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Issues affecting the functioning of parliamentary work during the COVID-19 pandemic (ECPRD Request No. 4498, update on the Question No. 4369)¹

Kwestie wpływające na przebieg prac parlamentarnych w czasie pandemii COVID-19 (wniosek ECPRD nr 4498, aktualizacja pytania nr 4369)

The authors present procedures and protective measures regarding the COVID-19 pandemic applicable in the Polish Sejm. Activities in this scope are carried out on the basis of 'Guidelines for the functioning of state offices and institutions during the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic in Poland'. The general rules include maintaining spatial distance, covering the mouth and nose, and the obligation to disinfect hands at the entrance to the building. Members can attend the plenary sitting in the Sejm building (in the plenary hall and in designated rooms) as well as remotely.

Keywords: coronavirus, ECPRD

Autorki przedstawiają procedury i środki bezpieczeństwa związane z zapobieganiem rozprzestrzenianiu się pandemii COVID-19 obowiązujące w Sejmie. Działania w tym zakresie są prowadzone zgodnie z „Wytycznymi dla funkcjonowania urzędów i instytucji państwowych w trakcie epidemii SARS-CoV-2 w Polsce”. Ogólne zasady obejmują m.in. zachowanie dystansu przestrzennego, zasłanianie ust i nosa oraz obowiązek dezynfekcji rąk przy wejściu do budynku. Posłowie mają możliwość uczestniczenia w posiedzeniu plenarnym w budynku Sejmu (w sali plenarnej oraz w wyznaczonych salach), a także zdalnie.

Słowa kluczowe: koronawirus, ECPRD

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¹ *Update on the Question No. 4369 – Issues affecting the functioning of parliamentary work during the COVID-19 pandemic (ECPRD Request No. 4498)* prepared on September 17, 2020, as part of cooperation in the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (Europejskie Centrum Badań Parlamentarnych i Dokumentacji); BAS-ZSP-1857/20.

In response to ECPRD Request No. 4498 regarding „Issues affecting the functioning of parliamentary work during the COVID-19 pandemic – update on the question No. 4369” the Bureau of Research provides the following information:

There have been no significant changes to the issues raised in request No. 4369 since April 2020 (see answers to ECPRD request No. 4369 as of 8 April 2020 attached to this reply).

On 26 March 2020 the resolution of the Sejm amending the Standing Orders of the Sejm was adopted² due to COVID-19 epidemic in Poland. A new section IIIa was added to the Standing Orders, concerning the use of electronic means of communication enabling the organisation of remote meetings and providing distance communication during meetings of the Sejm, committees and subcommittees. The amendments allow the Marshal of the Sejm to decide on organising such meetings. First plenary sitting of the Sejm under the amended Standing Orders took place on 26–27 March 2020.

All the meetings in the Polish Sejm are organised in accordance with governmental regulations contained in the Guidelines for the functioning of state offices and institutions during the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic in Poland (*Wytyczne dla funkcjonowania urzędów i instytucji państwowych w trakcie epidemii SARS-CoV-2 w Polsce*)³. General rules include i.a. maintaining spatial distance, recommendation to have protection covering the mouth and nose, obligation to disinfect hands at the entrance to the building.

During the plenary sitting of the Sejm, deputies are seated in several dedicated rooms (plenary hall and others). The distribution of seats is set by the Marshal of the Sejm, in consultation with representatives of parliamentary clubs and groups. The deputies are obliged not to change these seats during the meeting. The compliance of deputies with the distribution of seats is controlled by the Marshal's Guard. Deputies are also allowed to participate remotely in the plenary sitting. Deputies participating in the meetings in the Sejm buildings shall follow the recommendations of the Chief Sanitary Inspector in connection with the potential risk of infection with SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, such as: avoiding shaking hands, keeping a safe distance from other people, if possible – avoiding face to face conversations, avoiding gatherings.

² Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z 26 marca 2020 r. w sprawie zmiany Regulaminu Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej; consolidated version of the Standing Orders is available in English: http://oide.sejm.gov.pl/oide/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=14798:the-standing-orders-of-the-sejm-of-the-republic-of-poland&catid=57:prawo.

³ Available in Polish at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/rozwoj/urzedy-i-instytucje-panstwowe>.

