

Verslag van de bijzondere bijeenkomst van Leden van de Staten-Generaal
Met **de heer Jerzy Buzek**, voorzitter van het Europees Parlement,
Op dinsdag 29 maart 2011 in de voltallige zaal van de Eerste Kamer der Staten-
Generaal.

Aanvang: 16.00 uur

Mr René van der Linden (President of the Senate): Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, I open this very special meeting.

Also on behalf of Ms Geri Overbeek, President of our House of Representatives, I warmly welcome our guest, the President of the European Parliament, Mr Jerzy Buzek, to the States-General of the Netherlands. It is a real honour and pleasure to receive you in this plenary hall of the Senate.

Mr President, in many ways you embody the tremendous changes Europe has seen in the last few decades. In your home country Poland in the eighties of the last century, when your country was under oppressive communist rule, you were very active in the Solidarity trade union and political movement. You were one of the leaders that led your country to democracy. In the nineties you were appointed Prime Minister. After Poland's entry into the EU you were elected member of the European parliament with a very high number of preferential votes.

In 2009 you were elected President of the European Parliament. Your election as the first President of the European Parliament who comes from Central and Eastern Europe was a milestone in the history of the European Union. You are presiding over the most powerful European parliament the EU has ever seen, because through the Treaty of Lisbon which came into force on December 1, 2009, the European Parliament saw its competences widen drastically. The goal you defined for your presidency to bring the Parliament closer to the people is one that I wholeheartedly support.

Now you are the guest of the national parliament of one of the founding members of the European Union. The Dutch States-General have a long tradition of support to the European integration. After the Second World War the European Economic Community was created to prevent new wars. It has proven to be an extremely successful concept which indeed has maintained peace and has brought prosperity to many European countries, not least to the Netherlands. After the collapse of the

communist regimes the Dutch parliament fully supported the enlargement of the European Union based on the principle of "no more dividing lines in Europe".

Today we are confronted with new challenges on a global scale: climate change, energy crisis, terrorism and security risks, poverty and exclusion, budgetary deficits. The geopolitical map is changing. Europe has a crucial role to play in solving these crises. Crises have always helped Europe further. That can happen again, provided that we are ready to come up together with the right answers. We have to be willing to pool sovereignty, while preserving our identities.

We all know, however, that the growth of the European Union in the last decade also has led to scepticism among citizens about ends and means of European cooperation. Member States tend to become more inward looking. The Netherlands has not been an exception to this trend. Speaking for the Senate I want to underline that it has only stimulated us to be very active on European issues and in European arenas. We raised issues in interparliamentary committees such COSAC where we came up with proposals to increase the openness of the deliberations of European Council meetings, contain the unwanted growth of European agencies, and to improve the European financial control systems through the obligatory introduction of approval statements.

The strong conviction that Europe is more than the European Union has led to a very active participation by our members to the activities of the Council of Europe, particularly its parliamentary assembly. It is extremely important that a community of values on human rights, rule of law and democracy exists on the European continent which has a much larger scale than the European Union. From the beginning we have pleaded the EU's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights. Parliamentary diplomacy through official visits and informal contacts certainly contributes to the dispersing and implementation of values and international rules and agreements.

I am quite proud that the European activities of the Senate have been acknowledged by the "Fondation du Mérite Européen" which recently has decided to award the Dutch Senate its "Médaille d'Or". This will make the Dutch Senate the first national parliamentary institution to receive this prestigious honour. The Senate will receive this award on 17 May in this plenary hall.

I am convinced that the Dutch parliamentary action has contributed to strengthening the role of parliaments within the European institutional setting. Of course we

applaud the higher level of democracy that the Lisbon Treaty has brought. The Treaty is the beginning of a very important new phase within the European Union. It has given us parliamentarians enormous responsibilities. It is up to us to increase the indispensable support of the citizens to decisions which are important for the future of Europe. As national parliaments we have to respect the competences of the European Parliament under the Treaty. But the reverse is true as well. We expect a more open eye of the European Parliament for feelings and sentiments among European citizens. I make a strong plea that the European Parliament seriously take note of the opinions of national parliaments. We are partners in democracy.

