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Activities of the President of the Parliamentary Assembly between the third and the fourth part of the Ordinary session of 2012

Communication

President of the Assembly

1. Visits and meetings

1.1. Exchange of views with the Ministers' Deputies (1147th meeting) (Strasbourg, 4 July 2012)

I informed the Ministers' deputies of the activities and priorities of the Assembly. My presentation was followed by an interesting and fruitful exchange of views.

1.2. 21st annual session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE and Mediterranean Forum 2012 of the OSCE P.A.: "The Mediterranean partnership of the OSCE in a changing region: impact of the elections since the events of 2011" (Monaco, 5-6 July 2012)

On 5-6 July 2012, I took part in the 21st Annual Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE held in Monaco.

On 5 July, in my address to the plenary session, I welcomed the growing complementarity of the two parliamentary assemblies and proposed a series of practical steps to enable them to work together better to observe elections, resolve frozen conflicts and co-ordinate their messages.

As regards election observation, which has become one of the main areas for co-operation between our two assemblies, I pointed out that there is now an established practice of mutual co-operation on the basis of each body's standards and guidelines and, on the whole, we have always been able to achieve consensus between observers in assessing the democratic nature of elections.

I also addressed the democratic transformations in the Arab world and used this opportunity to invite eligible OSCE member States to apply for the Parliamentary Assembly's "Partner for democracy" status. Last but not least, I reiterated our deepest concerns about the continuing bloodshed in Syria and recalled Parliamentary Assembly's strong position in this respect.

On 6 July, I addressed the OSCE's 2012 Mediterranean Forum, where I outlined the steps taken by the Assembly to support democratic transition in the Arab region.

I held a series of bilateral meetings, in particular with Mr. Riccardo Migliori, newly elected President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and with whom we agreed to carry out a joint high-level visit to Ukraine before the forthcoming parliamentary elections on 28 October; unfortunately, we could not find suitable dates with the Ukrainian authorities.

I also met Mrs Walburga Habsburg Douglas, chair of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Team on Moldova, and we had a very fruitful discussion concerning our co-operation on the Transnistrian issue.

Lastly, I took this opportunity to meet with Mr Michel Roger, Minister of State of Monaco.



1.3. Developments in Romania and visit of the Presidential Committee to Bucharest (Bucharest, 18-19 July 2012)

Since the beginning of July 2012, I have issued four press statements expressing concerns at developments in Romania. From the outset of the current political crisis, I have been stressing that, as a member state of the Council of Europe, Romania must respect the commitments it has undertaken as well as European standards and that the independence of the judiciary, in particular that of the Constitutional Court, is an essential condition for the existence of the rule of law in any state. I have also persistently called on all parties to resolve the current crisis through political dialogue, while fully respecting the rights of the opposition, the constitution and the laws in force.

With a view to collect first-hand information and discuss the situation with the highest representatives of the country, the Presidential Committee decided to carry out a fact-finding visit to Bucharest on 18-19 July 2012. I was accompanied during this visit by the available members of the Presidential Committee, Mr Andreas Gross, Chairperson of the Socialist Group (SOC), and Ms Anne Brasseur, Chairperson of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), as well as by Mr Wojciech Sawicki, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Assembly.

I should like to thank the Romanian authorities, and in particular the Parliament, for having received our delegation without any hesitation and made all the necessary arrangements for this most successful visit, which was announced at very short notice,

We had talks with, among others, the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Mr Valeriu Stefan Zgonea, the Acting President of the Senate, Mr Petru Filip, the Acting President, Mr George Crin Laurentiu Antonescu, and the suspended President, Mr Traian Basescu, as well as with the Prime Minister, Mr Victor Ponta, and the President of the Constitutional Court, Mr Augustin Zegrean. We also met with members of the Romanian parliamentary delegation to our Parliamentary Assembly.

