

## OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENTATIONS AND DEBATES OF THE CONFERENCE OF SPEAKERS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION PARLIAMENTS

**Vilnius, 6-8 April 2014**

### OPENING SESSION

In his video address Mr José Manuel BARROSO, President of the European Commission, noted that 2014 was a special year because of the European Parliament elections and the appointment of a new Commission. The disconnect of citizens from EU-level politics was a serious problem and therefore national Parliaments had a significant role to play in encouraging the participation of Europeans in these elections. Mr BARROSO stressed that the existential threat to the euro had already been left behind, but many economic challenges remained, widespread unemployment being the most important one. On the other hand, the crisis in Ukraine showed that peace and stability could never be taken for granted. Ukrainians had been waving EU flags during the Maidan protests and this was an inspiration for the EU as well. Mr BARROSO thought that the *political dialogue* with national Parliaments was a success. He also noted that, at the EU level, democratic legitimacy and accountability was ensured by the European Parliament, while the role of national Parliaments was also very important, especially in economic issues. The main task of national Parliaments was to hold their governments rather than EU institutions accountable for the economic situation.

### SESSION I. ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS IN TACKLING THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL CRISIS

Mr Algirdas BUTKEVIČIUS, Prime Minister of the Republic of Lithuania, noted that the popularity of the EU had somewhat declined in Lithuania, which reflected a general trend throughout Europe. Although the economic crisis was the main reason for this decline, the citizens were also worried about losing track of the accountability of the EU governance process. Since the start of the crisis many new powers had been transferred to the EU therefore the engagement of national Parliaments had to increase as well. For example, national Parliaments could be given the right to propose legislation on economic and social issues. Mr BUTKEVIČIUS also underlined the importance of keeping the Economic and Monetary Union strong and expressed hope that Lithuania would join the euro in 2015. After the introduction of the euro in Estonia, its popularity increased by 20% since many of the anxieties of the citizens had proved unfounded. The Prime Minister believed that the current top priority of the EU was to address such issues as unemployment, especially youth unemployment, the mismatch of skills, energy security, and business competitiveness. Resurgent Russia was another challenge. According to Mr BUTKEVIČIUS, the EU would inevitably feel the pain of deteriorating relations with Russia, but the price of indifference would be much higher.

Mr Miguel Angel MARTÍNEZ MARTÍNEZ, Vice-President of the European Parliament, who spoke on behalf of H. E. Mr Martin SCHULZ, President of the European Parliament, stressed that the economic and financial crisis was the game changer in Europe. It fuelled populism and exposed weaknesses in the ability of Europe's democratic institutions to handle the pressures of economic difficulties. Therefore the current crisis was also a crisis of democracy. In efforts to handle the crisis, many measures had to be taken hastily because the markets could not wait. Hence they were often far from optimal, and citizens in many countries were feeling estranged by the decisions of the Troika and other intergovernmental bodies. The European Parliament, on the other hand, tried to be as active as possible in the area of economic governance and passed numerous significant pieces of legislation, such as on bank capital rules, short selling, trade in derivatives, hedge funds, financial supervision, late payments, cap on bonuses, etc. In March 2014 an agreement on the single resolution mechanism had been reached. Mr MARTÍNEZ MARTÍNEZ called on greater involvement of the European Parliament and national Parliaments in the new structures of economic governance, especially the intergovernmental ones. He welcomed the engagement of national Parliaments in the EU legislative process but thought this should be implemented through the control of the national executives. In other words, national Parliaments and the European Parliament had different powers and should be partners, rather than competitors. The European Parliamentary Week and the Article 13 interparliamentary conference were examples of positive cooperation in this regard.