The powers of the European Parliament have been strengthened. Its reputation as an efficient and effective democratic institution needs further improvement.

Openness, transparency, proper responsiveness to people's needs and expectations are required to gain people's trust. May I add: a constant cost-consciousness. The EP must assure that the expenses of the EU are necessary and justified. The EP's own expenses must be subject to utter self-criticism. In a period in which all state budgets are dramatically cut, the EP must be modest in its financial requests. The extremely important tasks and role that the European Parliament has to fulfil are now overshadowed by bickering over its own expenditure.

The world is changing rapidly. New economic powers have arisen. The recent dramatic events in Japan have increased the awareness that the energy crisis requires common global and common European action. The hopefully positive changeover in the Arab world poses a new challenge for our continent. It requires a common action to strategically strengthen the neighbourhood policy. Precisely the events in Northern Africa and the Middle East require also a strong Council of Europe next to the European Union. The European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe should make full use of the Council's experience and instruments to protect and strengthen human rights and democracy. The Council of Europe's work should not be weakened by costly duplications of its programs by the EU.

Mr President of the European Parliament, let me finish by thanking you for your tireless efforts to strengthen Europe. The floor is yours. And after your speech Ms Strik, chairperson of the Senate's committee on European cooperation, will lead the discussion with Senators and Members of the House of Representatives.

Mr Jerzy Buzek (President of the European Parliament): Dear Mister President of the Dutch Senate, dear Madam President of the Dutch House of Representatives, dear members of the Senate and the House of Representatives.

It is a great honour for me to deliver a short speech at the beginning of our discussion. Let me start by saying that the President of the Senate is absolutely right that we must be well aware of today's situation. We have to start to respond to everything that is happening around us. Let us not get into something like a babble. Gaining insight into our own problems and into the outside world are quite different matters. Let me say that, although sometimes there is a lack of information and communication, it is not necessarily so that wrong decisions are taken. That is the reason why we should be as close as possible. First of all this relates to the European institutions. Your European committee can influence European law on the basis of the Lisbon Treaty. A quite new era has begun in our European integration process. The most important thing of course is to have close contact with our citizens. I am quite sure that our discussion will be very clear as well.

It is also a great honour for me to be here because I realize that I am in one of the founding member states of the European Union. It is extremely important for rather new countries in the European Union not to talk anymore about old and new Europe, because now we are united and we take the common responsibility for everything that is going around, but let me say that, having been an important pillar of the European integration from the outset, the Netherlands is still an important member today. Your opinion and your point of view could influence many other member states. You are very active and mobile. There is also this big tradition in the Netherlands, called the "polder model". You know very well what it means: a triangle of negotiations. Let me remind you that I have some experience with this model. For many years I was very active in a trade union, not only fighting the communist system, but also conducting negotiations on behalf of workers. After that I had to take responsibility in the government. It is a very unusual combination, but you are not unfamiliar with such a combination, because one of your prime ministers had the same background.

I would like to bring up a couple of issues for discussion.

I think that the issue of interparliamentary relations is very important for the future, because we would like to be relevant. We do not only need instruments, but also the political will to use them. From this point of view I would like to say that the

cooperation with your national parliament is excellent. Quite recently, six committees of the House of Representatives as well as the European Affairs committee of the Senate paid working visits to the European Parliament. Why am I saying this? Because if we would like to assume responsibility for the European legislation we should contact each other as often as possible, at the level of rapporteurs and at the level of committee chairpersons. You have also opted to examine the Commission's annual work programme, in order to check particular proposals against compliance with the principle of subsidiarity. It is a very good idea not only to examine legislative proposals which are ready, but also the annual work programme. So far, no yellow card was shown, let alone an orange one.

