

Minutes of the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments

Vienna, 8-9 April 2019

As per tradition, the meeting of the Presidential Troika (Estonia, Austria, Finland and European Parliament) took place ahead of the general meeting. The Troika members debated the amendments to the draft conclusions and agreed on a compromise text that was to be discussed and adopted during the conference.

1. Opening session

Welcome address by Mr Wolfgang SOBOTKA, Speaker of the Austrian *Nationalrat*

Welcome address by Mr Ingo APPÉ, Speaker of the Austrian *Bundesrat*

Keynote speaker: Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, First Vice-President of the European Parliament

Mr Wolfgang SOBOTKA, Speaker of the Austrian *Nationalrat*, welcomed the participants to the last conference of the Parliamentary Dimension of the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. He reminded the participants that, because of the current renovations of the historic parliament building, the conference would take place at the Wiener Konzerthaus.

Mr Ingo APPÉ, Speaker of the Austrian *Bundesrat*, also welcomed the participants and highlighted the importance of the format of the Conference of Speakers for interparliamentary debate and the fulfilment of the common responsibility to make the right decisions for the citizens. He further pointed out that the EU was experiencing turbulent times, notably Brexit but also other challenges such as climate change, migration, technological advances or conflicts in the neighbouring countries, and stated that citizens' trust in the EU had suffered from these crises and had given EU-critical voices an opportunity to gain ground. This is why the Austrian Presidency had set the task of bringing the EU closer to the citizens through more transparency and by strengthening the principle of subsidiarity.

Mr APPÉ emphasised that even though a strong Union was needed for the big challenges at the European level, many challenges could be better faced in the Member States and the regions. He underlined that subsidiarity, and thus participation in European legislative and decision-making processes, was a fundamental principle for local and regional authorities for a future-oriented Europe. Regional parliaments must therefore be more strongly integrated into European legislation. Mr APPÉ underlined that the Austrian *Bundesrat*, as a chamber of the *Länder*, was extremely committed to exercising its right of participation in EU affairs and was one of the most active chambers of all national parliaments in terms of subsidiarity control in a European comparison.

Mr APPÉ closed his address by stating that only capacity for action and crisis resistance, as well as transparency and proximity to the citizens, could help regain the lost trust in the European Union. Concerning the European elections, he added that countries and regions played an important role because of their closeness to the citizens. This, he said, made the cooperation between national parliaments and the EU institutions crucial. He concluded the opening session by pointing out some practical issues of the meeting.

Taking back the floor, Mr SOBOTKA addressed the broad European neighbourhood in the South and in the East, which also includes Russia, without which there would be no sustainable peace in Europe or in the Western Balkans. He stressed that the migration crisis of 2015 had once again shown that new ways of cooperation with the Mediterranean countries were necessary. He added that only if Europe succeeded in opening up perspectives on an equal footing to the people of Africa, migration pressure could be eased in the long term.

Mr SOBOTKA called Turkey an important strategic partner of the EU, especially with regard to economic cooperation, energy security, security policy and the fight against terrorism. Even so, Europe must observe the ongoing developments in Turkey, in particular with regard to fundamental rights and media freedom. Mr SOBOTKA declared that the EU had a mediator position in Ukraine, as the conflict in the Donbass could only be solved with the implementation of the Minsk agreement. He added that the EU's relationship with Russia was strained because of the annexation of Crimea, the conflict in the Donbass as well as several espionage and cyber incidents. Even though Russia was an important neighbour, he said, EU sanctions would not be eased without visible progress in the Minsk process.

Mr SOBOTKA stressed that the relationship with the Western Balkans was of central importance to the Austrian foreign policy, mainly due to four facts: 1) the European effort to promote and maintain peace and stability cannot be completed without these countries; 2) pre-accession and EU integration has a long-term stabilizing effect; 3) European companies are the biggest investors in the region, which makes the further development of the rule of law and democracy crucial; 4) it is not in the EU's interest to leave direct neighbours to the influence of other global powers.

Mr SOBOTKA concluded his address by pointing out that Europe was not just a promise, but also a mutual obligation. Whereas the candidate countries have to implement reforms, the EU must reward progress with a credible accession perspective. In this context, Mr SOBOTKA congratulated Greece and North Macedonia on the settlement of the name dispute and stated that in June the EU should decide on opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. He also called on the national parliaments to become involved in the approximation process and pointed out that the Austrian Parliament offered a scholarship programme for staff members of parliamentary administrations of the Western Balkans.

The agenda of the meeting was then approved without any comments.

Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, First Vice-President of the European Parliament, opened her address naming Brexit as one of the main challenges currently facing the EU, as it is the first time that a Member State has voted to leave the Union. She reminded participants that the focus must be on making an orderly Brexit possible, even if this option needs an extension of the Article 50 deadline, which was to be debated at the European Council meeting that same week. She added that everybody could certainly learn from the current situation in order to avoid something similar happening in the future. She also pointed out that the EU and the Member States had to work towards a policy of compromise rather than conflict in order to fight against increasing polarisation.

Ms McGUINNESS then moved on to other current challenges. Concerning climate change, she underlined the motivation of young people to mobilise themselves for their future. She added that the EP supported decarbonisation and was aiming at zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. In addition, she said the EP did not believe that economic prosperity, industrial competitiveness and climate policy were incompatible. This is why there had to be more investment in industrial innovation, digital technologies and energy efficiency. Regarding digitalisation and artificial intelligence, Ms McGUINNESS pointed out that these developments would change the future of work and our societies and that the European and the national level had to work together to deal with citizens' concerns in this regard. She stressed that all challenges could be faced together as a Union and with solidarity among the Member States in order to avoid surrendering opportunities to competitors and losing the confidence of the citizens. Ms McGUINNESS added that people should not underestimate the role of religion and congratulated the Austrian Presidency on including interreligious dialogue in its conclusion of the Speakers' Conference.

