

SPEECH BY VICE-PRESIDENT WALLSTRÖM
COSAC CHAIRPERSONS MEETING
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It is now five months since we last met – at the COSAC Chairpersons meeting in Luxembourg. Quite a lot has happened since then, to say the least:

- The challenges we face today are not the ones we thought we were going to face, back then in February.
- The EU we have today is not the EU we had hoped for.

If we want to paint the picture very black, we could say that ... two referenda started an avalanche of negative views that culminated in a failed summit – the Constitution is mortally wounded and the EU has no budget. We are indeed facing a crisis.

But we can not allow ourselves be paralyzed by this crisis. We have to move forward and we have to take up the challenges this situation puts on us.

On the same time, I can't deny the fact that I'm disappointed – I am. Just as I suppose many of you and your colleagues are. Because when it comes to the national parliaments (and the European Parliament), we all know that the Constitution would have been a step forward. Now we don't know if and when we can take that step.

Just a few hours before we met in Luxembourg in February, I had presented to the College of Commissioners the new targets for our relations with the national parliaments. That was done without the Constitution – and without anticipating the Constitution. So on that particular point nothing has changed: we have the same commitment today.

And I see this as a very important part of Plan D. Plan D is not a campaign for the Constitution. Plan D is not a “quick fix” or “just one of those new Commission projects”;

- Plan D is about a new vision and a new attitude
- Plan D is about the wide issue of the need for new structures for democratic influence in the EU
- Plan D is about Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, rather than different variations of “qualified majority voting and speaking times in the Council”, however important that is.

This plan has a starting date – now! – but it has no end date, and certainly no best before date.

We need to establish a new consensus, a narrative – the modern story what Europe is about and what the European Value Added is.

Europe cannot do that without its national parliaments!

As we said in our targets already in February: “Connecting with people and their elected representatives – a greater voice to parliaments is a greater voice to Europe’s citizens”.

For us – the Commission and the national parliaments – for us the “period of reflection” and the Plan D started already in February. Five months down the line, we have taken some significant joint steps forward. But more needs to be done, and perhaps also different things.

But let me here make just a brief outline of what has been happening during those past five months; what I and my colleagues have been doing when it comes to the Commission’s relations with the national parliaments.

And of course I also want to touch upon the two items that are the topics for this afternoon’s discussions. To give more room for our discussion, I will take both those items in one go.

But before I do that, I would like to extend my gratitude and thanks to all those of you and your Speakers and Presidents who contacted me after I presented the new targets for the Commission’s relations with the national parliaments. If I were to judge from the many letters and other reactions I have had, our new targets were very well received.

I am of course very grateful for that, but more importantly, I see it both as a good starting point and incentive for our immediate future work. And recent events have shown us that now more than ever it is vital to reach out for dialogue.

In their declaration after the recent summit, the Heads of State or Government stressed the importance of now having a period of reflection. “This period of reflection...” (they stated) “...will be used to enable a broad debate to take place in each of our countries, involving citizens, civil society, social partners, national parliaments and political parties.”

The huge challenge we face today – and we do face it together – as Prime Minister Blair put it in his speech before the European Parliament a few weeks ago, “is not a crisis of political institutions, it is a crisis of political leadership... [and he continued] Have we the political will to go out and meet the people so that they regard our leadership as part of the solution, not the problem?”

Just as in February, I say again: a greater voice to parliaments is a greater voice to Europe’s citizens!

? So, what have we done; or rather, what have we started doing – step by step?

You might recall that I promised to visit all the national parliaments. Needless to say, I have not had the time to fulfil that promise completely just yet. But as you can see I have fulfilled my promise to come to the COSAC Chairpersons meeting, and I intend to continue doing this, just as Commissioners will start coming regularly to the COSAC meetings (if they are wanted there...).

I also attended the EU Speakers Conference in Budapest in May, and I have had many meetings in Brussels with delegations from national parliaments. And I particularly want to point to the evidence session I had with Lord Grenfell and his colleagues on the 1st of February, just as want to thank all of you and your colleagues who made my visits to Madrid, Stockholm, Dublin and the Hague so rewarding.

