

Intervention by Mr Laurent FABIUS, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of France

**50th Meeting of the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs
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European Integration and Democracy: the Role of Parliaments

Madam Speaker of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, Loreta GRAUŽINIENĖ,
Mr Gediminas KIRKILAS, Deputy Speaker, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs,
Members of the national Parliaments and the European Parliament,
Mr Maroš ŠEFČOVIČ, Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of inter-institutional relations and administration,

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

First of all, I want to express how pleased and honoured I am to be involved in your work which I hold in high esteem. I subscribe under the importance of inter-parliamentary cooperation which began a few years ago and has been expanding ever since.

In 1979, for the first time in history, European citizens elected representatives to the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. This was a pivotal date. The legitimacy of the decision-making process of the EU was at stake, and this also meant that the question of the role of national Parliaments in Europe would be raised in future.

Ten years later, in 1989, in my capacity as President of the French National Assembly, I proposed creating COSAC with the role of national Parliaments in mind. The aim was twofold: to allow national Parliaments to participate in the life of what we did not yet call the European Union, and to promote cooperation among national Parliaments, on the one hand, and between national Parliaments and the European Parliament, on the other.

Similarly to you, I had a belief that national Parliaments had an important role to play in the proper functioning of the EU. Interparliamentary cooperation provides EU decisions with greater legitimacy and allows to better take into account the expectations of the people.

The first meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Conference was organised by the National Assembly in November 1989. The Berlin Wall had only just fallen. The European Union consisted of as few as 12 Member States; the parliamentarians' meeting in Paris considered strengthening of parliamentary oversight of European affairs and debated on their role in the European Union.

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Nearly 25 years on, we are participating in the 50th meeting of COSAC today. The reasons that justified the creation of COSAC are still valid and are probably even more pertinent today, given the developments in the late 1980s that reshaped the European Union. The EU indeed faces a growing disenchantment of its people disappointed by policies that do not always rise up to the challenge in a period of crisis and change. Europeans are mostly attached to the European idea, but they criticise the European management. The way to bridge this gap, which puts the democratic legitimacy of the Union into question, is to bring decision-making closer to European citizens. It is not enough to have ideas, legal framework and European policies. These ideas, provisions and policies need to meet the expectations of our citizens.

Much progress has been made since then. The European Parliament, under the Treaties, now represents the citizens of the European Union and is co-legislator for most legislation. It is a key

player in the institutional triangle and it defends the interests of European citizens in the decision-making process. The Commission is accountable to the European Parliament and hearing procedures of Commissioners at the time of renewal of institutions are demanding. National Parliaments are now involved in discussions on the Community legislation and deepening of the EMU: debates are organised in the national Parliaments, the procedure ensuring monitoring of the principle of subsidiarity is in place, and interparliamentary conferences now exist.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

We need to go further. The EU, in particular the Economic and Monetary Union, has been deepened in the recent years to meet the challenges of the economic and financial crisis. The two-pack and six-pack provisions have a direct impact on the budgetary sovereignty of national Parliaments. Strengthening the EMU, however, requires greater coordination of economic policies and therefore calls for improved coordination between representatives of national institutions. It is especially important to respect the principle that every step of decision-making must be made at the level of the relevant institution. This is important for ensuring the democratic legitimacy of the measures taken in the future EMU and the EU. Parliaments should be able to find their place in this new framework and strike the right balance by adding a parliamentary element to the deepening of the EMU. This is the objective of the Interparliamentary Conference on economic and fiscal governance, as laid down in Article 13 of the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the EMU (TSCG), with its first meeting held in October here, in Vilnius.

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What else can be done in this area and what can be done better? We all have our share of responsibility. For the purpose of ensuring greater democratic legitimacy of the Union, action should be taken at all levels of decision-making, including the Commission, national governments, national Parliaments and the European Parliament.