European laws must not only be passed, but implemented as well. We should cooperate on the preparation of legislation, but also on its implementation. The latter is sometimes even more important. We can only realize full implementation if we all agree to the laws we pass. We can only agree if we are all part of the decision making process. Thank you very much for your engagement. I had an appointment with the presidents of both the House of Representatives and the Senate, where we discussed all the possibilities.

Another important issue is the budget and the EU's multiannual financial framework. The discussion about this started at the end of last year. We will also discuss the annual budget for 2012. There was a lot of discussion and I am open for further discussion on this issue, because it is very important. Maybe there have been some misunderstandings at the end of last year about the idea not to reduce the European budget. There is one reason for that: 94.4% is spent on investment in the European economy. However, I understand the position of member states very well. In times of austerity measures this is difficult to understand. As you know very well, we reacted very quickly on the proposals from member states, so the figures were absolutely the same as member states proposed. It is also connected with European added value in such important areas as European research and European innovation policy. If we bring together our scientists and our companies, we can build and develop fantastic things. It is impossible for a country on its own to do so. Even bigger countries cannot achieve the same results. Another issue is the single market. We cannot build a single market without money. Building a good infrastructure, for instance, means developing a better single market. A single market also means that we need a common market for energy. A single market without a common market for energy is

not a genuine single market. This requires investment in cross-border connections. This is also a European matter, because not all trans-border connections are commercially profitable. Sometimes, investment from the EU-budget is absolutely necessary. We know that very well from our experience.

The euro is of course one of the most important achievements of our common policy, so let me now turn to another issue, namely the European stability mechanism. Let me underline that all the measures taken last week to support the euro do not imply a transfer of sovereignty to the EU. They are instruments we need to prevent future crises. They reassure the markets, which is very important. However, this is not enough. We need exit strategies. This is something different from recovery. Stability and recovery are very close to each other, but exit means growth by 2,5%, 3% or 3,5%. We would like to avoid stagnation. Probably, we also need some money from the EU, for our 2020 strategy. It is an excellent exit strategy, but if there is no money from the European Union, it would probably be difficult to get started. We should and we can spend money to improve important things at the national level and we are ready to do so. That is absolutely necessary as well. But let us always keep in mind that in some cases investment by the European Union could be more effective.

In your speech, Mr President of the Senate, you mentioned Africa. The Dutch polder model is a model of solidarity between three institutions, representing all the citizens and the public authorities. The dialogue between trade unions, employers' organizations and representatives of public authorities is the most important dialogue in our community. Solidarity is the first issue, but it must be grounded on responsibility. It is not possible to go ahead and to have solidarity without responsibility. This is connected with the European stability mechanism. There is also a close connection with the common foreign and defence policy. As we see in North-Africa, we are not efficient enough. It is very difficult for us to take decisions. What happens in both our southern and eastern neighbourhoods should be a wake-up call for us. We were probably the first European institution to call for the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya, together with the Arab countries. This is the best solution, of course. I spent five days last week in Egypt and Tunisia and met the leader of the Arab league, Mr Moussa and we discussed all these problems. It is very important that your government and you, as a parliament, decided to contribute soldiers, ships and planes to the international coalition, and I praise you for that. This is part of our crucial feeling about solidarity with the innocent people who are murdered now. We

remember very well our actions in the Western Balkans, for example. If we are united and if we know what to do we are much more effective. On the basis of the Lisbon Treaty we have established the European External Action Service, but now we need a common foreign policy and a common defence policy. It would mean a great step forward in our project. We need to be players, not only payers. From the point of view of development policy we are certainly the best all over the world. As a matter of fact all the development projects in Central Africa and the Middle East, especially in Gaza, are based on the European Union and its member states.