At the end of the visit, we issued a statement in which:

- we expressed concerns about the haste with which profound political changes affecting the functioning of institutions in Romania have taken place, without, at the same time, engaging a real political debate. In this context, we called on all political forces to fully shoulder their responsibilities and ensure that the country's institutions function democratically, with due respect for the rule of law;
- we stressed that a worsening of the present situation must be avoided. To this end, we asked the main political forces to initiate serious dialogue among themselves and to avoid certain practices which undermine the democratic functioning of institutions and create an atmosphere of distrust and revenge in political life, such as excessive use of emergency measures, pressures on the judicial system and misuse of proceedings for purely political purposes;
- we underlined that any political interference in the administration of justice is unacceptable and that independent institutions such as the Ombudsman play a vital role in a democracy. All public institutions and political players have a duty to ensure that such institutions are independent of all pressure. In this connection, we also called for judicial decisions, particularly those of the Constitutional Court, to be duly and timely published and enforced;
- we welcomed the request made by the Romanian authorities to the Council of Europe's Venice Commission for expert appraisal of two disputed emergency measures and reiterated that the Venice Commission is at the disposal of our Romanian colleagues to provide them with full and impartial legal advice on all questions of constitutional law;
- we also considered that it would be desirable to begin consideration of any possible changes to the Constitution in the light of the experience gathered in the last two decades;
- we stressed that the parliamentary elections which will be held in the autumn must take place in a context of democratic political debate and in accordance with accepted international standards. In this connection, we considered that our Assembly should be ready to observe these elections;
- finally, we called on all of Romania's political forces not only to follow all constitutional procedures, but also to engage in genuine dialogue based on tolerance and mutual respect, to carry out dignified campaigns focused on the problems facing the country and to avoid all personal confrontation.

On 30 July, following a referendum on the dismissal of the President of Romania which took place on 29 July, I called on all players in Romanian politics to overcome their differences and agree to work together to meet the major challenges which lie ahead for Romania in the coming weeks and months, showing the mutual respect without which democracy would be just a set of formal rules. I also urged them to safeguard the independence of the judiciary, which is vital to the establishment and strengthening of the rule of law.

On 6 August, following the concerns expressed by some members of the judiciary about possible attacks on their independence, I published a message of support to the Constitutional Court. I stressed that the role of the Constitutional Court is to guarantee respect for the Constitution and the laws, which is essential for the institutions to function democratically. It is thus crucial to safeguard its independence, and any political intrusion into its proceedings is unacceptable. In this connection, I also suggested that the Constitutional Court could request support from the Venice Commission's experts in its scrutiny of the ratification of the results of the referendum held on 29 July 2012.

Finally, following the announcement, on 21 August, by the Constitutional Court of its decision invalidating the referendum, I called on all institutions and political players in Romania to abide by the decision.

I also called, once again, on all political actors to exercise wisdom and overcome their differences to ensure that cohabitation takes place under the best possible conditions. I stressed, in particular, that in these times of crisis, it is essential that all the country's institutions work together to provide the right solutions to the problems facing the country's population.

Finally, I reiterated the availability of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to provide our Romanian partners with the political support they may need, particularly in the preparation of the general elections scheduled for this autumn.

1.4. Ceremonies of the 68th anniversary of the disembarkation in Provence (14-15 August 2012 – Théoule-sur-Mer (France))

On this occasion, I represented the Parliamentary Assembly and delivered a speech, as well as laid wreaths, at two events.

1.5. Meetings of the Presidential Committee and of the Bureau (Nice, 2-3 September 2012)

During its meeting in Nice on 3 September, the Bureau updated the agenda for the next session (1-5 October 2012), discussed the observation of the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Georgia (1 October 2012), Montenegro (14 October) and Ukraine (28 October), and dealt with the 2013 election calendar. Christian Estrosi, Mayor of Nice, addressed members at the opening of the meeting.