I will not go into all the details about all we have done with the national parliaments over the past months, but let me just briefly mention a few more examples.

- I attended the annual meeting of the liaison officers of the national parliaments and the European Parliament, in April in Brussels.
- We set out to publish a newsletter – we did that. The first issue was distributed in early March.
- We set out to play an active role as “facilitator” in the electronic exchange of EU-related information between your parliaments, for example via the IPEX co-operation – we did that.
- We set out to organise information meetings in Brussels for your civil servants on specific technical topics – we did that, and we continue doing it.
- We set out to designate a co-ordinator in our administration for requests directly from your parliaments’ administrations – we did that.
- You asked us to play our part in your subsidiarity pilot project on the 3rd railway package – we did that.

But I want to be very frank with you – it was not an all easy decision by the Commission exactly how to play that part. After the French and Dutch referenda, I am sure you understand how tricky an issue it has been for a long time for the Commission not to anticipate the Constitution.

Testing a “Constitution mechanism” is evidently going to be seen by some as anticipating the Constitution, however good the cause may be.

And we should not forget the reason in the first place for your pilot project: the possibility for your parliaments to test their own systems – logistically and politically – for coping with a very important “Constitution mechanism”.

The result was in some parts quite enlightening but depressing for the Commission. The fact that 65% of the participating chambers deemed it necessary to criticise the Commission on the issue of subsidiarity based on the current Treaties is something we at the Commission will have to pay very, very close attention to – and act on. And I can assure you we will.

But back to the question of pilot projects at large. We can all agree that after two referenda and one European Council we are now in a rather different situation, compared to the Chairpersons meeting in Luxembourg in February.

For obvious reasons, I or the Commission does not have any view on whether or not the COSAC should launch a 2nd pilot project. That is entirely up to you and no one else.

But the subsidiarity mechanism as we know it from the Constitution is on a break. Not only do we now have a period of reflection, but we also continue the ratification process in those Member States that so wish. This means we are still in the situation

of not anticipating the Constitution; of not moving in any direction that can be perceived as circumventing the national parliaments and the citizens.

But that should not and could not prevent us from looking at, and discussing what we can do, and how we can improve under the current Treaties. Now more than ever it is vital to reach out for dialogue. It is today and not tomorrow that we need to close the gap between the EU's decision makers and its citizens, and to "democratise" the EU.

The national parliaments have an enormously important role to play in this venture; perhaps one of the most important of them all.

So, my comments on "the way forward for the subsidiarity mechanism and possible second pilot project"... If you think I have been a little bit vague, I agree – that was my intention, mainly for two reasons:

- (1) if we are to take our "period of reflection" seriously, we have to be extremely careful about anticipating a Constitution that some voters have already rejected;
- (2) I do not see it as my or the Commission's task to try to influence you in your internal COSAC decision making.

As for the other topic for this afternoon's discussions, I can be very brief for partly the same reason. Neither I nor the Commission have any view on how the national parliaments best scrutinise the Commission's Annual Work Programme – that is up to you.

On the other hand, what we will have a view on, is how and when the Commission best process any views or opinions from the national parliaments. But for us to be able to have that view, we of course first need to know "your parliaments' requirements for types of information and ways of co-operation with the Commission", as we phrased it in our targets in February.

In other words: you need a useful platform – we need to know in what way you will operate. We depend on your input. And to be very honest with you, we haven't got very much concrete input so far.

That's why I am so much looking forward to the discussion we will now have. But before we have that discussion, let me conclude with this:

If we are to succeed in creating a more democratic Europe that can cope with the challenges of the global economy, policy must be anchored in each country's government and national parliament, in political parties and democratic traditions. Grassroots movements, interest groups and individuals must be allowed to participate in, and take responsibility for, a wide debate and to place European issues where they belong – in day to day politics.

This is Plan D for democracy! Being more effective at listening and at explaining – and being very good at doing something concretely with all the views and ideas; to show that serious views and good ideas do make a difference.

Let us now continue our part of Plan D with dialogue and debate.

Thank you.