The next issue is also connected with North Africa and our solidarity and responsibility as well. I am talking about our immigration and asylum policy. This must be a common European policy. The European Parliament believes we need a joint immigration policy, so that we avoid that certain countries are overwhelmed by illegal immigrants. However, for a joint immigration policy we need solidarity among 27 member states. I also mention the issue of the Roma people, who have been Europeans for at least eight or nine centuries. We must tackle all the problems, because we are true Europeans. We should consider ourselves as European citizens, but that is very difficult for us. Strengthening Frontex comes at a cost, but is still a common responsibility. It is not enough to strengthen our external borders. We need to channel illegal immigration, maybe through some kind of legal immigration, the same way in every member state, for instance by introducing the blue card. This is not decided yet, the proposal is still on the table. For this to work, we need common rules and common standards. That is where the EU can add value.

We, in the European Parliament, believe that what the EU offers in terms of common policies depends on the laws we pass and the money we spend. In order to face the challenges of the 21st century and to be successful we need to be united. With countries like India and Brazil growing in power, we can play a global role. This is necessary to defend our citizens, to fulfil their expectations and to tackle the challenges they face. We are a community of shared values, the most important of which, in this triangle you have experience which, is solidarity. Moreover, there is consensus. In the European Union we always take decisions in consensus. The third point of the triangle, of course, is responsibility. This triangle is similar to that of your tremendous polder model. We always need solidarity, we need to take decisions in consensus, and we always need responsibility, also in our European stability

mechanism. Why do we need such a mechanism? Because it is absolutely necessary that every member state takes its responsibility.

I share these remarks with you, because on the European continent this model is one of the best concepts in practice. We need your leadership, especially the leadership of the founding members of the European Union, and your readiness to deepen our integration. That is very important. We need your signal, maybe together with that of Belgian or German citizens. I say this because I come from a country which lies far away. The situation is not so bad now, but 25 years ago we still had the iron curtain. It was not easy to go to my country and from my country to your country. Today, it is no problem at all. But still we feel that you are a nation responsible for the future of Europe. That is why, today, I would like to know your feelings about and your approach to the integration, knowing that we are going through a crisis and knowing that 80 years ago Europe was in a very similar situation. We finished up quite wrong and horrible then. We must improve ourselves. Everybody. The European Parliament as well. If you have any complaints, I am open to discuss them, because we all must improve. That is very important for me. Thank you very much.

Ms **Strik** (chairperson of the committee on European Cooperation of the Senate):

Thank you very much, Mr President, for your kind words to the Dutch people and also for your encouraging remarks about keeping actively involved in the European integration process. I welcome that you reminded us of our responsibility. Thank you also for sharing with us your interesting views about various topics. Let us start the exchange of views with the members of both chambers of our parliament. There is little time left, but I am sure you will notice that we will not lose ourselves in a babble. We will really discuss issues that matter to people.

Let me first make some introductory remarks. You said that the European Parliament wants to be relevant. We appreciate that. The European Parliament wants to be an inevitable partner and it already assumes the role it was given by the Treaty of Lisbon, to form a counterbalance to the Council. You really made this clear by the establishment of the SURE committee. Last week we paid a working visit to the European Parliament, where we spoke with members of the SURE committee. It is very clear: the European Parliament does not want to wait for the Council to present its negotiation results on the multi-annual budget framework only, it also wants to draw up guidelines which the Commission should take into account when drafting a

proposal. It is important that the European Parliament fills this democratic gap at the European level adequately, also because sometimes it proves to be very hard for national parliaments to get and to hold grip on the governments' positions in the Council. However being complementary in our work, we need a close and effective cooperation between the national parliaments and the European Parliament, in terms of sharing information in time and exchanging views and taking these views into account.

Let me inform you on two positions regarding this cooperation. The Treaty of Lisbon gives us explicit share powers in controlling Europol and Eurojust. The Dutch Senate supports the idea of a joint committee of members of the national parliaments and the European Parliament to control these institutions as effectively as possible. We do not need a new institution, but an adequately working committee. The European common foreign and security policy remains a national competence of the member states, but the European Parliament becomes more and more involved in this issue, for instance with regard to the functioning of the External Action Service.