1.6. Meetings in Strasbourg (11-13 September 2012)

During these three days, I met several personalities (in chronological order):

- Mr Titus Corlăţean, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Romania

Mr Corlăţean informed me of the latest developments in Romania, following the decision of the Constitutional Court to invalidate the referendum of 29 July, due to the insufficient turnout. He stressed in particular the fact that the Constitutional Court had confirmed that all legal procedures for the organisation of the referendum were observed and the Romanian authorities were acting in compliance with the Constitution and the laws of the country. Mr Corlăţean expressed the commitment of his government to make sure that the political cohabitation goes well; at the same time, he stressed the need to address the issue of the constitutional reform after the elections to be held in December 2012, in order to clarify, inter alia, the functions of the country's top officials and avoid the repetition of similar crisis situations in future.

On my side, I welcomed the direct communication we have established with Minister Corlăţean, following his appointment in August 2012, and assured him of the Assembly's readiness to support the Romanian authorities in the process of constitutional review, in particular, through the Venice commission.

Finally, we exchanged views on a number of current issues of the European political agenda, such as the situation in Europe's Southern neighbourhood, the crisis in Syria, as well as the resolution of "frozen conflicts".

- Mr Nils Muižnieks, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe

On 11 September, I met Mr Muižnieks in order to discuss the modalities for extending further the cooperation between the Commissioner and the Assembly. In particular, we agreed to regularly exchange information about our activities and co-ordinate the dates of our in-country visits, as appropriate. Moreover, we discussed the need to avoid duplication of work between the Council of Europe and the institutions of the European Union, as well as the ways to overcome potential overlap in our respective activities.

- Mr Didier Reynders, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Belgium

On 11 September 2012, I met Mr Didier Reynders, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Belgium, at a working lunch convened by Mr Alain Cools, Permanent Representative of Belgium to the Council of Europe. The main topic of our discussion was the monitoring of member states' commitments and obligations to the Council of Europe.

- Mr John Ringguth, Executive Secretary of Moneyval

I have been informed by Mr Ringguth of the activities of Moneyval and we discussed the possibilities to reinforce the cooperation between our two organs.

- Mr Thomas Dubus, Director of Strasbourg airport

From my meeting with the directors of Strasbourg airport, it emerged that the measures taken have borne their first fruits, with in particular the creation of new routes.

However, this new impetus could be compromised because of the decision by Air France to close the airlink between Roissy and Strasbourg, as part of its restructuring plan. This problem is further aggravated by the risk of a significant reduction of the airlinks subsidy granted by the PSO (public service obligations).

The combination of these two measures and their immediate implementation would raise serious problems for the airport.

I have therefore intervened with Air France for them to postpone their decision, so that the new impetus is not curbed, and for them to reflect on alternatives. With regard to the PSO, the new Chairperson of the French delegation has intervened with the French authorities so that these subsidies be maintained at an acceptable level.

- Ms Houria Youfsi, General Consul of Algeria

We discussed the latest events at the South of the Mediterranean and the prospects of cooperation between Algeria and the Parliamentary Assembly.

- Mr Evan Read, General Consul of the United States and Deputy Permanent Observer to the Council of Europe

Following the attack on the Consulate of the United States of America in Benghazi (Libya) which led to the death of the US ambassador in Libya and three of his colleagues, I met Mr Evan Read, General Consul of the United States in Strasbourg and Deputy Permanent Observer to the Council of Europe, in order to express, on behalf of the Parliamentary Assembly, our sympathies to the families of the victims, as well as the American authorities and people. In particular, I stressed that this was an unjustifiable attack on diplomats who were trying to help Libyans to build better lives.

- I also took part in the meeting of the Pan European Working Group of the European People's Party, and made an intervention on "The relations between the European parliament and the Council of Europe".
- On 12 September 2012, I participated in the plenary sitting of the European Parliament, following the debate on the situation in Romania.
- I had a working breakfast with members of the Association of European parliamentarians.

