

Speech by Maroš Šefčovič, European Commission Vice-President for Inter-institutional Relations and Administration

At the COSAC chairpersons' meeting, 27 January 2014

Hellenic Parliament, Greece

Re-connecting Europe with its citizens: the role of the institutions

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Honourable Members,

It was the Greek story teller Aesop who first said 'United we stand, divided we fall'.

More than 2000 years after Aesop's life, it is a phrase that continues to have great resonance, in particular in relation to the EU.

There are some who would like to see more division than unity in today's EU –it is a growing perception that could risk undermining the work of the EU and all it has achieved.

This year, however, we have a chance to set the record straight.

Because 2014 is, as you all know, a European election year.

Many of the themes that are likely to dominate the polls in May are already clear: they range from Europe's response to the crisis, over deeper economic and political union to more fundamental questions about the way in which the EU is run and the balance of responsibility between the institutions.

Some of these themes show indeed that these are challenging times for Europe, some people even see a crisis of confidence and trust. The EU is often seen as disconnected and distant, of little relevance to the lives of 'ordinary' Europeans.

The decision-making process is a complex process, and one that seeks to find consensus among many different players, often with widely differing view.

Complexity in itself is not an insurmountable obstacle, if the process is clearly explained – but of course this is rarely the case!

The European elections certainly provide us with a great opportunity to set the record straight, but this is by no means simply the role of the European Parliament and its MEPs.

We all of us have a part to play – in the Commission, Council, European Council, but also you as representatives of National Parliaments – in encouraging citizens to vote in the elections, and to do so with a much clearer understanding of what exactly it is that they are voting for!

Because that is one of the most persistent myths about European policy-making –that decisions are made in Brussels and imposed on governments whether they like them or not (at least when they are seen as 'bad' decisions, anyway).

It doesn't help, of course, that there is often little recognition of the role played by the EU when 'good' decisions are made; it is all too common for the consensus reached in Brussels to have disintegrated into 28 national 'victories for common sense' by the time an issue reaches the national media.

This 'Brusselisation' of failure and nationalisation of success has gone a long way towards perpetuating some of the most harmful myths about the EU project which, let us not forget, has resulted in the most peaceful and prosperous period in our continent's long history.

And what better year than 2014 – the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War – to take a look back at that history to try to make sense of just what the EU has brought?

Why not try to make a quick mental calculation, comparing life in the first 50 years of the last century to life in the second 50?

The EU as we know it was forged in the fires of two world wars; it was born from a world dominated and nearly destroyed by xenophobia, nationalism and anti-Semitism; without that tragic history, we would not have today's EU.

For the older generation of Europeans, those who lived through these conflicts or their immediate aftermath, the EU has helped bring peace and stability – even if for some it is hard to forget the old conflicts and antagonisms.

For the younger generations, those who have grown up knowing only peace in a unified Europe, the EU has a whole lot more to offer

Like the freedom to travel and holiday where they like or to study and work where they like; these are things that would be far harder without the EU, and are concrete rights and privileges that we should do more to remind people of.

This year we are also celebrating the 10th anniversary of the biggest enlargement of the EU, which brought ten new Member States to our family. It has led to unprecedented growth and prosperity for all EU Member States. It has secured freedom, democracy, protection of human rights and rule of law in countries in the new Member States – values, of which their citizens were stripped of for more than 40 years and for which they fought to re-enter Europe.

For millions of citizens like me personally, who have lived behind the Iron curtain, this was the biggest achievement: to become member of a family based on values like democracy, freedom of expression, protection of minorities etc.

With this unprecedented enlargement, the EU has also grown to become the largest trading block in the world. We have defended this position successfully until now !

Europe has also managed to introduce a single currency, the Euro, though not all of its Member States are yet part of it. It has led to stability and prosperity. Yes, we have faced an economic and financial crisis. But the Euro currency was not at its origin. There have been flaws in the construction of the economic and monetary union. We are addressing all these flaws and are successfully exiting the crisis. Look at Ireland, Spain and Portugal. Look here at Athens, at Greece. Yes, there are a lot of things still to be done. But there are enormous and important efforts being done, also thanks to the important and constructive role of national parliaments.