A decision on the parliamentary oversight of this area, after the dissolution of the WEU-assembly, is to be taken next week at the EU Conference of Speakers of Parliament. This has not yet been discussed in the foreign affairs and European affairs committees of the Senate, but let me take this opportunity to state our general position on this issue. The fact that the area of European foreign affairs and defence is an intergovernmental policy area should be reflected in the model of parliamentary scrutiny. The new conference should not be a new or standing institution. It should replace the current COFACC and CODCC conferences. All the national parliaments and the European Parliament should be full members of the conference. We think that delegations from each parliament to this conference should consist of no more than six members. The conference should be organised by the Troika countries. The cost should be kept to a minimum. We hope that the Conference of Speakers of Parliaments will come up with a satisfactory solution next week. We really look forward to working constructively together with the European Parliament, within this new structure. We hope to hear your view on this topic as well.

Let me now give the floor to the members of our parliament. I would like to ask the members of the House of Representatives to ask their questions first. Let us gather three questions and then give the President of the European Parliament the opportunity to reply.

Mr **Ten Broeke** (House of Representatives): Thank you, Mr Buzek, for visiting the Netherlands and our parliament. I have two questions. One relates to Strasbourg. Would you be willing to give us a very clear statement as to where you stand with regard of the whole "circus" of constantly travelling between Brussels and Strasbourg?

In this country, we believe that one should practice what one preaches. We have been a country of preachers for a long time, and also a country of salesmen. These two go hand in hand, sometimes. Throughout the European Union enormous austerity packages are implemented. This has a great impact on the peoples we represent. Whether we live in Greece or in the Netherlands, we need to save money in order to get back on a track that the European Union has widely described to us. Our parliament has wisely decided to cut the budget by 8%. The European Council has decided to cut its budget by 4.4%. Our people are cutting their budgets at home. Unfortunately, the European Parliament, which says it represents the European people or wants to do so at least, does not cut its budget. It does not do so this year and it does not seem to intend doing it next year. In fact it is increasing its budget by more or less the same percentage other institutions are cutting theirs. How do you expect us to achieve the European dream if we are not practicing what we preach? I believe that this is at the root of the legitimacy problem of the European Parliament and the European Union. I would like to hear your statements on that.

Mr **Bontes** (House of Representatives): Thank you, Mr Buzek, for visiting the Dutch Parliament. A topic that really bothered me last week was the corruption of four members of the European Parliament. Mr Buzek promised a zero-tolerance approach. Could you please comment on that? What will it look like?

Ms **Bemelmans-Vidéc** (Senate): Mr President of the European Parliament, your CV shows a very impressive career, also as far as the protection of human rights is concerned. Could you please give us your appreciation of the ongoing process of the accession of the European Union to the European Convention on Human Rights? Could you also indicate the time frame you would consider realistic for this process?

Ms **Strik**: Maybe it is good to note that Ms Bemelmans is also the leader of the Dutch delegation to the Council of Europe.

Mr **Jerzy Buzek**: Thank you very much for your cooperation with the SURE committee of the European Parliament to prepare the multi-annual financial framework. I know that there are a lot different points of view on the next budget. I know the point of view of the Dutch Parliament and the Dutch government on this issue. I realize that there are some differences, but they do not seem very big to me, as a matter of fact, from the point of view of our common perspective and the consensus in one and a half year. We should finish the matter during the Danish or Cypriot presidency. I am optimistic. It would be much better to start the discussion immediately. We should also take into account our partnership on the southern and eastern borders, and our foreign and defence policy in general.