Mr Mogens LYKKETOFT, Speaker of the Danish Folketing, stressed that unemployment was the biggest economic and social challenge in the EU at the moment. He questioned whether authorities had not gone too far by implementing harsh austerity measures. Young people had been disproportionately affected by austerity as the number of unemployed young people throughout Europe stood at 5.6 million. Social problems were undermining EU legitimacy and were fuelling populist parties that offered easy solutions. To get the EU out of the crisis, its competitiveness had to be increased, mainly by investing in education and conducting proactive labour policies. National politicians in the EU were blaming the EU for most of the problems. To reduce this blame game, national Parliaments should be involved in boosting their sense of ownership of the European political process. National Parliaments should have a 'national semester' in addition to the European Semester and should review the stability/convergence programmes before they were submitted to the European Commission. On the other hand, commissioners and European Parliament rapporteurs on specific legislative dossiers should also do their best to appear before national Parliaments for debate and scrutiny.

In the debate many Speakers noted that the legitimacy of EU decisions should be strengthened in the eyes of the citizens. This necessarily meant greater involvement of national Parliaments in economic decision-making at the EU level, for instance, in the context of the European Semester. Unemployment, especially that of young people, was an issue raised by many Speakers. Lack of lending to the real economy and the social dimension in economic policy-making were the other topics that received the Speakers' attention. Some spoke about the need to impose tough penalties on those Member States that broke the rules, otherwise economic and financial problems would persist while others suggested rewarding the Member States obeying the rules and thus achieving considerable positive results. The Speakers also stressed that the key role of national Parliaments was to control national budgets, therefore support was shown to the idea of a 'national semester'. With regard to the Interparliamentary Conference on Economic and Financial Governance, many Speakers expressed the view that the conference was the right forum to engage national Parliaments in the EU economic decision-making

process and that the conference should adopt non-binding conclusions and should have its own rules of procedure. Vice-President of the French National Assembly, Ms Laurence DUMONT, went further to suggest that the conference could in the future become the parliamentary arm of the euro area government. Speaking about the improvement of the economic governance, Ms DUMONT suggested considering the possibility to include the complementary additional children poverty indicator to the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure Scoreboard. President of the German Bundestag, Mr Norbert LAMMERT, on the other hand, warned against overstretching the conference as it had no legitimacy of its own. Mr LAMMERT proposed to amend the Presidency Conclusions of the Conference of Speakers by emphasising the existing macroeconomic differences among the Member States.

## SESSION II. FIVE YEARS AFTER THE COMING INTO FORCE OF THE TREATY OF LISBON: LESSONS OF SUBSIDIARITY CHECKS IN PARLIAMENTS

Mr Milan ŠTĚCH, Chairman of the Czech Senate, noted that despite the rising number of reasoned opinions, the impact of the system of subsidiarity checks was negligible, i.e. the effort did not match the results. Mr ŠTĚCH thought the European Commission should provide more nuanced and more accurate replies to the reasoned opinions. To increase the constructive engagement of national Parliaments in the EU legislative process, national Parliaments could be closer involved in the pre-legislative phase, for example when the Commission issues green or white papers. They could also have the right to invite the Commission to initiate legislation (the green card proposal). Other proposals concerned extending the deadline for submitting reasoned opinions, reducing the threshold for the yellow card, and extending the scrutiny procedure to the principle of proportionality. Mr ŠTĚCH noted that in the context of the political dialogue the Czech Senate had sent 182 opinions to the Commission but received very vague replies.

Mr Pietro GRASSO, President of the Italian Senate, emphasised that subsidiarity was one of the fundamental principles of European democracy and that national Parliaments should act as intermediaries between the citizens and the Union. Mr GRASSO noted that in Italy there had previously been little parliamentary oversight of the government in terms of EU policy-making. That is why the political dialogue with the Commission had been welcomed and it had increased the Italian Parliament's interest in EU affairs. However, Mr GRASSO was against using subsidiarity checks as a blocking instrument or a means to obstruct the functioning of the European Parliament or other European institutions. He thought national Parliaments should control their national governments while interparliamentary conferences could provide a platform to coordinate how such control was best implemented among different Parliaments. Mr GRASSO spoke in favour of strengthening the EU itself and favoured improved interparliamentary cooperation on economic governance and in the AFSJ. He particularly supported the idea of setting up the EPPO. In his view, the question was not about more or less Europe but about better Europe.

