

The Speech of the Prime Minister Algirdas Butkevičius
At the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments
8:45 p.m., 7 April 2014,
The Hall of the Act of the 11 March, Building I of the Seimas
Language of the meeting: Lithuanian (interpreting provided)

Honourable Speakers of Parliaments,
Your Excellencies,
Dear Members of Parliaments,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

- I am very glad to welcome you all today. Since the topic of our meeting is the role of the speakers of parliaments in the process of creating welfare in the European Union after the economic and financial crisis, I would like to share my thoughts with you on the role of the national parliaments in the process of reducing the lack of democracy, so visible during the crisis.
- Not that long ago Lithuanians, according to the surveys, were the leaders among the European Union enthusiasts. In the 10 years of our membership of the EU, the image of the union became less positive in our country: in 2004 nearly one third of all the citizens claimed to have a positive image of the EU; now only 4 out of 10 respondents claimed to see it in a positive light.
- Lithuanians could be losing their false expectations about the membership of the EU – that it will solve all internal problems in the country, sustain economic welfare and social security. In this respect, the citizens of Lithuania resemble average Europeans (long-time EU citizens especially), who are more sceptical about the EU.
- You will probably agree that the insecurity the EU citizens experience was heightened by the economic crisis. We can still feel its effects. It was the economic downturn that prompted the discussion about the most suitable administrative structure for the European Union, one of the most modern international organizations.

- It can be difficult to choose between a strong supranational alliance and a relatively free cooperation of governments. The fear of the EU citizens of losing the democratic control of the fundamental political decisions makes this choice even more difficult.
- The problem of democratic deficit is one of the most delicate questions in most of the EU member countries. The latest Eurobarometer survey results are as disheartening as ever – about 66% of EU citizens do not believe that their opinion matters in the EU. It is believed that the EU institutions have been far removed from the people and are too little accountable to them, while the operation principles of the institutions are complicated and confusing.
- That is exactly why we must remind ourselves not only of the European Parliament's role in the EU, but also the role of the national parliaments as the representative democracy at the national level.
- It is not a secret that the European integration determined the transference of a part of the national parliaments' law-making competencies to the supranational EU institutions. This process was highlighted by the crisis, and new intergovernmental support mechanisms were created, such as the European Financial Stability Fund (EFSF) and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM).
- However, despite the fact that the EU, as an international institution delegated with much powers, is sometimes referred to as the United States of Europe, it is important to remember that the decisions on key issues are made by the national parliaments of the states (decisions, supporting this provision, were made by the constitutional courts of some of the EU member states – Germany, France, Spain, Poland and the Czech Republic).
- The active role of the national parliaments in the decision-making processes, as an intermediate between the EU citizens and the EU institutions that aims to eliminate the democratic deficit, is consolidated in the Lisbon treaty. The establishment of new rules prompted the dialogue between the national legislative bodies and the EU institutions (European Commission).
- One of the means for an effective involvement of the national parliaments in the decision-making process is the European Semester.

National governments could perform a more active role in the areas of economy and social politics, because they know their national specifics better. In other words, an active cooperation would allow the national parliaments to submit their proposals concerning relevant economic and budgetary issues to the European Commission.

- Active cooperation between the national parliaments and the supranational institutions is able to guarantee the effectiveness of the mechanisms that secure the welfare of the European Union.
- As the Head of the Government of a country that expects to become a member of the Eurozone in 2015, I want to emphasize that, despite the problems that the EU faced during the crisis, the economic and monetary union is of great importance. This is seen in the efforts of some countries to keep the common currency in times of difficulty. Another example comes from our Estonian neighbours – their support for the euro as a common currency of the EU increased by nearly 20 percent after its adoption.
- I believe that the new members of the European Union use all the advantages that make their life in the EU more convenient and experience the benefits of the membership, such as the common currency, the possibility for an easier and less burdensome life, work, studies and travelling, even though the benefits have not yet become self-evident.
- These opportunities that come with the membership are the ones that draw the new members to the family of the European countries. Most of them are ready to pay a considerable price. I am sure that none of us should stay indifferent to the worrying situation evolving right at the border of the EU. Lithuania, as a neighbor of the Russian Federation, was the first one to experience the economic price of the upheaval. We understand the arguments about the harm that poor relations with an important trading partner may cause for the recovering economy of the EU, but we are also aware of the harm that the indifference may cause.
- When we speak about the annexation of the Crimea, we must stay strong and defend our unified position; and that position must undoubtedly express our values, because the values, such as democracy and the superiority of the principals of law, above all, make the European Union what it is today.

- And, even though a lot has to be done in the future – fighting youth unemployment, solving the issue of imbalance between the supply and demand of abilities, business competitiveness, creation of leverages crucial to the economic growth and the establishment of the common energy market, I believe that by upholding our common European values we will together achieve the desirable results and not only justify the trust of the EU citizens, but also increase it.