I gave several interviews:

- Phone interview with Radio Romania;
- Interview for Strasbourg magazine on the World Forum on Democracy;
- Interview with Mr Olivier Singer, Information center on the European Institutions - Europe Direct Strasbourg, on the World Forum on Democracy.

1.7. European Conference of Presidents of parliaments and bilateral meetings (Strasbourg, 20-21 September 2012)

I chaired the conference together with Mr Omirou, President of the Cypriot parliament ; we also presented the conclusions at the closing of the event. The conclusions of the European Conference of Presidents of parliaments are appended in Appendix.

I held several bilateral meetings in the margin of the conference (in chronological order):

- Mr Alain Hausser, Deputy-Head of mission and Minister-Councilor at the Canadian mission to the European Union
- Mr Nebojša Stefanović, President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia
- Mr Terje Andersen, President of the Parliament of Norway
- Mr Yiannakis L. Omirou, President of the House of Representatives of Cyprus
- Mr Reuven Rivlin, President of the Knesset, Parliament of Israel
- Ms Jozefina Topalli, Speaker of the Parliament of Albania
- Mr Karim Ghallab, President of the Chamber of Representatives and Mr Mohamed Cheikh Biadillah, President of the Chamber of Councilors, Kingdom of Morocco
- Mr László Kövér, Speaker of the National Assembly of Hungary
- Mr Vangelis Meimarakis, President of the Hellenic Parliament
- Mr Jesus Murillo Karam, President of the Chamber of Deputies of Mexico
- Mr Miguel Angel Martinez, Vice-president of the European Parliament
- Mr Ranko Krivokapic, President of the Parliament of Montenegro
- Mr Hovik Abrahamyan, President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia
- Mr Ogtay Asadov, President of the Parliament of Azerbaijan
- Mr Jean-Pierre Bel, President of the Senate of France
- Ms Tsetska Tsacheva, President of the National Assembly of Bulgaria
- Mr Marian Lupu, President of the Parliament of Moldova
- Mr Riccardo Miglioni, President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
- Mr Mustapha Ben Jafaar, President of the National Constituent Assembly of Tunisia
- Mr Ivan Melnikov, first Deputy Speaker of the State Duma of the Russian Federation
- Mr Claude Bartolone, President of the National Assembly of France

1.8. 9th Conference of the Council of Europe of Ministers responsible for Youth (St Petersburg, 23-25 September 2012)

At my address during the opening of the Ministerial Conference on Youth, I stressed that, though young people have today unprecedented access to information, this does not necessarily give them any real say and will not always enable them to join existing associations or political bodies. Therefore, they should be encouraged to take part in politics.

Considering that young people seem to want more participatory democracy, they demand their own forums for discussion where their opinions would be truly taken into account, I pointed out that the PACE had made proposals on subjects such as education for citizenship, establishing Youth Councils, holding Youth 'States-Generals', the use of social networks by leading politicians to communicate with young people and access for the young to political office.

I also underlined that the Youth Assembly, which is to be held by the PACE in Strasbourg on 5-7 October 2012, is precisely a step in the right direction. We want to give young people a chance not only to express themselves but to be on an equal footing with politicians when discussing issues which affect all of our societies and young people in particular.

Generally speaking, I found the discussions of the Conference, in which representatives of the young people took part, very interesting. I was also glad that three other members of the Assembly, Mr Connarty, Mr Flego and Mr Volonté could come to Saint Petersburg and bring a substantial and well appreciated contribution to the discussions.

However, I was very disappointed that it was impossible to find a consensus at the level of Ministers and their representatives to adopt a final declaration of the Conference which, in my opinion, does not give the right message, at first place, to the young people.

