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PARLIAMENTARIANS LAUNCHED PARLIAMENTARY FORUM OF THE COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRACIES

Under Presidency of Lithuania Parliamentary Forum of the Community of Democracies was launched in Vilnius on March 12th, 2010, coinciding with the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the restoration of Lithuania's independence.

The Parliamentary Forum of the Community of Democracies will complement current cooperation between the Community of Democracies' governments and non-governmental organizations. Members of the Forum will intend to meet regularly every year, make suggestions regarding the development of democracy around the world and share their experience of parliamentary work with countries in transition and pro-democratic groups in authoritarian regimes. Members of the Forum will also aim to strengthen democracy in their own countries. One of the goals of the Forum is to strengthen the role of the Parliament, as a key state institution, ensuring the democratic governance of the state.

Members of Parliaments from 18 countries, who aim to foster the ideas of democracy, human rights and freedom, attended the convening meeting of the Forum and adopted the Vilnius Declaration, thus committing themselves "to work together to strengthen democracy where it is weak and invigorate even where it is longstanding, to promote peace, development and human rights in their respective countries and around the world."



The newly established Parliamentary Forum of the Community of Democracies passed a resolution, which expresses deep concern about the imprisonment of Chinese activist and intellectual Liu Xiaobo and strongly supports his nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. Resolutions on the situation in Georgia and Cuba were also adopted. The former points to Russia's ongoing militarization of the Georgian regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the humanitarian situation of the remaining Georgia's citizens in these occupied territories. Another resolution calls on the democratic community to take concrete steps in demonstrating solidarity by "providing humanitarian and technological assistance" to the pro-democracy movement, which has grown during the recent years in Cuba. During the meeting in Vilnius, the situation in Belarus and Cuba and possible projects of support to democracy in Moldova and Georgia were discussed.

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The Parliamentary Forum was launched by 43 Members of Parliament from Lithuania, the U.S.A., other European, Latin American and Asian countries. Patron of this event, Speaker of the Seimas (Parliament) Irena Degutiene, U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and President of the European Parliament Jerzy Buzek welcomed the Forum meeting.

Long-time member of the United States House of Representatives Lincoln Diaz-Balart, one of the most active Canada's fighters for human rights and democracy David Kilgour, German representative in the European Parliament Michael Gahler, who significantly contributed to Lithuania's Euro-Atlantic integration, leader of the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the European Parliament Michał Tomasz Kamiński, one of the most active participants in the Prague Spring and former Czech Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Vondra, Speaker of the Georgian Parliament David Bakradze and Mexican Senator Adriana González Carrillo were elected as Vice-Presidents of the Forum.

Eastern Europe Studies Centre presents the outlines of the speeches delivered during the Convening meeting of the Parliamentary Forum of the Community of Democracies.

❖ Democracy in the 21st century: importance, current challenges and troubles

Participants of the Convening meeting of the Parliamentary Forum stressed the importance of democracy and freedom in the world, and challenges they face at present.

David Bakradze, Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia noted that *democracy is a success story and a road to freedom* and it should be spread around the world. "The story of Europe is a story of expanding democracy and a story of expanding borders of Europe <...> I believe that the story and logic of Europe is the logic of enlargement, inclusiveness, democracy and freedom, and there is no other way" – he said, suggesting to take freedom and democracy as a baseline of the forum agenda, since "it's impossible to achieve freedom without achieving democracy and it's impossible to build democracy without having a freedom".

Borys Tarasyuk, the Chairman of European Affairs Committee at Rada (Ukraine), invited everybody to be awake, aware and active - "<...> *democracy needs our everyday protection and promotion*, and democracy is value based, democracy should be protected and nobody has the monopoly on democracy <...> So we have to protect the democracy first, and second we have to help those countries where democracy does not prevail yet."

