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

### **COMMUNICATION**

by

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**SPEECHES BY DISTINGUISHED VISITORS  
DURING A SESSION OF PARLIAMENT**

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The opportunity to address all the members at a plenary session of parliament is a rare privilege. In theory, it is reserved for members of Parliament and the Government.

Occasionally, others may be permitted to address one of the two chambers (the National Council or Council of States) or both chambers together (the United Federal Assembly). These are usually VIP visitors, such as representatives of foreign states or international organisations, high-ranking dignitaries or experts.

For a long time, the Chambers were reluctant to allow non-parliamentarians to speak before Parliament during a sitting. It was not until 1970 and the speech given by the Indian President Varahagiri Venkata Giri that a distinguished guest was able to address MPs for the first time. Twenty years later, in 1990, the Czech president Václav Havel followed in his footsteps. This was followed by Chilean President Eduardo Frei in 1995.

The decisions that led to these three speeches were based on special circumstances rather than on established rules.

In recent years, the Swiss Parliament has been faced with an increasing number of requests to allow such speeches, which is why it has been necessary to define a practice and system for making a decision by taking various criteria into account (category of speech and type of event, etc.).

By way of introduction, it should be noted that speeches by external speakers who are neither Members of Parliament nor Members of the Government are not regulated in the Parliament Act or in the rules of procedure for the Chambers. They are authorised by the presidents of the councils, who are alone in having the right to allow a guest access to the parliament chambers ([Art. 69 para. 1 Parliament Act](#)). Proposals are first discussed by the Office of the Federal Assembly or the Office of the National Council and/or the Office of the Council of States, depending on the occasion, and a decision is made or further consultations are held.

Official speeches during a session of the Swiss Parliament (in accordance with [Art. 2 of the Parliament Act](#)) can be divided into **two categories** :

- (i) speeches made during a formal sitting of the Council and
- (ii) speeches made outside a formal sitting of the Council.

Speeches made during a Council sitting may be made to the Federal Assembly (the United Chambers) or to an individual Council (the National Council or the Council of States). In both cases, permission to speak is given by the Council President. The speech is included in the programme for the sitting and appears in the Official Bulletin of proceedings.

Speeches made outside a Council sitting are given during a break in the sitting, e.g. during the lunch break. Once again, the Council President grants permission to speak. In contrast to speeches during sittings, these speeches are not included in the programme or reproduced in the Official Bulletin.

There are **two types of event** at which a speech may be given:

- (i) The first type of event comprises **anniversaries, important celebrations or similar events**.

Foreign speakers may, for example, address Parliament when Switzerland and another country or international organisation are commemorating long-standing diplomatic relations or when particular international agreements are being celebrated. Depending on the nature of the event, a number of people may be asked to make a speech. These occasions are rare; they are organised by the Swiss Parliament and the Government is invited to attend.

Since 1970, eleven such speeches have been given at this type of event.

- (ii) The second, less frequent, type of event includes **state visits, official working visits and courtesy visits**.

Here it is important to note that normally - and this is the first basic criterion - the Swiss Parliament does not seek to invite guests from foreign states, including representatives of international organisations, to come and speak before Parliament. When foreign guests visit, they usually take a seat in the diplomatic gallery and are greeted by the MPs, without actually having to make a speech.

Occasionally, however, a guest asks to speak before Parliament. In such cases, the bodies responsible must take a decision based on a number of criteria.

These criteria include

- **Switzerland's prevailing foreign policy interests** and the impact of what the guest may say on foreign policy matters;
- **exceptional political or historical circumstances**;
- **the support of a large majority of the political groups represented in Parliament**;
- **or the closeness and importance of the relationship** with the country or international organisation in question and the fact that the two parties **share common values**.

Since 1970, there have been only eight speeches of this type, three of which were given during a sitting of the United Federal Assembly (combined chambers).

Despite the criteria, permitting a distinguished guest to speak before parliament remains a political decision, carefully considered on a case-by-case basis, and the Swiss Parliament does not seem to want to increase the number of speeches of this type. They therefore remain an exception: 19 speeches since 1970 (link: [speakers invited by the Swiss Parliament](#)).

On the other hand, various formats are currently being examined that will enable MPs who are interested to meet an outside guest in camera during an official visit. When the President of the Ukrainian Parliament visited Switzerland in 2024, he was officially welcomed in the gallery. He then had the opportunity to speak 'off the record' to all the MPs who wished to attend, in a separate room. This exchange

took place behind closed doors and provided an opportunity to discuss issues of common interest.

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