

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

RAISING NATIONAL EUROPEAN AWARENESS

**Speech by Mr. Manuel dos Santos,
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(Transcript)**

Mr. President of the Slovak National Council, Commissioner Kovács, dear colleagues, dear guests,

I will be very brief because the most important things have already been referred to by our President and also by Commissioner Kovács. United in diversity, European scrutiny, fighting the democratic deficit, involving citizens in the integration process, more transparent decision-making and more accountable processes; these are the key guidelines that have been laid down by the President of Slovak National Council and these are indeed the key pillars that should be responsible for permanent task of raising European awareness.

We are faced with the structural problems. This is a problem that will not be solved once and for all; it is a constant and ongoing problem, it is a problem that is part of our culture civilisation, and therefore it is important that it is extended over time and goes way beyond the mere solution of the problems that the European Union faces. When the Constitutional Treaty is dealt with, it is dealt with and this is it, main pieces of legislation that are drawn up will come into force, will be applicable. But in fact the actual task of raising awareness is a permanent ongoing task, and it is a structural process.

A lot is said about democratic deficit and usually the main course of this deficit is considered to be lack of information. This is not my personal opinion, however. The European institutions, the Parliament, which I represent, have made major efforts and

great deal of pressure in order to provide varied information and to supply also a lot of it in political priorities defined by Parliament for the second part of its mandate that is very clearly focused on raising European awareness. One of them is to step up the budget and also in terms of political resources, sometimes even more important than budget resources.

With the view to promoting our communication policy, the offices located in all member states are executing the important task of being in contact with citizens, drafting reports, providing information, organising meetings, conferences, promoting study visits to the Parliament and to the European institutions. The case of Bratislava for example, our office in here is an excellent example of a very efficient work. And we also have a policy for people to visit the European Parliament, and this will be linked to the creation of a Museum on Europe quite soon.

So, major efforts have been made to be more in contact with the citizens and to raise their awareness. Therefore, in my view the question of democratic deficit is not just the question of information; it is question of political will. Citizens do not understand that the political elite are not able to go from words to action. Yesterday, when we were discussing the question of the Constitutional Treaty, I thought that if the world was just us here in this room, then there would be no problem at all. There might be one or two who are not totally in agreement, but basically there would be no problem. But the problem arises, when we are unable to go from words to action, and frequently we defend things in words, but we are unable to apply them in practical action. And this is what people do not understand.

Negative reaction that some people have to the Constitutional Treaty has in fact less to do with the very content of the Treaty than with this feeling of frustration, this feeling of not understanding and not accepting that there is a lack of political will. As the Commissionaire Kovács said a short while ago, the important thing is to obtain results, it is important that a policy produces results that people can understand, the results that obviously will defend and promote key values of the Community; the values of solidarity,

cohesion, peace, democracy and development. These are things that are important for citizens. And when they demonstrate that they do not feel that they belong to this new reality, that are jeopardizing their condition as national citizens, what they are doing of course is demonstrating that there is this deficit.

National parliaments therefore can play an exceedingly important role here. I think there should be no conflict between national parliaments and the European Parliament. I think things are very clearly defined. National parliaments have this fundamental role; I repeat this, fundamental role to scrutinize and to accompany the activities of their governments in their own countries and what comes back to them from the European policy. This is clearly the aim of national parliaments. And there is another capacity, the capacity to intervene. This can only be solved if you have this interparliamentary cooperation that we are discussing here today.

So, the key part in all this is the question of transparency and how the institutions actually function. When I say transparency and functioning, I am talking about all of them, because all affect people in their day-to-day life. Just talking about the European Parliament, obviously, this probably is the most open institution that exist, where everything is known and everything is discussed. The Council is not yet so open, there are more murky areas that people do not fully understand yet and there are other bodies, as well, for example the Committee of Regions, the Economic and Social Committee, and particularly the European Central Bank. I am not talking about the independence of the Bank here, obviously that has to be safeguarded and that is enshrined in the Treaties, but many European citizens frequently do not understand because it is not explained to them. I am not criticizing the position taken by the European Central Bank in this respect, but it is important that citizens understand and that accountability becomes recognised by citizens. It is important that people understand the nature and the reasons for the monetary policies that are implemented in Europe, and that they can see that it is in line with their expectations and their ambitions. So all this together, as I say, it is not something that can be achieved in one day, it is a global and ongoing, permanent task of a structural nature. And that, I think, is very

fundamental for Europe.

As I said, a month ago, the Parliament has defined among its priorities two that are linked to raising European awareness. The stepping up of the resources for the communication policy, and not only resources, but also the very quality of this communication is going to be improved. Better legislation for example in line with the Legislative and Working Programme approved by the Commission and presented to the European Parliament and national parliaments, this is also very important. Here, we have a closer link with how the institutional treaty, therefore we have to link up very carefully the different legislative instruments that are approved and the corresponding pieces of legislation in different countries. But the idea is that the legislation be better, be easier to understand and better taken aboard by citizens, and that is a very important aspect in terms of improving awareness. The European Parliament is coupling the efforts made by the Commission, giving it its fullest backing and we feel sure that in the near future things will be improved.

Let me conclude with a word of optimism. I think the European awareness has indeed been improving significantly in recent times. And even some decisions that we may not be in agreement with, electorates tend to decide well and I would say than in terms of some recent decisions taken, particularly in terms of rejecting the Constitutional Treaty, reveal that people are becoming more aware and therefore there is this opportunity for political elites to change and to move closer to its citizens.

Thank you very much.