Former member of the parliament of Canada, member of the Board of Directors of the Council for a Community of Democracies David Kilgour stressed the importance of pluralism and the role of the citizens - "The waves of multiparty democracy sweeping

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through much of the world during the last 30 years are an extraordinary achievement. ***Democracy subordinates states to citizens; we own our governments, not vice versa.***” He addressed the participants of the meeting - “We, democrats, place the governance process above ourselves; we must be disciplined as many have said this morning through engagement and participation <...> We owe humanity the continued spread of multiparty democracy, pluralism and human rights. Human dignity is ultimately indivisible in our shrunken world.”

Former U.S. Congressman Dennis Hastert drew the attention of the colleagues that ***“democracy is an evolving process:*** you just don’t have a birth of democracy <...> Democracy comes from experience and reaching out and working to bring people together. It just isn’t something that we talk about.” He gave the example - “Today USA is certainly a different country than it was



50 years ago. So again I say democracy is an evolving thing. The voting rights of African Americans are very different today than it was 50 years ago, the issue of civil rights has changed, has evolved. Economic opportunities for certain groups of people, especially the liberation of women has changed in 50 years and this is democracy that we fought for a long long time.”

D. Bakradze adhered to the statement of D. Hastert – “I also believe that the ***approach of the Forum - never to assume democracy is achieved and that it must always be strengthened*** - provides a helpful framework for all of us to engage without feeling that we are being weighed or measured against our neighbors.”

D. Hastert criticized the prevailing Euro-centrism of the democracy, inviting for a broader democratic dialogue and inclusiveness. “We, who understand democracy maybe a little bit better, ***we should not impose our democracy on everyone else***, but should help other democracies deliver transparency and dialog and help to understand institutions of democracy <...> ***democracy cannot be Eurocentric.*** There are other democracies in the world who want to be part of economic process and part of the dialog, ***so please include everybody.***” He also pointed out the importance of diverse historical and political backgrounds and the challenges they provoke for the development of the democracy in different continents and different countries:

“Lithuanians have diverse backgrounds; however, they constitute the Lithuanian nation, so do the Czechs, or the Slovaks, or whoever we want to talk about. But in the US nobody is indigenous except for American Indians. In the US, everybody has come from someplace else and everybody has brought religions and values, and economic systems, and cultures, and philosophies, and heritages. *And the problem or the challenge is how do you melt those together and*

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form one government, one something that functions, that gives people the ability to achieve. The only common denominator for all these things is the value of the individual, the rights of the individual, and the respect for the individual. <...> When dealing with US you are dealing with a lot of different personalities and national personalities: you are talking about Irish, Poles, Lithuanians, Germans, Norwegians, Scots, Swedes, Turks, Chinese, Indians, Cubans, Japanese, Thais, Mexicans, Czechs, Israelis and from all over the world, all in my district and many many more, and that's what's typical."

Karel Schwarzenberg, Senator, Former Czech Foreign Minister, insisted on solving inner problems of the democracies – “Especially in Central and Western Europe we should remember that **democracies are in danger from inside** too due to a spring of radical movements <...>. And we see that there are no perfect democracies, we have the feeling that the European Union doesn't solve elementary problems <...>. First of all, we have a core for a strong man, and we have a core for the strong nationalism, and against the European idea, against the idea of common effort, liberty and democracy, and of rule of law. I do think we should mention this problem too – because as long as we are in our countries united for the defence of liberty, rule of law and democracy, *I am not afraid of the enemies from abroad, from outside, but at the moment we are not so sure about ourselves then the danger really starts. That's the most dangerous moment, and I see that in some countries there are forces who are questioning democracy, questioning liberty, and questioning the right of the neighbour countries to have the same rights as themselves.*”

Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson - former Member of Parliament and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Island – enumerated “concentration of power, concentration of wealth, disregard of egalitarianism, the allowance of inequality that breaches the social consensus” as negative tendencies in the process of the democratic development. He gave the example of Island's recent problems:

“Iceland was the first major victim of the international financial crisis and the one that has suffered most. Essentially it is that three plutocratic cliques with easy access to unrestrained financial markets abroad organized their banks in such a way that in 6 years time they became tenfold bigger than the national product of Iceland operating abroad and then house of cards fell, they left behind debt that was 4 times the GNP for the Icelandic taxpayers to pay. What happened? *It was a concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. It was the total disregard for the duty of the democratic state to restrain their greed through law. They put themselves above the law, and the regulations and the supervision. The democratic state has a role to play because it should be the guarantor of public interest, it should keep those who usurp power in the name of money, or ideology, it should keep them under the rule of law responsible to the public interest, because no one should be above the law.*”