Moving on to the European elections, Ms McGUINNESS emphasised that, according to Eurobarometer polls, citizens' trust in the European Union was at its highest in 35 years. She also pointed out that the elections would be particularly important because of the political developments in many Member States and stressed that European elections were not secondary to national ones, as their outcome would also affect national politics. She added that the EU and the Member States needed to work together to ensure rules against sources of foreign disinformation, social networks designed to manipulate public opinion, and the illegal use of citizens' personal data to influence voting intentions. In the transition period to the new parliament, broad cooperation – both across party lines and between Member States – would be needed, she said. Ms McGUINNESS closed her keynote address by pointing out that 2019 marked the 10th anniversary of the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, which made national parliaments actors on the European level, and that the fruitful cooperation between them and the European Parliament would become even more important when tackling future challenges. As a final appeal, she asked the participants to encourage citizens to participate in the European elections.

2. Session I: The European Union and its neighbours

Keynote speakers: Mr Andrej DANKO, Speaker of the Slovak *Národná rada*; Mr Nikos VOUTSIS, Speaker of the Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*; Mr Roberto FICO, Speaker of the Italian *Camera dei Deputati*

Mr Andrej DANKO, Speaker of the Slovak *Národná rada*, started his address by highlighting that the conference facilitated interparliamentary dialogue by targeting specific and topical European matters. He pointed out that the European Neighbourhood Policy should be a key element in foreign policy, as numerous conflicts and crises required attention and a stable neighbourhood.

Mr DANKO emphasised that the security situation in the neighbourhood was less predictable than it used to be, as numerous regional conflicts and crises required attention. As ensuring neighbourhood stability was the most pressing challenge at the moment, the prime goal must be to strengthen prosperity, stability, security and, ultimately, ensure a stable, secure and prospering European Union. He further underlined the belief that EU enlargement was a

strategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe and highlighted the need to convey a clear and persuasive signal of fellowship, cohesion and a shared future to the Western Balkan region. Mr DANKO welcomed the historical breakthrough that had been achieved by North Macedonia and Greece, giving a positive impulse for the whole region. He also stressed that a clear prospect of EU membership based on shared values and common standards was the best motivation for further pursuit of reform and modernisation processes in the region. Should the EU fail to make use of that strategic opportunity of integration, it would open another door to security threats and instability and would encourage the involvement of other external actors.

Mr DANKO declared that the Slovak Republic was a strong supporter of the Western Balkans' pursuit of reform and that there had been joint activities of the V4 to prepare them for accession. He added that progress had been made in the bilateral cooperation with all countries even though the overall situation, particularly due to the ongoing conflicts, remained extremely complex. On the one hand, he pointed out the commitment to support the partners while, on the other hand, deep reforms and recognition of values and principles were expected. He therefore admitted that the Eastern Partnership programme had become a multispeed programme. To this end, the adoption of a global strategy on foreign and security policy of the EU redefining the objectives on the global level was a positive step.

Mr DANKO emphasised that terrorism was currently one of the greatest security threats and that the EU had to work together to fight it and its roots. He stressed that religion per se was not a danger, but fanatic religious extremists were. He closed his remarks by stating that other global challenges, such as the digital agenda, instability, illegal migration, global climate change and the deterioration of the environment, also demanded global solutions and that he was confident that the European Neighbourhood Policy and the new Commission would have a stronger strategic drive and be more flexible.

Mr Nikos VOITSIS, Speaker of the Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, opened his address by naming the Prespa agreement with North Macedonia as a good example of positive neighbourly relations. In his view, the agreement proved that, given the necessary political will, states could solve their differences based on international law and a good relationship with their neighbours. It created the framework to fully develop political and economic bilateral relations and paved the way for a Euro-Atlantic and European perspective for North Macedonia. Mr VOITSIS also said that the Greek Prime Minister had recently visited Skopje together with ten other ministers and had participated in the first meeting of the High Cooperation Council between the two countries, which included the signing of various memoranda. He then thanked the participants for the encouraging words.

Mr VOITSIS emphasised that the rapid integration of the Western Balkans remained a consistent priority for Greece for regional stability, EU security and economic growth in the region. He added that Greece supported the principle of basing the pace for the integration process for each candidate or potential candidate country from the Western Balkan region on each country's individual progress in order to maintain a strong incentive for pushing forward the necessary reforms. At the same time, the EU needed to implement a renewed strategy that would include policies of aid and convergence. He also reminded participants that the EU's neighbourhood consisted not only of the Western Balkans nor that the relationship with the neighbours was limited to the enlargement process. Mr VOITSIS stressed that this year

marked the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership and that the EU needed strong and democratic neighbours. Therefore, the Eastern Partners had to be encouraged to remain committed to the ongoing reforms and coexist harmoniously with the southern dimension of the EU neighbourhood. Mr VOUTSIS added that Greece had also established regional cooperation schemes with the Eastern Mediterranean, investing in the emergence of new security architectures through multilateral cooperation with Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine.

Mr VOUTSIS further pointed out that, beyond the enlargement process and the neighbourhood policy, the overall international actions of the EU as a global power for stability and peace must be guided by the promotion of peace, the respect for international law, the protection of the rule of law and human rights, and the strengthening of the principles that lie at the foundation of the Union. He remarked that the efforts by Greece and other countries regarding the management of refugees and migrants did not always receive the expected solidarity from European partners and that burden-sharing had not been fully distributed among all Member States. He therefore called for a reform of the Common European Asylum System based on solidarity and burden-sharing. Mr VOUTSIS closed his remarks by mentioning that Greece had always supported Turkey's European perspective, as this would be for the benefit of the EU, the Turkish people and Greece. Nevertheless, he pointed out that Turkey's path to European membership was linked to the principle of conditionality.

