

## THE CONFERENCE OF SPEAKERS OF EUROPEAN UNION PARLIAMENTS

### SESSION V – STRENGTHENING POLITICAL DIALOGUE

#### Background note

The “political dialogue” begun in September 2006 is the main channel of direct interaction between national parliaments and EU institutions, notably the European Commission and the European Parliament.

Every year, national parliaments submit on average more than 600 contributions to the European Commission, of which just over 15% are reasoned opinions issued in connection with the early warning system related to subsidiarity checks.

This figure indicates that the new procedures introduced by the Lisbon Treaty to enhance the role of parliaments in European decision-making have become an embedded part of the political dialogue, even though no express provisions for dialogue are included in the Treaties. Essentially, then, the growing involvement of national parliaments in European affairs is not limited simply to controlling enforcement of the principle of subsidiarity, but has expanded also and especially to include discussions of the merits of the policy and legislative choices made by the European Union.

Yet this quantitative growth of the political dialogue has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in the impact of national parliaments on the actual content of the legislation and policies framed by the EU.

This is true above all with respect to the interaction with the European Commission, notably with respect to the quality of the Commission’s responses to the issues raised by national parliaments, which are a key indicator of the attention paid by the Commission to political dialogue.

Furthermore, the way in which national parliaments themselves have so far been using the instrument of political dialogue renders it difficult to measure its impact on the shaping of EU legislation and policies. Some parliaments see political dialogue as complementary to their functions of policy-setting and oversight over actions of their governments in Europe; others, especially in cases where the houses of parliament do not vote the confidence in the government, see it as their main channel for intervening independently in European affairs.

It should also be considered that most of the contributions of national parliaments concern legislative proposals that have already passed through inter-

institutional negotiations at the European level, and have therefore reached an advanced state of progress such that it is difficult to assess whether or to what extent the contributions of national parliaments have been taken on board.

As the European Commission has repeatedly pointed out, little use has been made of political dialogue in the pre-legislative stage, especially as regards the consultation and strategy documents circulated by the Commission, which, however, is precisely the moment when national parliaments have the best opportunity to influence policies as they are being developed.

The question, then, is whether and to what extent First Vice-President Timmermans's actions, done on the behalf of the new European Commission, are capable of effectively enhancing the quality of the political dialogue.

Vice-President Timmermans made particular recommendations to the other members of the European Commission to increase the number of meetings with national parliaments for the discussion of the legislative proposals and other initiatives of the Commission, to intervene personally in the preparation of the replies they give to the contributions of the national parliaments, and to make sure that the responses they offer to the issues thus raised are detailed and expressed in political rather than bureaucratic terms.

In light of the foregoing observations, the session could focus upon the following salient points:

- a) Whether political dialogue at the pre-legislative phase of European decision-making process should be intensified, and if so, how.
- b) Whether any specific areas or subjects suggest themselves as particularly useful for strengthening the links between national parliaments and the European Commission (for example – and as proposed by the Commission itself – the European semester for the *ex-ante* coordination of economic and budgetary policies).
- c) Whether Vice-President Timmermans's initiatives to make Commissioners engage more deeply and regularly with national parliaments will lead to a real leap forward in political dialogue with the European Commission.
- d) Whether any national parliament is building up a set of practices or procedures that it might want to draw to the attention of other national parliaments, or possibly share with them.