Ms Anouchka VAN MILTENBURG, Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Netherlands, stressed that one of the primary roles of the Dutch Parliament was to scrutinise the activities of the Dutch government. That is why the Dutch Parliament welcomed the creation of the system of subsidiarity checks as this provided national Parliaments with the opportunity to scrutinise the European executive, i.e. the Commission, and that is why the Dutch Parliament used this tool very often. According to Ms VAN MILTENBURG, there were a number of studies that had been carried out about the effectiveness of subsidiarity checks. The studies indicated that there was room for improvement, while improvements could be made without

changing the treaties. Moreover, efficient dialogue would have the potential to increase the support of the citizens for EU legislation. COSAC could be the forum to take up this task. For example, there could be a working group within COSAC that would explore the possibilities to improve the dialogue with the Commission. On the other hand, cooperation with the European Parliament should also be improved because there was too much competition between national Parliaments and the European Parliament. More efficient dialogue with the European Parliament would have three positive consequences: it would improve exchange of information, increase transparency, and increase the visibility of EU decision-making in the Member States.

Lord Timothy BOSWELL, Chairman of the European Union Select Committee of House of Lords of the United Kingdom, presented the report of the House of Lords on the role of national Parliaments in the EU<sup>1</sup>. The report concluded that the EU needed national Parliaments to play a more active role. This could happen without a treaty change and did not imply a power grab, i.e. the role of national Parliaments could be strengthened without reducing the powers of any other EU institution. With regard to the system of subsidiarity checks the House of Lords had made specific recommendations. First, the scope of the procedure was restrictive and should include the check of the proportionality principle as well. Second, the current time period (eight weeks) was too restrictive. Third, the effect of the system was too weak. However, checking subsidiarity was only one instrument in the toolkit of national Parliaments. There were other ways to ensure constructive engagement of national Parliaments, e.g. by putting in place the *green card* procedure and thus allowing national Parliaments to propose legislation.

In the ensuing debate many Speakers stressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of the system of subsidiarity checks, particularly with regard to the timeliness and content of the Commission's replies. Some noted that the introduction of the procedure improved the discussion on European issues in their Parliaments and more generally increased the legitimacy of EU policies at the national level. There were diverging opinions on whether the Commission should be directly accountable to national Parliaments. There was a tendency in the debate to stress the potential for national Parliaments to be engaged in the EU decision-making process more constructively, for example, by implementing the *green card* proposal. There were proposals for national Parliaments to increase their own interaction and networking to more effectively share information and best practices on how to improve their engagement at the EU level. Opinions were also divergent on the expansion of the system of subsidiarity checks to include evaluating compliance of EU legislation with the principle of proportionality. Generally, there was no broad support for the extension of the eight-week period for the subsidiarity check among Speakers of national Parliaments. However, those who took the floor on the subject expressed their support for the initiative.

### SESSION III. INTERPARLIAMENTARY COOPERATION WITH THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES

Session III started with a video address by Mr Oleksandr TURCHYNOV, Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. Mr TURCHYNOV noted that the unstable situation in Ukraine did not allow him to participate in the Conference. He recalled that it was the refusal of the ousted President Viktor YANUKOVICH to sign the Association Agreement with the EU that had sparked the EuroMaidan protests. He emphasised, however, that the driving force behind the EuroMaidan movement was the will of the Ukrainian people to liberate their country from

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldselect/ldeucom/151/15102.htm>

the profoundly corrupt and autocratic regime that had been put in place by President YANUKOVICH and sponsored by Russia. According to Mr TURCHYNOV, the signing of the political part of the Association Agreement on 21 March 2014 marked a historic milestone and a civilizational choice for his country. He urged the EU to abolish the visa restrictions for the citizens of Ukraine that were still in place to further bolster the pro-European choice of the Ukrainian people. Mr TURCHYNOV spoke of the ongoing efforts by Russia to destabilise the situation in South and East Ukraine and reaffirmed his country's determination to never recognise the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia. He warned the Speakers that Russia's current leadership was trying to restore its former empire and that such attempts were threatening the entire post-Cold War security architecture in Europe.

