

UNION INTERPARLEMENTAIRE



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

## **Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments**

### **COMMUNICATION**

by

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on

**“Resilience of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland in the face of humanitarian and health crises”**

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Strengthening the resilience of bodies and institutions is an obligation and a critical task of states. Resilience is a condition of a specific structure, such as a state or society, which adapts to the changed needs of its functioning and, at the same time, strengthens instruments to counteract any emergency or crisis.

In recent years, Poland, including the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, has faced many crises testing its resilience. A significant challenge for the Polish Sejm was the **health crisis** related primarily to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. At that time, the Sejm took both legislative measures to safeguard Polish women's and men's health security and ensure adequate working conditions for MPs and parliamentary staff. The first meeting of the Sejm in remote mode was held on 29 March 2020. Because of **climate change**, the Sejm of the Republic of Poland is taking steps to promote sustainable development and create good laws to take care of the limited resources we have, such as water and forests. Nevertheless, the **humanitarian crisis** triggered by the Russian aggression against Ukraine proved to be the biggest test for the resilience of the Polish Parliament.

### **Humanitarian action of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland and the Chancellery of the Sejm on Ukraine**

On 24 February this year, the Ukrainian people faced a particularly dark face of war - military attacks bringing cruelty, pain and suffering. Since that effective date, more than 10.5 million people<sup>1</sup> have crossed the border of Ukraine in various directions; most of them, more than 6.72 million<sup>2</sup>, have crossed the border into Poland. In response to the unprecedented wave of war refugees, millions of Poles opened their hearts and prepared shelter for them in their homes. The situation where women and children constitute 80-90% of the refugees paints a very depressing picture. The hundreds of testimonies of sexual violence committed by Russian soldiers against Ukrainian women are equally shocking. Ukrainian women, who tremble for the safety of their loved ones or watch them die, have become victims of bestial acts of aggression by Russian soldiers. Also, women of Ukraine fight in the national armed forces and pay

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>. Data as of 2/10/2022.

<sup>2</sup> Data of the Polish Border Guard as of 2/10/2022.

the price of their lives and dignity for this struggle. The image of Ukrainian female soldiers with shaved heads recaptured from the enemy's hands shows their physical and psychological drama. That is precisely why solidarity with the Ukrainian people, including women, is so crucial and necessary. For it makes us best aware of what crisis category we are facing. It is horrifying to state so, but it is the true face of this war - we are dealing with vicious crimes and with genocide.

Faced such a cruel war, the Sejm of the Republic of Poland and the Chancellery of the Sejm undertook numerous humanitarian significant **symbolic** (Sejm resolutions and statements by the Marshal of the Sejm condemning Russia's actions and supporting Ukraine), **legislative and practical** (tangible humanitarian aid to Ukraine) measures. Moreover, the intensification of the Sejm's **inter-parliamentary cooperation** with foreign partners to support Ukraine was also of great importance.

First, given the humanitarian crisis related to the massive influx of refugees from Ukraine, the Sejm undertook **legislative work** to lead to institutional support for refugees. First, the Act of 12 March 2022 on assistance to Ukrainian citizens in connection with the armed conflict on the territory of Ukraine was passed. Under this law, several other acts were also amended, thus contributing to supporting or assisting refugees from Ukraine in terms of, among others, taking up employment, education or running business and professional activities. There were also amendments to acts that made it possible to receive health, social and family benefits (especially the so-called 500 plus benefit for each child) based on the amended Act on State Aid for Raising Children. Furthermore, regulations were adopted to allow local government units to provide aid to refugees, as well as rules granting financial support to Polish citizens who shelter refugees in their homes and apartments.

Already on 23-24 February and 3 March this year, the Sejm of the Republic of Poland passed two critical **resolutions** (No. 2029/22, No. 2060/22) and one **statement** (No. 2048/22) condemning Russia's violent actions and its unprecedented aggression against Ukraine. Subsequently, the Sejm passed two more resolutions condemning Russia's criminal activities in Ukraine in March (23/03, No. 2104/22) and April (8/04, No. 2164/22) this year. It is also worth mentioning that the Sejm of the Republic of Poland had already warned against the aggressive actions of the Russian Federation targeting Ukraine on 27/01/2022 in Resolution No. 1961/22<sup>3</sup>. The MPs

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<sup>3</sup> [https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/opinie9.nsf/nazwa/1961\\_u/\\$file/1961\\_u.pdf](https://orka.sejm.gov.pl/opinie9.nsf/nazwa/1961_u/$file/1961_u.pdf) other resolutions and statements <https://sejm.gov.pl/sejm9.nsf/agent.xsp?symbol=UCHWALYALL&NrKadencji=9&NrPosiedzenia=61>

underlined in the Resolutions that the Russian Federation has carried out open, unprovoked and unjustified aggression against Ukraine despite the international community's intensive efforts. The brutal act of violating international law standards constitutes a direct attack against Euro-Atlantic security and the entire global order, with enormous geostrategic consequences. Therefore, the Russian Federation excludes itself from the international community and goes back to the darkest times of Soviet totalitarianism.

