance. While it is difficult to track informal and individual exchanges between MPs and particular ministers, no official record of any in-house activity of the MPs who participated in this IPC is available. Finally, at least in the Polish case, the findings do not confirm the expectation that greater involvement of MPs from sectoral commissions in the IPC SECG increases their Europeanisation (cf. Kreilinger, 2019). As admitted by parliamentary clerks from the PFC, there is no observable, increased mainstreaming of EU-oriented debates in the commission as a result of attending the IPC. While joint meetings with the EAC take place occasionally, no intensified inter-institutional cooperation has occurred so far (interview, July 19, 2019).

In the case of the *Assemblée Nationale*, *ex post* debriefings on the IPC SECG take place from time to time at EAC meetings. During the current legislature (2017–2020), oral accounts were presented twice by Sabine Thillaye, the then chairwoman of the EAC on October 2019 and February 2020 (during the same legislature, the EAC held five debriefings on the IPC CFSP). They consisted of short overviews of the events’ agenda and some critical reflection. It is worth recalling the latest one as it illustrates the absence of a genuine impact of the IPC attendance on parliamentary leverage in process of European Semester. Reporting on its meeting in Brussels, Thillaye observed:

These meetings are always a little frustrating. Each person expresses their position in two minutes, which limits the depth of reflection on such vast

subjects, and the discussions do not find any concrete translation likely to allow national parliaments to influence the governance of Economic and Monetary Union, which was the stated purpose of the creation of this conference. (Assemblée Nationale, 2020)

Also, “in a complementary way, a clerk with experience at the EAC and finance commission has not recalled any other substantial, commission—or plenary-level, debates in which the contents of IPC SECG were discussed or used in any substantial way” (interview, October 29, 2020).

While looking for possible explanations of the ‘missing link’ between participation in the IPC SECG and the enhancement of domestic parliamentary capacity to hold executives accountable in the process of European Semester, apart from the inherent procedural weaknesses of the Conference itself, we should also consider the actual domestic position of parliamentary chambers in the Semester procedure. There is an important similarity between the two cases as both the Polish and French parliaments do not dispose of instruments to meaningfully influence executive decisions within the Semester cycle. In France, although the government transmits the draft Stability Program and NRP to the parliament before they are submitted to the Commission, parliament’s role in the drafting of both documents is ‘marginal’ (interview, March 18, 2019). The main actor responsible for monitoring the procedure is the parliamentary finance committee where the Stability Program is discussed with corresponding ministers. MPs admit, however, that their lack of actual power to influence its contents is ‘glaring’ (Assemblée Nationale, 2015, p. 32). What differentiates France from Poland in this context, is the French practice of making the Stability Program subject to a plenary debate and a vote. This, however, does not give MPs a chance to amend the document—making it a purely formal procedure (interview, October 29, 2020). Interestingly, the government’s discretion to organize such a debate provoked political controversy in 2015 when the French government of Francois Hollande, concerned with insufficient parliamentary support for the Stability Program, decided not to hold a plenary vote on it, an act which was met with harsh criticism from MPs.

In the Sejm, the debate on the Convergence Program and the NRP takes place during joint sessions of the EAC, the PFC, and the EDC, in the presence of relevant ministers. While MPs can ask questions and make comments, these have a similarly symbolic weight. The Sejm is not asked to present any formal position nor place any amendments to the documents. Consequently, neither the plenary nor the EAC or any other commission, adopt opinions related to the Semester. As observed by Schweiger (2021, p. 129), in the context of the European Semester in Poland: “The government is trying to push through its agenda without substantial input from MPs.” Such systemic marginalization of parliamentary voice in the process of European Semester might discourage MPs

from making better use of the IPC SECG’s proceedings in the domestic context.

5. Conclusions

This article aimed to look at the performance of the IPC SECG from the perspective of domestic legislatures and verify whether the body enhances their capacity to better scrutinize and control their executives in the process of European Semester, thus contributing to increasing the domestic accountability of EU economic governance. The data gathered reveal that this is, in fact, not the case. Only four out of 25 chambers acknowledged the IPC’s role in improving the oversight of national government or the Semester cycle, while the rest admitted that it serves more as a networking forum aimed at the exchange of views rather than any sort of scrutiny-enhancing leverage.

The more in-depth case studies of Poland and France reveal that there is hardly any link between IPC SECG attendance and domestic parliamentary activity under the Semester. The expectation that the Eurozone Member States parliament with weaker formal prerogatives in EU affairs would make better use of the IPC domestically was confirmed only to a small extent, with regard to the reporting practice. The fact that institutional aspects of the IPC are at all discussed in the French EAC differentiates the attitude of Assemblée Nationale from the Polish parliamentary disinterest.

While the analysis has not accounted for all national parliaments, and calls for more comparative research, the presented findings—both with regard to cross-country overview as well as the two case studies—do not seem to fully agree with Krelinger’s opinion that “if assessed by the objective set in its Rules of Procedure... the Conference actually does what it is supposed to do” (2018, p. 174). While it might perfectly “provide a framework for debate and exchange of information and best practices,” it does not meaningfully “contribute to ensuring democratic accountability in the area of economic governance and budgetary policy in the EU” (§2.1 Rules of Procedure). The IPC SECG’s structural and procedural weaknesses are only one part of the problem. As the analysis of Polish and French cases has signalled, another important reason for the lack of a meaningful impact of the Conference on the parliamentary oversight capacity might be the marginalized domestic position of parliaments in the European Semester procedure. In this context, the 2018 report of the EP concerning the role of national parliaments in the Semester is telling. Its findings, based on a parliamentary survey, revealed that about one-third of national legislatures are informed by their own executive about the contents of NRP only after they have been submitted to the Commission, and only a few legislative chambers issue an opinion in this regard. Moreover, many parliaments are not consulted by their governments beforehand regarding draft budgetary plans presented to the Commission, while some

are not informed about them at all (Hagelstam et al., 2018). While these results are alarming in the context of parliamentary accountability of the EU economic governance, future research should look in more detail at the actual ways this domestic marginalization of parliaments affects their participation in the SECG IPC. It would be especially interesting to analyse these arrangements in the case of the 26 chambers who consider scrutiny of budgetary policies and holding governments to account as high priorities which should be further developed in the area of inter-parliamentary cooperation (COSAC, 2019, see responses to question 18 in the Annex).

Such a state of affairs calls for a toning down of the optimism present in the literature on IPCs, and more specifically on the IPC SECG, with regard to assigning them prospective accountability and oversight-enhancing functions. It is doubtful whether—without a qualitative change in domestic governance arrangements—even after the procedural disagreements at the IPC level are resolved, the forum will allow national parliaments and the EP to “embark on jointly scrutinizing the executive decision-makers of EU economic governance” (Kreilinger, 2018, p. 274), or whether the potential adoption of common conclusions by the IPC SECG could be used as a “joint platform for parliamentary resolutions or mandates to be addressed to respective governments” during the main stages of the economic governance (Lupo & Griglio, 2018, p. 367).

The limited nature of findings presented in this article also sets avenues for further research aimed at precisely identifying the interests and preferences of national parliaments regarding their own roles as accountability agents in the process of European Semester and the role that they believe the IPC SECG should perform. Such identification would be important also with regard to the other existing IPCs since—as revealed in the abovementioned 32nd COSAC report (2019)—parliamentary expectations as to the role that inter-parliamentary cooperation should play in the EU differ.

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Conflict of Interests

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