



**Extraordinary Meeting of the Association of European Senates
organized at the occasion of the 10th anniversary
of the renewal of the Czech Senate**

Prague, September 28 - 29, 2006

MINUTES OF THE MEETING

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Good morning, distinguished representatives of European Senates, Excellencies, Ambassadors, Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, ladies and gentlemen! Welcome once again to the Czech Senate to the Extraordinary Session of the Association of European Senates. This meeting has been convened on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the reinstatement of the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic to discuss the role of Upper Houses of Parliament in the 21st century.

Welcome. I am sure we all agree that Upper Houses of Parliament play an important role all over Europe. Although the Czech Senate is a very young House, it is a very active one. The Lower House has accepted over 40 per cent of bills in our amended version.

We happen to meet on a Czech national holiday that celebrates the memory of our patron saint. Saint Wenceslas and his tradition is linked, first and foremost, with the efforts of the Czech lands to become part of the European cultural and political space. Upon gaining independence in 1918, our new political representation was faced with a challenging decision to choose a system of our democratic governance. The system we opted for clearly emulated Western European models based on the balance of powers and a bicameral legislature.

Our choice of a bicameral legislature was supported by our tradition as well as the prevailing opinion of our political representation. As time went by, the Senate proved to be a safeguard of democracy both politically and psychologically. The first thing every undemocratic regime reigning in this country before WW2 and after did was to abolish the Senate.

It's a pleasure to meet you in the reinstated Czech Senate. I hope that our meeting confirms that the Czech Republic is a standard democracy and a part of Europe.

I hope you will all spend pleasant moments in this beautiful building, and that will have a successful meeting conducted in good spirit.

Thank you for your attention.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Just a few housekeeping remarks. If you have your speeches in writing, please submit them to the reception desk so that we can make them available to others. Copies will be at your disposal in the lobby. If you have any comments on the Final Declaration, please submit them by 7 PM this evening. You have all received copies of the comments that had already been sent to us. I assume teams from all delegations will meet to work on the clean copy of the Final Declaration.

I am sure the small photo exhibition in the courtyard caught your attention. There are photos of many of you and your predecessors.

Czech President Vaclav Klaus has decided to record his greetings on a video as he is currently abroad.

(Video greetings by Vaclav Klaus; in the beginning, the sound overlaps with French interpretation)

Václav Klaus:

I am deeply convinced that parliamentary democracy has entered the 21st century as the only viable organization of political power that guarantees civil liberties and rule of law while making it possible for societies to evolve and make necessary changes. Yet we also live at a time when standard mechanisms of parliamentary democracy are challenged in various ways, recently and most notably through referendums that have been overused or abused to make various decisions. The risks under which they put the freedoms of our citizens outweigh the benefits brought by standard parliamentary democracy by a manifold.

Various pressure groups are also trying to challenge the legitimacy of decisions made by people's elected representatives and pursue their partial interest at the expense of the majority. They do so outside the framework of standard democratic procedures and at their expense.

If we are to maintain the meaning and content of parliamentary democracy, we must counter these trends, although they are often presented as a benefit and a positive feature of modern times.

Perhaps the following thought is relevant to this meeting: parliamentary democracy can function only so long as there is a political *demos*, i.e. people bound together by a common historical experience, common basic interests and a number of other cementing elements that create their awareness of common identity. It is no coincidence that modern parliamentary democracies and free societies emerged only after political nations were born through historical developments in Europe. Europe is however currently going through developments that do not want to respect this fact. The process of European integration has set out in a dangerous direction that runs counter to long years of functioning democracy. The role of national parliaments is continuously weakening at the expense of the center in Brussels that lacks democratic legitimacy. Parliaments are losing their ability to stay accountable to their electorate for developments in public affairs. They are giving up their powers in favor of European institutions.

Political convulsions, instability, and turbulences are unfortunately not only a thing of the past or something belonging to other parts of the world. We have to stand ready to face them even today, even in our countries. That is why I appreciate the stabilizing, anti-conjunctural and positively safeguarding role of the Upper Houses of Parliament; they are at least one certain point in a complicated situation on the political scene.

I wish your meeting success and the courage to broach sensitive issues of our times.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka :

Ladies and Gentlemen, the president of the Czech Republic. I'm sending him my thanks to Mongolia. The importance of our meeting is underscored by the presence of the Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolanek, whom I'd like to give the floor.

Prime Minister, you have the floor.

Mirek Topolanek:

Ladies and gentlemen, Presidents of Senates, Excellencies, colleagues, welcome to the Czech Republic.

As President Sobotka recalled, you are meeting on the Day of Czech Statehood, the Day of St. Wenceslas. In addition to being a symbol of Czech statehood, Saint Wenceslas is a link between believers and atheists. He is a patriot as much as he is a European. It is good that you are spending this day in Prague.

The opportunity to speak to you today is not only a pleasure and honor. It is also a pleasant recollection of the 8 years that I spent on these benches. I used to sit on the right. So I know very well what some members of the Lower House think about the

role of the Senate. Please, do not take it too seriously. Although some believe that a Senator is politically a useless creature, a Senator can obviously even become Prime Minister. I am a proof of that. Actually, all the talk about abolishing the Upper House is in a way part of our political folklore.

I have encountered these debates during my trips all over the world. Some countries with a bicameral legislature have had long debates whether the Upper House should be abolished. Countries with a unicameral legislature are discussing the need of establishing a second house with just as much passion.

Of course, I won't forget that I have launched my national political career in the benches of the Czech Senate. Despite all the critics, I am deeply convinced of the significance of the Upper House. If I were saying anything different here today, you would probably be quite surprised. So, let me explain the specific reasons I have for this belief.

My personal experience confirms that the Upper House serves as a filter that improves the legislative process both in terms of constitutionality, implementation of European directives, and in many other respects. The ease with which the Lower House can outvote the Senate based on the Czech constitution does not take anything away from it. The fact that Senators can review particularly important standards and codes in greater peace is in itself important. In many cases, Deputies in the Lower House adopt a bill with amendments presented by the Senate. The Czech Parliament is a good example of that. The reason is simply that amendments introduced by Senators are often guided by expert assessment and logics rather than ideology and party bias.

In a post-totalitarian country that is going through a transition, the Senate helps improve political culture. Surely one of the reasons is that we Senators – and I am speaking as one of you – take up office at a more mature age than Deputies and Prime Ministers. But that's not the only reason. The Upper House stands somewhat outside the main political battle between the Chamber of Deputies and the government. That in itself raises doubts about the usefulness of the Senate, but on the other hand, it makes it possible for Senators to approach issues from a bit of a distance, with a bird's eye view, more factually, without unnecessary passion.

We have seen many times that the voice of reason comes out of the Upper House in tense moments. It is a voice that may and in fact does give citizens back their trust in parliamentary democracy.

Last but not least, the Senate is elected through a majority system in this country, and thus serves as a solid obstacle to extremists. Right-wing extremists have never been elected to the Czech Senate, and only a few communist have. I am sure that its two-round majority electoral system does not eliminate small parties. On the contrary, it gives everyone, even individuals a chance, if they can unify and integrate rather than polarize and divide the electorate. A two-round majority electoral system leads to politics of consensus. It pushes out those who clamor outside the system as

well as those who arrogantly pursue the technology of power. That, I believe, is a value that we are very much in need of. Not only now and not only here.

What I have told you so far comes from my personal experience rather than a comparative analysis of parliamentary systems. That would be a job for a political scientist. I speak for myself when I repeat that it is a great honor to have been able to experience the work of the Senate from the inside. The years at the Senate have been very useful. I am leveraging that experience even in my current role.

I wish your meeting a lot of success. I hope you will have an enjoyable stay in Prague, and I'll be looking forward to seeing you again.

Thank you for your attention.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka :

Thank you, Prime Minister. Before we continue, allow me to introduce the Czech delegation. To my left we have the Vice President of the Senate Jiri Liska, the Chairman of the European Affairs Committee Ludek Sefzig, the Chairwoman of the Committee on Health and Social Policy Alena Paleckova, and a member of the Committee on the Economy, Agriculture and Transport Jiri Nedoma. Next to Prime Minister Topolanek we have the head of my secretariat Edvard Kozusnik, the Secretary General of the Senate Frantisek Jakub, and my advisor Jindrich Marek.

And now I'd like to give the floor to the Founding Father of our Association – I hope he will forgive me for calling him that – our spiritual father, the President of the French Senate Christian Poncelet.

My dear friend, you have the floor.

Christian Poncelet :

First let me send my greeting to President Klaus who has spoken to us from far away. I have been touched by your kind words. I'd also like to greet the President of the Czech Senate, and thank him for his traditionally warm welcome. I'd like to greet the Prime Minister. In response to your remarks, I'd like to say that I have come to believe that a Senator is dormant in every Deputy. Despite all the criticism of bicameralism that we hear, we need to bear in mind that we often criticize what we like. Deputies often advance into the Senate. I'd like to greet every one of you, dear colleagues, Excellencies. I consider all of you my dear friends.

Thank you, Mr. President, for giving me the floor during the opening of this Extraordinary Session of our Association of European Senates. It is a great honor.

The Czech Senate was established in 1996 based on the Constitution of 1993. The Czech Senate wanted to celebrate its 10th anniversary in the circle of its European friends. It is a very kind gesture, and we appreciate it very much. It was indeed a very good idea.

You have used these ten years very well. The highest authorities in the Czech Republic have spoken to me about their appreciation of your institution. The importance of your Senate is clear to everyone.

I am happy to say that the number of Upper Houses grows around the world: from 40 Senates in 1990 to 80 in 2005. Bicameralism is democracy in its highest form. *Victor Hugo* said: “A unicameral Parliament is an ocean during tempest; there is always a need for balance.” Bicameralism is also a guarantee of good state administration. My predecessor used to say that as long as we have the Senate, we can rest assured that bills will be properly debated. This young assembly proves that bicameralism is alive and well. This young assembly has made us all feel a bit younger. It certainly has made me feel younger, for which I would like to thank you, Mr. President.

This young assembly has its future before it; as time passes, its position among institutions will grow. The 21st century has just started. It is not going away. The 21st century presents our gathering with many challenges. Upper Houses of Parliament must exchange their experience, and enrich each other. Through this Association, where we are all equal, we can foster our ties of friendship. We can grow to appreciate each other, and feel close to one another.

Upper Houses of Parliament must continue to evolve and cultivate their specific nature. In an unstable and uncertain world, Upper Houses provide a necessary framework within which our institutions can operate in a more balanced fashion, and our citizens can be better represented. Upper Houses are houses of reflection, wisdom, and experience. This meeting of our Association presents us with another opportunity to prove that, although we haven't celebrated 10 years as an association yet.

Thank you Mr. President and Mr. Prime Minister for receiving us in your beautiful country. I wish your Czech Senate all the best on its birthday, and I wish all of us every success in our work.

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Mr. President of the French Senate, thank you very much for your words.

And since we are meeting on the occasion of the Senate's 10th anniversary, we have prepared a short video presentation of the Czech Senate.

(Video Presentation)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Ladies and gentlemen, you have seen a small profile of the Senate's work. At this stage, I'd like to adjourn our meeting until 2:30 PM to give us a chance to say goodbye to Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek, who will have to leave us now. Let us resume in 15 minutes.

Thank you for your close attention so far.

(Applause)

(Break)

(Jingle)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Dear colleagues, we are now going to hear your speeches in Czech alphabetic order. In fact, we are going to break this rule straight away, because our Austrian colleagues will have to leave early.

So the first to speak will be Mr. Gottfried Kneifel, the President of the Federal Council of the Republic of Austria.

Mr. President, you have the floor.

Gottfried Kneifel:

President Sobotka, President Poncelet – Founder of the Association of European Senates, ladies and gentlemen! First of all, thank you for the wonderful organization of this meeting, and for sharing this beautiful celebration with us. Congratulations on the 10th anniversary of the Czech Senate.

I believe European countries and Senates would do well to follow the example of the Czech Senate's public relations. Our work is important, but it is equally important that people know about our work. We must make our work transparent.

The relations between our two countries have been very long, and not always problem-free. I believe we now must look forward into the future and not X-ray our past. We need to focus on the future and on making the work of European Upper Houses of Parliament even better.