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❖ Goals and future activities of the Parliamentary Forum

Czech Senator Alexandr Vondra said Vilnius Declaration is “*just a bone without any meat*”, and encouraged colleagues to discuss specific problems, set goals and outline real activities, real actions of the Parliamentary Forum. Parliamentarians discussed the goals and the future activities of the Parliamentary Forum during the morning session. Regions and countries of preference for the future activities were suggested, representatives of Georgia and Moldova invited members of Parliamentary Forum to contribute to the development of democracy in their countries.

It was agreed that parliament being the institution representing people’s will plays a crucial role in ensuring democratic governance, therefore efforts have to be put in order to strengthen parliaments. Lincoln Diaz-Balart said “we come together to emphasize our belief that parliament embodies democracy best as a central institution which expresses the will of the people.” He invited to “cooperate in strengthening democratic institutions, primarily parliaments in transition and pre-transition countries”, so that “the Parliamentary Forum will stand on the side of those who work for democracy where liberty is still a yearned for dream.”

Zbigniew Romaszewski, the Deputy Marshal of the Senate of Poland, lamented “I mean a certain degradation of the parliament for the sake of the executive, we have the emergence of new powers and the media has an influence for the form of democracy. These are the main problems that we face today.”

Adriana Gonzales Carillo, Senator of Mexico, noted down the importance of a strong and pluralist party system for the development of democracy in Mexico - “We have to change the party system, so that parties become entities representing public interest open for agreement. We also have to make plurality our strength and not a barrier, the diversity and complexity of the political representation has to give life and dynamism to democratic system.”



Mihai Ghimpu, the Interim President of Republic of Moldova, Chairman of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova presented the difficult situation Moldova faces these days – “we have a constitutional crisis; however, we hope to overcome it this year. We have been gravely affected by the economic and financial crisis resulted in poverty and reduced development of the country. We have faced other problems such as corruption, inadequate development of the country, huge budget deficit, and insufficient social protection of citizens. However, these difficulties are regarded as challenges and we are ready to meet them.” He invited participants of the Community of Democracies’ Parliamentary Forum to pay a visit to Moldova and help to find the best solutions to the problems he mentioned.

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Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia David Bakradze was more explicit; he invited all members of the Parliamentary Forum to contribute to the development of the main democratic institutions in Georgia. “When it comes to democracy, I think one of the defining points is *internal political system*: how countries arrange, how system of checks and balances works and how internal political system functions. So I think *sharing national experience could be an interesting and helpful idea within the framework of our Forum.*” – He said, and offered 4 areas of activities where members of the Parliamentary Forum can cooperate and contribute the development of democracy in Georgia by sharing experience and giving examples: (1) Work of the Constitutional Reform Commission which is currently preparing recommendations for the best model of power distribution in the country; (2) Strengthening Georgian Parliament; (3) Strengthening the role and status of the opposition in the parliament; (4) Strengthening political parties; (Find more details of the speech in Box 1.).



Bakradze also expressed his will to share Georgian experience with other countries. He said to believe that the Parliamentary Forum *can serve as a very important bridge connecting EU and NATO members and aspirant countries* “I see <...> this gathering representing countries which are already EU and NATO member-states and countries which aspire to join that club and to become EU and NATO member-states. <...>

This is a bridge for experience sharing, this is a bridge for ideas what can we do together” – *he said.*

D. Hastert supported D. Bakradze’s statement about the exclusive role of the opposition in the system of democratic governance - “<...> The opposition is important to democracy, because when too much power is accumulated in one place all of a sudden you don’t have democracy. And the only way to equalize that is to have *opposition* <...> that makes democracy work; <...> Democracy depends upon an open political debate. As our friend from Georgia talked about, opposition is vital for such debates to take place, there has to be a dialog, or a multilog of some kind in a Congress.”

