



European Conference of Presidents of Parliament
Conférence européenne des Présidents de Parlement
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Conclusions by Pedro Agramunt President of the Parliamentary Assembly

Dear Presidents, colleagues,

As host of this year's European Conference of Presidents of Parliament, I have the honour and the responsibility to present you with my conclusions on these two days.

I would like to start by thanking all of you for your active participation and contribution. The quality of the debates in this hemicycle and the high number of bilateral and other meetings confirms the growing importance of inter-parliamentary dialogue and the increasing awareness of the role that parliamentary diplomacy can play in the context of international relations. Our regular meetings make it possible to build bridges and channels of communication which help us exchange experiences and identify common solutions, in the interests of our citizens.

My special thanks and gratitude go to the key-note speakers of each of the three themes of the Conference. Their interventions served as guidance and food for thought for the debates that followed.

In my opening speech, I recalled some defining dates that have marked our troubled times and changed our perception of the world in which we live.

In my conclusions, I would like to mention some 'defining quotes' that we heard during our debates, which have set the tone of the Conference. YOUR statements have captured, in a few words and with powerful images, the fundamental questions that we MUST address.

To start with **Theme 1 - Migration and refugee crisis in Europe – role and responsibilities of parliaments**, a question that particularly struck me was: *'Do we really walk our walk?'*

Indeed, as regards migration and asylum, our legal obligations are clearly defined and we know our moral responsibilities. We also agree that solidarity and responsibility-sharing are necessary and that a unilateral response to migration and asylum – which is a global, unstoppable phenomenon – is bound to be inadequate and short-lived.

However, we must be self-critical and recognise that the political will to walk our walk has been lacking. In fact, the current crisis is not the arrival of 1 million migrants and refugees to EU member states last year – a tiny percentage of the continent's population – but Europe's failure to provide an adequate, commonly-agreed response to a flow that had been predicted. This also has to be taken in the context of 3 million refugees, mainly from Syria, in Turkey today.

The debate clearly highlighted the existence of different approaches on how to tackle the present crisis, and a different understanding of its depth and impact on the European project. The debate also confirmed, however, that national parliaments should redouble their efforts to develop a constructive dialogue on this matter, with a view to achieving a common position.

Dear colleagues, on the basis of our discussions I have identified a few recommendations that could inspire our future activities.

National parliaments should ensure that migration and asylum measures are not geared towards the short term but are embedded in a long term overall revision of policy and legislation. In this context, it is of the greatest importance to develop better integration policies to allow the full inclusion in our societies of those who will certainly stay. Undoubtedly, integration has a cost but this cost is amply compensated by its benefits for the whole society, as confirmed by our discussions under the third theme. We should keep in mind that failure to integrate implies greater costs in the long-term.

In addition, national parliaments should be more involved in the decision-making process in the area of migration and asylum. Thanks to their pluralist and representative composition, they can provide greater legitimacy to decisions, and guarantee that responses are better tuned to citizens' wishes. The potential of national parliaments to bridge the gap between European decision-making and citizens should also be further explored.

At the same time, as politicians, we have the responsibility not to stir or capitalise on public fear and fall into the trap of populism. We must resist the temptation to present our citizens with a false choice between security on the one hand and dignity and liberty on the other. Security must be taken seriously, and so must human rights.

National parliaments should make greater use of their oversight role, questioning their governments on the poor or delayed implementation of decisions taken at European level to tackle the crisis, as well as supervising the implementation of agreements and other undertakings.

A comprehensive and effective migration and asylum policy requires a strong external dimension. This includes close co-operation with non-European countries of origin and transit and a targeted development aid policy. It also requires a stronger stance on conflict resolution and the restoration of peace in war-afflicted areas because, as it was said, *'there is a deficit of peace'*. These measures would all help in reducing migrant and refugee movements.

Theme 2 - National parliaments and the Council of Europe: together promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law gave participants the opportunity to illustrate the efforts that have been carried out by national parliaments to comply with binding and non-binding Council of Europe texts and decisions, and to co-operate with many of its bodies, including the Parliamentary Assembly.