The European Union, to which there is no alternative, is a great help in regard. Last year, Austria and the Czech Republic showed us a lot of wonderful examples of regional partnership, particularly through infrastructure projects and Trans-European networks; let me recall the Prague-Linz railway link. There is no alternative to this

cooperation. It is an opportunity that we seize together, an opportunity to build our common Europe.

I will spare you a detailed lecture on the history of the Austrian Federal Council, our Upper House of Parliament. I would like to recall how important it is for the Upper House to create balance. That was the case already during the Monarchy. The Emperor was not very keen on Parliamentarism. Although there was a House that represented the people, the Emperor did not want to cede all his power to it. That's why he established another House, a Senate of sorts, to make sure that representatives of the people did not wield too much power and influence.

The Chamber of Austrian states was envisaged in the Constitutional Act passed in 1920, an Act that in fact established Austria. Since its inception, the Federal Council has been composed of representatives of state parliaments. Despite all debates about the meaning of bicameralism, or lack thereof, the Upper House has been very important for us in that it helped create our country and give our citizens a feeling of identity. Bicameralism, in our opinion, is a wonderful construct.

Federalism entails competition, competition for the benefit of our citizen who is our most important client. This idea is more important than ever before.

Of course, debates about the Upper House have always taken place in Austria. A Convention deliberated on these issues for almost two years, and arrived at a conclusion supported by large and small political parties alike. The Federal Council was given the green light to serve as an assembly of representatives of our states. The Constitutional Convention acknowledged the legitimacy of bicameralism.

What does the future hold for us? That has been appropriately chosen as the subject of our today's meeting. I have already alluded to the extensive debates about the relationship between bicameralism and federalism. We are called upon to show our commitment to subsidiarity, and review compliance of European Council regulations and directives with subsidiarity. I believe this leads to a new role for the Senates. We are called upon to execute our European competences, and work as a liaison between the European Union and the citizens that we represent in our Upper Houses. We need to fulfill this role. We need to seize this challenge.

The Commission presented all its Drafts to us a few weeks ago, and will continue to do so. We will check the compliance of these documents with the principle of subsidiarity. And that is the important role of Upper Houses in Europe: they serve as a bridge between the European Union and regions.

We must take on this role, and push the debate further. Surely, this role is specific. It requires particular qualities from members of the Upper Houses. It calls for more work, for a tighter scrutiny of legislative proposals. We need to review all these documents. There is, however, no alternative. The possibility of carrying out subsidiarity checks in Upper Houses presents us with an opportunity to revive popular trust in the European project. Who else should take on this project if not us,

Senators and Deputies? We cannot delegate this role to another institution. After all, the most noble and important role of a Deputy or a Senator is to liaise between the law and the citizen. We will be called upon to do so even more in the future.

Subsidiarity checks are a new instrument that serves that very purpose. In order for us to process and examine an issue, we will need to pay attention to these new aspects, and in doing so, we will be in a position to provide our citizens with better information. Who else should do it if not us. We know the context; we have contacts with citizens, associations, and community groups. I see a completely new role for Upper Houses as mediators between the authorities and citizens. Mediation is an important and honorable task. It is also a great challenge.

It could serve as a binding material in the building of common Europe. It can help us revive people's trust in Europe. I am looking forward to this new task very much, and I will do my utmost to make sure that my House fulfills this role for the good of our citizens. I feel a particular commitment as chair of the European Affairs Committee. I wish us all good luck in facing up to these new challenges. I hope we will meet these challenges for the good of Europe's citizens.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you very much, Mr. President of the Austrian Federal Council, for your words, and have a safe trip back home.

Now let us go back to the alphabetic order of speakers. I'd like to give the floor to Mr. Francis Delperee, the 1st Deputy Chairman of the Institutional Affairs Committee of the Senate of the Kingdom of Belgium.

Francis Delpérée:

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen! I wonder whether the nexus of parliamentary roles still makes up a sufficiently coherent whole. We know that bicameralism presumes that two Houses share powers based on a very complex mechanism that regulates how they draft laws together.

The original feature of the Belgian system is that the Lower House prevails in some cases, while the Upper House in others. When it comes to national laws, the Lower House, that is the House of Representatives, has the upper hand. That's where the bills are initiated and first debated. Afterwards, they come to the Senate. Our bicameralism is asymmetric. If the Senate wants to leave a mark on a bill, it has to come with something new. Although the Senate works with a bit of a time lag, it is involved in codification and consolidation work that is indeed far-reaching. This is how it works with national laws.

When it comes to laws ratifying international treaties, the Senate prevails. The bill is first presented in the Senate, where it is also reviewed. The first deliberations take place in the Senate. The bill is then sent to the House of Representatives.

For example, when we were deliberating on the draft European Constitutional Treaty, the first debate took place in the Senate, and only then in the House of Representatives. As the Senate prevails in international affairs, it plays an important role in international diplomacy.

So far I have discussed the roles that the two Houses of Belgian Parliament share. There are also tasks we both carry out in parallel. It means that each House carries out its role on its own, without orchestration with the other. This of course relates to political control. Although the Senate has lost much of its clout in this area, it is still left with some roles to play. The Senate, for instance, carries out parliamentary investigation of organized crime. The Senate also decides on the mandate of Belgian troops deployed abroad, which makes sense because the Senate as the supervisory body cannot draw political consequences from these decisions. That is up to the executive power.

Let me mention a few words about committees of inquiry. I would particularly like to mention a committee in charge of scrutinizing the work of the police and secret services. It plays a very important role now that terrorism is on the upsurge.

Then, there are specific roles played only by the Senate and not by the House of Representatives. There is an official and a less official way of regulating this. The Senate is a house of reflection, and as such, it should allow citizens to get involved. The Senate does not hesitate to seek opinions of Belgian and foreign experts. The Senate tries to gather all relevant information before proceeding with legislative work.

The Senate is also a federal body, and as such it must manage various conflicts that may arise among regions or communities in Belgium. We are usually asked to resolve such conflicts once a year.

Half a year ago, I said at a meeting of our Association, that the legitimacy of a political assembly is derived from the regularity of the election process. That is self-evident. Let me now add that in a modern state, the usefulness of a political assembly is measured not only by what it may do, but also by what it actually does. Our Prague meeting fits well into this context in that it asks us to consider the roles that the Senate can play inside the Parliament. It is about unity in diversity.

Unity is needed in the organization and the work of the Senate if it is to retain high profile. It also needs diversity to play its political role efficiently within the constraints set by the Constitution.

The Senate cannot lose itself in disarrayed activities, particularly when controversial issues are at stake. The Senate must choose its priorities carefully. It must remain unified and coherent in the direction takes.

Thank you for your attention.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you very much, dear colleague. The next speaker on our list is from Bosnia and Hercegovina. As he excused himself for a moment, I will ask the Vice President of the Czech Senate Senator Liska to replace me in the chair while I deliver my remarks on behalf of the Czech Republic.

Vice-President of the Czech Senate Jiri Liska:

Thank you. President Sobotka, you have the floor.

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Distinguished Presidents of European Senates, Excellencies, Ambassadors, dear guests! Welcome once again to the Extraordinary Session of the Association of European Senates held on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the reinstatement of the Czech Senate. I am pleased to say that meetings like this confirm the growing role of Upper Houses of Parliament in Europe.

In our community, we will all easily agree that parliamentary democracy is a basic feature of truly free societies, and that bicameralism provides the best safeguard and a tool for the stabilization of their political culture. Bicameralism also makes a major contribution to maintaining the quality of new laws and the efficiency of the legislative process. The Senate can also act as a supervisory body if the Chamber of Deputies is dissolved or if elections into the Lower House do not lead to a functional government.

The Czech Senate was reinstated ten years ago, some time after the fall of communist totality. Although we are only celebrating our tenth anniversary, we are proud to have had opportunities to prove ourselves in our role. During its relatively short live, the Senate has made a number of successful interventions in creating laws, resolving governmental crises, or taking strategic decisions in our foreign policy. The Senate has also provided a forum for public hearings in cases when the majority of our citizens considered a particular executive decision problematic, or when inappropriate pressure was being applied.

Experience with parliamentary democracy and bicameralism varies in its duration and underlying historical experience among our countries. In each country, Upper

Houses have different possibilities of influencing domestic politics but their existence is always justified.

Our Senate benefits from the mode of its elections. Every two years, one third of Senators run for re-election. The Senate therefore cannot be dissolved and serves as a fundamental pillar supporting the stability of our constitutional system.

In the past, the cold war divided our continent into two hostile blocks. Although that part of history is fortunately behind us, some of us have clearly more experience with totalitarian systems. The other part, in its turn, has more experience with long-term parliamentary democracy. Despite all its advantages, parliamentary democracy will always keep encountering new risks jeopardizing the quality of European democracy, and those dangers will not be always presented only by domestic political extremism.

Parliamentarism has for a long time been often criticized in some liberal democratic circles. That's why we can benefit so much from each other's different experience. Of course, there are also risks that we all face together, among which international terrorism features prominently. We need to take a unified approach to it.

I'd like to thank Christian Poncelet and all of our dear guests for coming to Prague to this meeting on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the reinstatement of the Czech Senate. We have an opportunity to exchange our experience. It is becoming more and more obvious that the European integration process has not sidelined the role of national parliaments. For many reasons, this is good also for the EU. I am glad that the European Commission is taking steps to increase the involvement of national parliaments in EU activities. The initiative should be coming from the bottom up, from where the practical knowledge of the issue is. This good idea should not end with national parliaments rubber-stamping signals that come out of Brussels.

National parliaments should also make sure that principal pillars of the EU underpin all member states alike, which brings me on to the issue of Schengen. I believe weighty European issues should be broached on these forums rather than only among the top leadership of the main EU structures. I am also convinced that the work of national parliaments can reverse certain bureaucratic trends that we see in the EU. It can also mitigate the complicated nature of European law that sometimes makes the idea of European integration seem quite remote for ordinary citizens in member states. That calls for meetings such as ours.

I believe that another suitable solution can be found in fostering bilateral relations and taking initial steps in shaping the discussion on the European direction of small groups, such as the Benelux or Visegrad or the Central European Initiative, that now extends beyond the current boundaries of the EU.

I also believe that international cooperation among national parliaments will further enhance their ability to scrutinize compliance with subsidiarity and proportionality in their domestic political work. At any rate, this calls for specific outputs and conclusions of our debates and meetings. That's why I appreciate that the Association of European Senates does not limit itself to the current borders of the EU, and has invited colleagues from the Russian Federation, the Swiss Confederation or Romania, whom I'd like to congratulate along with Bulgaria on the approval of their accession to the EU in January 2007 by the European Commission.

Ladies and gentlemen, I trust that this meeting will be useful and inspiring, and I'm looking forward to our debate. Thank you for your attention.

(Applause)

Vice President of the Czech Senate Jiri Liska:

Thank you, and now I'd like to give the floor to the President of the Senate of the French Republic Christian Poncelet.

Christian Poncelet:

My dear friend Premysl Sobotka, President of the Czech Senate, dear colleagues and friends. Although the topic of our meeting challenges us to look into the future, I'd like to start by telling you how happy I am to be back in the beautiful Prague to celebrate with you the 10th anniversary of this wonderful institution.

As we can see, Upper Houses of Parliament are asserting their vitality at the threshold of the 21st century. The function of the Senates has some permanent elements, and that's what I'd like to start with. Before I get to other aspects, I'd like to say that Upper Houses of Parliaments provide a new kind of balance in our democratic societies. First and foremost, Upper Houses of Parliament have been called to, and will continue to provide a balance in the functioning of Parliaments. There is always a danger that in representative democracy, one of the centers of power will start expanding at the expense of the others, and will try to move beyond control. Some of us have already experienced this. The balance of power is tipped.

Of course, political conflicts have lost a lot of their intensity in today's Europe, and the risks of abuse of power seem much milder. But history hasn't ended, and we do not know what this new century has in store for us. We can't describe it in words or in writing.

The existence of an Upper House will always serve as a protection from anyone gaining dominant power, and that possibility is always there. It is a constant temptation. The Upper Houses are houses of reflection. Without proper checks and balances, those in power can sometimes lose their ability to consider issues maturely, and can fail to adjust their decisions to reality. For example, certain discrepancies can

arise in the drafting of legal texts, and that's why we need these texts to be reviewed by the Upper House and by the public.

