

**The Conference of the Speakers of the EU
Parliaments
Bratislava, 26 May 2007**

ASSISTANCE TO PARLIAMENTS OF NEW AND EMERGING DEMOCRACIES

**Speech by Mr. Pavol Paška, Speaker of the National Council of the
Slovak Republic**

My dear colleagues,

The next topic is not new to you. The truth is that in the last few years some of you have already witnessed this matter being discussed several times within this honourable Conference. It was in Athens in 2003, when you heard of the importance of improving the coordination of the external activities of the EU parliaments and the best ways of doing so. Effective coordination must serve to better promote our common interests.

Based on the initiative of the Italian Camera dei Deputati in 2005, under the Danish presidency, our parliaments started to examine how to create and use a synergic effect arising from the international presence of the EU parliaments. Under the principle of voluntary participation, a well functioning working group was created which was able to deliver the results of its work in Copenhagen last year. However, the work on such an extensive issue cannot be allowed to end just by producing a report. It is necessary to transform the findings into concrete actions and results.

For this, we may rely on the always fully engaged Italian Chamber of Deputies and the hard working Danish Folketing. On this occasion I would like to thank the Task Force formed by the two before-mentioned parliaments and supplemented by the Slovak Národná rada for their continuous work, which has really proved that the Conference of the EU Speakers functions as a working process and not just as a few-days meeting once a year. But, whatever the results of the Task Force are, they would not be implementable without our political support, and the willingness of our partners to coordinate our parliaments' activities in the international field.

Now let me explain to you why I deemed it necessary to put this topic on our agenda again. If a Parliament is the central institution through which the will of the people is expressed, laws are passed and government is held to account, then we, Speakers of the EU Parliaments, have a huge responsibility to promote the role of our parliaments and help other parliaments to follow a good example. We do not want to export our traditions, procedures and approaches and apply them insensitively wherever in the world. As parliamentarians we are elected by our people, and are here in these rows only due to the will of those people. So we need to be sensitive to what they say. We are also listening to people in other countries where they elect our fellow colleagues. All these people, and common sense, are saying that it is best if the specific circumstances and conditions of given parliaments are taken into regard while any discussions are taking place. I am therefore of the opinion that it is better to have fewer projects, but of a higher standard and respecting these local particulars, than to compete amongst each other as to who can implement the most projects which in the end might not even satisfy the recipient parliaments. Simply put, we should be striving for quality rather than sheer quantity.

As you might have noticed, esteemed colleagues, I have not mentioned the title of this block so far. The reason is that I cannot identify this topic only with the term "assistance". Technical assistance usually implies exchange of experience, parliamentary procedures, organization, techniques, and communication with the media in the form of meetings, trainings, seminars, or studies. These always happen within a process involving at least two parliaments - donor and recipient. It is always a two way communication. The feedback from the recipient parliaments makes us see our strengths and weaknesses and we evolve through the process of delivering our experience further. But we cannot exclude bilateral meetings. It is often at bilateral meetings that we learn about an opportunity as to how to make our work better. So now I take the liberty to propose that we should talk further of the exchange of best practices, involving the exchange of experience and the transfer of know-how and techniques. Only if we talk about Parliament(s)-to-Parliament(s) cooperation in a very practical sense can we achieve concrete results and contribute to our aim, which is spreading democracy in the world.

Now I would like to highlight some of the achievements of the Task Force, which will contribute to the better coordination and exchange of information on what the EU parliaments are doing in this field. The Task Force, in cooperation with the Board of IPEX, assessed the Feasibility Study of the possible development within the IPEX website of a database on the exchange of best practices between the EU parliaments. Based on the study, it is conceivable to incorporate a database within the IPEX system as soon as the necessary technical requirements for its better functioning are fulfilled. Afterwards, we can establish a more structured and intensive cooperation with the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Development, and the Interparliamentary Union. Working more closely with both these bodies will allow us to exchange the information amongst more parliaments, and collect valuable information on the needs of potential beneficiaries.

It is crucial that through a coordinated approach we spend resources coming from our budgets wisely and efficiently. There are some parliaments that are very active in the field of spreading best practices and promoting democracy in the world, and some have a specific budget line for these projects. Let me inform you that Národná rada Slovenskej republiky has also prepared a Strategy paper on Interparliamentary Cooperation. This development plan for 2007 – 2008 defines the basic principles, forms and aims the Slovak Parliament will seek to implement in cooperation with other parliaments, with the document being revised every two years. It is the first time in the history of the Slovak Parliament that Interparliamentary Cooperation will have its own specific separate budget item within the overall state budget. So for 2008 I am ready to fight fiercely for the finances necessary to be allocated within this budget line. Of course, I am sure that the debates with the Ministry of Finance will be very interesting.

Whilst talking of financial resources I must not forget the European Commission. The Commission represents the Union in the world and manages the common budget. The combination of these two factors makes the Commission an ideal partner for EU parliaments in exchanging best practices. I would like to appeal to the Commission to commit themselves to help parliaments in this matter. Consulting in advance with the representatives of the parliamentary administrations when drafting programmes, projects, and strategies for technical assistance would result in a greater involvement of the EU parliaments and would enhance the effectiveness of their projects of cooperation. Moreover, we need to be informed timely about the Commission's programmes, calls for tender and any other relevant documentation and procedure for assistance. To this end, the IPEX website could offer a useful platform for exchange of such information.

I am really delighted to have a representative of the European Commission here in Bratislava. The presence of Commissioner Kovács at this Conference is for us one of the valuable and very needed signals from the Commission that has committed politically to work with the EU parliaments along the lines that have been described by us in previous correspondence. Exchanging information and ensuring consultation with the EU parliaments - also with regard to the access to the EU funding when involved in bilateral capacity-building projects with non-EU countries parliaments - must be an important goal for the Commission when it comes to implementing the External Relations policy of the EU.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me thank each Parliament and each parliamentarian that is involved in spreading the democratic practices and transfer of know-how of a well functioning democratic parliament. It is not an easy task and it brings an incredible additional workload alongside everyday duties. However, I believe that by approving the report prepared by the Task Force, this hard work will be rewarded and we will contribute to this agenda being brought to a higher political level in a concrete form.

Thank you.