Mr Roberto FICO, Speaker of the Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, commenced his keynote speech by pointing out that the sheer scope of the global challenges facing Europe made the action of individual Member States structurally inadequate and required a strong, joint response. He noted, however, that this had not been the case so far, as the relations with the southern shore of the Mediterranean so dramatically showed. Mr FICO stressed that Europe must be united in rejecting any armed solution and must reaffirm its support for a political settlement among the various actors in Libya through dialogue promoted by the United Nations. He criticised that the European Union had too long acted as a passive onlooker with respect to the southern shore of the Mediterranean, thereby leaving the action to individual countries or a group of Member States. Regarding migration, he stated that too much emphasis was placed on secondary movements and too little on the primary movements that affect countries with an external border, such as Italy. In addition, he lamented that the principles of solidarity and fair burden-sharing under Article 80 TFEU had not been implemented.

Mr FICO stressed that migration could be managed in an orderly manner in compliance with international law only through common action along several axes:

- 1) Sharing responsibilities relating to migrants in terms of rescue operations and ensuing management. He reiterated that refugees or migrants that arrive in a Member State must be taken on by Europe as a whole, which requires the superseding of the Dublin regulation.
- 2) Full cooperation in controlling the external borders, including combatting human trafficking and slavery.
- 3) Creation of reception camps; assistance and information.
- 4) Greater coordination of national systems for the integration of refugees and legal migrants as well as establishing common minimum standards in accordance with international law and the fundamental principles of European law.
- 5) Financial support for the consolidation of peace, democracy

and the rule of law in the southern partners of Europe and in other African countries, support for economic growth and improvement of the life prospects of the population.

He further pointed out that the Italian *Camera dei Deputati* and the *Senato della Repubblica* were concluding a European twinning project together with the French *Assemblée nationale* aimed at strengthening the administrative capacity of the Tunisian Parliament in addition to similar forms of cooperation with the parliaments of the Horn of Africa and the Sahel.

Regarding the next Multiannual Financial Framework, he said that this should reflect the stated priorities and that the current proportion in the allocation should be maintained, i.e. two thirds to the southern neighbours and one third to the eastern neighbours. In this context, Mr FICO stressed that the funds for managing migration had to be increased. The current allocation of 35 billion euros for the entire 2021-2027 period was not enough, he said, as two thirds would be used to control the external borders.

Moving on to the European elections, he underlined his belief that it was necessary to focus more on the external action of the EU in the electoral debate and to speak more with a single and stronger voice. Mr FICO also mentioned the possibility for the Union to have a united representation within international organisations, as a first step towards a permanent European Union seat within the UN Security Council, as was already envisaged under the current treaties. He closed his remarks by calling for a reflection on the form of EU relations with Russia, on the one hand, and with China on the other and by pointing out the need to assert the core of a European identity in the EU's external relations.

Twenty-two speakers took the floor during the ensuing debate, which opened with an intervention by Mr Gordan JANDROKOVIĆ, Speaker of the Croatian *Hrvatski Sabor*, pointing out that the current geopolitical complexity had set a secure and stable future for Europe as the Union's priority. Therefore, he said, Europe must consolidate its political space, including Southeast Europe. He also emphasised the importance of enlargement as one of the most successful EU policies, calling it an investment in peace, stability, security and progress based on shared values. He further added that, during its Presidency of the Council of the EU, Croatia would support the European perspective and further enlargement through a credible, strict and fair accession process based on individual achievements, conditionality and the fulfilment of set criteria.

Mr Radek VONDRÁČEK, Speaker of the Czech *Poslanecká Sněmovna*, highlighted the issue of the enlargement process, as the Western Balkans were part of the continent, shared a common European history and held a place in the future European Union. He stressed that access to the Union would drive the social and economic development in the region and give impulse to the reforms already underway.

Mr Ivan BRAJOVIC, Speaker of the Montenegrin *Skupština Crne Gore*, emphasised that the EU's internal problems could not be solved by slowing enlargement, as consolidation within the EU and the accession of countries which share the same values were two complementary processes. He also pointed out that if the EU set aside the politics of integration, it might face an increasing influence of other actors in the region. He closed by underlining Montenegro's devotion to regional cooperation, harmony and better living standards.

Mr Talat XHAFERI, Speaker of the North Macedonian *Sobranie*, pointed out that historical steps had been made with the Prespa agreement, which unblocked the North Macedonian path to the EU and NATO. He stressed that this step showed the necessity of dialogue for solving open issues and problems.

Mr Viktoras PRANCKIETIS, Speaker of the Lithuanian *Seimas*, stated that, even though Lithuania was geographically far from the Mediterranean, migration constituted an unprecedented challenge that required joint efforts by the EU institutions, the Member States and international organisations. At the same time, he said that democracy and stability in Southeast Europe were creating a positive and cooperation-friendly environment for the entire European Union, recognising that much had been achieved during the 10 years of the Eastern Partnership. Mr PRANCKIETIS further declared that partners which had made more progress should be given a possibility of moving faster and further in order to avoid a policy based on a lowest common denominator and as a way to respond to individual needs.

Mr László KÖVÉR, Speaker of the Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, emphasised that the EU should not open its doors to illegal migrants from outside Europe, but to countries that were awaiting accession. The European success story of enlargement should be continued and not stop halfway through, he said, as the security and stability of the Western Balkan region was a matter of decisive importance for the whole of Europe and the perspective of EU membership carried a force that could effectively stabilise the political systems. He agreed with various speakers that other powers could step in to fill a geopolitical void. Mr KÖVÉR expressed his hope that, in the next institutional cycle, the EU would be enlarged by Montenegro and Serbia, that accession talks would begin with Albania and North Macedonia, and that Bosnia and Herzegovina would be given candidate status that year. Though not as advanced, he highlighted the integration process of Eastern Partnership as having the same stabilising power as in the Western Balkans with the same responsibilities to honour obligations and commitments.

