

Conference of EU Speakers

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5. The contribution of the EU Parliaments to the enhancement of the global role of the EU

External relations of the European Union

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The signing of the Constitutional Treaty last October in Rome marked an important step forward in the process of the political construction of the European Union. In the hope that the ratification procedures can be speedily completed, let us make a start on sensibly preparing our countries for further progress in European unification.

Picking up the threads of a discourse begun in this forum, I should like to examine the role attributed to the Parliaments of the Union - in their capacity of fundamental links between the population and the national and European institutions - in contributing to the projection of the European Union outlook also in international relations. The road to European construction passes in the first instance through a strong continental identity shared by all the social and political components. I believe that the adoption of a constitutional text containing the lofty values of the charter of fundamental rights can contribute to the spread of a sense of shared belonging. The affirmation of the principles that have emerged in European history over the centuries has been and continues to represent

an essential contribution made by the European Union to the development of mankind as a whole.

The European Union, which was an extension of the foreign policy of the Member States, is itself gradually becoming one of the main actors on the international stage. Several important steps forward envisaged in the new Constitutional Treaty come to mind, such as the attribution of legal personality to the Union, the capacity to sign treaties and to seat on international fora in a position of equality with the other great international players. Also the establishment of the figure of the Foreign Minister comes to mind, for the time being only at the theoretical level, but hopefully it will soon take on a real dimension. It must be given substantial empowerment, such as the ability to speak on behalf of all 25 Member Countries in multilateral fora. Clearly, the political will of the individual Member States will represent the key through which new horizons may be opened up to the credibility of the Union's foreign policy, such as giving concreteness to the prospects of a European seat on the UN Security Council. The first step in this direction still remains the commitment to a prompt ratification of the Constitutional Treaty, which the Italian Parliament has already approved with a large majority and in which Parliaments are playing a primary role even in countries in which referenda are to be held.

For their part, the EU Parliaments must adopt the necessary tools to interpret this transformation so that the external clout of the Union can be perceived also at the parliamentary level. More than any other institution, Parliaments are the symbol of democracy, pluralism, the forum in which popular sovereignty is expressed to the highest degree. They are therefore by definition the bearers of the noblest values of democratic life. These values may be transmitted "by contact" through inter-parliamentary exchanges, thereby contributing to the spread of the practice of legality, pluralism, dialogue and tolerance throughout the world. There is no doubt that this operation will become exponentially more effective if it is

coordinated among the Union Parliaments that share the same values, creating synergisms that end up producing something that is much more than the sum of each individual action.

After addressing this issue in previous years, I think the time has come to contemplate concrete forms of coordination of the presence of EU parliaments in the world, not just as individual entities but along jointly agreed pathways. I should like to point out that this coordination in no way implies a reduction in individual autonomy, but it would actually enhance the activities of individual Parliaments through mutual support.

I am also of the opinion that the pluralist nature of the Parliaments, their function of accommodating conflicting viewpoints, must emerge as an added value for our initiatives, also in deepening the exchange on the great issues of the Union's external action on which shared priorities have been identified.

I refer to the processes of enlargement to new Member States; to the repercussions that these processes will have on geopolitical dynamics of the neighbouring areas and that have already been taken into consideration in the elaboration of the European Neighbourhood Policy; the alignment of the western Balkan countries to European standards, which demands the active and coherent commitment of all the subjects involved. These issues, which play an important strategic role in configuring the planet's future, must be increasingly present in the external action of our Parliaments. We have already done considerable work in these areas, for instance, through the creation of parliamentary counterparts to numerous regional fora. However, I believe that these tools can be made more effective by means of greater coordination.

I refer also to the Middle East and to the need for the strong demands coming from that region for a greater involvement of the Union to be finally transformed into concrete action to solve the conflict. Also in this field we could operate more actively as Parliaments, in the first instance in the

framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly in order to give greater impulse to the attainment of a just and lasting peace.

I refer also to relations with our great partners on the global scene, above all the United States, as well as to the consolidation of the trans-Atlantic dimension. It is necessary for our Parliaments to devote particular attention to this issue, also by boosting exchanges with the US representative bodies in order to contribute to bridging the gap that has widened between the public opinions on both sides of the Atlantic in recent years.

I refer also to the other great actors gradually playing an increasingly primary role on the international scene, such as China and India, with which it is necessary for Europe to interact to an increasing extent on an equal footing and not as an antagonist. The global challenges lying before us can be addressed only through multilateral concertation and the seeking of agreement.

Moreover, I think in general of Asia and Latin America with which the European Union has been engaging in fruitful dialogue. Relations exist also at parliamentary level and fora for dialogue already exist that can contribute to fostering mutual understanding.

Lastly, I mention Africa and the other areas that run the risk of being left out of the economic processes involved in globalization and of losing even more ground in the race for development. Union policy regarding aid to developing countries must be boosted above all in qualitative terms by guaranteeing greater effectiveness of action also by coordinating with the other forms of both multilateral and bilateral aid.

In all these areas the Parliaments of the Union can do much to boost cooperation and identify specific actions that make their presence in the world stronger and more coherent. I believe that this Conference has an

important role to play in promoting common initiatives in the respect of the autonomy of the individual Parliaments and of political plurality.

One area where I think we ought to initiate action is related to the coordination of the parliamentary delegations of the 25 Member States of the European Union in the framework of broader-based fora such as the Inter-parliamentary Union, the Parliamentary Assemblies of the Council of Europe, the WTO, OSCE, NATO and so on. These contexts can be used, albeit only informally and experimentally, to create coordination groups with a view to identifying themes of common interest on which to compare the respective opinions.

This kind of intra-European coordination is increasingly taking form at government level on international issues in various fora, both multilateral and in the EU embassies abroad, which is producing significant results. I think it is a method that can be useful in inspiring action also by the parliamentary institutions of the Union involved in common policy.

Another area in which we can promote forms of coordination is that of the assistance many Parliaments provide in support of other parliamentary administrations. This form of sharing best practices and of solidarity with less advanced countries has been developing in recent years with a wealth of useful and praiseworthy initiatives that nevertheless occasionally run the risk of creating duplications and waste in the absence of proper coordination among donors. I thus believe it is advisable to start work on eliminating these risks using coordination mechanisms involving as many Parliaments as possible among those providing assistance and those receiving it.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the role to be played by the Speakers Conference in this area. The Guidelines of the Conference as well as the Guidelines on inter-parliamentary cooperation approved at the Hague last July attribute to us the function of encouraging and coordinating inter-Parliamentary linkage activities, including those at

international level. I believe that we have the duty to fully exploit the opportunity offered us in the present forum to open up fresh horizons for our cooperation also in the field of external parliamentary relations, in the most suitable forms, which also take account of the debate animating our national institutions.