

**SPEECH BY LORETA GRAUŽINIENĖ, SPEAKER OF THE SEIMAS OF THE
REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA, AT THE CONFERENCE OF SPEAKERS OF EU
PARLIAMENTS**

STRENGTHENING POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Rome, 21 April 2015

President BOLDRINI,
President GRASSO,
Esteemed colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

First and foremost, let me thank the Italian Parliament for giving me an opportunity to address you, my dear colleagues. Let me share my thoughts on political dialogue with you, the initiative that was launched by the then President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, almost a decade ago, and to elaborate on its future.

We all know that the Barroso Initiative was introduced in September 2006. This was a time when the period of reflection was launched in the aftermath of the failure to conclude the ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty. Efforts were made to look for informal alternative ways of engaging EU national Parliaments in the process of shaping EU policy. The prime motive behind the Commission's initiative was to enhance the parliamentary and democratic dimension of the Union.

That was the plan. There is no doubt that much progress has been made in the framework of political dialogue; national Parliaments have increasingly been making use of the possibilities it offers.

But the question is whether the political dialogue is on the right track. When assessing the political dialogue one can sometimes see differences in how the process is understood by the European Commission and national Parliaments. Sometimes one gets an impression that the Commission regards the political dialogue as an instrument for clarifying its proposals to national Parliaments, for responding to questions raised or concerns expressed by them on any aspects of the Commission's proposal.

On their part, national Parliaments often expect their views to be taken into account when the substance of a legislative proposal is amended. We receive little information as to whether the European Commission takes good note of contributions from national Parliaments. The Commission's annual reports on relations with national Parliaments lack information about a real impact that national Parliaments' opinions have on legislative initiatives from the European Commission. The Commission's annual reports are restricted to statistical data about the number of opinions received from national Parliaments and its dynamics. The reports lack summaries of the key aspects of the opinions and do not reveal whether those opinions have been taken into account, and if so, which opinions, from which national Parliaments, and in what specific ways they have been made use of. The political dialogue might become more meaningful if national Parliaments could see their tangible contribution towards improving the substance of Commission's initiatives.

Following the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon on 1 December 2009, we believed that the situation would change substantially. It was the first time in the history of the European Union that the role of national Parliaments was clearly defined not only in the protocols annexed to the Treaty but in the body of the Treaty too. National Parliaments gained not only a right but also a duty to “contribute actively to the good functioning of the Union”.

Honourable colleagues,

You know only too well that we can do a great deal if we, national Parliaments, the European Parliament and the European Commission, are consistent and persistent in our joint work. While recovering from the economic crisis today, we must come up with and suggest ways to generate more jobs, to promote economic growth of European countries, to safeguard financial stability in Europe, to improve Europe’s competitiveness, and to restore public confidence in the European project. As the geopolitical situation remains complex, we must also pay particular attention to the collective security of our countries, respect for human rights in conflict zones by implementing programmes aimed at reducing poverty.

We therefore sincerely welcome the determination of the new Commission led by Jean-Claude Juncker to establish a new partnership with national Parliaments. It is essential to translate this determination into real action, the success of which is measured in tangible results. Only then will we see a true leap forward.

National Parliaments want and have to be heard today. The political dialogue held so far between individual national Parliaments and the European Commission is insufficient. The political dialogue must be strengthened and developed. We have to look for new instruments to promote greater involvement of national Parliaments into the decision-making process of the EU. I am convinced that all of this can indeed be done by using the provisions of the existing Treaties.

Esteemed colleagues,

In the light of what has been said, I suggest that we develop the political dialogue along two lines:

- first, developing a multilateral political dialogue between national Parliaments and the Commission;
- second, developing a political dialogue, similar to the Barroso Initiative, between national Parliaments and the European Parliament.

For me, a multilateral political dialogue represents a collective political dialogue between national Parliaments and the Commission.

Having taken the helm of the inter-parliamentary cooperation in the EU for the first time in the second semester of 2013, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania chose an active and ambitious programme for its Presidency. One of the novelties which we proposed and which, thanks to all us, was successfully used during the Lithuanian Presidency, were conclusions adopted at the meetings of the chairpersons of parliamentary committees. The conclusions, adopted by consensus, were sent to the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council.

Dear colleagues,

The vast majority of you have already faced the Presidency challenge. The Board of the Seimas adopted a final decision on the events to be held by sectoral committees having taken

note of the purpose of the events, the relevance of topics to the European Union, and the priorities of the Lithuanian Presidency. The Board stressed that Presidency events had to generate a tangible added and practical value, the effect of which could be understood and felt by European citizens.

We believe that the conclusions of the events in the framework of the parliamentary dimension of the Presidency of the EU Council are an expression of a collective opinion of national Parliaments in their specific areas of activity. This collective opinion may become a crucial lever when making decisions on not only the ways to shape EU policy but also on legislative initiatives of the European Commission. Therefore, it is particularly important to ensure that before this opinion becomes a collective voice of national Parliaments, it is fully discussed in a parliamentary event, with direct participation of members of the European Commission and rapporteurs from the European Parliament. Moreover, this opinion should be laid down on paper. Openness and transparency is key to the hearts of European citizens, our voters. This helps excite public interest in parliamentary activities. This might at least partly ensure higher turnout at the European elections and tamed euro scepticism vis-à-vis the European Union.