There are of course many, many other examples that I could give of how working together at the European level brings massive benefits to citizens.

Most EU countries are too small to compete effectively on the global stage, but the single market allows them all to do just that, bringing economic growth, lower prices, better services and greater competition.

And while I think its limiting to look at the EU purely in monetary terms, there is no escaping the fact that Europe DOES add value.

That's why the Confederation of British Industry estimates that EU membership has brought the equivalent of £3000 a year for each and every UK household, and why similar analyses in other countries also show significant monetary benefits to EU membership.

I think it's important to underline that, like the CBI, many of those who highlight the benefits of EU membership are not linked to the EU institutions at all – they are the businesses, the schools, the researchers, the holidaymakers – the very people for whom the EU was created in the first place!

Take the City of London who has warned about the hugely negative effects of a possible exit of the UK from the EU, highlighting the many advantages of the single market for the British economy. Take the YouTube shots of Dutch farmers, for instance, stressing the advantages of the common agricultural policy.

This doesn't mean we should bury our heads in the sand, either, and pretend that everything is rosy.

There are, of course, still plenty of things that we can indeed improve, plenty of ways we can work more effectively.

And we're already doing just that, from improving transparency and democratic accountability to cutting red tape.

But we need to do it together.

Cutting red tape is a perfect example: we now have one of the most open and transparent policy processes in the world, with impact assessments and public consultations on

legislative proposals that are designed to take on board the widest possible range of views ensure that new legislation is an improvement on the old.

This extensive preparatory work also serves to ensure that we only make proposals where they are really needed, in compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

And for this we of course count on the valuable scrutiny work carried out by your chambers, as part of our political dialogue and subsidiarity control mechanism.

But we also all well know that red tape can be added through introducing amendments in the EU decision making process, or gold plated by governments when transposed into national law.

We have to make sure that we don't undermine our own efforts to do better, and to make sure that the message we send to citizens is clear and consistent: we are working for you!

And let's not forget that we also have many ways of getting citizens directly involved in this process.

The European Citizens' Initiative is perhaps the most high-profile of these but it is by no means the only one.

For example, there are the public consultations and hearings I just mentioned, giving citizens a chance to have their say on policy proposals before they have even been drawn up.

And we're continuing with our efforts to make the EU decision-making process more transparent and easy to understand, as well as more democratically accountable, through measures such as the transparency portal and register.

Incidentally, I'm glad to say that the public hearing for the first ECI to collect a million signatures (Right2Water) will be taking place next month in Brussels, a debate that will feed into the Commission's decision on whether or not to propose legislation.

There have so far been three ECIs that have gathered over a million signatures, and over 20 in total on a very wide range of topics. The ECI shows that Europe is willing and ready to listen to the direct concerns of citizens, to take action on the things that really matter to them, and I encourage all of you to promote this democratic tool to citizens in your own countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen

One hundred years ago, Europe was heading for a devastating and disastrous conflict that would set us back for half a century or more.

Driving Europe towards that conflict were the extreme forces I mentioned before – people motivated not by a desire for peace and prosperity but rather by hatred, distrust, deceit and ambition.

Those forces still exist today – albeit in many different shapes and sizes, perhaps – and they are still a threat to the Europe that we have created together out of the ashes of conflict.

That's why we all of us have a duty to restore the trust in the EU that is often so sorely lacking – and which is being exploited by those very forces.

We need to learn the lessons from the past, and not cave in once again to those who would set us against each other rather than working with other for the betterment of all.

This is what we have achieved over the last 60 years – so let's be proud of that achievement – and above all remain united! Let's not take for granted all these achievements but cherish them every day new. Look around the world, to the many conflict regions. People from third countries look at us with great admiration that we are living in a stable union of prosperity, democracy and solidarity.

Our construction is attractive, we just have to look at our Eastern neighbours and look what is happening there.

Thank you for your attention.