

COSAC Chairpersons Meeting

**Eduskunta
Helsinki
11 September 2006**

Introductory address

“Cooperation of the Commission and National Parliaments”

[+/- 15 min]

Chairman, honourable chairpersons,

[Thank you – and I turn especially to you, Jari Vilén – for inviting me here to speak.]

The summer 2006 was in many respects an unusual one. In large parts of Europe, July proved to be the hottest and sunniest July within living memory. And then – when some of us went on our summer holidays – we got the rainiest August for decades.

But this summer gave us much graver concerns than the weather, and more acute ones than the climate change. Unfortunately they were far from unusual. War in Lebanon. Continued unrest in Sri Lanka, Iraq and Darfur. Sadly the list is far too long. And did you know that more people drowned at sea fleeing Africa, than died in the Lebanese war?

But there is also a glimmer of hope. Take Lebanon, for example. The attacks have ended, and negotiations, dialogue and rebuilding has started. It will take time and courage, and it will require substantial support from the international community. But one thing is sure: everyone knows that the only way forward is spelled "peaceful dialogue and political stability".

And here the EU has made a substantial contribution. Both in terms of humanitarian aid, and playing its part in building peace and political stability. Because these are some of the great challenges facing the European Union. Even if things happen outside our continent they have an impact on us – and we have the moral obligations to act.

This reflects the priorities of the Barroso Commission – prosperity, solidarity and security. We cannot have a prosperous and secure Europe, without showing solidarity with those in need outside Europe. That is part of the global challenge, and this is an area where the EU can really live up to being a "solutions united".

But as always, the journey starts at home. Our primary challenges lie in our 25 Member States – and of course in our institutional structures. And it is without doubt important and demanding challenges we face:

- we have to make EU policies understandable and relevant to citizens;
- we have to listen and to deliver;
- we have to use the right mechanisms;
- we have to make the EU Institutions accountable and reliable to those they serve.

To go from words to deeds, a new approach is needed. As national parliamentarians you have a crucial role to play when it comes to developing democracy, dialogue and debate on European issues.

As you know, this Commission has set in motion an ambitious plan to facilitate your playing that role. We want to give the national parliaments improved possibilities and a good starting point for an informed and engaged debate on European issues.

The reason for this is simple: it will lead to European issues being better anchored in the political parties and in the democratic traditions in the Member States. This kind of debate will lead to an increased interest and a broader discussion among the citizens as well: → → →

EU becomes an everyday issue that is discussed in the same way as other everyday issues – in the political parties, in the Parliament, in the media and at home by the kitchen table.

Put this together with the recent Council decision to have open meetings when they act as legislator, and I think three important things can and will change:

- the image of the EU,
- the knowledge about the EU, and
- the interest in the EU.

This will be a good step in the right direction, to make it plain and clear what the EU does, and how it affects the citizens around Europe in their daily lives.

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On the 10th of May the Commission decided to [quote] “transmit directly all new proposals and consultation papers to the national parliaments, inviting them to react so as to improve the process of policy formulation”.

I said it already at the EU Speakers Conference in Copenhagen: I must admit I was perhaps a little bit surprised over how positive and accommodating the European Council was to this Commission initiative. They also asked the Commission to take your comments into account, to acknowledge receipt and that we should “offer a reasoned response within an acceptable timeframe”.

This should apply to questions on subsidiarity and proportionality in particular. I leave it to you to deliberate on how much that “in particular” could be stretched (and in what direction...).

But one thing is sure: since the proposed mechanism does not refer only to subsidiarity or proportionality – and don't forget: there is no formal six weeks period – it can not possibly be argued that the Constitution has been anticipated. It is altogether based on the current Treaties.

Furthermore, as you know, the Council also encouraged the national parliaments “to strengthen the co-operation within the framework of [...] COSAC when monitoring subsidiarity”.

And I'm well aware that COSAC has already started answering up to that call from the Council. The Commission proposal for a Council Regulation *on jurisdiction and rules concerning applicable law in matrimonial matters* has come under close scrutiny, thanks to COSAC.

I will not make any comments on that particular proposal: I'm not an expert and I certainly don't want to pre-empt any follow-up the Commission might give to the comments from the national parliaments. But what I *do* want to say is that your comments will be carefully studied.

The transmission of documents has already started from the beginning of this month. The documents concerned are all legislative proposals and consultation documents, including the soft law (reports and communications). In practice it means all official documents already officially transmitted to the European Parliament (apart from rare cases of classified documents).

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These documents will be transmitted in the linguistic versions chosen by your assemblies as soon as they are available. In practice your parliaments may opt for receiving documents not only in your own language(s), but also in English, French or German, as these linguistic versions are usually available beforehand.

In addition to this, at our Commission meeting last week we took a decision on what internal routines we will use to process the comments we undoubtedly will get from you. Let me take this opportunity to present you with some of the details of this new decision. In a way, it's really quite simple when we come down to the "pure mechanics". As you would expect, our *internal* starting point is that we act both collegially and coherently.

The Commission General Secretariat has opened a new mailbox, especially dedicated to receive your comments. You will automatically get a receipt of delivery when submitting something to this mailbox. And needless to say, you are free to send your opinions in whatever official EU language you choose.

As I said, there is no formal six weeks rule, as in the Constitution. There is no deadline or "best before date" for your opinions. But it, of course, goes without saying that the sooner we get your opinions the better; the more time we have to take them into account.

Because of my portfolio, I will always be the Commissioner responsible for seeing to that your comments are properly handled. But I will share that responsibility with the respective Commissioner in charge of the subject matter at hand. We will also automatically consult both with the Commission General Secretariat and the Legal Service.

In this way we will ensure *not only* that your comments really reach those persons and departments that are on top of things, but also that you always get as much of an expert reply as possible.

It is impossible to even start speculating about what the outcome may be. How it will affect the Commission's proposals – how it will affect the national parliaments. We know it will be demanding on our resources; both in the national parliaments and in the Commission (for us, the translation issue is neither easy, nor cheap...). But we also know that it will increase the openness and transparency in our respective procedures.

But the important thing is this: the Commission has taken a political approach to our commitment from the 10th of May. And that is what this is all about – a political move. We have not started questioning the European institutional system, and it is not in any way interfering with interinstitutional issues or procedures: it is entirely based on the current Treaties.

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Next COSAC Chairpersons meeting will take place in Berlin in about half a year's time. Those will be interesting times indeed. 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, the joint declaration on European values and ambitions. And add to that a reinvigorated European debate in the national parliaments. I think that in many aspects the coming months, and this Finnish Presidency, could be the take-off run to a new dynamic in European politics.

But to achieve this we need to co-operate. The results will depend just as much on your national parliaments as on the Commission. We are mutually reinforcing.

I believe European affairs suffer from a “participatory deficit”. But citizens still have high expectations on delivery and policy content. This puts important demands on the EU Institutions, and on the Member States, and particularly on the national parliaments. We have to better involve citizens in the policy process at all levels, particularly young people and women.

The citizens deserve a more democratic, more transparent and more effective Europe. It is our shared responsibility to do our parts, and to deliver.

Thank you.