

Speech by Foreign Minister Bert Koenders at a Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union, COSAC (The Hague, 8 February 2016)

Chairs of the Committees on European Affairs, distinguished parliamentary colleagues,

I'd like to welcome COSAC back to our country for the fourth time since its foundation during the 12th Netherlands Presidency of the EU Council.

When your conference first met here 25 years ago, the list of participants fit on only two sheets of paper, and the outgoing Luxembourg Presidency had just submitted a consolidated outline for a Treaty for the European Union. The meeting's agenda covered the implications of a political and economic union for the legislative powers, and the capacity of national parliaments to exercise effective democratic control over community decisions.

In 1997, the then Dutch foreign minister, Hans van Mierlo, presented the state of negotiations just before the final IGC on the new treaty that took place in Amsterdam. And your conference underlined the importance of transparency, in order to bring the EU closer to its citizens.

And in 2004, your conference laid the basis for the mutual coordination of national subsidiarity checks: the yellow card system.

All this goes to show that your debates are often ahead of their time! I hope that applies to today. However, I have to say that this makes me a bit nervous about our debate this afternoon. After all, politicians like to debate issues they can solve at short notice! But joking aside, your foresight shows your immeasurable value. Each of the conferences I've mentioned has laid the groundwork for important milestones in terms of democratic legitimacy, accountability and your own role as national parliaments in conjunction with the EP. Not a debate in this house goes by when I am not asked to reflect on these topics in some shape or form.

Ladies and gentlemen, before I reflect further on these issues, let me say a few words about our Presidency. The Dutch EU Presidency is navigating turbulent waters. Globalisation and digitisation may have brought the world closer together, but given today's many political conflicts I can also understand those who feel it is close to falling apart. The dreadful attacks in Paris and the instability at our borders have struck at the very heart of Europe. And the migration crisis seems to be tearing away the fabric of EU cooperation. Let's be honest: in recent months we've glimpsed the prospect – however remote – of the EU succumbing to political regression or even fragmentation. But let me say this: It is a fiction that one would gain effectiveness and ability to reach one's political goals by giving up shared sovereignty. Gaining room for manoeuvre sounds appealing but is meaningless when it yields no results. Without a seat at the table where decisions are made one becomes dependent and is forced to become a "follower". In order to have a maximum say on how our future is shaped, we have to be ready to compromise.

Today the EU is undergoing a series of stress tests. Although I can't predict the state of our Union at the end of our Presidency, I promise you all that we'll do our very best to leave it in better shape than we found it. Today we are all faced with a question: what kind of Union do we want to be? What kind of Union do we want to leave to our children? The Dutch Presidency will have to address some urgent and immediate issues, but we will work hard not to let short-term crises eclipse longer-term priorities.

During the euro crisis many of us did what was necessary, but sometimes it seems we've forgotten about the pain and the cost. Europe is built not only on the Brussels institutions, but also – and above all – on its citizens. And they are becoming increasingly unconvinced of our ability to tackle the problems we face today. This is the paradox of our time: just as the globalised nature of our problems demands practical and when necessary European and multilateral solutions, people are turning to the nation state as a source of protection and civic pride. Without fail, euroscepticism is resulting in electoral gains – in the Netherlands and abroad. In my country there is little support at present for much deeper and further integration.

The migration crisis is jeopardising our common goals and values – in particular the integrity and achievements of the Schengen system. As a result, public support for European cooperation is waning. So it's now more essential than ever to show unity in our approach. And an appeal for solidarity from member states under pressure should be answered with firm solidarity by all. We are faced with an overwhelming influx of migrants, border security failures and the failure of the Dublin system. There is a lack of a sense of urgency when it comes to implementing the agreements we've made on registration and identification, and on fair distribution. The crisis is affecting the relations between member states. It has an impact on solidarity in all its forms, and on the functioning of Schengen itself. Unilateral measures will only further undermine unity, and create additional tensions.

In other words: Europe also on this issue needs to get its mojo back. This Union relies on the support of its citizens. We need to regain their confidence. The confidence that we can measure up to the challenges of our time and deliver. That starts with focusing on the essentials.

In our Presidency we will therefore limit ourselves to four main issues that lie at the heart of Europe's current challenges:

1. Migration and international security. The influx of refugees will continue to dominate the European agenda. Our policy can be summed up in three words: implementation, implementation, implementation.

The informal meeting of the ministers of Foreign Affairs in Amsterdam last weekend has been another step in the difficult process of tackling the migration crisis. During a presidency seminar in Strasbourg last week we have examined how migration and the rule of law within Europe interact. Our Union is also a Union of values - and we must act accordingly.

2. The Single Market as job creator and innovator. Many people think that the Single Market is somehow complete. We all know that's not true. We will continue the vital work of promoting a deeper and fairer Single Market. This means making the digital market more transparent and make sure that consumers can buy products and services on the internet throughout Europe without national limitations. A fairer internal market means equal pay for equal work all across the Union.

3. Sound European finances and a robust eurozone. Maintaining financial and economic stability requires our ongoing attention. We must press ahead with structural reforms for modern economies and healthy budgets. Another key to public confidence is effective governance in all member states. That is the foundation of a strong EMU. And that's why I keep pressing the point that European discussions need to focus on Better Governance. We need to discuss and address weaknesses in this area. We must understand that 'Brussels' can't solve all our problems: a strong Union needs strong member states. We also aim to use our Presidency to start an open and inclusive debate on a new and reformed Multiannual Financial Framework. And I am glad Commissioner Georgieva mentioned it. We also aim to use our Presidency to start an open and inclusive debate on a new and reformed Multiannual Financial Framework. In the high level meeting the week before last in Amsterdam, where some of you were present, we have managed to stir up the debate and get the stream of creative and out-of-the box ideas flowing. Let's try to keep this spirit alive, and avoid in the next MFF discussion a repetition of the past.