Mr Pio GARCÍA-ESCUADERO, Speaker of the Spanish *Senado*, stated that Europe needed to deal with the migration crisis but that it should also overcome its purely Eurocentric approach and pursue a different relationship with countries such as Morocco, Algeria and Nigeria. He pointed out that this was a world with increasingly interconnected countries where terrorism, the digital agenda, human rights and migration required a cooperation framework that went beyond single states.

Mr Gérard LARCHER, Speaker of the French *Sénat*, stressed that any accession talks or activities should be founded on the accession criteria, including respect for the rule of law and the fundamental principles, and be based on the merits of each country. Regarding the neighbourhood policy in the southern shores of the Mediterranean, he pointed out the immense challenges, namely the doubling in size of the African population by 2050, illegal migration and extremist developments. A stronger European effort was therefore needed, he said, to fight these challenges, offer development aid and support governance.

Ms Borjana KRIŠTO, Speaker of the Bosnian *Predstavnički dom*, reminded participants that much progress had been made since Bosnia and Herzegovina began its accession process in 1997 and that the formal request for EU membership had been submitted in 2016. She also emphasised that, despite the challenges facing her country, especially the amendment of

electoral legislation, there was unanimous support for the position that EU membership was the country's future.

Mr Gramoz RUCI, Speaker of the Albanian *Kuvendi*, thanked participants for the support given to his country and stressed that Albania had taken important steps to address the five key priorities set by the Council, mainly by implementing a justice reform and taking important steps for the co-management of the migration crisis. He pointed out that enlargement not only meant more Member States, but also an investment in the stability of the region.

Ms Carmen Ileana MIHALCESCU, Deputy Speaker of the Romanian *Camera Deputaţilor*, reminded the participants of the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership and stated that Romania would support all efforts of partner countries for closer relations with the EU, each of them according to their own pace and political ambitions. She further pronounced Romania's full attachment to a strong partnership with the southern neighbourhood. Concerning Israel and Palestine, the only viable and realistic alternative was a two-state solution for peace in the region, and the entire international community should increase its contributions in this regard.

Ms Tsveta KARAYANCHEVA, Speaker of the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*, pointed out that Brexit, migration and populism had changed the European mindset and had put European values in a new context. The EU was not in a deadlock, she said, but rather in need of strategic debate over its future. A division into centre and peripheries and a Europe of two speeds were unacceptable. She concluded by saying that the rapprochement of the Western Balkans was a geostrategic investment of the EU for a solid, strong and united Europe.

Mr Daniel GÜNTHER, Speaker of the German *Bundesrat*, began his address by stating that the European project had been put into question for a number of years now, in part due to developments outside the EU. He emphasised that it was time to take a firm stance with regard to Turkey and that he would welcome a clear signal from the Turkish government and the AKP party that they would recognise the outcome of the recent municipal elections. He added that the EU had to find a joint position on the fight against the root causes of migration and a real outlook had to be offered to the people in their home countries by avoiding wars, consolidating peace processes and fighting poverty and climate change. In addition, he stressed that European rules for migration had to be found and burdens had to be shared fairly.

Mr Andreas NORLÉN, Speaker of the Swedish *Riksdag*, welcomed the Commission's renewed focus on enlargement and stated that the principle of conditionality should form the basis of the continuing process. The Eastern Partnership should be based on mutual commitments for the rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights and the rights of minority groups. A membership perspective should also be extended to partner countries who were willing to carry out ambitious political and economic reforms, he said. Regarding the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean, Mr NORLÉN added that the Swedish Parliament had decided not to appoint a delegation for the coming period due to organisational shortcomings but that the parliament hoped to resume its participation in the future.

Ms Maja GOJKOVIĆ, Speaker of the Serbian *Narodna Skupština*, emphasised that Serbia was participating in all changes facing the EU, and particularly had proven its role in the

migrant crisis. The full commitment of Serbia to the enlargement process, she said, was based on the belief that all these efforts were in the interest of the region and the EU. She pointed out that Serbia was the only country that had opened Chapter 35 in the accession negotiations. She also stressed that Serbia expected the EU to facilitate the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue.

Ms Ināra MŪRNIECE, Speaker of the Latvian *Saeima*, stated that Latvia was a strong supporter of a European perspective for the Western Balkans and that the accession process was a driver of transformation in the whole region. Latvia welcomed the conclusion of the Prespa agreement as a historic step and asked the EU to acknowledge this by opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in June. She further welcomed the fact that the first round of elections in Ukraine had taken place according to international standards. She lamented that Russia had failed to honour the Minsk agreement and expressed concerns regarding Crimean Tatars on the Crimean peninsula.

Ms Doina Elena FEDEROVICI, Deputy Speaker of the Romanian *Senatul*, agreed that the promotion of peace, stability and economic prosperity should be the aim of the EU's neighbourhood policy. She stated that Romania would further support all efforts of neighbourhood countries to come closer to the EU and was planning to generate a process of reflection of the post-2020 goals. Regarding the CFSP, Romania reiterated the EU's shared commitment to the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Eastern Partnership.

Mr Henn PÕLLUAAS, Speaker of the Estonian *Riigikogu*, recounted that Estonia's 15 years of NATO and EU membership had reinforced and increased security and prosperity. He said that this was why Estonia sympathised with anyone who shared the passion and values of the EU. He stated that the Eastern Partnership remained a priority for Estonia and added that, in bilateral cooperation, Estonia was paying great attention to the reform and promotion of e-government, education, environment, the fight against corruption and the development of civil society in the Eastern Partnership countries.

