

**Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments**

**COMMUNICATION**

**by**

**Mr Alexis WINTONIAK**

**Deputy Secretary General of the Austrian Parliament**

**on**

**“The overall renovation of the Austrian Parliament:  
a leap from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century”**

**Nusa Dua Session**

**March 2022**

## **The Austrian Parliament**

Austria's Parliament today consists of two chambers: the National Council with 183 directly elected members, and the Federal Council, whose 61 members are delegated by the nine Diets of the Federal Provinces. The seat of both chambers is the Parliament building in Vienna's city centre. The edifice, which dates back to the latter period of the Habsburg Monarchy, is a masterpiece by the well-known architect Theophil Hansen and was built between 1874 and 1883. It has been in service without interruption for over 130 years. While the building itself has undergone regular maintenance and repairs, it has not seen any major renovations, with the exception of a rebuild of extensive parts of the building that suffered bomb damage in 1945. Some extensions were added in the 1970s and a visitors' centre built in the early 2000s. However, the building began to suffer ever more frequent technical issues and a worsening lack of compliance with current legal and technical standards; also, it lacked the equipment required for modern parliamentary business. A full assessment was performed in 2010 to gain an in-depth insight into the structural state of the building, the need for refurbishment, as well as its potential for redevelopment. Specifically, the assessment clearly revealed that action was needed.

## **From dossier to legislation**

Given that no political consensus could initially be achieved over the next steps to take, the Parliamentary Administration worked with technical consultants and experts to prepare a comprehensive dossier for the project. It described a range of non-negotiable emergency measures, outlined various scenarios from a light-touch project to a comprehensive refurbishment, and detailed plans for a potential complete rebuild. Each variant was described in full architectural, technical and financial detail, along with an assessment of each option's impact on parliamentary operations. After the elections of September 2013, a cross-party consensus was achieved in favour of a full refurbishment of the Parliament building, during which the National and Federal Councils would move out and conduct their business elsewhere. The respective legislation was unanimously adopted by both chambers in the summer of 2014. It stipulated the budget for the project (EUR 352.2 million for the works and EUR 51.4 million for the setup of and move to a temporary home), defined the involvement of the parliamentary parties in the process, and foresaw the establishment of a company to manage the project.

## **Project autonomy and involvement of decision-makers**

This company was set up in November 2015 under Austrian corporate law – a joint venture of the Austrian Parliament and the Federal Real Estate Agency – to manage the planning phase, the procurement process and the selection of providers, oversee the preparation of the works, and set up an interim location for the chambers. The board of management and the supervisory board of this entity were hence obliged to manage the project in accordance with Austrian corporate law and thus on the basis of private law. Once the works began in 2018, all responsibility for operations was transferred to the Federal Real Estate Agency, leaving the Parliamentary Administration to concentrate for the remainder of the project on the requirements of the Parliament as the client and of the users of the building. Since the project began, political decision-makers have been involved in the project on two levels. On the one hand, the Presidents of the National Council, the chairpersons of the parliamentary groups and the President of the Court of Audit form the “client's committee”, which oversees compliance with the budget and timeline. On the other, the “users' advisory board”, which consists of

representatives of the parliamentary groups, the Parliamentary Administration and Parliament staff, is overseeing the planning process and assessing the quality of the works. Until now, the client's committee has met 28 times, the users' advisory board 45 times.

### **Relocation of parliamentary operations**

There was also cross-party consensus that all parliamentary operations would relocate elsewhere for the duration of the works. Premises were found and adapted to users' needs in the nearby Imperial Palace (Hofburg), with interim office space set up on the square between the Palace and the Parliament. Operations moved in the summer of 2017, meaning that parliamentary business has been conducted outside of the Parliament building proper for more than four years now. Although the temporary premises are fully functional, the fact that the various organisational units are currently spread across 15 sites poses a number of organisational and logistical challenges.

### **Budget and timeline**

The original timeline was three years, with work set to conclude in 2020. However, the project experienced two major setbacks. In 2016 and 2017, a number of procurement processes had to be relaunched given that there would have been considerable budget overruns occasioned by a construction boom. This delayed the project by around nine months. The second major setback came in 2020, with the Covid-19 pandemic a major factor. As matters stand now, the project is anticipated to wrap up in September 2022. These two delays, coupled with the increase in prices over the last two years, have led to a budget increase. When the underlying legislation was adopted back in 2014, a 20 per cent budget tolerance was already taken note of; this increase was unanimously approved by the National Council in November 2020. Current estimates suggest that the new budget will suffice, with a potential 2 to 3 per cent overrun.

### **Communication and information**

A long-term communications concept was developed to accompany the project. It includes regular documentation of the works' progress on the Parliament's website, regular press events, photos and videos on social media, information events for stakeholders, staff and neighbours, and guided tours of the building site. Since the Parliament building is not just an architectural highlight of the city but also a symbol of Austrian democracy and freedom, the project has enjoyed strong public approval from the beginning. While there were a small number of critical reports, they have had no significant impact on public opinion.

### **The return**

The Parliamentary Administration set up over 40 smaller projects to prepare for Parliament's return to the refurbished building. Facility managers are trained to handle the new technical equipment, various media and PR projects were launched, new civic education programmes were designed, and parliamentary operations adjusted. The building is slated to re-open in the second half of 2022, with parliamentary sessions taking place in the refurbished building henceforth.

**International cooperation**

Prior to the decision to refurbish the building, a benchmark exercise was performed comparing the Vienna building with various other parliamentary buildings in Berlin, Budapest, The Hague, Helsinki, Copenhagen, London, Lisbon and Stockholm, amongst others. Infrastructural data was gathered on, e.g., floor space, equipment, capital expenditure and operating costs, as a further aid to decision-making. The Austrian Parliament is also active in the International Network of Parliamentary Properties, of which it is a founding member.

<https://sanierung.parlament.at>