Public opinion has been mobilized in France on a number of occasions, mostly when a particular text was adopted by one of the Houses, and the other House had to mobilize to either make the text more accurate or to attenuate tensions. This is typical of a bicameral legislature. We need to create space for a dialog through which we can find compromises, and I mean compromises in the best sense of the word.

A bicameral system is best suited for the forces of political gravity. These forces will not stop operating, and Upper Houses of Parliament will continue to play their balancing role.

The second permanent role of Upper Houses is to complement the representation in the first houses. No electoral system is perfect. No electoral system can secure a stable majority, in which all minorities will be represented along with every candidate and every local administration. Those that have been elected at local, regional or national level must have the opportunity to carry out their mandate, but checks must be applied to democratic representation. The existence of an Upper House makes representation more balanced and complete by providing for cultural and regional diversity. This requirement cannot be sidestepped. It is surely no coincidence that from a certain size of population up, all European countries have bicameral legislatures.

A bicameral legislature is in a better position to represent the diversity that is typical of small and large countries in Europe. Upper Houses of Parliament play a dual role in their everyday work: that of a legislator and a controller. This dual mission will surely develop further in the 21st century.

Their legislative function is, generally speaking, more and more limited to compliance with the Constitution and international law. The government often has the legislative initiative. When it does, it is the role of the Parliament to scrutinize the government's legislative proposals. The Parliament is therefore an agent of subsidiarity. Members of Parliament are involved in the legislative process even when a draft legislative act was presented by the government in that they make amendments.

It is once again the Upper House who can prevent the risk of conflict over a draft legislative act, and the dissolution of the Parliament.

Countries and Parliaments must cooperate to ensure high quality of legislation. There are many laws. Sometimes laws are quite obscure. Still, they need to be approved in a fashion that does not damage our democracy. We have a lot of work to do. Whether consciously or subconsciously, our societies create safeguards. Our citizens want to have guarantees that their work hours, free time, education, and health are secured. Hence, our legislative work is often quite plentiful. It seems as

though individuals were losing their sense of personal responsibility and were delegating that responsibility to someone else.

The legislative process takes place in various layers that stack on top of one another, often creating ambiguities. Citizens, businesses, administrations and often even judges are having a hard time finding their bearings in this convoluted legislation, yet they have to secure constitutionality. Before we adopt a particular act, we must ask ourselves several questions. This is perhaps more important in the 21st century than ever before. To what extent does this new legislative text dovetail with the entire legal system? Do we already have a similar law? Could we simplify the text? What kind of problems can we expect in the application of this law? Many laws are not applied. Sometimes legislative texts lose their original intention as they pass through the approval process.

These questions must be answered by the Upper Houses because they work with a certain distance. They seem to be in an ideal position to become more and more important in providing for high quality, simple legislation. The supervisory role of these assemblies is bound to develop.

Parliamentary scrutiny is destined to grow in importance. It is a fundamental tool that makes sure public policy is carried out effectively and for the good of the citizen. Parliamentary scrutiny is often invoked only after a crisis has broken out. It must however become an important and constant part of parliamentary work, because it will let the citizens take a look at the work that takes place behind the parliament's stage. Parliamentary oversight is a tool that allows the citizen to be involved in public decision-making through his or her representative.

Upper Houses of Parliament tend to be less dependent on governments, and are therefore in the best position to carry out permanent parliamentary oversight. I have heard repeatedly that when drafting legislative texts, Parliaments often rely on the Senate to play its role. What would we do if we did not have Upper Houses? It is equally important that in exercising their supervisory role, Parliaments create space for debates that will help citizens shape their opinions on controversial issues. Of course, media play their part, although their role is shaped differently. Given their independence and bird's eye view, Upper Chambers are well suited to organize such debates and make sure that they unfold in a spirit of plurality without being limited to narrow partisan interests. That has led us to the decision to give citizens a chance to participate in Senate deliberations through TV broadcasts and special TV channels.

Dear colleagues, Upper Houses of Parliament are evolving, and they are also maintaining and further enhancing their specific features. Bicameralism will remain a basic tool of balanced democracy that is both efficient and desirable.

Thank you for your attention.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Let us continue. Before I give the floor to the Ambassador of Bosnia and Hercegovina Ivan Orlic to deliver his address on behalf of the 2nd Vice President of the House of the Nations of Bosnia and Hercegovina Mr. Mustafa Pamuk, who is not feeling well at the moment, I'd like to make a small remark about our Final Declaration and your proposed amendments.

We have received an amendment from the Upper House of the Russian Federation. Their proposal complements the Declaration rather than replaces it. Once again, if you have any other amendments, I'd like to ask you to present them by 7 p.m. so that our experts from various delegations could meet and work on the clean copy.

Now I would like to give the floor to His Excellency Ivan Orlic, Ambassador of Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Ivan Orlić:

Ladies and Gentlemen, I apologize that the President of the Parliament of Bosnia and Hercegovina will not be able to deliver his address. Mr. President, I'd like to start by congratulating you on the 10th anniversary of the reinstatement of the Czech Senate. I am convinced that the Senate will continue in its successful work both domestically and on the European scene. It is a great pleasure to address this distinguished assembly.

The legislative branch is working toward extending its remit and gaining more power. In modern societies, power must be shared. In Parliament, it is shared between the Upper House and the Lower House.

In federal countries, the first House represents citizens as a nation, while the second House represents the constituent parts of the federation. This provides for the representation of smaller regions alongside the larger ones. All federations share a basic principle that allows their members to retain a degree of independence while requiring them to contribute to the common good within the realm of their possibilities.

Many regional, political, economic, ethnic and other interest groups are aiming at achieving greater political and economic influence. According to theories of pluralism, the conflict between these interest groups cannot play out as a no-holds-barred fight but through a constructive compromise-building process aimed at a win-win situation. This process is not expected to unfold by itself. It is regulated by the state.

As you know, Bosnia and Hercegovina is a multinational state. The two houses of our Parliament are on an equal footing in our legislative process. The main task of the House of the Nations, being the Upper House of our Parliament, is to protect our

vital national interests, such as our language, culture, and education. The House of Nations plays an irreplaceable role in the functioning of the state in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition to defending national interests, it also makes sure that various regions develop in a cohesive fashion.

In the 21st century, it is imperative that all the diverse interests of states and nations be represented in the European Union, and that all the interests of regions be represented at state level. The purpose of Upper Houses is to provide a balance to the First Chamber that represents citizens.

Thank you very much for everything.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you. His Excellency the Italian Ambassador to the Czech Republic Giorgio Radicati will speak on behalf of the Italian Upper House.

Your Excellency, you have the floor.

Giorgio Radicati:

Mr. President, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen: first of all, thank you very much for inviting us to the Extraordinary Session of the Association of European Senates, and congratulations on the great job your protocol has done in organizing this conference.

As you know, the Italian delegation was to be led by the Vice-President of the Senate. Unfortunately, my colleagues were in the end unable to come to Prague because of urgent commitments related to their Senate work. They send their apologies, and regret that they were not able to come.

Mr. President, may I use this opportunity to congratulate you on the 10th anniversary of the reestablished Czech Senate. This anniversary is particularly important because the Czech Republic's young democracy is maturing, and its institutions are gaining strength and power.

Italy has had what we call "perfect bicameralism" since 1948. Bicameralism defines our political life, enables exchange of opinions, and had helped establish full-fledged democracy in our country. Bicameralism was very useful during our integration into the European Union. Bicameralism has helped us explore various important issues in great depth, and acquaint members of both Houses with European affairs.

Bicameral Parliaments are an important element of parliamentary democracy, in that they provide for efficient law making. It may seem at the first glance that

bicameralism creates a complicated system that prolongs the adoption of bills, but a deeper look will show that bicameralism makes it possible to explore issues from all vantage points and by all political parties. That has been our experience with bicameral systems all over the world, particularly in Europe.

Of course, different constitutional systems have given rise to different models according to which Upper Houses operate in different countries.

Since its inception, the Italian Senate has clearly proven that it has played its proclaimed part in maintaining the stability of our constitutional system and the dynamism of our political debate. It has always served as a vital element of control and balance that characterize every political system. It has been committed to the spirit of free debate at various levels, as these debates are a foundation of every true democracy.

Many challenges of the 21st century will be met only with the help of all citizens of Europe. Of course, Parliaments can represent the interests of various electorates and create a perfect balance. Our societies have not found a system that would suit everyday political life better.

In closing, Mr. President, I'd like to thank you once again for your invitation, and wish the Czech Senate and your country all the best.

Thank you.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you, Ambassador. We have kept to our schedule very well. The break was scheduled for 3:30, and it is now 3:31. Let's have refreshments in the room where we had lunch, and resume at 4 PM.

Thank you and see you at 4.

(Break)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Ladies and gentlemen, let me open the second session of our meeting.

The first speech will be delivered by Mrs. Yvonne Timmermann-Buck, the President of the First chamber of the States-General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Yvonne Timmerman-Buck: Dear President Sobotka, it is an honor to congratulate you today on the tenth anniversary of the reinstatement of the Czech

Senate. I therefore accepted your invitation to celebrate this momentum with an extraordinary meeting of our Association of European Senates with great pleasure.

I would also like to thank you for your warm welcome in this beautiful Waldstein Palace. Mr. President, you have to show me the Dutch influence in this palace; as I understood, the main wing of your palace has Dutch dormer-windows. I wonder if you knew, Mr. President. I have learnt that the Czech Senate has taken several initiatives to celebrate the tenth anniversary. I would like to recall two of these projects.

In March of this year, you opened the information center to offer visitors a chance to monitor your sessions and learn about the Senate's history and activities. Secondly, you organized competitions for the pupils of primary and secondary schools on Senate related topics. The involvement of our youth in the work of the Parliament is of the utmost importance. I sincerely hope that both initiatives will turn out to be a huge success. Like the Czech say "we should protect ourselves not by a fence, but by our friends." So let us open our Chambers for our citizens and especially our youth.

Dear Mr. President and dear colleagues, let me now turn to the subject of this conference: the role of upper chambers in the 21st century. The Kingdom of the Netherlands is, as you all know, not a federal state, but we have had a bi-cameral system since 1815. In this system, the Dutch Senate safeguards and fosters the stability and quality of our parliamentary democracy. The core of our parliamentary democracy is in the system of "checks and balances." If we carry out these checks and balances in a proper way, we ensure the stability of our democracy and with that, we preserve the confidence of our citizens.

The quality of our democracy can be found in the way we perform our tasks and if needed, adjust to the checks and balances. Do we truly solve the original problem by adopting a specific piece of legislation? I believe this principle of safeguarding and fostering the stability and quality should remain our guiding principle in the 21st century. I'd like to take today's opportunity to stress the need for this principle. Furthermore, I would like to elaborate on the way the Dutch Senate carries out its tasks guided by this principle. Hopefully this will contribute to a valuable exchange of best practices.

Bearing in mind that stability and quality of parliamentary democracies are somewhat interdependent a mutually reinforcing, I would like to start with the matter of stability which will allow me then to substantiate that in the Dutch Senate, we use quality as a means of stability.

Parliamentary democracy is a dynamic model. The stability of this model will sometimes get dented in order to allow government and parliament to undo damage. Looking at the position of the Senate in our Dutch constitutional, political, and civil context, I would like to mention three challenges that influence our democracy. After

that, I will try to explain how the Senate uses quality to face these challenges, and in conclusion safeguards and fosters both stability and quality.

The first challenge that can influence the stability of a parliamentary democracy is also the most fundamental and difficult challenge: namely to have the confidence and trust of our electorate, of our citizens. After the referendum in the Netherlands on the European Constitutional Treaty, the discussion was mainly focused on the lack of Dutch citizens' interest in the EU and the methods of communication used by the authorities on EU issues. At that time I pointed at another aspect. I stated that we were also experiencing a re-emergence of the gap between voters and elected members of Parliament. As elected representatives, we had and still have to win back the confidence of our voters and regain their trust in our parliamentary system. Of course, this is not an easy task and we are still working toward this goal. The elections that will be held in the Netherlands in November might of course contribute.