Mr Demetrios SYLLOURIS, Speaker of the Cypriot *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, congratulated the Austrian Parliament on hosting the next IPU Speakers' Conference in Vienna in 2020. He continued by saying that Cyprus, being at the southeast flank of Europe, could play the role of a bridge builder for dialogue and cooperation between the Middle East and the EU through initiatives for regional cooperation and bilateral and multilateral agreements.

Mr Stanisław KARCZEWSKI, Speaker of the Polish *Senat*, stated that Poland supported the accession process in the Western Balkans and a policy of open doors regarding the countries of the Eastern Partnership, such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. He added that there were certain costs, such as a change of the direction of the transfer of money within the EU when it comes to regional and agricultural policies and the possibility that a political vacuum could be filled by countries such as Russia acting aggressively towards the EU and exporting destabilisation and corruption. He added that Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova did not have a roadmap similar to the Western Balkans, but the EU had to reinforce the offer and find new instruments. He emphasised that, as long as Russia remained a source of aggression, it had to be the object of EU sanctions and could not hide behind projects like Nord Stream 2.

Mr Dejan ŽIDAN, Speaker of the Slovenian *Državni zbor*, emphasised that, regarding the issue of migration, the EU needed to tackle the reasons why people migrate, support agricultural

and economic production in source countries, and fight climate change. Concerning the Western Balkans, Mr ŽIDAN stressed his support but also stated that the EU needed to offer clear and frank expectations and take a decisive step in Brussels in June.

Mr Fernand ETGEN, Speaker of Luxembourg's *Chambre des Députés*, noted that Luxembourg was open to the idea of enlarging the European Union on the condition that all criteria were respected, in particular the chapters linked to democracy, the rule of law, and justice. He added that the democratic requirements depended on shared values, rights and freedoms, this being the reason why interparliamentary relations should be further strengthened. He stated that, at the same time, it was important to give a credible perspective and not make unrealistic promises.

3. Session II: The European Union ahead of the 2019 European elections – further development of cooperation between national parliaments and European institutions

Keynote speakers: Mr Wolfgang SCHÄUBLE, Speaker of the German *Bundestag*; Ms Ankie BROEKERS-KNOL, Speaker of the Dutch *Eerste Kamer*; Mr Gérard LARCHER, Speaker of the French *Sénat*; Mr Marek Kuchciński, Speaker of the Polish *Sejm*

Mr Wolfgang SOBOTKA, Speaker of the Austrian *Nationalrat*, opened the session by pointing out four aspects relating to the topic. As a first point, he emphasised that an essential part of European identity was certainly the common commitment to the rule of law, to fundamental and human rights, and to parliamentary democracy. These values should not be taken for granted, he said. Secondly, he noted that there was an increase of anti-Semitism in Europe and worldwide and he requested that any form of anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia be condemned. Mr SOBOTKA further pointed out that in December 2018 the Council had for the first time adopted a declaration on the fight against anti-Semitism. Mr SOBOTKA also mentioned the modern secular states as a central feature of Europe, a fact that should not be destroyed by radical Islamic or other extremist forces. One failure of European politics in recent years was the lack of a timely response to the emergence of parallel societies in European countries. As a last aspect, Mr SOBOTKA highlighted the core importance of the principle of subsidiarity to European integration and pointed out that Member States should have more leeway regarding issues affecting their citizens directly and concerning European legislation that meant more guidelines and fewer regulations. In closing, he emphasised that taking subsidiarity seriously did not mean weakening the EU, but rather strengthening citizens' trust in the Union.

Mr Wolfgang SCHÄUBLE, Speaker of the German *Bundestag*, called 2019 a watershed year for the European Union, not only regarding Brexit but also regarding the lack of unity in many areas of politics, adding, however, that the Union was capable of overcoming these difficulties. He noted that there was a growing acceptance of the EU within the population, with 62 percent of Europeans viewing their country's EU membership positively and more than two thirds believing that their country benefitted from membership. That was only one part of reality though, as citizens also harboured doubts over the European institutions' ability to solve problems and over the benefits of EU policy on their day-to-day lives.

Mr SCHÄUBLE stressed that national parliaments were one important channel of communication for strengthening Europeans' links to the EU institutions after having gradually

gained significance in European policy matters as a result of the European treaties. He stated, however, that the freedom to reform afforded by primary law was nevertheless limited, not least due to the principle of unanimity. In his view, this would necessitate a fundamental debate on what Member States could decide for themselves and where joint action would be necessary, for example in matters of environment, border security, migration, banks and the economy. He emphasised that Member States were still the sole deciders on many key issues and that the willingness to share national sovereignty was not particularly great in many places. Mr SCHÄUBLE underlined the importance of interparliamentary meetings, stressing that national parliaments were called upon to always adopt a genuinely European perspective alongside the national point of view with its narrower angle in debates on European matters. In this context, he also mentioned the Joint Parliamentary Assembly of the French *Assemblée nationale* and the German *Bundestag*.

Mr SCHÄUBLE further declared that nothing could be reformed in Europe if each Member State attempted to shape the other in its own image, but only by overcoming self-imposed national blockades. He called for convincing explanations to point out that there are areas of politics where cooperation represents the best path. Mr SCHÄUBLE stated his belief that a common security and defence policy was indispensable, as Europe needed to take on more responsibility for its own security and for the security of the surrounding regions. The agreement on joint military projects within the framework of PESCO was therefore a first step in the right direction, he said.

Mr SCHÄUBLE closed his address by pointing out that the renovation of the historic Austrian parliament building was an opportunity to create a building with greater openness and transparency for contemporary parliamentarianism and an example of what is expected of parliamentary work today.