Box 1. Extracts of the D.Bakradze’s speech

1. “We set up an independent *Constitutional Reform Commission*. The idea of this commission is to come up with recommendations <...> for the development of the Georgian state, of Georgian democracy, what could <...> be the best model of power distribution in the country. The commission is composed in a very inclusive and balanced way, it includes representatives of different political parties, basically 20 political parties together with academicians and lawyers, it includes representatives from NGOs and civil society. The idea is to come with a compromise, to come with new ideas what could be the best model of power. <...> We expect that this commission will submit a draft constitution by late summer of this year. *We would be happy to share these findings with all of you, my friends and we would be happy to get your*

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feedback as well. So I think this could be one small contribution and direction on which we offer to work together.”

2. “<...> of course we are all here parliamentarians and the second point may be regarding the *specific role of parliament within this process*, because I think everybody agrees that parliament is a cornerstone of democracy in every country. **A strong parliament is absolutely essential for a strong democracy.** <...> *We are now working in Georgia on strengthening our parliament and part of the constitutional reform which I mentioned would be exactly and specifically the strengthening of the Georgian Parliament. So again, we would be happy to share our findings and to listen to your experience on how we can make the parliament a strong institution, a cornerstone and a central place for the democratic processes in our country”.*
- 3.”<...> *for a strong parliament one needs to have a strong opposition within that parliament.* <...> *That is again one of the directions on which we are working nationally and one of the directions on which we would like to hear more from your countries: what are the functions of opposition, what is the role of opposition within the respected national parliaments of your countries and what we can do, because a strong opposition in a parliament is a precondition for healthy political debates which in turn are a precondition for healthy political process in a country. And a healthy political process is a precondition for democracy. Thus by strengthening the role of a parliamentary opposition one strengthens democracy and a normal political process, so we would be interested to listen to experiences of your respected countries and your respected parliaments in this direction.* “
4. “Another point which is just as important for a democratic governance and on which we would like to offer more debates within our Forum is the **role of political parties** in our countries. *It is not a secret that in many countries with transitional democracies, Georgia for example, the system of political parties is still weak, it’s still based on personalities, it’s still based on leaders, rather than a system of values, system of fundamental beliefs.* So, we need to strengthen political parties, we need to strengthen system of political parties, and that is one of the challenges which we have now in Georgia on our political agenda.”

❖ Frontlines of fight for democracy and proposed actions

Member of the European Parliament, Chair of European Conservatives and Reformists Michal Tomasz Kaminski noted that freedom and democracy are under danger at present not only in Central and Eastern Europe; he outlined “three borderlines and three frontlines of fight between democracy and forces of evil”. The first frontline - the “whole post-Soviet zone, in which we are confronted with the growing Russian imperialism”, the second one is the Middle East, and the third one is Latin America and Central America “where we still see the brutal communist dictatorship in Cuba, the so-called “Chavezian socialism” in Venezuela. He seconded the observation of Vytautas Landsbergis – “countries which are on the bad side, they are ready to cooperate.” For example, cooperation between Belarus and Venezuela, and connections between Iran and Venezuela – even though these countries have nothing in common

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(geographically, economically, politically), they are cooperating. So one of the major goals of the Parliamentary Forum “is to promote the values of democracy, but especially in the regions of the world, in which this democracy is in danger, and the freedom of the people is in danger”.

Alexandr Vondra agreed with the 3 key battle fronts – with “the still continuing challenge of the Russian imperialism, the rise of the radical Islamism in the Middle East, and the Marxism resisting in the various corners of the world”. In order to avoid general suggestions he offered to set more tangible objectives for action:

1. To join Czech and Slovak parliamentarians who initiated the nomination of the Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo for the Nobel for Peace Prize. He proposed to endorse this in the parliaments of the Community of Democracies member states.
2. To protest against the imprisonment of Aung Sang Sushi (Burma, Nobel for Peace Prize, 1991) in order to prevent her from taking part in the coming elections.
3. To support the fight of political prisoners are under chain-hunger-strike in Cuba.