This is connected with the second question, namely how to organize ourselves in the European Union and in our interparliamentary cooperation. We do not want new institutions. We should integrate our effective committees. Cooperation in the field of our common foreign and defence policy is very important. I think we can easily reach a consensus about the number of participants from the parliaments of the member states. When it comes to the internal and justice policy I refer to the Stockholm programme. We are responsible for the integration. Why is this so important? Not only because our citizens expect something from us, but also because it is laid down in the treaty. It was said that the common foreign and defence policy is an intergovernmental responsibility, but on the basis of the Lisbon Treaty there is a quite new concept, quite similar to the responsibility of the national parliaments for the European legislation. We are trying to make everything more clear at the level of the European Union and to be more united. Our interparliamentary cooperation in the field of foreign and defence policy and also in the field of justice and internal affairs is absolutely crucial. Europol and Eurojust should be well organized to tackle all the problems in this field.

Whether the European Parliament should continue to gather both in Strasbourg and in Brussels is an issue falling entirely under the responsibility of the member states. Let me underline that once again. The member states should take a unanimous decision to change the situation. The European Parliament does not influence this at all. Maybe there are reasons for change, but the matter is not interesting from the

point of view of legal certainty. The legal basis has to be provided by the member states. Strasbourg is a symbolic city. Maybe this is not so important for this part of Europe, but for Central and Eastern Europe it is very important to have such a symbol. We know and we remember the meeting of chancellor Kohl and president Mitterand in Verdun, in 1983 or 1984. We were then behind the iron curtain, but to see something like that was absolutely incredible for us. We are still at the level of symbolic meanings in our part of Europe. However, I know that we spend a lot of money on the shuttle. I repeat that a decision to change the situation has to be taken by the member states.

The next issue is the austerity package. It is rather difficult for me to discuss this point in my capacity as President of the European Parliament. I understand your position very well. On the other hand we must realise that on the basis of the Nice Treaty about 40% of the European legislation is subject to the co-decision process. The European Parliament gives an opinion on the remaining 60% of legislative proposals. When the opinion procedure applies, the European Parliament is less influential than is the case with co-decision. We are now responsible for much more areas of legislation. This probably makes it easier for you to understand that we need more advisers and more assistance from experts, because today we bear at least twice as much responsibility for legislation as we did before. We are below inflation, of course, but not minus 4% or minus 8%, not at all. We need to prepare our legislation and discuss it with the Council in a responsible way. Is it really a lot of money if we are better prepared for examining proposed legislation? One could say that we do not make perfect legislation and that very often our position is not perfect either. The European Parliament may not always do well, but we try to improve, through expertise. We feel we have much more responsibility. Maybe I can explain this to you, but not to our citizens. To them my answer will sound stupid, to put it simply, because austerity measures are implemented everywhere, whereas the budget of the European Parliament is increased by 2%. This is still below inflation, however, because inflation is around 3.5%. But there is growth. How can the citizens understand that? I am now trying to explain this to you, but I know very well that for our citizens this is not enough. We would like to tackle the problem in a responsible way. This is not easy for us, because as you know very well, more than 50% of the legislation in the member states stems from the European Union. The 25 MPs from the Netherlands are as responsible for this legislation as all the other MPs.

I do not have anything new to say about corruption. I am determined to protect and safeguard the integrity of the European Parliament. I am determined to practice zero tolerance in this field. But let me say that the cooperation with the national authorities is very important, because we do not have such a thing as a European prosecutor. We cannot carry out an investigation at the European level. OLAF is responsible for administrative investigations, but that is absolutely not enough. Another question is that of the immunity of the members. One of the four members in question resigned. The others are still members of the European Parliament, unless they announce their resignation in a plenary session and are penalized. I cannot explain this to our citizens, of course. In the press it was said that they do not have immunity, but in fact they do have immunity. The next plenary sitting will be in Strasbourg, I am sorry to say it, in six days. We should not act against the law. Zero tolerance means that we need tools. At the moment we do not have tools, such as a European prosecutor. We do not have a constitution, so we do not have a European prosecutor. I am not complaining about this, but it is not easy to tackle the problem. Belgian law also applies, because our seat is in Belgium. Moreover we have to do with the legal systems of Slovenia, Austria, Romania and so on. Transparency International, a very responsible organisation, said: we understand you, Mr President of the European Parliament, because we know that the problem is not easy to tackle. We should change the law for this.