Ms Loreta GRAUŽINIENĖ, Speaker of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, started her speech by inviting the Speakers to pay tribute to the victims of the EuroMaidan protests in Ukraine by observing a moment of silence. In her speech Ms GRAUŽINIENĖ stressed that in the case of Lithuania it was integration with the EU that provided the vital impetus for the country's economic development and the consolidation of democratic reforms. Then the EU offered the opportunity to embark on a path towards closer political association and economic integration with the EU for the six Eastern Partnership countries. She recalled that after Lithuania had gained independence in 1990 the support of foreign partners was essential for Lithuania in its efforts to withstand the political, military and economic pressure by the failing Soviet empire in its fight for freedom. She therefore urged the international community to provide all possible assistance to Ukraine in the efforts to liberate itself from the resurgent and neo-imperialistic Russia. Ms GRAUŽINIENĖ also stressed that it was vital to keep the door open for the Eastern Partners to one day become members of the EU. She emphasised that the signing of the Association Agreements with the DCFTA components with Georgia and Moldova were the instruments that would guarantee the long-term security and prosperity of these countries. She also called for further strengthening of the trans-Atlantic partnership, the significance of which was highlighted and greatly appreciated in the periods of crisis such as the current one.

Ms Solvita ĀBOLTIŅA, Speaker of the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia, reminded that Latvia would assume the Presidency of the EU Council on 1 January 2015 and that Latvia was already preparing for the Eastern Partnership summit, due to take place in Riga in May 2015. Ms ĀBOLTIŅA cited Robert SCHUMAN who, after the 1956 events in Budapest, said that EU integration should advance not only in the interest of the free countries but also in order to welcome the people of the East who were subject to oppression at the time. The same principle should be valid today for those countries that were outside the zone of stability, democracy and prosperity. For the EU to be strong and secure, it had to strengthen its neighbours. The new Member States were examples to the Eastern Partners that they could perform just as well if they continued on the path of reform. Ms ĀBOLTIŅA considered that the approach to the Eastern Partners should be diversified while the policy should be guided by common values and principles. She outlined several priorities in this area. First, the remaining provisions of the Association Agreement needed to be signed with Ukraine. Second, agreements with Georgia and Moldova needed to be signed as soon as possible. Third, visa liberalisation was the next big step to take in efforts to bolster people-to-people contacts between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries. She also stressed that the EU did not want a new Cold War however it should not be careless and complacent. She called for a decisive response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

In his intervention Mr Igor CORMAN, Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, stressed that Moldova was undergoing a historical process which would determine its future. He congratulated the decision by the EU to abolish visas for Moldovan citizens and expressed hope that the Association Agreement would be ratified soon after its signature. He also expressed concern about the crisis in Ukraine, considering that it could have repercussions on Moldova's break-away region of Transnistria. He therefore called for international support to Moldova for it to withstand the current internal and external pressures.

Mr David USUPASHVILI, Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia, believed that the EU looked much more united in 2014 than it had been in 2008 when the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been occupied by Russia. He stressed that if a country was not punished for violating international law, this would be repeated time and time again. He therefore called on EU leaders not to allow the repetition of the Georgian scenario in the case of Ukraine. Mr USUPASHVILI reaffirmed that Georgia had maintained its pro-European course since 2012 and that the competition in Georgia was about who was more pro-Europe and more pro-NATO. He also said that 80 per cent of Georgians wanted to join NATO because Georgians were afraid that without NATO they would sooner or later disappear from the map of the world.

Mr Hovik ABRAHAMYAN, President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia, spoke positively of the cooperation with the EU and thought that the Euronest PA was an excellent platform to advance regional cooperation. He stressed that, despite choosing to join the Customs Union with Russia, Armenia was determined to advance relations with the EU as well. He thought the EU could help Armenia to implement the necessary reforms at home.

