

Speech by President of the Chamber of deputies

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Distinguished Speakers and Presidents, your Excellencies, dear colleagues: it is a great pleasure for me to be here today at my first Conference of Speakers of European Union Parliaments. A year ago I was unable to attend the Conference because it coincided with the election of the President of the Italian Republic. And it is a particular pleasure for me to see some of you who were in Rome just over two weeks ago at the international conference that I organised jointly with the President of the Greek Parliament, Evangelos Meimarakis. Lastly, I would like to thank the Speaker of the Lithuanian Seimas, Loreta Graužinienė, for inviting me to address this Conference today.

In Rome and now again in Vilnius our meeting is taking place against the grim background of an impending conflict on our borders. This is a terrible threat – one which our Eastern partners shared their concerns about just yesterday - which overshadows our discussion of the other items on the Conference agenda, despite their great importance.

I would like to begin by taking up a number of points raised at the Rome Conference, as I promised at the time. Let me start with one of the questions we are being asked to answer in this session: what contribution can the Area of freedom, security and justice make to growth and prosperity in Europe? Or, to phrase it differently, what are the costs and benefits of the various policies in this sector?

President Meimarakis and I – as well as our colleagues from Spain, Malta and Cyprus – are fully aware of the most grievous price being paid for an issue which is dealt with in the framework of the Area of freedom, security and justice: the deaths of so many migrants trying to enter Europe. I have first hand experience of the situation: before taking up my current position, I had been working for fifteen years with the United Nations Refugee Agency, paying frequent visits to the little Italian island of Lampedusa, where thousands of people disembark every year.

Just a few days ago, a group of journalists and researchers published the most comprehensive set of data ever collected on the numbers of people who have lost their lives on our borders or along the routes leading to Europe. Since 2000, according to estimates which only record proven deaths, over 23,000 people have perished in our seas, on our land borders, and in deserts in transit countries. The highest death toll – numbering almost 8,000 people – has been in the Mediterranean, the Mare Nostrum.

Who is to pay for these deaths, fellow Speakers and dear colleagues? A true Area of freedom, security and justice should also serve those who have lost their lives attempting to reach it, fleeing from persecution, violence and grinding poverty. Just as it must safeguard those who survive the journey and are often recruited to be exploited in agriculture, on building sites and in the European sex trade. If we are to put an end to people smuggling and trafficking, we must join forces. These crimes, which are the most heinous of the modern age, are by definition cross-border crimes. And it is to combat these very crimes that the European Union – among other important achievements - has adopted a Directive on trafficking and promoted enhanced judicial cooperation.

Hence '*burden-sharing*' between the member countries must first and foremost be designed to save human lives. The Sicilian Channel, like the Aegean Sea and the Ionian Sea, or the Western Mediterranean, are not merely the borders of a handful of coastal states. They are Europe's borders. We should therefore step up our joint search and rescue operations, as advocated by the Task Force on the Mediterranean established by the European Commission, and guarantee the absolute inviolability of the principle of *non-refoulement* when dealing with asylum seekers and refugees, including in the context of FRONTEX's maritime operations, as stipulated in the Agency's draft Regulation, currently awaiting approval by the European Parliament.

It is not by closing or 'defending' our borders – as some claim to garner easily-won support – that we will stop migration. In order to manage migration better we must act, both bilaterally and through the Union's external action, to address the root causes of these population movements much more effectively.

To prevent people risking their lives at sea we must also consider other proposals that have been raised by the European Commission and by some representatives of national institutions, such as enabling people fleeing violence and persecution to apply for political asylum at the diplomatic missions of EU countries in transit states in order to avoid having to embark on what often become fatal journeys to reach Europe. As advocated by both the European Commission and international organisations, we should also bolster our resettlement policies so as to enable refugees to be transferred, with assistance from multilateral agencies, from first reception countries – where, let it not be forgotten, most of the world's displaced people are to be found – to final destination countries. In 2012 only 4,400 of the 70,000 or so refugees transferred to third countries under the United Nations Refugee Agency's resettlement programme reached the European Union. It is obvious that we have to do more.

Fellow Speakers and dear colleagues, we very often forget one of the major innovations introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, whose Art. 3 states that the establishment of an Area of freedom, security and justice ranks high among the institutional missions and general aims of the European Union, right after the promotion of peace and the well-being of Europe's peoples. It is only in the following paragraphs that reference is made to the objectives of establishing the internal market, as well as to economic growth and price stability.

And yet – as we noted in Rome – the European Union, spurred on by the economic and financial crisis of the past few years, has taken a series of decisions to guarantee the sustainability of public and private finances without fully assessing their social impact.

In many member countries, broad sections of the population have been exposed to conditions of increasing vulnerability: the risk of poverty has grown, in blatant contrast to the objectives of the 2020 Strategy, and social inequalities have increased. All this has led to the erosion of a number of inalienable rights, starting with the right to health and work, solemnly enshrined in the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights. Consequently, there has been a drastic fall in public confidence in national and European institutions.

A loss of trust which could have a major impact on the turnout for the European elections and on the way citizens will cast their vote.

One has the impression that the European Union has not always fully appreciated the fundamental importance of the objectives laid down in article 3, which are based on the founding values of the European Union: respect for human

dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights, with a particular emphasis on minorities, safeguarding pluralism and non-discrimination.

I believe that 2014 – when Italy is going to hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU once again – should signal a real change in the implementation of Article 3. First and foremost, by re-launching growth and jobs as a precondition for protecting social rights and by countering the arguments of those who preach hatred and violence against individuals who are marginalised, excluded or belong to minorities.

Then we must act decisively to ensure that fundamental rights – all fundamental rights – are respected in the countries of the European Union by setting up monitoring mechanisms and prompt and effective penalties in the event of non-compliance. We can no longer afford to be accused of double standards depending upon whether countries are accession candidates or full members of the EU, nor can we use the threat of article 7 of the Treaty on European Union against member states violating fundamental rights – the so-called ‘nuclear option’ – without ever imposing any sanctions or identifying alternative solutions.

This year, as the draft Conclusions of the Conference quite rightly emphasise, the Stockholm Programme will come to an end and the Union will have to lay down its strategic guidelines on justice and home affairs for the years to come. Since 2010 a great deal of progress has been made: we have put in place a common asylum system, enhanced the protection of personal data, and introduced the automatic recognition and immediate enforcement of judicial decisions in every member state, whose benefits are already apparent to the general public and to the business community.

And yet there is still so much more to be done. For example, it is a matter of concern that there has been no progress on the horizontal anti-discrimination directive regarding equal treatment irrespective of religion, age or sexual orientation. It was put forward by the European Commission six years ago, in 2008, and so far it has been held up by strong resistance from a number of member states.

There are other issues which need to be addressed in our day and age and which require greater cooperation between states, such as the increasing spread of cyber-bullying, online hate speech and cyber-harassment, which must be dealt with, as the European Parliament has recently stated, through targeted policies and educational programmes specifically designed for young people.

Lastly, 2014 will see the end of the transition period following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. As from January 2015, matters relating to the Area of freedom, security and justice will also be subject to the ordinary legislative procedure, thereby heightening the role and powers of the European Parliament and, through the provisions governing subsidiarity, of national parliaments as well.

In conclusion, dear colleagues, it is also incumbent upon us to ensure that Europe not only consolidates its existing achievements as regards the Area of freedom, security and justice, but that it is able to go further still and enable our continent to become a world leader in the protection of fundamental rights and the rule of law once again.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to welcoming you to Rome next year for the next Conference of Speakers of European Union Parliaments.