4. A forward-looking policy on climate and energy. We will move forward with the implementation of the 2030 Climate and Energy Package – mainly through the discussion of the ETS revision – and we'll continue working to strengthen the other pillars of the Energy Union as well.

5. And last but not least: We need to fix the bond between our citizens and the EU institutions.

In the light of the challenges and tensions I've described, it is crucial to focus on making connections during the Dutch Presidency. Connections between the member states and the institutions. Connections between the EU and the European people. Many are critical of the EU, but many also realise that no European country can face today's challenges alone. In Europe we are stronger together, and ultimately there's more that unites us than divides us. That goes for our trade, our environment, our climate, our energy and, not least, our peace, security and prosperity.

So if we want a Union that connects. And we can't even think about tackling this challenge without you. Because the key role here is for the national parliaments: closer relations between parliaments themselves, and close dialogue between national parliaments and the European Parliament and Commission. When I speak to national parliamentarians they sometimes say, 'The EP isn't interested in us.' I don't believe that's true. Nor do I believe that it's a competition. Together you represent 500 million Europeans. Together you can shape a true demos, connecting with citizens – not only consumers – and fulfilling your democratic task of ensuring checks and balances.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The EU envisaged by its founding fathers has evolved greatly. And the challenges today are very different to those immediately after 1945. We are well beyond 'Monnet version 1.0'. We are trying to build Monnet version 3.0, and it's not easy. We have to balance the need for effectiveness and democratic legitimacy. And we have to balance the wish of the people to do things at national level where possible with the need to tackle problems at European level when they demand a common approach. Together we must find that balance. Not by dreaming, but by working hard and working together.

The treaties are quite clear: there are two pillars of democratic legitimacy in our Union. First there's the EU pillar: the European Parliament, which is directly elected in EU elections. And second, there's the national pillar: the Council and the member states' parliaments, elected in national elections. And whereas the EP has been given a much stronger role in recent decades, developing into a fully fledged parliament with legislative and control powers, the role of national parliaments in EU decision-making has not evolved in the same way. We believe there is room for improvement here. We believe that their role should be expanded in several ways:

1. Firstly via a stronger direct role in the EU decision-making process itself; that is, through the enhanced use of yellow and orange cards and the 'structured dialogue' with the Commission: sending written input to the Commission and/or inviting the Commission to visit national parliaments. And they do that a lot.

2. But also via a stronger indirect role in EU decision-making; that is, by involving parliaments more in the national process of determining a member state's position in the Council.

3. And lastly via enhanced interparliamentary cooperation – not only among yourselves, in the framework of COSAC, but also in the context of the 'Article 13 Conference'. These are powerful forums for collaboration, which is why I'm delighted to be here among you today.

We believe national parliaments are the bridge to the national electorate – it's your voice that needs to be heard, at national and EU level. So we encourage you to take forward the work you're doing on all these points. And where appropriate, we will work to further strengthen your role.

In that regard of course we study and follow with considerable interest the proposals published as part of the New Settlement for the United Kingdom. The issues at stake are not just important to the UK but should make for a better deal for all of us. The 'red card' option for a majority of 55 percent of national parliaments will certainly add an extra dimension to the role of national parliaments in the European decision making process. I am sure this will further increase the Union's democratic legitimacy.

But ultimately this is only part of the equation. I've said already that we need broad public support for the choices we make. One of the key questions we need to answer is how to restore public confidence in our ability – at both the national and European levels of the EU – to solve today's problems. Practically, as far as EU decision-making is concerned, it's up to the institutions to answer this question: the Council, the Commission and the European Parliament. I won't speak for the European Parliament or the Commission today. But as Council Presidency holder, I would like to talk about the role of the Council and why it can increase public confidence and connect with citizens.

A key word in this respect is transparency – a traditional pillar of Dutch EU policy. The EU will remain opaque and inaccessible if we fail to open the windows and give the public a good look inside. That means not only giving people tools to locate information swiftly, but also helping them understand the information they find. I believe that by increasing transparency, we can also help national parliaments fulfil their role, and thus improve public confidence in EU policymaking.

This is why our Presidency has put transparency on top of the agenda of the General Affairs Council. Increasing transparency will help national parliaments control their respective governments. We will press for a register of delegated acts and a dedicated database on the state of play in different legislative dossiers. What's more, on 1 June 2016 we will be hosting 'Transparency Camp Europe'. This event will bring together the diverse fields of open data and IT, journalism, academia, politics, government and start-ups, with one simple aim: to improve European transparency through the use of open data.

Public – and thus transparent – procedures will help national parliaments exert influence on EU decision-making. We want the Council to practice what it preaches and set the right example. The agreements on transparency set out in the Interinstitutional Agreement on better law-making (IIA) will therefore be our first focus point. Arrangements regarding Trilogues, for example, and the agreement regarding the mutual exchange of views and information between the Council and the Parliament during the legislative process. I very much hope that the IIA will be signed into law by the three institutions soon, so that we can start implementing it.

I would like to thank you and I wish you success and close cooperation in your meeting today.