Many of the mechanisms put in place to respond to the crisis have strengthened the role of the Commission, particularly in the area of economic governance. The European semester is a case in point. Procedural change was crucial for preventing the worst from happening, but better democratic control of the new procedures is needed. To this end, I think it would be useful to organise a debate between the national Parliaments and Brussels. When formulating its country-specific recommendations, the Commission could, for example, meet with representatives of parliamentary assemblies and present its reports to them. It is often said that there is a gap between the national Parliaments and the Commission. The first solution would be to liaison with the Member States. Admittedly, this is possible, in part. I think this process should become more systematic. In other words, every Member State should hold debates on EU matters. The Commission, in return, should go to the Member States, explain its policies to national representatives and take their questions and requests into consideration.

We also need a profound and objective European debate in the Member States. We can criticise or reject European decisions even without being Euro-sceptical. However, once a national government supports a decision in Brussels, it should summon the courage to endorse it. Therefore, we need to improve cooperation with the parliamentary assemblies while adopting the European Union decisions in order to reinvigorate the popular trust in Europe. This is why since 2005, in France, ministers go to the Parliament to account for the matters debated at the Council which fall within their remit. Similarly, the Minister of State for European Affairs came to the Parliament last October to discuss with MEPs the items on the agenda of the European Council. All members of the executive should strive to fully engage national Parliaments into the decision-making at the EU level.

MEPs, stakeholders of the institutional triangle and representatives of European citizens, for their

part, need to work with members of national Parliaments, particularly in the framework of COSAC. The new Conference on economic and financial governance, established by the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the EMU (TSCG), goes in the right direction. Its first meeting a fortnight ago has laid the foundations for the new model of coordination.

Even though the procedures under the two-pack and six-pack were certainly needed to address the asymmetry of the EMU, they must be legitimised by the citizens; in addition, the positions of national Parliaments on the matter need careful consideration. This is an issue of striking the right institutional balance. Moreover, if the MEPs elected in the 27 Member States will discuss the economic policies of the 17 members of the Eurozone, another imbalance will set in. Thus, a new mechanism dedicated to the Eurozone could be put in place in the European Parliament after the upcoming European elections in order to ensure democratic control of the legitimacy of the appropriate decision-making on the Eurozone. The European Parliament could of course decide how to get there. This suggestion was highlighted in the Franco-German proposal of May 2013. It seems sensible to me.

National Parliaments have a range of instruments to intervene in the European decision-making. Returning to the subsidiarity issues, I would like to dwell for a moment on Protocol 2 under debate. Any parliament can send to the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission a reasoned opinion stating why it considers that the draft in question is not consistent with the principle of subsidiarity. This function is fully in line with the role of the Parliaments. It is not aimed to stop the construction of Europe, but rather to allow nationally elected representatives to comment on the proposals of the Commission. The national Parliaments should seize this tool to challenge any abuse, and also to emphasise their willingness to go further down the path of European integration. This notion has already demonstrated its effectiveness. The draft regulation *Monti II* is a case in point. National Parliaments were able to send the signal of alarm in time to draw the attention of the Commission and, *inter alia*, defend the right to strike. Brussels heard the opinion of the national Parliaments.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a few months, European citizens will be called to the polls to elect their representatives to the European Parliament. A new Commission will be appointed, and its President shall be elected under the new arrangements.

Preparations for the elections are taking place in a context of anxiety. The low turnout rates and anti-European thinking are serious concerns. I do not share the opinion of those who ambitiously believe that only a fundamental revision of the treaties will, in time, strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the European Union. We cannot hesitate. It is imperative to improve the cooperation at all levels of decision-making (Commission, Council, European Parliament and national Parliaments). This will mobilise our citizens for the European elections next year.

In my opinion, the reasons that paved the way to the creation of COSAC have not aged with time. In my capacity of the founding-father of COSAC, may I invite you to continue using this forum by making it a place for debate the Union will need for years to come.

There is a common expression in the EU and in my country, which I fiercely dislike. Unfortunately, we often hear and will often hear in the coming months that “Brussels has decided”. This simplistic formula is technically inaccurate and politically dangerous. It is we who make decisions in Brussels and Strasbourg. The European Union is the result of our common efforts. Let us demonstrate it.