

Speech for the 50th COSAC taking place in Vilnius on 29 October 2013 – by the Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Danish Parliament - Mrs. Eva Kjer Hansen

Mr. President,
Honorable colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Today we're gathered for the 50th COSAC meeting.

An anniversary is always an opportunity to look back and to look ahead. What have we accomplished and where are we heading? The European Parliament and national parliaments have gradually gained more influence in the European Union. This has happened in the recognition of the crucial role directly elected representatives play for the legitimacy and accountability of our Union. For 25 years parliamentarians have met in COSAC exchanging views and best practises. Surely useful, but let's be honest with ourselves and ask if we can enhance the impact in the future?

Sometimes I see COSAC as this IKEA fellow.

If only we could put the pieces together in the right way, the result would be most useful.

But COSAC is not some IKEA fellow unable to fix things. It is US in all our diversity

I believe that we as national parliamentarians (together with the European Parliament) have a special obligation to contribute to the debate about the future economic governance of the EU and not least on how we maintain a Union that is truly accountable and democratic.

Let me reflect on some current challenges for the parliaments of Europe.

The question of democratic legitimacy and accountability is becoming still more relevant as Europe is struggling to recover from an unprecedented economic and financial crisis. This has also turned into a social crisis with dramatic consequences for many citizens. Some EU Governments and Parliaments have adopted harsh austerity measures and implemented unpopular reforms in return for the much-needed rescue loans.

The crisis has led to a worrying disillusion among citizens.

According to a recent Eurobarometer 72 percent of Spanish citizens do not trust the EU. 75 percent of the Italians think European economic integration has been bad for their country, as do 77 percent of the French and 78 percent of the Greeks, according to the Pew Research Centre. In my own country, Denmark where employment rates are not as alarming as in Southern Europe, support for the EU is at a history low, with 39 percent wanting Denmark to leave the European Union.

Honorable colleagues

In seven months time, voters across Europe will judge what we have achieved over the past five years.

Resolving the crisis and bringing Europe back on track towards economic recovery will be the main topic of the European Parliamentary elections in May next year.

Looking back I think it is fair to say that the European Union has delivered a determined response to the crisis.

We have mobilised more than 700 billion euro to save crisis-struck countries. We have decided to move towards a deep and genuine Economic and Monetary Union that will imply a more integrated financial, budgetary and economic cooperation in Europe.

But we have not decided how this new policy framework should be anchored democratically.

I think Europe needs a democratic framework that matches the European Union's increased role and powers regarding economic governance.

I believe that national parliaments must play a leading role here as the Union gets still more complex and more involved in national affairs.

The European Semester already enables the Council and the Commission to examine national draft budgets even before they are passed in national parliaments. Decisions regarding national budgets are at the very heart of national parliamentary democracy.

This is a democratic deficit that needs to be addressed.

Honorable colleagues

How do we move forward?

Some would ask if democratic legitimacy is not already sufficiently secured by the European Parliament.

The European Parliament is an important representative of European citizens that plays its role extremely well. But presently it does not fill the gap in the field of Economic and financial matters. National parliaments still hold the prerogatives when it comes to adopting national budgets and economic policies. Furthermore national parliaments have a special role in bringing the concerns of citizens to Europe – as well as bringing the decisions of Europe to its citizens. This includes taking responsibility for what is decided by Europe.

Therefore now is the time to bring a truly European perspective to the involvement of national parliaments in European decision-making. Just being able to block legislative acts we deem in breach of the principle of subsidiarity is not sufficient. We must become proactive players involved more directly in building Europe.

To this end we don't need new European institutions.

But I believe national parliaments need new tools in the toolbox if we should fulfill our role as democratic institutions in the still more integrated financial, budgetary and economic policy framework of Europe.

That is why we in the Danish Parliament recently introduced a so-called "National Semester". The National Semester provides the Folketing with the possibility to cross examine Government Ministers before they submit Denmark's input to the European Semester at three important points in time: 1) Before the European Commission launches its Annual Growth Survey, 2) Before the Government submits the National Reform Program and Convergence Program to the Commission, 3) Before the Council's deliberations on the Country Specific Recommendations.

However holding our governments to account is only one side of the coin.

To reinforce the political dialogue with the European Commission is the other.

I believe it was a breakthrough for our relations with the Commission when President Barroso in 2006 encouraged national parliaments to express our views on all new Commission proposals. This dialogue was further improved with the Commission's commitment to respond to inquiries

from national parliaments and to let Commissioners appear before national parliamentary committees as requested by COSAC in Copenhagen in April 2012.

However I believe we can still strengthen the political dialogue with the Commission further.

Try to imagine if national parliaments had a right of initiative. Every national MP could go to his or her local constituency and invite every European citizen in any little township to bring forward good proposals which could eventually turn into European legislation.

And why not let national parliaments contribute positively to the European legislative process by issuing political opinions that the EU institutions should take into account. Like they are obliged to today, when they receive reasoned opinions from national parliaments.

Now, critics would say that giving national parliaments a right of initiative would threaten the European Commission's prerogatives. But I don't think the Commission's monopoly to propose legislation was ever intended to prevent others from coming up with good ideas, which they would like the Commission to take up. The Council and the European Parliament can already do this. Why not national parliaments? I am not calling for treaty changes. A political commitment from the Commission like in 2006 would be a step in the right direction.

Honorable colleagues

But let me stress that all these instruments will remain "pies in the sky", if we don't take advantage of them.

So far only a very few of us have actually used the possibility to submit written inquiries to the Commission. But we must get started using these instruments if we want to build a closer relationship with the European Commission. So don't hesitate to invite Commissioners to give briefings in your parliaments or submit inquiries to the Commission or table proposals for European Union legislation.

Finally let me comment on some recent developments in EU interparliamentary cooperation.

In my view the main purpose of organizing interparliamentary meetings is to promote exchange of information and best practices between our parliaments with the aim of strengthening the scrutiny of our governments in the national context.

It is not to create new European decision-making bodies.

We therefore don't need new interparliamentary bodies with powers to adopt joint resolutions. We already have COSAC.

The CFSP-Conference and the article 13 conference are both currently striving to become bodies with similar powers and functions within their respective policy areas. A lot of talk is and will be produced at these large scale conferences, but without real policy impact.

Let's stop creating new large scale interparliamentary meetings with too many participants, too many pre-prepared speeches and too little useful political debate.

Instead I think, we must become operational, innovative and solution-oriented. For instance, national parliaments could organize themselves in small informal clusters around shared interest and common themes in order to have a true exchange of information with European colleagues. This will be beneficial to the scrutiny of our governments and eventually feed positively into the European decision making process.

Just a week ago 14 parliaments met in Copenhagen to discuss the question of "free movement of workers and National Welfare Systems" at such an informal cluster meeting. I believe the debate proved to be very useful for the participating parliaments.

Honorable colleagues

In conclusion I think democratic legitimacy will become an issue as Europe is struggling to integrate in the economic, financial and budgetary field.

The European elections in May provide an ideal occasion for having a genuine European debate about this question. The European Commission has already announced its intentions to present some ideas on the future of Europe and how best to consolidate and deepen Europe in the longer term.

I therefore call on the European Commission to include both national parliaments and the European Parliament in these considerations. And let us not turn it into a beauty contest between national parliaments and the European Parliament about who is the true democratic representative of European citizens.

National parliaments and the European Parliament have a common interest in anchoring the evolving Economic governance of the EU democratically.

I believe both the European Parliament and national parliaments must play a leading role in this process in order to restore trust and confidence in Europe among our citizens.

We cannot leave such an important task to governments only.

Thank you for your attention