What should be the main answer of the Dutch Senate when facing this challenge? Quality. Safeguard and foster the quality of our work. Do not focus too much on procedures and structures, but find the Senate's added value within the existing institutional and constitutional framework. Quite honestly, I do have to admit, when facing the citizens' challenge, the members of the Dutch Senate have a slight advantage. Our senators are what we call part-time politicians. Most of them also fulfill an active role in the Dutch society. So when tensions in our society occur or when the relationship between voters and politicians is under pressure, the Senate is pre-eminently the place where the society is deeply rooted and combined with sound reflection. As President of the Dutch Senate, I cherish this formula of representation.

The second challenge that might influence the stability of a parliamentary democracy is what I like to call indirect external effects. I will mention two of them.

In the Netherlands, there is a continuous debate on the way in which our Parliament carries out its legislative and controlling tasks. For the most part, political developments and incidents reinvigorate these discussions. Unfortunately, the Dutch way of brainstorming on increasing the effectiveness of our system is perhaps too often characterized by debating the procedures and instruments. This results perhaps too often in the introduction of new instruments and the renewal of old instruments. Of course, the Senate is willing to look at new ideas to improve our work, but first we always try to see if we can achieve the same goal with our already existing instruments. So again, the answer of the Dutch Senate is: Quality. Safeguard and foster the quality of our work.

Another external effect that influences our democracies is the fast developing world with supranational and intergovernmental organizations. International and European issues are increasingly becoming more important for the Parliaments and should not remain the working field of just a small group of Senators. We therefore have to strengthen the link between the international and national level. Our members who are representatives in international organizations play a crucial role in

forging this link. It is essential that we send our most competent and knowledgeable people to act as national representatives in these organizations. Again, we should strive for better quality. We, Dutch Senators, strive to improve our existing ways of operating on the European and international field.

In my introduction I mentioned three challenges. The last challenge is the most political one, namely the balance and interaction in a bi-cameral system.

In the Netherlands, the current trend is that politics is more and more about the issues of the day. Especially in a bicameral system, this influences the work of both chambers as well as the balance between them. This trend will hopefully not reach solid ground. And although I am aware that my Dutch colleague from the House of Representatives is not here today to respond, I have to express some concern about the fact that, as several Senators feel it, the quality of some laws, passed by the Lower Chamber, is questionable. Even with this last political challenge, our main responsibility is good law-making.

Dear colleagues, you heard me say at the beginning that the Dutch Senate uses quality to safeguard and foster stability in a parliamentary democracy. You have heard me repeat our focus on quality three times. I have however kept you in the dark on the instruments of quality the Dutch Senate uses. I did reveal that we do not believe in creating new systems, new methods or structures, but try to find the Senate's added value within the existing institutional and constitutional framework.

Let me give you a few examples of how we create and use our added value. First, if we look at the constitutional set of instruments of the Dutch Senate, for example the right of written consultation, question time, the right to reject a bill, I must say that we actually rarely use them. This might come as a surprise, because if you have these powers, why not use them as much as you can, you may be asking.

Well, the guiding principle in the Senate is that the quality of interventions should prevail over their quantity. We use our instruments only if it is truly effective. In other words, we use our instruments as instruments of quality. This indeed strengthens the Senate's position, and the function we fulfill in a bicameral system. More importantly, it improves our relationship with the voters. It creates confidence.

Although the Dutch Senate does not have the right to amend bills, our most far-reaching instrument is the right to reject a bill. As I understand, most Senates can reject a bill, which in practice often means sending it back to the Lower House. If the Dutch Senate rejects a bill, it will not be sent back to the Lower House. The bill is completely taken off the parliamentary agenda. We very rarely make use of this instrument. It might sound paradoxical, but the Senate thereby enjoys a privileged position.

The veto right alone provides the Senate with a powerful instrument to influence the implementation of a policy as well as the policy itself. In addition, with a well set up registration of the pledges made by cabinet ministers during debates in the Senate,

we are very effective in keeping our finger on the pulse. Ministers regularly have to report back on what they did with their promises to the Senate.

Another instrument that the Senate can use to face various challenges in parliamentary democracy and to create added value is our new approach to deal with the annual budgets of the ministries. As you might know, the separate budgets need the approval of both chambers of Parliament. The House of Representatives discusses these budget proposals separately and in the order of their receipt. The Senate, however, has begun to cluster several of these budget proposals and, consequently, debates them with more than just one member of the government. The clustering is based on an overarching topic that the Senate considers relevant for its citizens. The added value of this kind of debate is that members of government are forced to look beyond their own portfolio and not be guided only by the departmental policy views. In the future, this should make it easier to establish essential connections that exist between different policies and policy areas. Something that has until now been hampered because of the invisible yet very real walls and barriers between ministries. This new approach is part of our search for added value with regard to our political role and political identity in comparison with the Dutch House of Representatives.

Since we are gathered here in a European setting, I must not forget to mention the instruments that the Dutch Senate uses to improve the quality of our national work at European level. When elaborating on the challenge of internationalization and Europeization, I talked about the need to delegate competent and knowledgeable people to meetings across our national borders. I am very proud to be able to say as President of the Dutch Senate that the members of the Senate do an excellent job on the national political level, but especially also on European and international levels. Our delegates are well informed, well equipped, and bring home results. Over the last years, the Senate has been a true think tank for ideas on strengthening and improving the European integration process and the European policies, both at national and European level.

I would like to finish my presentation on the Senate's set of quality instruments with two examples. Both underscore the fact that we can explore options to add value within the existing institutional and constitutional framework.

My first example shows that we can find added value at national level to influence the European agenda. The Dutch Senate has – according to our Constitution – no direct right to ask the Dutch Council of State, which is the main advisory body to the lower chamber and government, for an opinion. Last year, however, we decided to work around this and asked for an opinion of the Council of State through our government. Although it stirred a little confusion as to whether it was constitutionally possible, the government accepted our request. This new use of an existing instrument was not the only unique aspect in this issue. The opinion was asked about a European matter. According to our constitution, the Council of State advises strictly on national law, while our request concerned the parliamentary control and institutional embedding of European Agencies. I am pleased to inform

you that we not only have received the opinion, but we also succeeded with this opinion to place the topic on the European agenda in 2007 within the context of COSAC. The Council of State provided us with the right arguments to start a discussion on European agencies that are shooting up like mushrooms with not enough democratic control and too much institutionalism.

My second example integrates national, EU and European forums. Two members of the Dutch Senate took the initiative to table a motion in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the accession of the EU/EC to all the European Conventions on human rights. This motion was accepted by all leaders of political groups. To increase the use of our instrument, to create an added value, this initiative has been followed up on the national level as well as the EU level.

Generating attention in as many ways as possible and integrating different playing fields is probably the most simple, but also most effective use of an instrument. I would like to take this opportunity to also bring to your attention this motion on the need for the EU/EC to accede to the European Convention on Human Rights. We are aware that the legal obstacles cannot be overlooked, but our plea is to at least open the accession negotiations while the political momentum remains. Accession is of the utmost importance to our citizens, and will increase our European standards on human rights.

I would like to appeal to you to raise this issue in your Parliaments. Mr. President, I proposed an amendment to include a paragraph in the final declaration of our conference concerning the accession to the European Convention on Human rights, but after consultations with colleagues I realized that not all delegations can make a statement on this issue, simply because it concerns an EU matter. So I would like to withdraw my amendment, but I do ask for your kind attention to this important subject.

I have tried to sketch to you – in a nutshell – what I believe should be the role of upper chambers in the 21st century. We have to invest in safeguarding and fostering the stability and quality of our parliamentary democracies. The Dutch Senate is well aware of this task and we do our utmost to fulfill it accordingly. Parliaments will face many challenges in the 21st century. I just mentioned three possible challenges: the citizens' challenge, the political challenge, and the challenge of external effects. I have tried to underline that quality of our work, in combination with a search for and the identification of our added value, is our best instrument. I truly hope that the exchange of best practices during our meetings like today will provide us with ideas that we can use to improve our ways at home. Like our host said: "Democracy must operate so that people are not embittered by politics and need not worry too much about laws, because good laws lead them without troubling them."

Thank you.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

We are under a bit of time pressure. I'd now like to give the floor to the President of the Senate of the Republic of Poland, Mr. Bogdan Borusewicz.

Bogdan Borusewicz:

Dear President Sobotka, I'd like to join those who have thanked you and congratulated you. I have been a Senator only for a few months, so I am probably the most junior of you all. The Polish Senate was reinstated seventeen years ago, but the tradition of Polish parliamentarism is much longer. I know I only have ten minutes, so if I exceed my limit, please let me know.

The Polish Senate joined the European Union along with Poland in the 21st century. Of course, our Sejm and Senate had to adjust. And that's what I'd like to tell you a bit more about.

Similarly to other national parliaments, our Parliament lost a large part of its competencies upon our accession to the EU. To compensate for the loss of clout of national parliaments in lawmaking, it was necessary to provide them with institutional possibilities of influencing European lawmaking. This reinforces the role of national parliaments, reduces the democratic deficit of the EU and its bodies, and prevents excessive weakening of the position national parliaments have in their countries. Democracy is thus secured both in the EU and in member states. It helps maintain a democratic balance between national and European institutions in the architecture of integrating Europe.

Many Declarations and other documents issued by the European Union, such as the Protocol on the role of national parliaments in the European Union, encourage national parliaments to step up their EU-related efforts, and cooperate with national governments to reach common positions.

I'd like to illustrate how the Polish Parliament, and the Senate in particular, is involved in European law making and to what extent.

In order to implement the Protocol and fill the gap caused by missing constitutional provisions, Poland adopted in 2004 the Act on the cooperation of the Polish Council of Ministers with the Sejm and the Senate on issues related to Poland's membership in the EU. The Act requires the government to cooperate with the Sejm and the Senate in all matters related to Poland's membership in the EU, and to submit information on Poland's involvement in EU decision-making to both Houses.

Despite Senate's efforts, the initial language of the Act did not provide both Houses with equal powers. Only the EU affairs committee of the Sejm was given the right to submit its opinion to the Polish Council of Ministers on draft legislative acts before these acts are debated in the Council of the European Union. The Senate was

deprived of this important power. Seventy-five Senators from various political parties who did not agree with this solution appealed to the Constitutional court to review the constitutionality of the law that limited the powers of the Upper House in this area. The Senate also initiated its own bill with the intention of changing the provisions that were disadvantageous for the Senate.

Having examined the case, the Constitutional Court agreed with the petitioner that the law was unconstitutional insofar as it circumvented the obligation to request an opinion of the body set forth in the Senate's Rules of Procedure. The ruling of the Constitutional court resulted in an amendment that redressed this misbalance of powers, though it did not do so completely.

Based on this amended act, both Houses of Parliament have the right to receive, through their European Affairs committees, information from the government concerning Poland's participation in EU decision-making, including debriefs from meetings of the Council of the European Union. They both may request additional information, and have the right to receive documents that must be consulted prior to their approval, as well as draft legal acts and the position of the Polish Council of Ministers on these acts. Both committees may adopt resolutions on the position the Polish government intends to take on a particular draft legal act in the Council of the EU. Unfortunately, the two Houses are not completely equal in terms of the real influence they have on the government's position. According to the Act, it is only the resolution of the European affairs Committee of the Sejm that must be used as a foundation for the Polish government's final position.

It is regretful that the Constitution and the Rules of Procedure of the Polish Parliament have not made it possible to establish a Joint Parliamentary Committee on EU Affairs. That would have been the best solution. As it is, the Sejm committee also has the exclusive right to comment on candidates for certain posts in the EU.

The Polish Senate does not face only European challenges. In order to expand democracy, it is becoming increasingly important to enlarge the group of people involved in parliamentary procedures, particularly legislative ones. By its nature, the legislative process must incorporate various points of view, interest groups as well as professional associations and community groups. They all must have an opportunity to express their views, interests or expectations in the democratic process of "good law-making." Being the Upper House of Parliament, the Senate seems to be the right place where such an opportunity could be given to those stakeholders in the legislative process that are not part of Parliament.

Thank you for your attention.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you very much, dear colleague. And now I'd like to give the floor to Mr. Nicolae Vacaroiu, the President of the Senate of Romania.

Nicolae Vacaroiu:

Dear President Sobotka, distinguished colleagues, it is a great pleasure for me to extend to you and your Czech colleagues, on behalf of the Senate of Romania and my own behalf, the most sincere congratulations on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the reinstatement of the Czech Senate. I would also like to thank you, Mr. President, for the invitation to this meeting, for your hospitality, and the excellent premises in which we can all meet.