Joining the Convention on Human Rights is a very important issue. It is laid down in the treaty and we must implement it as soon as possible. We are on our way to do so, as you will know. We do not have any doubt. Tomorrow I will go to the meeting of the commissioners, because the European Commission is responsible for the action in this field. I will ask a very simple question to Mr Barroso, the President of the Commission, and to the other commissioners who are responsible for this. All of them will be around the table. Every two or three months there is such a meeting of the President of the European Parliament and the Commission. I will ask them where we stand now in this whole procedure.

Mr **Kox** (Senate): Mr President, you said that the European Parliament was the first institution to call for a no-fly zone in Libya. May I remind you that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe was the first institution to offer the parliaments of Northern Africa and the Middle East a partnership for democracy? I was in Palestine

last week, on their request. The Moroccan parliament has also made a request in this field. Perhaps next month I will receive an application from Tunisia. How can we assure that the efforts of the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe add value? How can we prevent duplication of efforts to help the emerging democracies in Northern Africa and the Middle East? Could you please elaborate on that? If you meet with our minister of foreign affairs, it would be good to highlight the necessity of providing aid to Gaza and the West Bank, because there has been a change in our government and I am afraid they are forgetting about that.

Mr De Vries (Senate): Thank you for your visit to us, Mr President. I have a question similar to the question Mr Kox asked you. You said that we live in historical times, which is indeed true. But are we learning any lessons from the historical events we witness? Until recently, we used to embrace all these dictators from which the peoples are now freeing themselves. Now we boast that we are full of values. But we did not recognise the development at the time that it was relevant. These peoples are liberating themselves, without our help. I would like to know what role human rights and fundamental freedoms should play in the European foreign policy. What is your view on that?

Mr Jerzy Buzek: These are very good questions to conclude our discussion, because they relate to the human rights and fundamental values we believe in. It is very important to be reminded of them again and again. Let me first answer the question about the no-fly zone and Northern Africa. We have some experience in this field. Twenty-two years ago there was a similar uprising in Central and Eastern Europe. However, in some of the Central European countries there had been a working democracy in the 1920s and 1930s, so these countries had already had some experience with the democratic system in the past. This is not the case in Northern Africa. Maybe Egypt had some form of democracy between the first and the Second World War, but the other countries all have a colonial heritage. Therefore, change is very difficult for these countries, because they do not have any experience with democracy. But there are more differences. I spent five days in the region and had some very fundamental discussions with members of NGOs, students and young people on the Tahir Square, where I went by midday. I shook hands with at least two hundred people. I told them that I was from the European Union. Some of my

sentences were interpreted. What I had not expected was that I would be extended such a nice, polite and open welcome. There was no person who did not smile at me or did not shake hands. We ate baked potatoes together. They were not hungry, but they wanted to eat with me. I say this, because it is very important for all of us. We must build credibility. Those people remember the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries. We must take our common responsibility. I am very interested in Northern Africa. My own country is far away from Northern Africa, so I think it is even more important for me to be there than it is for any citizen from Italy or Spain. I am sure that the European Union has a common responsibility. I expect of course colleagues from Spain and Portugal to go to Belarus, Moldova and Georgia, despite the fact that their countries are far away from Eastern Europe. For me it is important to stress that we have a great responsibility for Northern Africa. In the near future we have to stop a humanitarian disaster. I am talking about Libya, of course, and of stopping Khadafi killing his whole nation. The humanitarian disaster also affects Egypt and Tunisia, because large numbers of refugees on their borders cause big problems. We should immediately send water, food and medicine to Egypt and Tunisia, because it is sometimes difficult to send it to Libya itself.