1.9. Phone conversation with Mr Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament (25 September 2012)

I had a very fruitful conversation with Mr Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament, where we discussed following subjects:

- the preparation of the working lunch between the Conference of Presidents of the European Parliament and the Presidential Committee of the Council of Europe in Brussels on 7 November 2012;
- I also reiterated my invitation to address the Parliamentary Assembly, which he accepted;
- we discussed current political issues, in particular in respect with the Russian Federation and Romania.

1.10. Lunch-debate convened by Mr. Jean-Jacques de Dardel, Ambassador of Switzerland in Paris (Paris, 27 September 2012)

The Ambassador of Switzerland in Paris, Mr. Jean-Jacques de Dardel, invited me to a lunch on Thursday, September 27. The Ambassador Carla Del Ponte, former Attorney General of the Swiss Confederation and later of the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia, moderated this round table, the theme of which was the fight against impunity, dealing with the past as well as the rehabilitation of victims. She referred to her experience at the Tribunal in the Hague. The participants in the very rich debate which took place in this context were, among others, Mr Robert Badinter, Mr Jean-Marie Fardeau, Director for France of Human Rights Watch and Mr Pierre Valleix, Counselor for justice of the President of the French Republic.

2. Press Releases

1. PACE President calls for vigilance to ensure that the values of the Council of Europe are upheld (25 June 2012)
2. PACE President announces a Youth Assembly to be held in October (29 June 2012)
3. Action Group meeting on Syria: the Assembly calls for concrete action on democratic transition in Syria (1 July 2012)
4. PACE President hails growing complementarity with OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (5 July 2012)
5. PACE President voices concern at developments in Romania (6 July 2012)
6. PACE delegation headed by President Jean-Claude Mignon visits Romania (13 July 2012)
7. Romania: PACE calls on political forces to ensure that institutions function democratically (19 July 2012)
8. PACE President calls on all players in Romanian politics to overcome their differences following the referendum (30 July 2012)
9. Romania: PACE President suggests that the Constitutional Court consult the Venice Commission (6 August 2012)
10. Verdict in the 'Pussy Riot' trial: in the light of Council of Europe standards, a disproportionate sentence (17 August 2012)
11. Romania: cohabitation must take place under the best conditions, says PACE President (21 August 2012)
12. PACE President and co-rapporteurs deeply disappointed with Court of Cassation decision in Tymoshenko case (29 August 2012)

13. PACE President concerned by the serious deterioration in relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan following the decision to pardon Ramil Safarov (5 September 2012)
14. PACE President welcomes European Parliament resolution on illegal detention of prisoners by the CIA (11 September 2012)
15. PACE President reacts to deaths of US Ambassador in Libya and colleagues (12 September 2012)
16. Middle East: PACE President and his predecessor call for calm, mutual respect and dialogue (16 September 2012)
17. Jean-Claude Mignon: the crisis in Europe is financial and economic, but also democratic (17 September 2012)
18. Georgia: PACE President shocked by ill-treatment of prisoners (20 September 2012)
19. Jean-Claude Mignon : Young people should be encouraged to take part in politics (24 September 2012)
20. Following Montpellier match-fixing allegation, PACE President calls for ban on betting in some competitions (27 September 2012)
21. 'It takes two to hold a dialogue' says PACE President, following the announcement that Sergey Naryshkin, Speaker of the State Duma, will not be coming to Strasbourg (27 September 2012)