Ms Anki BROEKERS-KNOL, Speaker of the Dutch *Eerste Kamer*, opened her address by reminding participants about a speech she had given 10 years ago at the 43rd COSAC in Madrid where she spoke of the new model for relations between national parliaments and the European Parliament following the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon. She stated that many of the topics that were discussed at the conference had already been addressed back then. She continued by pointing out the need to avoid starting up a lot of new interparliamentary conferences as this would in all probability not contribute to the essential process of strengthening relations between national parliaments and the European institutions. She stressed that the reason for interparliamentary cooperation between national parliaments and the European Parliament, namely, to connect and to reconnect the citizens of Europe with the European project, must never be forgotten.

Ms BROEKERS-KNOL emphasised that the year 2019 would undoubtedly be another year with unprecedented events and political challenges, additionally to Brexit. She stressed that, in today's complex world, no single Member State could tackle issues such as terrorism, climate change and migration alone. Working together means having more clout, also in global trade and geopolitics, and going beyond strictly national interests. Having said that, Ms BROEKERS-KNOL stressed that she did not support the idea of a federal Europe, as for her the European Union was a unification of people, not states. She added that it was the duty of the EU institutions and of the national politicians to seek a balance between a Union of close

cooperation, on the one hand, and the acceptance by citizens of some unification on specific subjects on the other. She further stated the decisiveness that politicians keep their promises.

Ms BROEKERS-KNOL called upon parliamentarians to address the issue of the added value of the EU for the daily life of citizens, but also to be clear about EU proposals that were not in the interest of the citizens. National parliaments should also be more transparent and accountable about their position on EU policy, because even though some procedures were difficult, citizens should be able to understand and follow them and even influence decisions through their national parliaments. She closed her remarks saying that parliamentarians owed it to the people of the European Union to cooperate effectively on the national and European level so that the citizens felt connected to the European project.

Mr Gérard LARCHER, Speaker of the French *Sénat*, opened his address by stating that the Heads of States of the EU Member States would debate the request from Prime Minister Theresa May for another Brexit postponement. He stressed that, of course, an orderly withdrawal would be preferable, but the EU could not be conditioned by all the votes in the UK *House of Commons* and needed a clarification from London. Moving on to the upcoming European elections, he declared that unless there was a genuine reestablishment of Europe, Europe would not be capable of taking on and coping with the global challenges.

Mr LARCHER also stated that national governments had turned the EU into a scapegoat and that the priority should therefore be on bringing about an appeasement with Europe and its citizens. He pointed out that the current challenges were too urgent for any country to solve alone. He underlined the need to redefine Europe, thereby concentrating on the priorities that were expected by the citizens. As a first priority, he named the fact that citizens wanted a Europe that protected them. Given all the challenges with migration, he cited the need to reform the Dublin and Schengen agreements, harmonise asylum regulations and support the countries of origin, especially regarding readmission structures. The second priority should be to give the EU a polity that will lead to more employment and support for research in industry, bringing the EU back to the top. As a third priority, he said that the changing international power structures called for a change of the EU foreign and defence policy. In this context Mr LARCHER stressed that it was clear to see that the EU was not acting as the power that it should be and that if it wanted to stay a leading power, all the trade agreements would have to be strengthened. European security matters should not be automatically handed over to NATO or the USA but should rather lead to a stronger European commitment to develop a European strategy so that a strong Europe could be heard in the concert of nations.

In conclusion, Mr LARCHER emphasised that all those initiatives did not depend on the adoption of new treaties and getting lost in institutional discussions, but rather on strengthening the role of national parliaments as guardians of the principle of subsidiarity, as they represent the people and have a very important role to play in bringing Europe closer to the citizens. It should further be recognised that national parliaments have a right of initiative and that there should be more cooperation between parliaments in fields such as defence and security.

Mr Marek KUCHCIŃSKI, Speaker of the Polish *Sejm*, underlined the 30th anniversary of free elections in central Europe as another exceptional occurrence in 2019, as those changes had transformed the face of Central Europe and led to the unification of Europe. He then went on

to address four challenges of today. Firstly, Mr KUCHCIŃSKI stated the belief that the EU was facing a crisis of values, as recent years have made people aware that common identity could not be based exclusively on economic and institutional foundations independent of cultural and social awareness. Only when taking into account all of these values can optimum solutions be sought out in order to strengthen European identity. Secondly, he expressed his concern about a certain reduction in the functioning of law and the unequal treatment of different Member States, especially between those that joined in 2004 and later and the old Member States. He pointed out that even if the treaties define the competences of the states and the EU institutions, the EU often violated these limits. He condemned the criticism of Poland for not respecting the rule of law regarding its judiciary reform as formulated for the current electoral campaign of the EP. Such interferences with internal affairs of a given Member State should no longer be tolerated.

Mr KUCHCIŃSKI continued with the third matter, that of a democratic EU, which would require stronger national parliaments. He stated that the reform of the EU system should be accompanied by a real democratic mandate granted within the national electoral process as well as by the restoration of balance between national parliaments and the EU institutions. As a last point, Mr KUCHCIŃSKI emphasised that the EU should take care of its unity, because the strength of the EU does not exclusively stem from the strength of individual Member States but from the community. He called for a fresh approach to the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, especially regarding proposed cuts in the financing of the agricultural policy and the cohesion policy.

During the ensuing debate, 17 speakers took the floor.