Issues affecting the functioning of parliamentary work during the COVID-19 pandemic (ECPRD Request No. 4369)⁴

In response to ECPRD Request No. 4369 regarding „Issues affecting the functioning of parliamentary work during the COVID-19 pandemic” the Bureau of Research provides the following information:

1) Could you please list up those colleagues exposed to direct contact with Members of the Parliament during parliamentary sittings? Approximately how many colleagues can be affected as such?

According to information provided by directors of bureaus of the Chancellery of the Sejm, employees of several bureaus have direct contact with deputies during plenary sittings, mainly:

- Marshal's Guard – officers performing security duties, i.e. practically all those working in the premises of the Sejm on the day of the plenary sitting (as deputies have unlimited access to all buildings managed by the Chancellery of the Sejm). The number of officers working on such a day cannot be given for security reasons;
- IT Centre – employees servicing stationary voting systems; technical maintenance staff responsible for the functioning of voting systems who are at the Sejm during plenary meetings; employees working as a computer service staff who help deputies with mobile devices problems and other technical issues;
- Secretariat of the Sejm Sittings – the staff of the Department of Sittings of the Sejm Service (12 people).

2) Do your colleagues – or anyone else may be subject to direct meeting with MPs in the Parliament's building/chamber hall – wear mask, rubber gloves?

Protective equipment such as masks and gloves is provided to employees by the management of their bureaus. Wearing masks and rubber gloves is not mandatory, but most employees use them. Officers of the Marshal's Guard are obliged to wear masks and gloves.

3) What kind of protection – if any – do you provide for your colleagues (clerks) assisting directly the work of the speaker during plenary sittings? As far as we are concerned, a 1.5–2 meters physical distance – advised/requested by the World Health Organization against COVID-19's spread – cannot be

⁴ *Issues affecting the functioning of parliamentary work during the COVID-19 pandemic (ECPRD Request No. 4369)* prepared on April 8, 2020 as part of cooperation in the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (Europejskie Centrum Badań Parlamentarnych i Dokumentacji); BAS-ZSP-666/20.

maintained in the overwhelming majority of the parliaments, due to the architectural characteristics, work methods, etc.

As mentioned above, the employees of the Chancellery of the Sejm are equipped by the management of their bureaus with rubber gloves and protective masks. Moreover, disinfectants are located in their work places and some employees perform remote work at their place of residence. The Health and Safety Service of the Sejm in consultation with the Marshal's Guard introduced guidelines in accordance with the recommendations of the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate (*Główny Inspektorat Sanitarny*) and WHO. The maintenance of 1.5–2 meters of physical distance is implemented by reorganizing work stations, directing some employees for remote work and by installing plastic barriers in many places to protect against contact with other persons.

Different bureaus of the Chancellery of the Sejm applied additional rules and measures. For example, Marshal's Guard's personnel status has been reduced for the time being, officers in the increased risk group have been directed to remote work or are working at night shifts where they have limited contact with other people. In addition, there is a division into groups that work alternately.

As far as the IT staff is concerned, the layout of the Sejm plenary hall allows for 1.5–2 meters of physical distance between technical support staff and the Speaker of the Sejm. Keeping a safe distance from technical service is also possible in the case of a deputy who chairs parliamentary committees. All employees who can perform their duties remotely have been directed to work at their place of residence. Other employees perform tasks on a rotational and alternating basis. Unfortunately, due to the insufficient number of staff, it is not possible to limit the work of older employees to remote work only.

In the Secretariat of the Sejm Sitzings the alternating work schedule has been introduced (work in the premises of the Sejm and remotely). Older age employees, those with important health issues in the past or with reduced immunity are directed to work remotely in the first place. The employees working directly in the Sejm plenary hall next to the Marshal of the Sejm maintain the required distance of 1.5 m. Due to the architectural characteristics of the plenary hall the number of people working next to the Marshal of the Sejm has been reduced from 2 to 1 person.

4. What kind of protocol do you follow in case any colleagues would be infected with COVID-19? Do you have any counter-measures to prevent the likelihood of any failure of the Parliament's operation owing to potential consequences of COVID-19 at your Office?

The procedure for dealing with COVID-19 infection by an employee requires separating such a person from others, securing them by putting on a mask, notifying Chief Sanitary Inspectorate and following its further recommendations.

The undisturbed work of the Sejm is ensured with measures described in the answers to previous questions.