This extraordinary meeting of the Association of European Senates makes an important contribution to the often-lively debates concerning the role and powers of Senates. As it was already stated at this forum, the existence and political significance of the Senate is regularly debated in most European countries where this institution exists. May I recall that almost all long-standing European democracies have a second chamber. Of course, given that European countries have different histories and political traditions, their Parliaments and their Upper Houses have different structures, powers, and modes of operation.

The Association of European Senates was established in November 2000 in order to underline the usefulness of bicameralism and the Senate's unique contribution to the democratic development of all our societies. We have always discussed important topics, have been able to exchange experience, engage in debates, and present proposals. We have come to a place where we find inspiration in each other. Thanks to this exchange of experience, among others, Romania managed to increase the role of the Senate and its contribution to the building of our democracy by amending the Constitution.

The number of countries with bicameral legislatures continues to grow. We hope that Senates will be able to use this fact to confirm their legitimacy. Today, we have heard many good, solid arguments in favor of bicameralism. We all have an important role to play in strengthening our democracies, but it is not enough to simply talk about this role among ourselves. It is of course a great source of encouragement to have these discussions among ourselves, but the most important thing is to act and communicate at home in ways that would show our electorate that the Senate is an important safeguard in national parliaments. Taking into account all the arguments that we have heard here today, we must continue to improve our dialog with non-governmental organizations and with our voters in all constituencies. We must prove our added value for the society. We must show that we contribute to the quality and stability of our democracies, and to good law making that will help our societies develop even further.

Without wanting to re-iterate all the points made by previous speakers, I believe our Association should consider ways of creating a document that would present all relevant arguments, and make that document available to everyone who is interested.

We have heard many interesting examples here. We must make sure they reach the widest possible audience. It is not enough for us to support each other. Let us not forget that our electorate will have the final say. If there were a referendum in our countries and the voters would have to answer whether they thought it was worthwhile to abolish the Senate and keep only one House of Parliament, what do you think their answer would be?

Let me repeat once again, that we need a coordinated and a well considered procedure that would make it possible for us to use every free moment – outside plenary, committee and commission meetings – to meet with our electorate in various constituencies and explain why we exist. We must meet with representatives of the civil society, and try to explain to them why the Senate is useful, deserves their support, and needs their support to do its job and to improve.

I wonder whether you have noticed that during all nine meetings of the Association of European Senates, we start out by bad weather, and then the sun comes out by the end of the meeting. It is symbolic. When we arrived in Prague this morning, it was overcast and drizzling. If you go out now, you'll see that the sun has come out. It is symbolic of our hope for the future.

Awaited with high expectations, the first years of the 21st century were marked by a paradox: on the one hand, democracy, both as an ideal and a set of institutions and political instruments, prevailed in many countries; on the other hand, we have been witnessing an ever-growing disappointment of citizens, caused by the gap between promises and concrete results. Today's Parliaments, and particularly the Senates, have an essential role in dealing with this paradox. By their composition and the issues on their agenda, the Senates are more inclined to respond to the citizens' needs and concerns. It is not by coincidence that many Senates are representing local communities and are obliged to focus on their specific problems. But the Senates themselves are going through a period of transformation in an effort to adapt to the challenges of the new century. This means, first of all, to build ever-closer links with the citizens, to strengthen the relationship with the executive, to improve the dialog with the mass media and the civil society, and to increase their involvement in international affairs.

An important issue is the way in which the Senate is perceived by the public opinion, taking into account that mass media are largely inclined to focus on sensational subjects rather than the regular work of our institutions. We must restructure, modernize, and bring our activities up to date. From this point of view, it is very important to increase the use, in the parliament's work, of new information and communication technologies. We must make it possible for the electorate to be in direct touch with their elected representatives.

Undoubtedly, the realities of the contemporary world, a highly globalized one, require a more active involvement of the Senate in peace and international stability, the fight against terrorism, the promotion of democratic stability, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development, the protection of the environment, etc. To this end,

it is necessary to strengthen the parliamentary dimensions of regional and international organizations, and to develop parliamentary diplomacy in general, in all its forms.

As you know, according to the 1991 Constitution, Romania readopted a bicameral parliamentary system after 50 years of communist dictatorship. It is called a perfect bicameral system in that the powers of the two Houses are completely symmetrical. The Senate is an integral part of the legislative process. After a decade of gathering information and evaluating our experience, we realized that our Constitution needed to be amended due to political, economic and changes in our country, as well as in the context of our European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The Constitution was revised in 2003, allowing for a more simple and efficient legislative procedure, while strengthening parliamentary control over the executive. While the legislative powers of both Houses remained balanced, the Amendment introduced a degree of specialization, and made it possible for the two Houses to cooperate more easily. Legislative proposals are debated and adopted by both Houses, while each has the last say in some areas. The prerogative of the Chamber of Deputies covers ordinary laws, while the Senate makes the final decision regarding the ratification of international treaties and laws that are necessary for their application. Organic laws are distributed between the two Chambers according to the area they cover.

The Senate also has greater responsibilities for control over the executive power, particularly in international affairs.

I could go on and on about our experience over the past 16 years. We had to literally rebuild our legal system, and pass laws that would guarantee the proper functioning of our democracy. Life has given us arguments to substantiate a bicameral system. We have adopted over 10,000 laws – with amendments introduced during the adoption process; in some cases significant amendments. In the end, the final text was always better than the first bill. The Senate has played an important role in that.

We have not yet talked about the differences in the outcomes of elections that take place every four years in Romania. There has been an interesting development. Unlike the Chamber of Deputies, there is a greater balance between the party in power and the opposition in the Senate. In other words, the difference between the numbers of their seats is not as great as in the Chamber of Deputies, where the government is in a better position to pursue its interests through its Deputies. The difference between the coalition and the opposition is only three votes in the Senate. You will surely see that the balance is fragile.

As a result, bills are discussed more thoroughly and carefully. Whenever we get a draft bill from our government, we try to improve it as much as possible through our deliberations.

We also play an important role in monitoring the implementation of new laws. Unfortunately, a lot of our laws are not properly implemented. We have even encountered attempts by the government to pass decrees that would change the original intention of a law. That is an area we should pay more attention to.

Allow me to end by saying, Mr. President, that Romania will become member of the European Union on 1 January 2007. Due to recent developments, as you have certainly noticed, we will need to amend our Constitution again. I'd like to use this opportunity and thank you all for your unrelenting support in Romania's efforts to become part of European structures. I'd particularly like to thank you for your significant support over the past six or seven years. We have tried to do our best, and your support in all areas, including the legislative process, has been very valuable. Thank you once again for your support. And thank you for extending a helping hand by ratifying Romania's EU Accession Treaty.

Thank you also for your patience and attention, and for this excellent debate.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you. Now I'd like to give the floor to Sergey Mironov, the President of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. You have the floor.

Sergej Mironov:

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen! First of all, I'd like to congratulate our Czech colleagues, on behalf of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, on their national holiday. I'd also like to congratulate our President and our dear hosts on the 10th Anniversary of the reinstatement of the Czech Senate.

Dear colleagues! Given its historical, geographic, and ethnic uniqueness, Russia is an inalienable part of Europe. That is why the Federation Council approaches its participation in the Association of European Senates with a firm commitment to the objectives of parliamentary democracy, stronger European self-awareness, and the principles of bicameralism.

The subject of our meeting "Upper Chambers of Parliaments and their Functions in the 21st Century" is important and topical for all of us. We believe that parliaments should play a more active role in promoting true democracy and effective governance, in engaging broader popular masses in the activities of the centers of power.

The vast territory of Russia, its multinational population, and the significant differences between the economic and social situation in our regions are all reasons

for having a bicameral legislature in our federation. It ensures effective representation of interests of the constituent parts of the Russian Federation and its region at federal level.

Let me dwell in more detail on certain aspects of the activities of the Federation Council.

Our work began in 1993. We have been a professional parliamentary assembly since 2001. Debates whether Russia needed an Upper House of Parliament have been coming back since the very beginnings of the Federation Council. That's why today's topic is so relevant for us. It is relevant for Europe, and particularly for countries with bicameral legislatures, such as Russia.

When we make our case for the Upper House, we highlight that the Federation Council plays an important role in representing the interests of Russian regions. It does so at two levels: first of all, in Moscow, where Senators defend the interests of their region. I should recall that each region is represented by two Senators. Secondly, very few people realize how important our work in the regions is. The most important aspect of our work is that we try to harmonize the policies of the center and the regions.

Constant interaction, constructive cooperation, and mutual respect between two Houses of Parliament are the most important principles of parliamentarism. That however does not mean that we refrain from using our right of veto from or engaging in constructive criticism of our colleagues in the Lower House.

We have enough time to attend to legislative proposals properly. We do not have to pass laws in as much hurry as our colleagues in the Lower House. The texts sent to us from the Lower House often contain mistakes. I won't go into details, but I have to say that we have recently seen cases where those mistakes were quite serious.

Of course, we are always looking for ways of improving the quality of our legislative process, but that's not our only challenge. I have already said that our population is made up of many ethnic and religious groups. You have probably also heard that unpleasant incidents occasionally break out between our ethnic groups. This year, we established a commission for ethnic policy and government relations with religious communities. The Commission is composed of members of the Federation Council and representatives of regions. We are taking active part in its work. In addition to that, the Council of Legislators was established at the Federation Council four years ago. Its membership is composed of 24 representatives of the Federation Council coming from 16 ethnic groups, and all presidents of legislatures of constituent parts of the Russian Federation.

We have to be mindful of the incredible number of laws that we have to adopt. That's why we have been issuing an annual report on the state of legislation in the Russian Federation for the past three years. This Report evaluates the effectiveness of laws adopted over the previous year. It is a unique piece of work, and I'm happy

that our colleagues in the regions have emulated our federal experience, and started assessing the quality of legislation adopted in their regions.

I should also point out that a key element of our work is securing that human rights and rights of citizens are respected in our country. I will say frankly among friends that we still have a long way to go in this area but it does not intimidate us. We will continue to protect the interests of citizens, business people, retired people, and students alike. We take this work very seriously.

The last point I'd like to touch on concerns our close cooperation with non-governmental organizations in Russia. We have initiated the establishment of a Council for non-governmental organizations last fall, chaired by the President of the Federation Council. The Council represents non-governmental organizations from all walks of life. We have been cooperating very closely with them, particularly in protecting human and civil rights in the Russian Federation.

Dear colleagues, I hope I have not taken too much of your time. I am about to finish. In our opinion, the potential of Upper Houses has not been fully utilized yet. I would like to say that the Upper House of the Russian Parliament will strive to strengthen bicameralism as the best and most effective organization of parliamentary work. We will use all the experience we have gathered here among you, particularly at these regular meetings, back home. I'll be looking forward to seeing that experience bear fruit.

I wish us all every success in this important work. Thank you for your attention.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

I'd like to thank the President of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. Now I'd like to give the floor to Janez Susnik, the President of the National Council of the Republic of Slovenia.

Janez Sušnik:

Mr. President, dear colleagues, dear founding father of our Association, Mr. President of the French Senate, thank you for having invited me to this extraordinary meeting of our Association of European Senates, and for your hospitality. May I also take this opportunity to congratulate the Czech Senate on the 10th anniversary of its re-establishment.

I'm happy to see our Association grow into one big European family. I'm glad that we have representatives of Russia, Romania, and Bosnia and Hercegovina among us. It empowers and motivates us.

Our topic, the role of Parliaments in the 21st century, is very interesting. I'm sure we will all have something to say. The basic issue is the role Upper Houses should play in the constitutional systems of their countries. We have spoken at all our meetings about our experience with the legislative process, relations with the executive power, the composition of Senates, their relations with civil society, their involvement in European affairs, their responsibilities, and communication with regions.

We have always concluded that each Upper House has its own specific rules and procedures. We will also agree that there are responsible Senators in all Senates who are willing to find a compromise with Lower Houses.

The role of Upper Houses differs depending on their position in the constitutional system, their composition, and their powers. Some Upper Chambers are elected directly, which gives them irrefutable legitimacy and greater powers. Their role will be different from those Upper Houses that have weaker legitimacy because their members are elected indirectly or appointed. These Senates will have much smaller powers. Our National Council belongs to the second group. It participates in the legislative process but does not have a decisive influence on the final adoption of laws.

