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COSAC Chairpersons Meeting

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Introductory address

- Draft -

**“Prospects for co-operation between
the Commission and national parliaments”**

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Chairmen, honourable chairpersons,

[Thank you – and I turn especially to you, Matthias Wissmann and Willi Stächele – for inviting me here to speak.]

- *Politics is content*

“Prospects for co-operation between the Commission and national parliaments”. An interesting topic. An important topic. Don't misunderstand me, but it will never become truly interesting and important without the political content.

And this is exactly where I believe we have come in the past two years: the Commission's co-operation with the national parliaments is interesting and important because now it has that political content – it has substance.

- *National Parliaments are key players*

As national parliamentarians you have a crucial role to play when it comes to developing democracy, dialogue and debate on European issues – to deal with the substance and with the citizens.

For the Commission, the national parliaments are central. You are a main priority, for two very simple reasons:

- European affairs need to be fully anchored in the political parties, in the national democratic traditions, and in the daily political discussions. I can see no better backer for that than the national parliaments.

- Your discussions and debates – your views and your input will improve "the process of [European] policy formulation" (as we said in our Commission report last year, when we decided to start transmitting our proposals to you). Our decisions and our policies will become better and gain more interest and support if you are involved. Remember what I said two years ago, when I launched my initiative for the national parliaments: "Connecting with people and their elected representatives: a greater voice to parliaments is a greater voice to Europe's citizens."

- Three challenges

We have to act together and put that voice into good use. Because we have joint responsibilities to the citizens. And the challenges we face are the same, regardless of whether we work in Committees or in the Commission. The challenges are global, European and national at the same time. So they also become individual to each one of us, personally as politicians.

For me, these challenges – our joint political responsibilities – can be summarised in three main elements. Three fundamental aspects of life, if you wish:

- Sustainable development
- Integration
- Democracy

- Sustainable development

Let me start with the sustainable development. We have come to hear this "buzz word" more and more often, much because of the apparent and rapid changes to our climate. But we should not forget that sustainable development includes so much more. Ecological balance is one part of it – an essential part. But we also have the social and economic side to development. If we overlook one of the sides in this triangle, we will not have the "smart growth" that we need – and that we want.

Some people mean that we can increase growth only by deregulation; by lowering environmental standards and employment conditions. I do not agree. Sustainable development is a precondition for growth!

We cannot afford a society which is not sustainable. Climate change is obvious – inaction is not an option. But think also about public health. The health costs in Europe are astronomical. Each year we loose 600 million working days for stress related illnesses. Allergies caused by environmental problems cost the Member States 30 million Euros per year.

So, we have to invest both in technique, in people and in the environment. To make environmental demands becoming economically interesting. That is the core of "smart growth" – giving both a better life and business opportunities and jobs. "Vorsprung durch Technik" I believe one of the great German car manufacturers [Audi] have as their slogan. I hope they and everyone else can really live up to it. We have no time to loose.

- Integration

My second element is integration, and its opposite exclusion.

We have gotten used to seeing horrible pictures on our TV screens: tired, sick, scared and all too often dying refugees, coming on overloaded boats to Spain and Italy and Malta. The situation is desperate, not only for the refugees, but also for Spain, Italy and Malta. They need – and ask for – solidarity and support from the other EU Member States.

There is no common immigration policy in the EU. All Members have different rules, regulations and attitudes. And many are struggling with xenophobia, and even outright racism. There are fears for the welfare, and there are growing demographic problems: a decreasing number of workers have to support an increasing number of children, students and elderly.

What should we do to integrate all those who are – or feel they are – left on the sidelines, or entirely outside the society? All those who don't have what we feel are our natural roots in society? It is a question of education, of jobs, of social inclusion. And the truth is the same here as for the sustainable development – inaction is not an option. It is a question of politics and political engagement.

This link to politics is why inclusion is also a question of democracy, the third element I wanted to discuss with you.