We must formulate a mid-term strategy. It will not be easy to build true democracy. In Tunisia it will be easier, because the people there want further reform. In Egypt this will not be so easy, probably. We must stand ready to support, not to impose anything. They are interested in everything. There are 60 or so new political parties in Tunisia and even 100 in Egypt. Yet, even if transparent and perfectly fair elections were held, we are quite certain that the parties of the old regime would win, because nobody knows the new parties. We must be prepared that the elections to be held in a few months will result in a victory of the old regime. Maybe we can help them to build up democracy and strong institutions and procedure as quickly as possible. They are ready to take advice from us. In the long run, let us say 2, 3 or 10 years, it is prosperity that matters. We could open our market step by step. We could introduce visa liberalization, for students and research workers to begin with. We must think about that. Why is that so important? Because it will influence the internal policy of the European Union. It is strictly connected with our internal policy of an open, single market. The immigration issue is perhaps not so important for the northern member states of the European Union, but it certainly is for the southern member states. There are no easy answers. I am in the position that I can speak on

behalf of at least 90% of my colleagues. We share the feeling that we should go there and support them. Because it is also in our interest in the future. We know that the long-term prospective of stability is only possible thanks to democracy and prosperity, in the end. Democracy alone is not enough. There must also be democratic added value. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe there was certainly democratic added value, but we had a tremendous prospect: an open gate to the European Union. That was fantastic. You can see how it works in the Western Balkans. They stopped fighting. The hard power of the United States was very important, of course, in the 1990s, but now they stopped fighting. This is not enough for their accession to the European Union, given their criminal justice system. We wait for the example of Serbia to give us the proper answer. These are some reflections on the building of our European External Action Service. Perhaps we can adopt a common foreign policy with regard to our neighbours and to such important issues as non-proliferation and climate policy. The European Union could start to build a common approach on these issues. We cannot be very effective without a common approach in some fields.

Ms **Strik**: Thank you, Mr President, for being so frank with us. It has become clear that we share common views on many issues. We may disagree on some topics, but having the opportunity to explain our views and try to understand each other may be the first step towards agreement.

Now I would like to give the floor to the President of the House of Representatives, Ms Gerdi Verbeet, who will close this meeting.

Ms **Gerdi Verbeet** (President of the House of Representatives): Mr President of the European Parliament, Mr President of the Senate, ladies and gentlemen. I have the honour to make some closing remarks.

We can look back with satisfaction on an interesting and fruitful discussion.

Next week we will meet again at the Speakers Conference, where one of the subjects on the agenda is the future inter-parliamentary inspection of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, including the Common Security and Defence Policy. The Houses of Parliament of the UK, with the support of the French Senate and the Lithuanian and Dutch Parliaments, have sent a position paper on this matter to the Belgian Presidency. Our main consideration is the vital necessity for national

parliaments to be able to oversee matters of Common Foreign, Defence and Security policy. This is regarded as adding value to the work we do in our national parliaments in holding governments to account for their actions in the EU Council and European Council. We see future inter-parliamentary scrutiny primarily as a successor to the Western European's European Security and Defence Assembly, and would like to establish an Inter-Parliamentary Conference on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security, following the example of a "Conference of Committees" under the authority of COSAC. The Conference would not be a new or existing institution. All national EU parliaments and the European Parliament would be full members of the Conference. Furthermore, I recently promised my Norwegian counterpart, Dag Terje Andersen, to promote the possibility for the Norwegian Parliament and the Parliaments of other countries that are part of the European Economic Area, to attend these meetings as well. The organisational responsibility for the Conference would be borne by the parliaments of the troika countries, which would also have joint chairmanship. I am greatly looking forward to next week's discussion on this subject!

Mr President of the European Parliament, it is evident that both the House of Representatives and the Senate feel a strong commitment to deal with EU-affairs comprehensively. Not only on their own, but together with their natural partners. This is *our* Europe. Perhaps one day we will really be able to say to our citizens and to each other -- and now I quote from your inaugural speech: "there is no us and you; we can say loud and clear that this Europe belongs to us all."

I now close this joint meeting, and I would like to thank you all for your participation.

Sluiting: 17.15 uur