I happened to hear some politicians, taking part in the Presidency events in Vilnius, say that he or she is not mandated to represent the official position of his or her parliament and thus cannot take part in the decision-making procedure. Let me stress that such final documents cannot restrict national Parliaments and predetermine their positions. These documents should have a similar status to that of COSAC Contributions or the Conclusions of the Inter-Parliamentary Conference for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Of course, it is not easy to prepare a draft document of this type and reconcile it with all partners. We have already experienced this in the Seimas. However, let me assure you that it is possible. Moreover, I am convinced that it is absolutely necessary. It is high time we raised the bar of the parliamentary dimension events. Adoption of a final document could start a new and more qualitative phase of interparliamentary cooperation.

Honourable colleagues,

The so-called “green card” mechanism could contribute to the development of a collective political dialogue. In this context, I would like to express my gratitude to the House of Lords for their discussion paper on the “green card” and the Dutch House of Representatives for their co-hosting of an informal interparliamentary meeting on this innovation in Brussels in January this year, which has definitely prompted a wider debate. We welcome the proposal to test the “green card” mechanism in practice. COSAC could be a suitable format to do so. If I may recall, the subsidiarity check mechanism to be carried out by national Parliaments was also on trial in the beginning, but it fully proved to be a useful tool eventually. The Danish Folketing came up with a noteworthy initiative of submitting a proposal to the European Commission on the establishment of the European Business Forum by applying the green card procedure. I hope we will soon see more initiatives similar to the discussion paper by Lord Boswell.

On 18 March 2015, the Committee on European Affairs of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania considered the said discussion paper. The Committee approved of the initiative to enhance the political dialogue by establishing the “green card” mechanism. By applying the green card procedure, the Commission would be encouraged to take on new legislative initiatives and amend or repeal existing legislation, including delegated or implementing acts. The Committee also noted that the “green card” mechanism should be built on the basis of political dialogue, i.e. without amending any EU Treaties.

National Parliaments do not seek to compete with the Commission in the area of legislation. The purpose of national Parliaments having the possibility to submit their own proposals is to

help the Commission to respond as best as possible to the expectations and interests of EU citizens, whose will is expressed through their elected representatives. This kind of support from national Parliaments would be even more effective if the proposals reached the Commission at an earlier stage. Taking this opportunity, I would like to thank the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia as the Presidency Parliament for its decision to include the item titled *Green Card: Towards an Enhanced Political Dialogue* into the agenda of the COSAC Plenary Meeting that will take place in Riga this June. We will be looking forward to the results of the debates at the COSAC meeting.

On the other hand, the political dialogue should be enhanced by improving the existing means. First of all, we can commend the recommendations to European Commissioners by Frans Timmermans, First Vice-President of the European Commission. They include, among others, more extensive, more specific, and speedier responses by the Commission to the opinions of national Parliaments; more frequent visits by Commissioners to national Parliaments; more active participation of Commissioners in Presidency events of the parliamentary dimension; and presentation of the Commission's annual work programme in Parliaments.

Let me also express my gratitude to the European Commission for its public consultations in which the national Parliaments are also invited to take part. It gives a valuable opportunity for national Parliaments to express, at an early stage, their positions on the Commission's intent to adopt certain legislation. We should use this opportunity more actively.

Dear colleagues,

My second proposal on ways to strengthen the political dialogue is the political dialogue between national Parliaments and the European Parliament, which is the analogous with the Commission's initiative.

One of the possible forms of this type of dialogue could be the participation of rapporteurs from the European Parliament in the meetings of chairpersons of sectoral committees organised by the Presidency Parliament. For instance, a member of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development of the European Parliament working on a relevant report could be invited to the meeting of the chairpersons of the committees on agriculture to deliver a presentation on a subject of the agenda. Once the final document is agreed, it could then be made available to the public and forwarded to the respective national and EU institutions. Subsequently, the chairpersons could initiate parliamentary debates on the basis of this document.

One more proposal, which has been implemented in the Seimas since the very beginning of Lithuania's membership in the EU in 2004, is regular and active participation of the Members of the European Parliament, elected in their respective Member States, in the meetings of the European Affairs Committees of their national Parliaments and their right to have the floor there.

A good example of cooperation between the European Parliament and national Parliaments should become the ratification of the association Agreements of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia until the Riga Summit.

I therefore call on the Parliaments that have not yet taken the decision to do that as soon as possible.

By demonstration unity on this issue we could show our - European Parliament and national Parliaments – ability to take uniform and united decisions.

I am certain that you, Dear Colleagues, have more constructive proposals and ideas on ways to enhance the political dialogue, and I am looking forward to hearing them in the debate of this session.

Thank you.