Mr Andreas NORLÉN, Speaker of the Swedish *Riksdag*, started his address by pointing out that, in recent years, there had been several actions causing much concern, specifically that some of the Member States were undermining the independence of the judiciary, the rule of law, the freedom of the media, and the freedom of civil society. He added that, even though actions had been taken by the Commission and the Council, these processes were rather weak and had to be strengthened in the future in order to maintain the European Union based on fundamental values. He then moved on to the proposed update of the guidelines for interparliamentary cooperation in the EU. Referring to the various developments in the cooperation (new standing interparliamentary meetings and changes of practices), he underlined the need to bring the guidelines up to date to ensure that they correctly reflected the way the EU interparliamentary cooperation operated. He underlined his belief that the draft conclusions were sufficient, focusing on closer alignment with the treaty provisions, new functions and meetings, as well as the potential in using modern means of communication. This process would also provide, even if not specifically mentioned, a scope for reflection on the efficiency of EU interparliamentary cooperation, for instance in terms of coordination and technical support. Mr NORLÉN was pleased to find that an interparliamentary meeting for the evaluation of Eurojust had been included in the draft conclusions and that the Finnish Presidency would take both of those issues forward.

Mr Eduardo FERRO RODRIGUES, Speaker of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, pointed out that 2019 was a challenging year for Europe, naming Brexit as cause for a division of society as one of them. He declared that Europe was confronted with many centrifugal and nationalist forces that have turned the European Union into the scapegoat of all these adverse

events. Only a united Europe would be capable of defending its interests on a global level and of facing the big challenges of globalisation, precarious work, inequalities, unemployment (especially among young people), migration, demographic aging of the population, security and the fight against terrorism. He also underlined the importance of the Economic and Monetary Union and the cohesion policy.

Mr Gordan JANDROKOVIĆ, Speaker of the Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, pointed out that the list with challenges was long and named Brexit, migration and climate change as the most pressing examples. He continued by saying that all those challenges had negatively affected citizens' confidence in the European project, had given rise to Eurosceptic voices, and could only be overcome by promoting values and principles of unity, engagement, responsibility, solidarity and partnership. He added that the European elections would take place in a changed environment and that they represented a decisive moment for the future development of the European Union.

Ms Ana PASTOR JULIÁN, Speaker of the Spanish *Congreso de los Diputados*, named security, terrorism, the social and economic agenda, climate change and reform of the Economic and Monetary Union as the most pressing challenges, next to the ongoing uncertainty about Brexit. She also stressed that the intensification of the cooperation between the European Parliament and the national parliaments was one of the most effective ways to give citizens a voice, since parliamentarians were the ones who represented the citizens. Furthermore, national debates should be more in harmony with current community affairs as this would strengthen the sense of belonging to the collective project.

Mr Dejan ŽIDAN, Speaker of the Slovenian *Državni zbor*, said that, together with Mr SOBOTKA, he had had the honour of dedicating a memorial plate to Mr Anton Janša, who was a pioneer of global and European beekeeping. He added that, when talking about bringing the European Union forward, one had to read the history first and then make it one's line of thought and respect it. Mr ŽIDAN also mentioned Brexit and said it showed the defeat of the EU, but he expressed hope that the people would have another chance to vote again now that they had new information.

Ms Tone TRØEN, Speaker of the Norwegian *Storting*, emphasised that, even though Norway was not a member of the EU, relations to the neighbours, enlargement and the relations between national parliaments and EU institutions were of great interest. She also highlighted the 25th anniversary of the European Economic Area (EEA) agreement. She named the Single Market as the cornerstone of cooperation and called it a key to further growth and prosperity. Ms TRØEN added that close European cooperation was the only way to find solutions for challenges such as climate change and migration but also social inclusion and injustice.

Mr László KÖVÉR, Speaker of the Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, stressed that the European continent was now approaching the end of one of the most unsuccessful five-year periods in its history, as the EU had failed to protect its external border and had been in a state of paralysis when watching the biggest migration flow ever experienced since the end of the Second World War. As a result, one of its strongest members, the United Kingdom, had decided to leave. He added that Hungary had always been in favour of a strong Europe composed of strong nation states taking into consideration the different characteristics of the Member States. Therefore, the EU must return to the roots that enabled it to become the most

successful project of the 20th century. He lamented that the EU had shifted away from its citizens. He therefore called for the principle of subsidiarity to be enforced and urged a return to the provisions of the founding treaties.

Mr Demetrios SYLLOURIS, Speaker of the Cypriot *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, also noted that the EU, despite its progress, had been confronted with multifaceted challenges, above all the lack of trust among the European citizens in the institutions. That is why policies must be enforced to provide real answers to real problems by implementing principles in a uniform manner and therefore by getting results, he said. Otherwise, other players would fill the void and the populists would rise further.

Mr Roberto FICO, Speaker of the Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, emphasised that Europe today was faced with three possible approaches: The first would be to continue as before without focusing on the new issues, but this would only be a slow form of death. The second would be to go back to nation states and nationalist approaches, again a form of back stepping. The third approach would be reforming Europe toward closer integration, with a strong Europe, a strong European Parliament and a Common Foreign and Defence Policy at the European level. He added that within the Security Council of the United Nations, the EU should have a single and permanent seat and that unless there was a common foreign policy, there was only a weaker foreign policy, as could be seen in Libya. He closed his speech by asking for assistance concerning the Italian researcher Giulio Regeni, who had been kidnapped, tortured and murdered in Egypt and whose case has not even started being properly worked on.

Ms Carole BUREAU-BONNARD, Deputy Speaker of the French *Assemblée nationale*, stated that in order to fill interparliamentary cooperation with life, every Member State should find a way of sending their representatives in a more consistent way to interparliamentary conferences. She further called for a more efficient IPEX, the main platform for exchange of information between European national parliaments. Additionally, the Member States should further tap into the existing networks, including the network of permanent representatives in Brussels. Ms BUREAU-BONNARD pointed out that national parliaments and the European Parliament had a joint responsibility in guaranteeing the further development of the democratic systems. She also added that the French *Assemblée nationale* and the German *Bundestag* had just founded a binational assembly, which would debate suggestions linked to European developments.