We will be organizing a symposium on bicameralism and its significance for Slovenia. As far as I know, some of the Presidents who are here today will also attend our symposium where we will discuss our experience over the past 15 years. We have come to the conclusion that we need to propose and make changes in Slovenia.

Let me now share my views on the role of our National Council in the 21st century.

We have to struggle to make our role stronger. This can be achieved through slight modifications of our Constitution and procedures. The central role of the National Council in the 21st century will continue to be its participation in the legislative process. We should be given a possibility of commenting bills already during the legislative process in the National Assembly. It would also be helpful if the National Council were able to participate directly in the initiation and adoption of laws. That would significantly reduce the number of rejected bills.

The National Council vetoes bills if they contain unconstitutional provisions. The governing coalition has a majority in the Lower House, of course. We ought to determine a greater majority by which the Lower House can outvote the National Council's veto. Political support for particular bills should be negotiated in advance. The National Council should have more power in relation to local governments, which is the case in other countries with bicameral legislatures. Laws on local government, particularly those that concern the transfer of powers, should be agreed in this setting. Slovenia does not have regions, because our total population is only two million, but we have two Euro-regions.

Lastly, strengthening the role of the National Council with regard to constitutional amendments would represent another important increase of its powers. In other words, our legislative process should change so that the National Council would be giving its assent to constitutional amendments, which is common practice in other countries with bicameral legislatures. It is very important for decisions about the Constitution to be consensus-based. If the National Council is able to participate in drafting constitutional amendments, it will help us prevent bad constitutional amendments from being adopted.

We need to take our experience from the fifteen years of transition into account. We should counter those that doubt and challenge parliamentary democracy. We should introduce a two-third majority to make our system comparable to Senates in other European countries.

Of course, the Senate needs the support of its electorate. I have proposed changes in the rules of procedure of our bicameral legislature in Slovenia in order to improve the National Council's position in the adoption of fundamental legislation. Carrying out additional work in various areas can enhance the role of the Upper House. Members of Upper Houses are typically older and more experienced. Upper Houses tend to view things less politically, and are much less influenced by party politics than Lower Houses. Upper Houses are therefore in a better position to deal with technically complicated bills that have a lower political profile. We often have more time to consider various legislative proposals, and can be in direct contact with our electorate. In my opinion, Upper Houses would do well to stay away from politicized issues that are dealt with by Lower Houses, and focus on other important issues.

I would recommend in particular that Upper Houses focus on issues that do not cause controversies with Lower Houses, such as European Union issues. The example of the House of Lords has shown us that the Upper House can focus on key documents related to the EU, and present its positions through government representatives in Brussels. It is a question of state interest, not only the interest of a particular House of Parliament or the government. It would be desirable for as many institutions in a country to deal with these issues as possible. Upper Houses play an important role with regard to the control of subsidiarity and proportionality by national parliaments of EU member states. This role makes it possible to silence criticism of bicameralism and substantiate the importance of a bicameral legislature in Slovenia.

I believe the principle role of Upper Houses lies in their active work both for the interests they represent and the interests that are neglected by Lower Houses and governments. Both Houses could then complement each other in their work and eliminate disagreements.

I believe that our Prague meeting could contribute to the further development of Upper Houses of Parliament. As some joint activities in the EU have not gone according to plan, our Association is in a good place to help contribute to resolving our long-standing issues particularly because it reaches beyond current EU borders.

We should work together toward better regulation, better law making, and a better European Union.

Thank you.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you. It is now my great pleasure to give the floor to the Right and Honorable Baroness Hayman, Lord Speaker of the House of Lords of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Baroness Hayman:

Mr. President, dear colleagues! I'd like to join all those who have thanked our host, the Czech Republic, for organizing this meeting. I have already congratulated them on their 10th anniversary, and my thanks are perhaps even more heart-felt because I am a new President of an Upper House, and have filled a position that has not existed before. It feels as if you organized a workshop for me where I can learn more about the functions and roles of Upper Houses and meet colleagues. So once again, my heart-felt and sincere thanks.

The House of Lords is not a young Upper House; it has a very long history. Lord Speaker, however, is a new position. The House of Lords has been chaired by Lord Chancellors since 1660. I have to say that this has been a major change. It nevertheless shows that we are flexible, that we are evolving. If you look at the history of our Upper House, you will find many changes. With one exception, these changes were not rooted in law. From a House composed solely of hereditary members until 1958 we changed into a House where all but 92 do not inherit their seat. Half of our current members have joined the House of Lords only in the last ten years. Let us not forget that the House of Lords had no retirement age and no term of office. When I once was the youngest member of the House of Commons in the United Kingdom, my son told me: "If it is a life-long position, perhaps you will once become the oldest member of the House of Lords." I do not think that is my goal.

It is quite interesting that although it may appear that the future of the House of Lords reached an impasse in 1911 with the start of a debate about the role and composition of the House of Lords that has been continuing to date, we have still been able to adjust to the changing needs and change dramatically. Although we are still discussing about the future of the House of Lords in the UK, I have been quite surprised how little support there is for a unicameral legislature. Of course, there are always voices suggesting that our Parliament ought to have only one House, but those voices are not many, for reasons mentioned by all the speakers. We need a House that would first and foremost study legislative proposals in detail, because the House of Commons sometimes has neither time nor patience for such a detailed study. We need a House that will ponder ways of dealing with the challenges of

European law and that will oversee it. We need a House that will recruit its members from a wider community, not only political parties and ordinary politics. Perhaps this is appreciated the most in my country.

Besides, we need a House that creates a forum for complex and often painful national deliberations involving all our citizens. We often say that the House of Lords is filled with people who do not have ambitions any more, which is sometimes quite important. Upper Houses of Parliament can sometimes set aside more space for such deliberations, be it about ethical issues concerning the beginning and end of life or other great challenges of the 21st century, such as energy security, climate change or a balance between individual liberties and national security. These debates are very difficult, and I believe we need to have them in a forum that is outside political tensions and party politics.

Over the past ten years that I've been working in the House of Lords and trying to learn more about the functioning of Upper Houses, I have come to a conclusion that all Upper Houses are unique, based on their history and the geographic position of their country. That influences their powers, their composition, and their position in the constitutional system. All these things differ from one country to another.

The strongest and most successful Upper Houses are those that perceive their role as completely different from the role of Lower Houses. They do not try to imitate the Lower House. They see the need to complement the Lower House and bring in a different quality of debates that espouse different and broader perspectives.

Perhaps the most important thing is to ensure that parliamentary democracy is seen by the citizens as something relevant. This applies particularly to young people. I can say from my experience that it is relevant particularly for those countries that are "old" democracies. Sometimes I feel that the greatest threat to parliamentary democracy does not come from a military junta or a fascist regime, but from apathy. We have to find a way of communicating with our citizens, of showing that we are indeed relevant. We must communicate with them, open up to them, and earn respect in our countries.

Upper Houses have an opportunity to be more innovative. If you don't have any grand ambitions, you can afford to take greater risks than someone who still has great ambitions in the world of politics.

I have many more things to say, but I had rather finish by thanking Mr. President and all colleagues. I'm looking forward to talking with you, and learning a lot from you in the coming few days.

Thank you.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you very much. Before we adjourn, I have a small announcement concerning dinner. We are finishing later than planned, so let's meet at 7:15 rather than 7 p.m. You are all cordially invited to dinner here at the Senate at 7:15 pm.

Thank you for this wonderful debate, and I will see you a bit later.

(End of Thursday sessions.)

(Jingle – beginning of Friday sessions)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Welcome back. I am glad that you all got up and came back to our meeting this morning. Yesterday we heard interesting speeches in both sessions, and I hope it will be the same today. I have been happy to hear that your experience as Upper Houses has often confirmed our experience here in the Czech Republic.

I would now like to give the floor to the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexandr Vondra.

Minister, welcome.

(Applause)

Alexandr Vondra:

Good morning! Dear Senators, distinguished guests, first of all, I would like to welcome you to Prague on behalf of the new Czech government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We are honored that the Association of European Senates chose Prague to host its meeting this year. I am sure that the Czech Senate under President Sobotka's leadership as well as the authorities of the city of Prague have done the utmost to make you feel at ease in this beautiful city. Even the weather has been on your side.

I'd like to tell you two things: First, I am speaking here on behalf of our newly appointed government that will be asking for the Parliament's confidence next week. Our new government has set itself ambitious goals in foreign policy. It will be a pro-European government; it will honor and enhance our security ties with the Trans-Atlantic community while nurturing peaceful and friendly cooperation in Central Europe.

By the way, President Bogdan Borusewicz of the Polish Senate, who was a prominent figure in Poland's Solidarnosc, and President Premysl Sobotka of our Senate have signed some ten minutes ago a Joint Declaration commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Czechoslovak-Polish Solidarity, a joint effort of freedom fighters in former Czechoslovakia, who were active in Charter 77 and other organizations, and their friends from the Polish Solidarnosc. I grew up in that

community. In fact, I was just reminiscing this morning how we dragged heavy backpacks with printing equipment, literature and foreign policy declarations up the mountains along our border with Poland to meet our friends in the same kind of dark fog that we saw at 7 o'clock this morning. In the meantime, the fog has lifted, and the sun has come out. Let it be a metaphor of the fog that has lifted in Europe. Let us hope that we will continue enjoying the sunshine.

My second remark concerns the role of the Senate. As you know, the Czech Republic has a bicameral parliamentary democracy. We have the Chamber of Deputies, where I'll be running off to, because an important meeting starts there at 10 am, and then, of course, the Senate. Although the Senate does not wield any extraordinary political powers in the Czech democracy, it is a safeguard of democracy, and its voice of wisdom, maturity, and experience is irreplaceable in foreign policy. It deliberates on all international treaties, and has the main say in foreign policy commitments of our country.

May I use this opportunity and thank the Senate – and perhaps all of you, Senators, because in many European countries the Senates play a similar role – for this voice of responsibility, reason and continuity in foreign relations, because foreign relations require exceptional continuity, trustworthiness and decency. A voice that does not swing from left to right and back is exactly what I have encountered here in this beautiful building over the many years that I have been serving in a public office.

In closing, I'd like to wish you a pleasant stay in Prague. I will hope that your voice of reason, responsibility and decency will sound into the coming years. Those of us who want to see international relations develop in a harmonious and predictable fashion rely on you perhaps more than on others.

Thank you once again, and good luck.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you very much, Minister. I know other commitments are calling you, so I will let you go.

Let us continue in our debate. First I'd like to give the floor to Mr. Dirk Brouer, the Head of the Office of the Federal Council of the Federal Republic of Germany.

You have the floor.

Dirk Brouër:

Dear President Sobotka, your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen! Thank you very much for having invited us to this meeting of the Association of European

Senates. Mr. Carstensen regrets that he has been unable to join you today. He has asked me to relay his apologies and greetings, and to congratulate you on your 10th anniversary.

I would like to join him in his greetings and congratulations. May I say, Mr. President, that the beautiful environment of our event last evening was unforgettable for me, and I am sure also for the others.

Ladies and gentlemen! Seventeen years have passed since the Velvet Revolution or, as your Minister of Foreign Affairs put it, since the sun shone through the fog of Europe. Whether we are in the Czech Republic or anywhere in Europe, we can never underestimate the significance of your revolution. As a German, I feel particularly strongly about that.

How important is the Senate for the development of a democratic state? Your Senate has proven over the 10 years of its existence through its diligent work that it is very important indeed. It has shown very clearly that bicameralism is a good system, and that Upper Houses play an important part in democratic countries. The Czech Senate has made a major contribution to the development of your country as well as the entire European family.

Mr. President, you can look back at your work with pride, and can approach future challenges with the same optimism that we do. I wish you and all Czech Senators every success in your important work. In particular, I wish you personally every success in leading the Senate in its important role at national and international levels.

All the best, and thank you very much for your attention.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you very much. Now I would like to give the floor to Juan Jose Lucas, the Vice-President of the Spanish Senate.

Juan José Lucas: Mr. President, dear colleagues: first of all, congratulations! Thank you very much for the wonderful organization of this meeting, and for your hospitality during this meeting of European Senates. Our host, the Czech Senate, celebrates the 10th anniversary of its re-establishment, which has afforded us a wonderful opportunity to discuss the role of the Senates in the 21st century.

