

Video message by José Manuel Barroso on the occasion of the Conference of Speakers EU Parliaments

Vilnius, 6–8 April 2014

Dear President of the Lithuanian Parliament,
Honourable Speakers and Members of Parliaments,

Although I am not in the position to participate in your conference physically, I am happy that I can at least be with you for a moment through this video message. 2014 is a special year for the European Union, with the European elections coming up in May and also with a change of the European Union leadership.

At the previous European Union elections, we saw very low turnout rates. Unfortunately, we are facing the same phenomenon also at a national level. Citizen disconnect is a serious concern for all of us. It is, therefore, essential that we at European and national levels do our part in reaching out to citizens to make them engage with Europe. You and your fellow members of national Parliaments have a key role to play in debating and explaining the European Union and its policies to the voters. While being realistic about successes and weaknesses of Europe, let's try to inspire hope in our citizens. Let us be proud of Europe, of its achievements and its values – peace, democracy, the rule of law, open societies, equal rights for men and women, social market economy, and solidarity. And there are indeed very concrete and recent achievements. The creation of the banking union in record time is the milestone in our efforts to make the financial system more accountable and more robust. Significant progress is now materialising in Member States which are or have until recently been under programmes and have benefited from different kinds of assistance. And this is good news.

Europe as a whole has come out of recession. We see new economic growth and you can say that the existential threat to the euro is now behind us. But we have to be honest. And it's true there are also many challenges. Unemployment, in particular that of the young people, continues to be the biggest drama; in some of our Member States is an especially difficult situation. And we at European Union and national levels have a joint responsibility. Let us make sure together that particularly the European youth guarantee and the youth employment initiative and a new budget, a new Multiannual Financial Framework produce results, the desired results to help our young unemployed.

On international scene, the situation in Ukraine, particularly in Crimea, has shown us that we must stay united and work together to respond to new situations. We have seen now that more than ever we need the European unity. And, in fact, we should not forget that through difficult times the people of Ukraine were waving the European flag, looking at Europe with hope and also as a source of inspiration.

Just recently, President Obama coming here to the European Union said how important it is also for the world the role of Europe; that Europe is the cornerstone of the way the Americans are also engaging with the rest of the world. So let's be ourselves a little bit more confident about Europe. Europe has its problems but is more than ever indispensable. And I think the recent events have shown once again that peace and stability should never be taken for granted. The people of Lithuania, where your Conference takes place, understand this perfectly well. I am proud of the recent decisions taken by the European Council in this respect and the assistance package put together by the Commission to help the people of Ukraine.

Allow me also to say a few words about the political dialogue between the national Parliaments and the Commission which I initiated back in 2006. I am very pleased to see that this dialogue is now a well-established practice with more than 600 opinions received from national Parliaments in 2013. This is a proof of the high interest of national Parliaments in European Union affairs and of the success of the political dialogue with the Commission. And we also have positive experience with the new subsidiarity mechanism introduced by the Lisbon Treaty. National Parliaments widely use it. And you make your views on subsidiarity heard when necessary. The Commission gives the utmost attention to the views expressed by national Parliaments through this mechanism.

As regards democratic legitimacy and accountability in general, it is clear that at the European level democratic accountability and scrutiny are ensured primarily by the European Parliament. But national Parliaments will always be crucial in ensuring the legitimacy of national governments' action in European Union affairs as well as in the conduct of national fiscal and economic policies. In this context, the Commission supports efforts to reinforce the democratic legitimacy of European Semester process and we will favour even greater involvement of the European and national Parliaments. I am happy to see the commitment to European Semester process and to economic governance issues that was demonstrated at the second European parliamentary week in January. I have been saying it very often that we need, it is quite clear, we need much more coordination of our economic policies. We have seen during the most difficult moments of the financial crisis that the decisions or no decisions of some governments can have a very negative impact on the decisions of others and the situation of the European economy in general. So that is the reason why, as part of the European mechanisms themselves, we should have your input, we should have a much more deepened debate on the European economy situation with the national Parliaments. And the European Commission supports very strongly that evolution.

Dear friends,

I wish you a very interesting meeting with fruitful discussions on these issues that, like you, I think are of high importance for the European Union and its citizens.

I thank you for your attention.