Mr Stanislav SHUSHKEVICH, former Speaker of the Supreme Council of Belarus, spoke about the undemocratic nature of the regime of President Alexander LUKASHENKO, the harassment of the democratic opposition and the ongoing imprisonment of certain opposition figures. He thought the current system in Belarus was only serving the interests of the Kremlin. He called on the EU not to forget Belarus and to continue efforts to transform it into a truly European country that respected European values.

In the ensuing debate unanimous solidarity with the Ukrainian people and condemnation of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine were expressed. Different proposals on how to bolster the pro-European choice of Ukraine and other Eastern Partners covered stepping up the visa liberalisation process, increasing aid to the Eastern Partners and continuing with the signature of the Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and the DCFTA part with Ukraine. It was also mentioned that Ukraine had been tricked in the 1990s when it signed the Budapest Memorandum because it gave up nuclear weapons in exchange for guarantees of its territorial integrity. It was also emphasised that enlargement had been the most successful external policy of the EU, and that, had it not been for the prospect of membership, the history of Central and Eastern European countries would have been very different. However, there was no agreement in the debate on whether the Eastern Partners should be given a clear membership perspective.

#### SESSION IV. INTERPARLIAMENTARY COOPERATION IN THE AREA OF FREEDOM, SECURITY AND JUSTICE

Before the start of session IV, Ms Barbara PRAMMER, President of the National Council of the Republic of Austria, took the floor to commemorate the International Roma Day. Ms

PRAMMER noted that there were 10 to 12 million Roma people in Europe, 50 per cent of who were EU citizens. Being one of the biggest ethnic minorities in the EU, Roma people were still often subjected to racism, social exclusion and discrimination. The 28 Member States had committed themselves to improving the social inclusion of Roma and some results were already visible: there were more Roma school children, more Roma employed, they had better access to housing and social services. However, more sustainable action was needed: equal access to education had to be ensured, the number of school drop-outs had to be reduced, sexual exploitation of Roma women had to be prevented.

Following the speech by Ms Barbara PRAMMER, the Conference of Speakers adopted by consensus the Declaration on the occasion of the International Roma Day as proposed by the Austrian Parliament and amended by delegations.

After the commemoration of the International Roma Day, session IV began with the presentation by Ms Ewa KOPACZ, Marshal of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland. Ms KOPACZ underlined that national Parliaments should be engaged in debating new priorities in the area of freedom, security and justice (AFSJ) after the expiration of the Stockholm multiannual programme. She recalled the communication from the Commission on the topic, released in March 2014 and entitled *An open and secure Europe: making it happen*<sup>2</sup>. In this communication the Commission underscored the importance of strengthening the Schengen area, improving the common asylum policy, reinforcing the channels for legal migration and simplifying EU visa policy. Ms KOPACZ stressed that the post-Stockholm priorities should aim to consolidate the existing policies. She also discussed the areas that should be given priority in the post-Stockholm period, namely: combating terrorism, radicalisation, cyber-crime and cross-border crime; while legal immigration should be encouraged, illegal immigration should be curbed; national minorities in the EU should be protected against discriminatory policies; an EPPO should be established but focus only on issues that could not be solved at the national level; external border protection had to be strengthened, especially taking into account the growing migratory flows. Ms KOPACZ also stressed that the joint parliamentary scrutiny of Europol, and in the future of Eurojust and the EPPO, should be implemented via a new interparliamentary conference, which could be built on the model of the Inter-Parliamentary Conference for the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy and the Interparliamentary Conference on Economic and Financial Governance of the European Union.

Mr Evangelos-Vasileios MEIMARAKIS, Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament, stressed that joint scrutiny of Europol would mark a new phase of cooperation between national Parliaments and the European Parliament. Speaking about the joint scrutiny model, proposed in the European Parliament's legislative resolution on Europol, he called the wording of the regulation 'more than satisfactory' and supported the creation of the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group. Mr MEIMARAKIS also called on national Parliaments to play an active role in the debate on future priorities in the AFSJ and stressed that the consolidation of the existing legislation should be the priority. Speaking about the specific policy areas, he mentioned the importance of data protection and cooperation among intelligence services. He also underlined the importance of managing illegal maritime migration flows. He noted that Greece and Italy found themselves at the centre of these flows and that EU Member States should shoulder the burden more

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<sup>2</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/e-library/documents/basic-documents/docs/an\\_open\\_and\\_secure\\_europe\\_-\\_making\\_it\\_happen\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/e-library/documents/basic-documents/docs/an_open_and_secure_europe_-_making_it_happen_en.pdf)



proportionally, since the final destination of the majority of the illegal immigrants was not Greece or Italy but the countries in Europe's North.