Second, in addition to the resolutions, the Sejm of the Republic of Poland and its Chancellery organised **targeted and consulted humanitarian aid** for Ukraine on 3 March. On that day, a transport with gifts for Ukrainian refugees set off from the Chancellery of the Sejm to Przemyśl and the Medyka-Szeginie border crossing. The handing over of this tranche of donations collected at the Polish Sejm took place on my and Marshal's initiative. Parliamentarians of various factions, employees of the Chancellery of the Sejm and journalists accredited to the Sejm, took part in the collection. The following two convoys with donations left on 18 and 21 March. Another group of gifts for refugees was organised at the Sejm from 2 to 11 March. The Marshal of the Sejm, Elżbieta Witek, appealed for participation in the action, and employees of the Chancellery of the Sejm, the Chancellery of the Senate, journalists, parliamentarians and officers of the Marshal's Guard provided aid. Food, cleaning, hygiene and personal care products, groceries, school supplies and books were collected. The collected gifts were donated to needy war refugees from Ukraine.

Third, **inter-parliamentary cooperation** has significantly intensified due to Russian aggression. On 24 and 25 February, Marshal Witek held videoconferences with the Presidents of the Austrian and Lithuanian Parliaments, and on 2 March, she met with the US Ambassador on assistance to Ukraine. Marshal Witek remained in regular contact with the Speaker of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, Ruslan Stefanchuk. During all the talks and meetings held as part of parliamentary diplomacy, Marshal Witek addressed the topic of the war in Ukraine, emphasising the importance of supporting Ukraine and victory against Russia<sup>4</sup>. In March, a videoconference was held by the Chairpersons of the European Affairs Committees of the Parliaments of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on the situation in Ukraine. All participants in the meeting stressed their solidarity with Ukraine,

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<sup>4</sup> Development of meetings and humanitarian aid reports on the website of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, [sejm.gov.pl](http://sejm.gov.pl) and the intranet of the Chancellery of the Sejm.

condemning the Russian military attack. Moreover, the Sejm bodies have been active in parliamentary diplomacy to help Ukraine, including meetings with the presidents of the parliaments of Austria, France, Canada, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, Germany, New Zealand, Romania, Slovenia, Hungary, the United States, and Turkey.

Faced with the challenging situation of refugees from Ukraine, mainly women and children, Marshal Witek initiated **a new format of cooperation within the EU, namely the collaboration of the Women Presidents of the European Union Parliaments**. In April, at the invitation of the Marshal, the Presiding Women visited Dorohusk at the Polish-Ukrainian border, followed by a discussion in the Sejm of the Republic of Poland on possible forms of assisting female refugees from Ukraine. The second meeting of the Women Presidents took place in May via video conference. Initiatives and actions taken in support of Ukrainian refugees were then discussed. Another meeting of the Women Presidents will be held in October at the European Parliament in Brussels, also on the initiative of Marshal Elżbieta Witek. It aims to discuss all issues related to the management of the influx of women, children and older people from war-torn Ukraine, their integration and managing the social problems such as access to social assistance, labour market, education system, and health care.

### **Administrative tools applied in the Sejm due to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Considering parliamentary involvement, the role of the representative assemblies during the COVID-19 pandemic boiled down to several main areas of activity. The most important was to create the statutory conditions for parliamentary activity during the pandemic. In this regard, the Sejm reacted quickly, and Regulations were adopted already in March/April 2020 to allow undertaking work remotely using remote communication. Thanks to the openness to remote working, the pandemic did not paralyse the work of Parliament.

Within the adopted work organisation of the Sejm, a system of remote working, including remote voting, was established so that Members could take the floor in debates regardless of where they were. Due to the vast number of votes, was a real-time voting system instead of a solution based on the transmission of documents by email. That brought a high level of cyber security, consistency of processed data and fixed and mobile voting integration.

It proved necessary to implement the video conferencing system on a large scale and integrate it with the voting system. The video conferencing system was used extensively for meetings, briefings, conferences and international cooperation events. These solutions remain available should it be necessary to introduce the organisation of sessions of the Sejm and its bodies in a hybrid or remote format. In addition, solutions have been presented at the Chancellery of the Sejm to enable the remote working of employees who perform tasks that do not require permanent physical presence. As a result, the introduced legal and factual solutions increased the epidemic safety of MPs and those participating in the work of Parliament. That way, the remote communication tools were created and then used by the Sejm and its organs during the pandemic.

The administrative tools introduced in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic have made the work of parliaments more flexible. The remote communication instruments contributed to the improvement of international communication, enabling it to perform the function of a forum for public debate to a greater extent.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that the Sejm of the Republic of Poland is resilient to all kinds of crises thanks to the long-standing policy pursued by professional officials, communication with other parliaments and cooperation involving, among other things, the exchange of good practices.