3. Speeches

1. Opening speech of the 3rd part-session of the Parliamentary Assembly (25 June 2012)
2. Welcome to the attention of Mr Sali Berisha, Prime Minister of the Albania (25 June 2012)
3. Welcome to the attention of Mr Steingrímur J. Sigfússon, Minister of Economic Affairs, of fishing and agriculture of Iceland (26 June 2012)
4. Welcome speech to Mr Edmond Haxhinasto, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Albania, Chairman of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 26 June 2012)
5. Welcome to Mr Zoran Milanovic, Prime Minister of Croatia (27 June 2012)
6. Welcome to Mr Rudko Kawczynski, President of the European Forum of Roma and Travelers (Strasbourg, 28 June 2012)
7. Welcome speech to Mr Mustapha Ben Jaafar, President of the Constituent Assembly of Tunisia (28 June 2012)
8. Exchange of views with the Ministers' delegates (1147th meeting) (Strasbourg, 4 July 2012)
9. Speech delivered at the 21st annual session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE (Monaco, 5 July 2012)
10. Speech delivered at the Mediterranean Forum 2012 of the OSCE P.A.: "The Mediterranean partnership of the OSCE in a changing region: impact of the elections since the events of 2011" (Monaco, July 6, 2012)
11. Speech delivered at the 68th anniversary of the landings in Provence (15 August 2012 – Théoule-sur-Mer, France)
12. Intervention at a working group of the European People's Party on « The relations between the European parliament and the Council of Europe » (Strasbourg, 11 September 2012)
13. Opening speech of the European Conference of Presidents of parliaments (Strasbourg, 20 September 2012)
14. Conclusions of the European Conference of Presidents of parliaments (Strasbourg, 21 September 2012) – These conclusions are appended below in Appendix.
15. Speech delivered at the 9th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth (Saint-Petersburg, 23-25 September 2012)

Appendix



Conférence européenne des
Présidents de Parlement
Strasbourg, 20-21 septembre 2012



CONCLUSIONS OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

Mr JEAN-CLAUDE MIGNON

The Presidents of the Parliaments of the 47 Council of Europe member States and of numerous partner, observer and neighbouring countries, and the Presidents of Interparliamentary Assemblies, met in Strasbourg on 20 and 21 September 2012 for the European Conference of Presidents of Parliaments.

During these two days, we have discussed together three major topical subjects:

- the future of the European Court of Human Rights,
- the state of health of representative democracy,
- challenges and opportunities of the Arab Revolutions.

We have also considered how national parliaments can meet the challenges thrown up by these questions at the current time.

I should like to present to you the conclusions of our debates.

Theme 1: Future of the European Court of Human Rights – Role of national parliaments

The jewel in the crown of the Council of Europe is the European Court of Human Rights. From the outset, we all confirmed our unwavering support for this institution – and in no uncertain terms.

The discussions covered the role national parliaments must play in upholding the Convention system, and the vital role of the Strasbourg Court in this sphere. In this context, let us not forget that the Court's role is of course crucial, but remains subsidiary: it is primarily incumbent upon states' national authorities - the executive, the courts and the legislature - to prevent or remedy human rights violations at the national level.

[Resolution 1726 \(2010\)](#) of the Parliamentary Assembly emphasises the “the key role parliaments can play in stemming the flood of applications submerging the Court by, for instance, carefully examining whether (draft) legislation is compatible with the Convention's requirements and in helping states to ensure prompt and full compliance with the Court's judgments.” The Brighton Declaration, adopted on 20 April 2012, has at long last recognised and underlined the important role national parliaments and the Assembly play in this respect.

The question is: how can we, in our parliaments and in the Parliamentary Assembly, work together to prevent the Court from falling victim to deficient implementation of the Convention at national level?

Indeed, it seemed to us that the role of parliaments as guarantors of human rights has not been sufficiently exploited. Yet careful examination of the kind of work that we do shows that we bear a heavy responsibility on our shoulders. Parliaments must systematically examine in detail whether (draft) legislation is compatible with the European Convention, as interpreted by the Court. Likewise, legislative measures often need to be adopted speedily to ensure full compliance with the Strasbourg Court's judgments and some examples of good practices were mentioned during the debates. Especially in those states in which major structural problems have been identified, Presidents of parliaments have a responsibility to ensure sufficient parliamentary time and political support for such important work. Indeed, parliaments can hold the executive to account and influence the direction and priority of legislative initiatives, especially when it is necessary to introduce effective domestic remedies for structural violations.