- Democracy

Europe is undoubtedly getting both richer and stronger. But still there are – as I just said – more and more people left outside of that prosperity. In most countries, turnout at general elections is decreasing. And in too many places there is a growth in political parties with populism and xenophobia as their main dish.

There are even fascists and racists having seats in State parliaments and city councils – not to mention in the European Parliament. Is this a proof we have in fact failed with social inclusion?

Amos Oz, the Israeli Nobel laureate in literature, has said that the real battle of our time is not the clash between civilisations. It is not between north and south, or between Islam and the rest of the world. It is between the fanatics and the rest – those who believe in life. The "trial of strength" is between fanaticism and tolerance.

The best remedy I can think of is spelled integration and democracy.

But democracy doesn't work by itself. It requires active input – from citizens as well as from institutions. Democracy can quickly become very hollow if there is no engagement and participation.

Vaclav Havel has put his finger on the "must" for democracy:

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"Either democracy works, or it doesn't. The biggest threat is our own irresponsibility, our complacency and resignation as citizens. If Europe is to be united on a foundation of democracy, we must realise that democracy does not come for free – it requires engagement from all of us to work. It has not just fallen down onto our laps, irreversibly and for ever given."

- Ownership of the European project

As politicians we of course have a special responsibility. Perhaps even more so when it comes to European affairs. EU is often seen as remote, or even foreign. But we need to show that EU affairs are not foreign affairs. It is very much domestic policy, albeit in 27 countries at the same time; a kind of "multinational domestic policy".

What we need is political authorities, and public authorities – media, education systems – taking ownership of the European project. Seeing it as something of their own, something domestic, rather than something foreign.

- Commission and National Parliaments – how it was & how it is

If I return to the question of the Commission's co-operation with the national parliaments: here I believe we can see very good results of that ownership. Together we have managed to establish a new momentum. We have come quite far in the past two years. Not all the way – but far.

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We are no longer in the process of just planning the future, making the drawings, or laying the first bricks. We are right in the middle of a new building, discussing more if we should build any extensions, and how we can improve the interior design.

On 1st September last year, we started to transmit all the Commission's new proposals and consultation documents to your parliaments. To many parliaments this was a big step forward. For others it wasn't much novelty, as regards the flow of information. But perhaps more interesting, at the same time we opened up – as the European Council had asked us – to receiving comments from the national parliaments on our proposals.

In all the 50 years of our existence – the 50 years we are celebrating this year – we have never done anything like this. It may sound slightly pompous, but I claim that never before in the history of the European Union, has the Commission been so close to the national parliaments. And never before have the national parliaments had so many EU deliberations: 59 opinions on 34 different Commission proposals was the figure last week – and that is only the first five months of the project!

- *How it will get*

So, what are then the “Prospects for co-operation between the Commission and national parliaments” (as the heading for my intervention is)?

Well, first I have to admit that it is impossible to even speculate about what the outcome of this new venture may be. How it will affect the Commission's proposals – how it will affect the national parliaments, in the long run.

The important message is this: the Commission has taken a political approach to our commitment to you. This is a political move. It is not about the European institutional system and procedures. It is about anchoring, about engagement, and about ownership.

So I could easily summarise and say that the prospects are very good. We are at the stage of discussing extensions and interior design – not the foundation. Of course there are things we can improve, as it is in any building project.

Take the system for transmitting documents and receiving comments from you, for example. We said already at the outset that we should review our procedure after about half a year. Now we are almost there, and we should start looking at possible adjustments and improvements.

So I have written to your Speakers and Presidents to ask for your parliaments' feedback and input. It is only by listening and learning that we can get better.

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- Conclusion

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We have some important challenges ahead of us in Europe. I mentioned a few of them: sustainable development – integration – democracy. Some would say that's a tall order – it is. We can only succeed by taking our responsibility and doing the job together – by letting the European Union be a "solutions united".

I am full of hope for Europe's future. Not in a naively optimistic sense, but in the sense expressed by George Bernard Shaw. He said this:

"We are made wise not by the recollection of our past, but by the responsibility for our future."

Thank you.