Ms Laura BOLDRINI, President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, emphasised that the main question in terms of the future AFSJ priorities should be what the costs and benefits of the policies were, and how they contributed to economic growth in the EU. In her presentation she concentrated on illegal immigration to Europe and specifically on the loss of life among the migrants. According to Ms BOLDRINI, every year there were hundreds of people dying on their way to Europe. It was estimated that since 2000 approximately 23,000 immigrants had died, the majority of them in the Mediterranean Sea. Ms BOLDRINI stressed that the Member States should share the burden more equally and also focus not only on strengthening border protection but also fighting the root causes of illegal immigration in the countries of origin. She also emphasised the importance of social rights of EU citizens and thought that the only way these rights could be guaranteed was by relaunching economic growth.

Mr Per WESTERBERG, Speaker of the Swedish Riksdag, noted that Sweden had accepted more refugees per capita than any other Member State and that most of the immigrants originated in the Mediterranean region. He encouraged national Parliaments to strive for a more active role in defining EU-level policy priorities and stressed that national Parliaments had a fundamental role to play in scrutinising their governments and serving as intermediaries between the people and the government. Moreover national Parliaments should cooperate and coordinate their activities in this effort. With regard to Europol's parliamentary scrutiny, Mr WESTERBERG stressed that national Parliaments and the European Parliament should be involved in the process on equal terms. However, in fostering interparliamentary cooperation, EU Parliaments should concentrate on the big picture and not on procedural matters.

In the ensuing debate many Speakers stressed the importance of ensuring effective democratic control of Europol and the involvement of national Parliaments on equal terms with the European Parliament. Furthermore, national Parliaments should be treated equally, regardless of whether they were unicameral or bicameral. Some Speakers supported the establishment of the EPPO, while others expressed their concern about the fact that the Commission had decided to maintain its original proposal on the matter, despite the *yellow card* issued by national Parliaments. The idea of setting up a new interparliamentary conference on the AFSJ was supported by the Speaker of the Hungarian Parliament, Mr János LATORCAI. The Italian delegation proposed to discuss the idea during the incoming Italian Presidency, while the European Parliament was against the idea of a new interparliamentary conference. Mr MARTÍNEZ MARTÍNEZ argued that the Joint Parliamentary Scrutiny Group would be more cost-effective but, if national Parliaments were not satisfied with the idea, they could always turn to their governments to address the issue in the Council.

During the closing session the Conference of Speakers debated and adopted by consensus the Presidency Conclusions as proposed by the Lithuanian Presidency and amended by the delegations<sup>3</sup>. The Presidency Conclusions together with the Declaration adopted on the occasion of the International Roma Day and the overview of the debates drafted by the Lithuanian Presidency will be sent to the addressees specified in Article 5 of the Stockholm

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<sup>3</sup> Lord BOSWELL OF AYNHO took the floor to express his personal sense of solidarity with the people of Ukraine, and the importance of cooperation between Parliaments. However, in the House of Lords context, the Speaker held a non-political office, and he was not entitled to sign up to the specific political sections of the draft Conclusions relating to the Eastern Partnership.



Guidelines. The documents will also be published on IPEX and the Presidency website of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania.

Finally, Ms Laura BOLDRINI, President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, thanked Ms Loreta GRAUŽINIENĖ, Speaker of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, for the excellent organisation of the Conference of Speakers in Vilnius. Ms BOLDRINI invited everyone to Rome for the next Conference of Speakers of European Union Parliaments due to take place in spring 2015.