This presupposes the existence of appropriate parliamentary structures to ensure rigorous and regular monitoring of compliance with international human rights obligations. They should, as suggested in [Assembly Resolution 1823 \(2011\)](#), take the form of dedicated human rights committees or appropriate analogous structures set up by our parliaments. Parliaments also need to possess an efficient legal service with specific competence in human rights matters.

The double mandate of parliamentarians – as members of the Assembly and of national parliaments – is potentially of fundamental importance to ensure that the standards of the Convention are guaranteed and effectively implemented domestically. As some speakers indicated in our discussions, parliaments can and should hold government to account for inappropriate or dilatory implementation of Strasbourg Court judgments, by organising, for example, debates or hearings or raising parliamentary questions. Training, in human rights matters, of parliamentarians and their staff, is – in this context – a very worthwhile investment.

We reiterated the need to ensure full and expeditious compliance at national level with the Court's judgments, which, in many instances, requires regular and rigorous oversight. The Assembly's Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights is currently in the process of holding hearings with representatives of the countries which are lagging behind in ensuring such compliance with their obligations. But this is not enough. It is vital for national legislative bodies to give priority to this issue on their parliamentary agendas, so as to ensure systematic and effective monitoring, within all national parliaments, of the standards guaranteed by the Convention.

Theme 2: Is representative democracy in crisis? Challenges for national parliaments

Theme 2 was the subject of lively interest, which is hardly surprising as “representative democracy” is after all central to our activities.

We have all noticed a widening gulf between the public and elected institutions, as indicated by the low election turnouts observed throughout Europe. While most participants concluded that representative democracy, as such, is not in crisis, we all agree that it is one of the main victims of the global economic and financial crisis:

- support for traditional political parties has fallen, whereas populist and extremist movements are on the rise;
- austerity measures have been imposed by governments and through international negotiation mechanisms, with little parliamentary control, insufficient transparency and practically no citizens' participation;
- some citizens, whose protest movements have occasionally led to social unrest in many European cities, have therefore questioned the legitimacy of political institutions.

It has emerged from our discussions that the current situation should be regarded as an opportunity for bringing citizens closer to the institutions of representative democracy. Parliaments should not oppose changes in society, but adapt to societal and technological developments, while guaranteeing the stability of democracy by building a strong link between the institutions of representative democracy and citizens. Being themselves the incarnation of the outcome of voting, national parliaments can, firstly, improve “representativeness” by creating a closer link between the will of the people and the outcome of the vote, *inter alia* through:

- an electoral system which should better reflect the opinion of the people and the composition of the electorate and facilitate effective participation by minorities;
- the adoption of measures able to increase public confidence in the electoral process, providing for political pluralism, transparency of financing and greater internal democracy within political parties;
- the introduction of measures to promote the participation and balanced representation of women in politics, and increased participation by young people in the electoral process; youth assemblies are useful tools in this context;
- the reinforcement of parliaments' role in respect of initiating legislation and oversight of governments' action, including through parliamentary questions to the government, public hearings, etc; it is unacceptable for the representatives of the people to be systematically bypassed by governments on the pretext that matters are urgent;

- the establishment of better communication channels with the public, notably via the Internet, social networks, parliamentary television channels and/or civil society associations. Parliaments should move into social networks so as not to lose contact with the younger generations;
- the development of a new culture of civic and political responsibility through a strengthening of the *obligation to account for actions* and of *transparency* on the part of those who govern.

It also emerged from our discussions that now, more than ever, it is vital for citizens to have their say in the conduct of public affairs on a daily basis, and not just once every four or five years. Parliaments should not perceive the new deliberative models as in some way competing with representative democracy, so long as these continue to take part in debates. Thus parliaments could promote new ways for the people to express their views, beyond the traditional forms of mandate and delegation, inter alia through:

- the setting up of participatory and deliberative processes and structures such as: participatory budgeting processes; citizen-initiated referenda; national petitions; citizens' juries or conferences; voluntary-sector activity; activity of associations;
- citizenship education and political training;
- transnational networks formed by citizens to address specific issues, such as environmental, social or even constitutional ones.