Several Presidents praised the Council of Europe as a reference in the area of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, having given a major contribution to the consolidation of democratic standards in its member States. To underline the central importance of the European Convention on Human Rights, one President called it *'an achievement of human civilisation'*, a definition which I absolutely support.

Several speakers mentioned the challenging context in which European democracies operate: the threat of terrorism, economic hardship, increasing inequalities, youth unemployment, growing populism to the left and rights of the political spectrum; others focused on the broader geopolitical environment, in which Europe's relevance is shrinking.

Two quotes come to my mind in this regard. The first: *'It is in these difficult times that we need leadership and vision. Insularity could jeopardise what has been achieved so far in the area of democracy, human rights and the rule of law'*, and the second: *'We should not choose between our values and our prosperity. On the contrary, our prosperity depends on our values'*.

Some speakers also referred to the need to bring democratic institutions closer to citizens, for instance by ensuring greater transparency and inclusiveness in the deliberative process, including through online consultations. This is another area in which the Council of Europe could be of assistance, thanks to its work on e-democracy, and this could be further explored by the Assembly.

A recurrent issue was how to ensure that national parliaments are more receptive to early warnings launched by the Parliamentary Assembly and take greater heed of its resolutions. In my opinion there is room for improving the interaction and coordination between national parliaments and the Parliamentary

Assembly and I attach great importance to the pro-active liaison role to be played by the members of national delegations.

At the same time, the Assembly can further improve its knowledge of the interests and needs of national parliaments, for instance by reinforcing tailor-made and demand-driven activities for national parliaments and promoting direct exchanges between Assembly committees and their national counterparts.

On several occasions, during this Conference, we have been reminded of the reasons why we should work together and the values that are our common heritage. You may be aware, dear colleagues, that the Parliamentary Assembly has launched a proposal for the Council of Europe to hold a Fourth Summit of Heads of State and Government of Council of Europe member States. I invite you to support this initiative, which could give a fresh impetus to our co-operation in the years to come.

Dear colleagues, this morning our Conference discussed the theme ***Mobilisation of parliaments against hate, for inclusive and non-racist societies.***

There was a clear consensus that hatred threatens our democratic systems by undermining social cohesion. Societies are more cohesive when diversity is respected and valued as a richness. They are also, as a result, more resilient to threats, including radicalisation leading to terrorism.

Concerns were expressed about the risk of stigmatisation of some groups, especially in the current context of the fight against terrorism. This risk is amplified by a populist rhetoric, on the right and the left, as well as by the impact of the Internet, which has led to the coarsening of public discourse. As it was said, *'racism and incitement to violence are not an opinion. They cannot benefit from the right to freedom of expression'*.

The speakers suggested several ways in which national parliaments could mobilise against hate:

The first and foremost manner is by passing legislation to criminalise hate speech and by convicting the perpetrators of hate crimes. Punishment is not by itself the solution but a step forward.

It was clear from our discussions that great emphasis should be placed on PREVENTION. In this context, many speakers highlighted the centrality of education, the importance of education for democratic citizenship – a major activity of the Council of Europe –, and the role played by sports and cultural associations.

All those who took the floor mentioned the PERSONAL MOBILISATION of parliamentarians as a key component of the fight against hatred, racism and intolerance. As prominent public figures, members of parliament should set an example, be aware of the language they use in political debate and take a clear public stand against hate. They should also support alternative human rights narratives to hate speech. In this regard, I thank those of you who took an interest in the hashtag initiative NoHateNoFear, the No Hate Parliamentary Alliance and the No Hate Speech Movement. I invite you to follow up on these once you go back to your countries.

Mr Thommessen, I found your speech about 'role models' particularly inspiring. As political figures, WE can influence other individuals, especially the youth, to have trust in democracy and to become tomorrow's leaders. Whom we choose to meet, what areas of our cities we choose to visit and whom we choose to publicly support, will be the visible sign of how much we believe in equality and inclusion. We should bear this in mind in our work.

Colleagues, this Conference has given us many ideas for our future homework. The main difficulty lies with the fact that the matters we discussed in these two days need to be addressed simultaneously and without any further delay.

You can count on the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to stand by your side in this endeavor.

Thank you very much.