Mr Mauri PEKKARINEN, First Deputy Speaker of the Finnish *Eduskunta*, pointed out that voter participation in European elections had gone down since these elections were first held. He stressed that politicians should take politics to the voters, as the messages were often too technical, apolitical and defensive. Furthermore, political choices must be debated and concrete goals discussed. He stated that voters were not moved by European institutional details but rather by a choice among competing policies for stopping climate change and creating jobs, security and prosperity. He said that if the European project was not defended, then the game would be open to populists. Mr PEKKARINEN added that it was the job of the politicians to defend the EU, not of parliaments as institutions. Parliaments should rather be open to those who challenge the system and represent their people. He ended his remarks by saying that the Finnish *Eduskunta* had undertaken to chair a working group to review the guidelines for interparliamentary cooperation in the EU in order to bring them up to current standing.

Ms Claudette BUTTIGIEG, Deputy Speaker of the Maltese *Kamra tad-Deputati*, stated that the European Union had since its inception proven to be stable and resilient and that its ability to bring peace and stability remained a cause for celebration. Even though the road to EU achievements had not always been smooth, she stressed that the stones along the way had helped to strengthen the Union, as for example during the financial crisis. Concerning Brexit, she added that parliamentarians must recognise that, in spite of changing its nature, the relationship with the United Kingdom would continue and the interparliamentary dimension of this relationship would also need to be featured in discussions at the appropriate levels. She finished her remarks by highlighting the importance of respect for democracy and democratic legitimacy in order to fight the growing populism and disillusionment with the political class and to gain the trust of the citizens.

Mr Jacques BROTCHE, Speaker of the Belgian *Sénat*, pointed out that the representation on the national level was not sufficient anymore, which is why Belgium had always relied on its bicameral system with one directly elected chamber. In this regard, he stressed that senates also had to use their power. He then underlined the challenges of climate change as well as the necessity of alternatives such as energy transition. When talking about environmental issues, the dimension of public health should also be included, he said. Mr BROTCHE then asked for common European answers and announced his support for the fight against anti-Semitism. He called on the countries to follow the examples of Germany, Sweden, Bulgaria and others in fighting anti-Semitism.

Mr Ignazio Benito Maria LA RUSSA, Deputy Speaker of the Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, stated that there were still many citizens who did not understand the advantages of being part of the European Union especially because the EU was perceived as being very detached from the necessary measures that would be needed to handle the question of migration. He added that it was high time to go beyond the Dublin regulation, reach a more shared political and economic approach to migration, and review the current regulation.

Mr Fernand ETGEN, Speaker of Luxembourg's *Chambre des représentants*, emphasised that the EU had never been as politicised as it currently was and pointed out that even though Europe should be political and defend all interests there should not be a Europe of centrifugal forces. Strong European institutions were therefore needed, he said, but the national parliaments also had an important role to play. He underlined the fact that the EU was not just about institutional and national issues but should rather focus on the common policies and act on obligations beyond Brexit and the European elections.

Mr Nikos VOITSIS, Speaker of the Greek *Vouli Ton Ellinon*, pointed out that on the principle of subsidiarity there should be no perception leading to deny European integration but rather a redefinition of the need for the principle of subsidiarity. He announced his full support for the revision of the guidelines for interparliamentary cooperation and called the current times a historic moment because of the need to redefine the common strategy and the policies to work with convergence against the lack of trust in the EU. Mr VOITSIS also underlined the need to seek a European identity based on the values of peace, humanism, rule of law and democracy instead of solely national identities.

Dame Rose WINTERTON, Deputy Speaker of the UK *House of Commons*, asked participants for their understanding for the difficult debate that the UK Parliament was struggling with, even though Brexit had been taking up a lot of time and energy. She underlined the wish for a smooth transition in order to protect jobs and industries throughout the European Union and to continue the commitment to environmental protection, cooperation on security issues and many other issues. She also pointed out that, as there were clearly conflicting views both across the UK Parliament and within political parties, it was not surprising that it was taking time, because a poorly considered decision could lead to chaos. Dame WINTERTON emphasised that even if the UK reflected the different views of the people, the Parliament had voted twice against leaving the EU without a deal and that Parliament would vote that same night on a motion to require the government to request another deadline extension from the European Council. In closing, she reiterated that the UK Parliament and all political parties wished to remain friends and colleagues with the European partners.

4. Session III: Debate and adoption of the conclusions

Mr Wolfgang SOBOTKA, Speaker of the Austrian *Nationalrat*, thanked his colleagues for all the amendments and suggestions that had been submitted on the Presidency conclusions. He pointed out that many amendments had been accepted and the Troika had tried to come up with a balanced text.

During the final discussion, Mr Nikos VOUTSIS, Speaker of the Greek *Vouli Ton Ellinon*, stated that in the final text there was no mention of the obligation of the EU to protect the rights of refugees and migrants nor of the principle of solidarity and asked that reference be made thereof in the text. This was supported by Mr Demetrios SYLLOURIS, Speaker of the Cypriot *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*. Mr Jean BIZET, Member of the French *Assemblée nationale*, asked to include a further sentence on the withdrawal agreement with the United Kingdom. Mr László KÖVÉR, Speaker of the Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, pointed out that, despite having supported many modifications, Hungary could not accept the statement referring to refugees and migrants in order not to give an incentive for migration. This was supported by Mr Roberto FICO, Speaker of the Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, and Mr Andrej DANKO, Speaker of the Slovak *Národná rada*. Mr SOBOTKA informed the participants that the Troika had decided to include the French proposal but also emphasised that the passage on migration was already a compromise text and spoke against any new amendments.

In his concluding remarks, Mr SOBOTKA thanked all the participants for attending the conference and for their active participation in the debate. Mr Mauri PEKKARINEN, First Deputy Speaker of the Finnish *Eduskunta*, invited the delegates to the next Conference of Speakers of the EU Parliaments, which will be held in Helsinki on 17-19 May 2020.