Finally we noted that interparliamentary co-operation remains highly useful to strengthen the position of parliaments at national level, through exchanges of good practices. In this respect, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, for its part, offers a larger Europe-wide platform where representatives of national parliaments may exchange good practices and submit for debate (through motions for resolutions) questions of interest to the citizens in their respective countries, in order to seek common responses. The World Forum for Democracy, born within our Assembly, which is to take place in a fortnight's time in Strasbourg, preceded by a Youth Assembly, is another example of a platform for exchanges.

In conclusion, can we not sum up our discussions by slightly paraphrasing the words of Winston Churchill? "Representative democracy is the worst form of government, with the exception of all the others."

Theme 3: Arab revolutions: challenges and opportunities

Discussions on theme 3 focused on the main challenges that the Arab countries in transition are facing and on the opportunities offered to them and us.

We have expressed our great concern about the situation in Syria and the unprecedented violence and the humanitarian emergency caused by the conflict. We have also expressed concern about the violent protests that have flared up across the Arab world in the last couple of weeks, triggered by the circulation of an Islamophobic film. This is a totally reprehensible film. However, nothing can justify the unprecedented violence it has triggered.

Nearly two years ago, what prompted men and women in the Arab world to go onto the streets was the quest for freedom, dignity and equality. They wanted to break free from corrupt dictatorships which oppressed their fundamental human rights and political freedoms. We should be self-critical: all too often, western countries supported dictatorships, sacrificing peoples' freedom for the sake of stability.

The Arab revolutions were prompted by the same universal values which are upheld by the Council of Europe and shared by its member states. Free and fair elections followed some of the revolutions, giving democratic legitimacy to the process of political transition. We must therefore engage in dialogue with the political forces which are the expression of these votes, on the basis of our common values and the rejection of violence.

A free and fair vote does not on its own guarantee the success of democratic transition. To ensure such success, the parliaments and governments elected must tackle significant challenges, including:

- the need to reach as broad as possible a consensus on constitutional reform and the guarantee that it reflects democratic values;
- promoting equality between women and men and the empowerment of women, both in the public and in the private sphere;
- ensuring respect for human rights, including against the risk of religious fundamentalism;
- protecting the rights of religious minorities and actively promoting intercultural dialogue, including in its religious dimension;

- addressing insecurity and fighting against impunity, through the rule of law;
- freedom of the media;
- fighting corruption;
- empowering civil society, enhancing its participation in political process;
- fighting terrorism.

We have identified the way forward.

National parliaments in Council of Europe member States stand ready to provide tangible support to parliaments in the Arab countries in transition in confronting the above challenges through inter-parliamentary co-operation tools.

Throughout the conference, we repeated that all religious faiths can live together in peace, respecting one another's beliefs, to build together a free and humane society.

It is vital to back up democratic transition with economic development and growth, which are preconditions for stability. In this area, the European Union and many European states have a fundamental part to play.

The Council of Europe, and notably its Assembly, can also support the transition process by offering:

- political support and a concrete framework for exchanging views and sharing experiences on the issue of democratic transition, including through the Partnership for Democracy with the Assembly;
- assistance in the field of constitutional, electoral and judicial reform;
- accession to Council of Europe instruments and partial agreements open to non-member states;
- intergovernmental and parliamentary assistance programmes.

In conclusion, I should like to quote a passage from the Assembly's latest report on co-operation between the Council of Europe and the emerging democracies in the Arab world: *"It is for the Arab states to make their own choices, but Europe must be ready to step up to the mark. If Europe now fails to show ambition and a clear, democratic and optimistic political vision for the future, it will bequeath to future generations an environment still driven by political, cultural and religious dissent which could become insurmountable and which sooner or later will present it with a major problem."*