Ladies and gentlemen: bicameral systems have always been facing two main challenges. First of all, political representations of every country have to focus on the unity and equality of their citizens. It has always been important for politicians to focus on the interests of their citizens as well as various social groups and regions. Having said that, they have always had to work within their particular legislative

system. *Montesquieu* said that those who have power must be able to execute that power. And they have to execute their power within the framework of freedom and equity.

Bicameralism is a political art. It is an art of finding a balance between freedom and legitimacy while leveling possible inequalities among various groups. We have to defend the rights of individuals as well as groups composed of those individuals. Since we are in the Czech Republic, let me recall the words of Vaclav Havel: “*We have to bear in mind that politics is not the art of the possible, but the art of the impossible.*” Of course, we have to strive to better our societies.

The same applies to Spain. Our Constitution created a bicameral legislature in 1978. We have had a number of constitutions since 1812. Two of them, namely Constitutions from 1812 and 1931, opted for a unicameral legislature. As a matter of fact, these two constitutions had the shortest life. The President of the French Senate once wrote a beautiful article, where he said: “A Senate could have saved a country during the civil war in Spain.” He was right.

Clearly, politicians see bicameralism as something very important. It is also obvious how important the Senate is in Spain. We have had a bicameral legislature since 1978. According to our Constitution, the Senate represents our autonomous regions while the Congress represents the citizens. The Senate is therefore a House of regional representation.

In the 19th century, our Upper House had mixed membership. Nowadays it may be a difficult concept to grasp. Let us remember that those regimes that have lasted the longest in our history have always relied on a Senate.

Does the current Senate have an appropriate structure? That is certainly a relevant question. Spain is a relatively young democracy. Although we have seen various developments in our history, we can say that generally we have always tried to have a Constitution that would serve everyone. Our bicameral legislature, whose one House represents autonomous areas, is an expression of this effort. However, Spain was a centralized country without autonomous regions back in 1978. As decentralization and devolution to autonomous areas unfolded over the past 30 years, we realized that the Senate did not possess sufficient powers to adequately defend the interests of autonomous areas. In our system, four Senators are elected directly by individual provinces, while another two Senators are elected through regional parliaments. We are currently reviewing whether this is the right electoral system for us. After all, different autonomous areas in Spain have different sizes of population. In other Senates, like the US, Senators are elected to represent a particular area.

I am approaching this issue as someone who has been in our politics for many years. I was President of an autonomous area. I have been serving as the President of our Senate. I also served as a Vice-President of a regional representation in Brussels. I'd like to say that even a reform as substantial as the reform of our Senate should not raise any concerns or doubts.

We have heard interesting presentations. We should publish them and study them with a great deal of attention. Without singling anyone out, I'd like to say that I have noticed novel perspectives in many contributions. I believe it was the representative of Austria who said that each Senate should serve as an umbilical cord between Europe and the citizen. The presentations we have heard here enrich our political debate.

We cannot draft a good constitution without reforming such fundamental players as the Senate. And we cannot do so without the consensus of those involved. That would not be possible. Such a reform must not only follow political objectives. We must not change the current representation of provinces only for the purpose of increasing the representation of a political party, my party included, in the reformed Senate. We must once again reach a consensus among all political parties, like we did in drafting the Constitution. The Senate must, first and foremost, play the role of an elected representative. That is crucial.

When we debate Senate elections, a question of the powers of the Senate comes up. The Spanish Senate already plays a legislative role. Eighty per cent of bills referred to us by the Congress, that is the Lower House, are amended in the Senate, though the Lower House eventually has the last say. It would not be illogical ask that the legislative power of the Senate be enhanced by broadening the circumstances in which the Congress will need qualified majority to override our amendments.

Of course, the Senate also has the powers and roles of oversight. It may hold question time with the government every week, and request additional information, reports, and answers to written questions. In addition to the powers of oversight, the Senate also has powers of appointment. The Senate appoints a number of justices of the Supreme Judicial Council and the Constitutional Court.

The Senate should remain the House of the second reading, and should continue overseeing the government. We are also thinking of enhancing the powers of the Senate by focusing it on laws of territorial nature. What do I mean by that? I mean that such laws should be first debated by the Senate.

As the representative of the German Federal Council will probably agree, all disagreements between the two Houses should be resolved through Joint Committees. Only if these joint committees fail to resolve the dispute, the Lower House should decide by qualified majority. The reform of the Senate must increase rather than decrease our legislative powers.

I believe that in societies as complicated as ours, reasoned decision-making should not be sacrificed to speed and efficiency. *Hans Kelsen* wrote in his brief text "*On the foundations and values of democracy*," that as any parliamentary procedure tends to pursue a change, the principle function of Parliaments is social integration.

Some have claimed it was inevitable to give the Upper House more opportunities to support the cooperation among regions, and between the regions and the state. I

agree but with a warning that this cannot undermine the Parliamentary nature of our House. Our House has to remain a forum for a dialog on big issues, and should not limit itself to administration. Other factors play into the need to highlight the territorial nature of the Senate's representative role, and, in fact, of the Senate's composition.

The fact that the Senate has been defined as a House of territorial representation did not lessen the firm ground provided to it by our Constitution of 1978. In order to fulfill its mission, the Senate may transform its composition and functions. The process must be transparent, and must rest on a broad consensus. At the same time, the Senate must not lose its principal defining features.

Mr. President, dear colleagues! It is a great pleasure to speak to you today, because the debate we are having today is also very relevant in contemporary Spanish political discourse. When the current Prime Minister asked for the Parliament's vote of confidence, he laid out several aspects of the constitutional reform. First and all, there must be equality of genders in inheriting the Crown. We must change the current condition in which men are preferred over women. The status of national law related to our integration to the EU is another issue. Last but certainly not the least, we must reform our Senate.

Nowadays, no one doubts that the Senate is a safeguard of stability. We also understand that because there were no autonomous areas in 1978, the languages of the Constitution did not clearly define the powers of the Senate. We need the will of all political forces to lend the Senate its full legitimacy so that it could make a full contribution to the Parliamentary debate, to rule of law and democracy, which should be our main concern.

Thank you, Mr. President.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you. The last speaker of this session will be the President of the Council of Estates of the Swiss Confederation, Mr. Rolf Buttiker.

Rolf Büttiker:

Mr. President, dear colleagues! Do not be afraid of the Swiss. The Swiss will never be first, because as Durenmatt wrote in his classical book, the Swiss get up early but wake up late. That is also the case this morning.

First of all, I'd like to thank President Sobotka for having invited me to this extraordinary meeting of our Association of European Senates. You have invited us to join you in celebrating the 10th anniversary of the re-establishment of the Czech Senate. It is a great pleasure and a sign of our closeness and friendship.

Congratulations to the Czech Senate on their tenth anniversary. We hope you will continue being successful in your work for your country and the entire Europe.

This meeting revolves around a general issue of the function played by Upper Houses of Parliament in the 21st century. In my opinion, the Swiss Council of Estates plays six principal roles.

First of all, a democratic function. Members of the Council of Estates are elected by the people of their cantons through a majority system. They represent the interests of their electorate, and are accountable to them. The electorate tries to influence decision-making in the Council of Estates in several ways. Although members of the Estates Council may not receive any instructions per say, they are constantly in touch with community groups and citizens who want their views reflected in parliamentary debates. Referendums and plebiscites are anchored in our constitution. It is in part thanks to them that such contacts do not take place only before elections but throughout the entire term of office. I believe this is a particular Swiss feature that distinguishes us from other European countries.

Last Sunday, people cast their votes about three fundamental issues that are relevant in all European countries, but would probably be mostly decided by Parliaments. It was the Asylum Act, the Act on foreign nationals, and on the distribution of the profits of the National bank. Direct democracy is exercised even in these issues in Switzerland. We call it “government by the people.” Of course, that influences the policies of the Parliament, the National Council and, of course, the Estates Council. Consensus must be reached in constitutional questions, and the Estates council can have a major influence in this regard.

Onto Europe. There is a question of supreme importance that comes up in politics over and over. It was discussed once again in our Parliament last week when the Government was presenting a Report on the state of Europe. How can our ever-enlarging Europe become more democratic and federalistic? This is a major question for us.

At the last meeting of the Association of European Senates in Bern this April, we had a very detailed debate about the contribution Senates can make to bringing politics closer to the citizens. Your speeches – which we have published in three volumes – as well as our discussion, convinced me that regardless of institutional and constitutional differences, all European Senates take their democratic function very seriously.

Our second function is law making. With the exception of issues decided by plebiscite, the Estates Council and the National Council are the legislative powers of our country. Any bills and proposed constitutional amendments are first discussed in committees and are then referred to the plenary. In a country with rule of law, all actions by the state must rest on a constitutional and legal foundation. We can therefore say that the Estates Council lays down rules for any state action taken vis-a-vis individuals, groups, or the entire population. This traditional role of the

Parliaments has lost nothing of its importance in the 21st century. It has, however, become more challenging. Good law making requires technical knowledge as well as political judgment, which in turn calls for optimum cooperation between the government, the administration, and the Parliament.

The third parliamentary function is oversight. The government and the administration must be checked. Parliaments are in the best position to do that, as they are democratically elected. The Estates Council shares this role with the National Council. Parliamentary oversight differs from the oversight exercised by the courts. Courts get involved based on petitions filed by individuals or organizations. Parliamentary oversight is permanent, and can take place either in parallel or ex post.

Ex-post oversight involves examination of annual reports or closure of accounts, which is something that keeps the Estates Council very busy once a year. Parallel oversight is carried out mostly by parliamentary committees. The administration has to open its books, explain its activities to parliamentary committees, and report back on measures introduced by the Parliament.

This oversight must be targeted and effective. Oversight is also a very demanding Parliamentary activity. Administrative actions tend to be complex, and the Parliament needs expert support to assess them. The Parliament must focus on a bird's eye view without running into too much detail that lies outside the Parliament's competence. This is a very important point, particularly in view of our efforts to improve our services for our citizens.

Fourthly, the Parliament has a federal function. According to Article 150 of the Swiss Federal Constitution, the Estates Council has 46 Members coming from the cantons. Members of the Council of Estates are elected by the people of their cantons based on the law of those cantons. At the same time, they are members of a Federal body. They often contribute specific interests of cantons and regions to Parliamentary debates. This is what we call the federal function. There is a close tie with the governments, Parliaments, associations, and populations of the cantons. This is very important. Senators are watched by regional media because they are trying to pursue mainly cantonal and regional interests. This is meaningful in a country as federalistic as Switzerland. Based on our discussions at our 7th meeting in Berlin, I believe that regional interests are considered very important in your Senates as well.

Discourse is the fifth function. The important role of the Estates Council, being the Upper House, is to engage in constant dialog with the National Council, our Lower House. That fact that the Estates Council and the National Council have the exact same competencies makes this dialog even more important. All laws must be debated in both houses. The bill gets perfected step by step as we approach a consensus by both Houses. Of course, there must be the will to compromise on both sides. Fortunately, legislative proposals hardly ever fail only because one of the Houses digs its heels in.

The advantage of having a bicameral legislature is that various points of view are taken into account in the discourse of two Houses that are composed differently. In most cases, the debate between the two Houses improves the original legislative proposal.

And lastly, let me mention the international function of the Estates Council, and the importance of international cooperation among Parliaments. The issues we have to resolve in our countries often have aspects that transcend a single country. Look at transportation, energy or environmental policies. They don't stop at the border. In fact, those are the areas that I'm concentrating on in our committees. I am convinced it is necessary to further intensify our international contacts, whether bilaterally or multilaterally. Switzerland plays a particular role in the Council of Europe, where we try to pull down barriers between the East and the West, and will continue to contribute toward the integration of various countries into Europe. Of course, meetings of the Association of European Senates present us with wonderful opportunities to exchange opinions, for which I am very grateful.

Thank you once again, Mr. President, for having invited me to Prague.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you. Your point-by-point presentation served as a wonderful summary of our debate, and more or less followed the spirit of previous presentations.

Let us have a short coffee break, and return at 11 am to discuss issues that have been broached at this meeting or the Draft Declaration.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let's break until 11 a.m.

(Break)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Let us continue discussing the topic of this meeting or hear your comments on the final declaration, if there are any. Let me repeat that you can ask for the floor through the list of speakers or by raising your hand. There is a microphone in front of each head of delegation. You may start speaking after pressing the green button.

Onto the final declaration. You have all received my draft sufficiently in advance, and have had a chance to comment. The French, Dutch and Russian delegations have sent in their written suggestions, for which I would like to thank them. Let me recall once again that the proposal presented by President Mironov of the Russian Federation Council was meant as an addition rather than a replacement of our declaration. We also received a proposal from the House of Lords of the UK last afternoon. Expert teams have met afterwards. Representatives of certain delegations

have indicated it would be hard for them to accept some of the amendments as well as certain parts of the original text.

As this association decides by consensus, we have agreed on a modified and shorter version of the original declaration that you have on your desks under the title The Final Declaration of the Presidency.

President Poncelet and I have decided that conclusions of our future conferences will also be presented as Final Declarations of the Presidency. We are a voluntary, consensual group, so the text is at your disposal. The head of the Polish delegation Bogdan Borusewicz would like to take the floor.

Bogdan Borusewicz: I think the part of the Final Declaration in which we appealed to colleagues from the Parliaments of other countries to step up their efforts in areas where classical diplomacy is having difficulties should definitely stay. I think it is very important. Senates are involved in foreign policy and international relations, and I believe that they can play a significant role. I would like to see that part re-integrated in the Declaration.

Otherwise, I am happy with the entire Draft Declaration.

Thank you.

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you for your input. Anyone else? The representative of the Russian Federation would like to take the floor.

Sergej Mironov:

As there is no Russian interpretation, I will speak French. I have several other proposals to specify the role of European Parliaments in the 21st century.

We believe that more specific statements need to be made about the topic of our conference, namely Upper Houses and their role in the 21st century. What are the objectives of Upper Houses? What role are they expected to play? Upon careful reading of the draft, I can see references to the remarks made by representatives of Upper Houses. Mr. Buttiker spoke about the dialog between the two Houses. We can see a reference to that in the third paragraph of our draft. President Poncelet spoke about the responsibility of Senates vis-a-vis the economic and social lives. We can see a reference to that in the last paragraph. These are not additional amendments, just thoughts about specifying the role of Senates in various countries. I would therefore like to ask you to accept our amendments, particularly in the third, fifth and last paragraphs.

Thank you very much.

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

The head of the Austrian delegation, Mrs. Haselbach, has asked for the floor.

Anna Haselbach:

Thank you very much for the floor. May I respond to the contributions made by our esteemed colleagues from Poland and the Russian Federation.

I suppose many colleagues will agree with me that we have been involved in parliamentary diplomacy for a long time. We have been doing so on purpose, because we know that parliamentary diplomacy represents a diversity of political views expressed in contacts with other Parliaments and governments. As it is something we have been doing for a long time, we do not think it is necessary to state so in the Final Declaration of the Presidency. It is part of our everyday life. When I looked around and saw how happy we were to see each other again, I realized that it proved how excellently our contacts work at bilateral level, not only through meetings of Presidents. So, so much about this proposal.

As far as the Russian proposal to define the role of Upper Houses is concerned, I think we need to bear in mind that we all see our role in line with our Constitution, although we are naturally also the authors of those Constitutions, along with our Lower Houses. Still, I believe that the role of each Senate is spelled out by national law, and that is where it should remain.

The support of the economy will again depend on the role a particular Senate plays in its country. It will depend on its powers, its possibilities, and the mode of election of its members. This is all related. It depends on the focus of the work of a particular Senate. That's why I would ask us to go back to agreeing with the Declaration of the Presidency in its original language. Let us take all our other proposals back home and go over them with members of our thinktanks, and let our Senates decide. I do not think we can pre-empt their decisions here.

Thank you for your attention.

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you for your input. The representative of the Kingdom of Belgium is asking for the floor.

Francis Delperée:

Mr. President, I would like to say two things. First of all, I fully support the Final Declaration of the Presidency as presented to us this morning. I also second the Polish proposal to refer to parliamentary dipomacy in our Final Declaration. In other words, I propose to re-include the segment of the first version that referred to that.

I have two other observations. The original language said that we appeal to our colleagues in Upper as well as Lower Houses of Parliament. As we are the Association of Senates, I wonder whether it is useful to mention the role of other Houses. The original of this Declaration says that Senates should step up their efforts in parliamentary diplomacy. We have added to it that the Senate should do so in areas where classical diplomacy has difficulties. I think it unnecessarily attacks governmental methods. Parliamentary diplomacy should not be pitted against classical diplomacy. They are two parallel and most probably also complementary ways. Perhaps we should simply simplify the original text.

Thank you.

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you. President Timmerman-Buck of the Netherlands has asked for the floor.

Yvonne Timmerman-Buck:

I would like to second the Austrian proposal. We do not think it is necessary to introduce additional text as proposed by the Russian and Polish delegations. We agree with this text of the Final Declaration. We also agree with the title Final Declaration of the Presidency.

Thank you.

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you. Let me repeat that this is the Final Declaration of the Presidency at which we have arrived through consensual deliberation. We can agree or disagree with a number of proposals. All heads of delegations will attend a press conference that will be broadcasted live on Czech TV. I suppose everyone will have the right to share their personal views in addition to what has been expressed in the Declaration. If we start changing the text, it could easily happen that we will have to wait until 4 p.m. to see the final result.

I do not want to discourage you from your activities, but I would like to say that the current text has been drafted after a debate. The original was just my draft. These were all proposals. Let us be specific, as we are used to from our meetings at home, and share our personal views and our experience from this conference with the journalists. Perhaps that could be a solution.

President Poncelet is asking for the floor.

Christian Poncelet:

Mr. President, it is always difficult to find a synthesis that would respond to the legitimate expectations of one or the other. Let us not, however, lose sight of the goal that we pursued in establishing the Association of European Senates. We have aimed at building an institution through which we can meet and exchange our experience and opinions. We certainly did not intend to evoke any confrontation. Parliamentary democracy aside, we all have to draw from our conclusions what we consider useful for our own needs, and bring it back to our home countries and discuss it in our assemblies. The President has presented us with an excellent initiative today. We are trying to reach a consensus. It would be quite unpleasant if some of us were attacked by their colleagues at home that this initiative is not related to the work of their House.

What is our intention? We want to foster brotherly ties among us through these meetings. If I do not like something that goes on in another country, I will use bilateral discussions to try to convince my colleagues. That is certainly true. These meetings also make it possible for us to meet bilaterally. We have to get to know each other. We have to appreciate each other, and avoid confrontation. This is about building a consensus. We are not here to judge each other. What takes place in a country is probably useful there. I have come to Prague and heard this declaration, and think the developments in this country are reasonable. Perhaps we could consider them at home. I do not think we should use this declaration to push something that could be misunderstood. That could take us away from our goal. In fact, it would run counter to our goal of setting up a space where we can freely exchange experience, enrich bicameralism, and pursue bicameralism in our different ways in our countries.

Let us not adopt a text that will be challenged in our home countries. People do look at us. Somebody could take our declaration and say: "What are they getting involved in after all?" Perhaps it could bother colleagues that would otherwise enjoy these meetings. Perhaps our colleagues in Romania will see the declaration and say: "It makes no sense to go there." Yet, this is an association where we can all speak freely as responsible citizens without trying to influence conditions in other countries. That is why we will never have a perfect text. I still believe, though, that the President has presented a good summary, and that we can approve his text. We were thinking here together. Of course, I do not like certain things in the text, but I will still support it, because it is conducive to creating a unified family. And that is our goal.

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka: Thank you. The head of the Polish delegation Bogdan Borusewicz would like to take the floor.

Bogdan Borusewicz:

Mr. President, we say in Poland that the best is the enemy of the good. I would like this Declaration to be as good as possible. That is why I wanted to return to the part of the previous text, because it is relevant and correct, particularly in view of the clarification offered by Belgium. Of course, I will not be blocking the adoption of the

Final Declaration. I will not insist on the re-inclusion of that text, and I will accept the Declaration as presented to us.

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you. I do not see anyone else asking for the floor. According to Article 5 of the Statute of the Association of European Senates, decisions are made by consensus. I would like to ask those that had substantial or marginal issues, whether they insist on them. Of course, the decision is made by consensus, not by majority.

The President of the Russian Federation is asking for the floor.

Sergej Mironov:

Thank you, Mr. President. We are ready to join this compromise.

Thank you.

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you for your approach. Anyone else? President Poncelet of the French Senate would like to take the floor.

Christian Poncelet:

I would like to thank those colleagues who have withdrawn their amendments. We have presented our amendments, and we have discussed them, which is good. But let us imagine that we voted on a proposal and the proposal was rejected by a majority. How would the people in Russia and Poland feel about that? I am not seeking a conflict. We have talked about this. President Sobotka was looking for a consensus to keep our friendly, brotherly spirit without preventing anyone from taking part. We do not want any voting that someone would lose. I hope we can all go back home and say: "This Declaration and the speeches of my colleagues were enriching. Everyone would take something back home. We should stay away from being aggressive or criticizing.

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Thank you for this, I suppose, final contribution.

You have the text of the Final Declaration of the Presidency in front of you. Feel free to share your experience from this conference with journalists at the press conference, when you come back to your Senates, or visit the Upper Houses, be they friendly or unfriendly.

I deem the text of the Declaration agreed by consensus. Thank you for that.

(Applause)

Dear Presidents and Vice-Presidents of European Senates, Your Excellency Ambassadors, dear colleagues. These past two days have been very pleasant and useful for me. We have discussed such concepts as “free human society,” “strengthening and stabilizing democracy and bicameralism as a safeguard of quality and effectiveness of the legislative process.” As I said in my contribution yesterday, the experience with parliamentary democracy and bicameralism varies in its duration and underlying historical experience among our countries. But we all share the same goals and values. Our Final Declaration proves that. I hope and believe we will do well in the future, as suggested in the Declaration.

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen, for coming to the Czech Capital to celebrate with us the 10th anniversary of the beginning of the Czech Senate’s modern history. I hope you have had a pleasant stay, and that this meeting was as nice for you as it has been for me.

In closing, I would like to pass the torch to President Nicolae Vacaroiu of the Romanian Senate who will host the next meeting of the Association of European Senates. I will be looking forward to his closing remarks.

Mr. President, you have the floor.

Nicolae Vacaroiu:

Mr. President, I will be very brief. First of all, let me congratulate you once again on the 10th anniversary of the reinstatement of the Czech Senate. I hope you will all join me in thanking our hosts for their hospitality.

Despite certain differences in our views, there is a lot we can learn from each other. I was happy to share my thoughts with you. Please rest assured that the Romanian Senate will prepare the next meeting of the Association of European Senates to make sure we can continue our dialog.

As we have agreed in Berlin and Bern, as well as in conversations with our colleagues and the Founder of the Association of European Senates Mr. Poncelet, the meeting should take place on April 3-5, 2007. Please stay tuned, though, because the dates may change. If there is any change, though, we will notify you in advance. A number of our countries will be having presidential or parliamentary elections between March and May. We will work with that, and will confirm the dates of our next meeting. We will keep in touch with you over the next few months, and I am sure we can find a date that will be acceptable to all members of this Association to make sure that they can send delegations headed by Presidents or Vice-Presidents.

The topic of the conference will be transparent governance. My colleagues from the Romanian Senate and I will be looking forward to hosting you. We will try to

make sure the weather is as good as it has been in Prague. The exchange of our opinions will continue in Bucharest, and it will be useful to us all.

We will be looking forward to seeing you in Bucharest in April. Thank you for your attention.

(Applause)

President of the Senate Premysl Sobotka:

Mr. President, thank you for your closing remarks. I would like to close this extraordinary meeting of our Association of European Senates. Let me remind the heads of delegations that the press conference will start at 12:15 in the Frydlant Room. The rest of your delegations will find refreshments in the room where we had our break. We will take a boat trip at 12:45. The weather is beautiful, so we wanted to give you a chance to see Prague from our beautiful river.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for accepting our invitation to this extraordinary meeting. I was very pleased, and so were all my colleagues in the Czech Senate.

I also wanted to apologize for forgetting to introduce the First Vice-President of the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, Petr Pithart at the beginning of our meeting.

Thank you for coming. I'm glad this conference has taken place in such a good spirit. Let us continue in this nice day.

(Applause)