

# **The Conference of the Speakers of the EU Parliaments Bratislava, 26 May 2007**

## **RAISING NATIONAL EUROPEAN AWARENESS**

**Speech by Mr. László Kovács,  
EU Commissioner on Taxation and Customs Union  
(Transcript)**

Mr. Chairman, honourable Presidents, honourable Speakers,

First of all, I would like to convey to you the best regards and the good wishes of the European Commission.

Fifty years ago, when the leaders of six European countries signed the Rome Treaty, the role of European integration was to avoid a new world war and to put an end to the Cold War and the division and to unite Europe. Mission of the European Union today is to satisfy the needs and to meet the expectations of more than 480 millions citizens. Citizens expect better life, more solidarity, more security and sustainability, because they would like to share the achievements of integration with their children and grandchildren. All citizens should understand, however, that there are certain conditions of delivering prosperity, solidarity, security and sustainability.

The first condition is to tackle the global challenges. We have to be successful in the global competition with the United States, with Japan, with China, with Russia, with India and others. The major instrument to attain our goals is the re-launched Lisbon strategy of Growth, Jobs and Competitiveness. One of the major features of the re-launched Lisbon strategy is the close cooperation, partnership between the EU institutions and the member states. We have to guarantee also the security of our energy supply and to do it in a way, which will not result in the catastrophic consequences of climate change and global warming. That is the second and the third global challenge we have to tackle.

We have to reduce our dependence on energy import, diversifying resources and supply routes. We have to reduce energy consumption increasing energy efficiency. We have to reduce emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases, which are responsible for global warming, by trading emission quotas with market-based instruments and administrative measures. And we have to change the composition of our energy mix increasing the proportions of renewables, including bio fuels, which reduce both dependence on import and the climate change.

Another global challenge, which we have to tackle, is to contribute to solving the burning problems of developing countries easing poverty, boosting economic development, modernisation, establishing efficient education and public health care systems, because it would reduce the consequences on us. The invasion of refugees whenever a state collapses or when there is a civil war. It will reduce the illegal migration and it would reduce the effects of epidemics and number of other evils in the worlds. But it would also help eliminate the roots of local and regional conflicts and it would eliminate the roots international terrorism. We have to make our citizens understand that no country in the world, no country in Europe would be able to tackle these global challenges alone, only further integration can do it. Integration is to be enlarged and is to be further deepened. That is the key element of European awareness: people should understand it.

The second condition: we have to make the European Union and its institutions more transparent, more democratic, and more effective. And we need the institutional reforms for this purpose, because we cannot build Europe of tomorrow on the institutions of yesterday. And that is the third condition of meeting the expectations of citizens. This is the broad support from the citizens themselves, from the civil society. Politicians and the media should mobilize the public, should mobilize the people. But people cannot be expected to support the European integration, cannot be expected to contribute to and to participate actively in the Community policies, if they do not understand that the integration is for them, that the integration about them.

National parliaments, which are elected by the people to represent them, can and should play a specific role in raising European awareness of the public. Because parliaments have the credibility, parliaments have the publicity, and parliaments have the institutional instruments to do with.

I want to express my congratulations and appreciation of COSAC and for taking the initiative the Conference of Speaker to support and adopt it. The Commission, which is to represent community interest, has been doing its best to be an active and reliable partner for the national parliaments. We have jointly developed the instrument for raising European awareness in the member states, the yearly coinciding debates on the Annual Legislative and Working Programme adopted by the Commission. These debates place the most important European issues on the political agenda of the member states; draw the attention of the public to the community policies; and bring the EU, the activities of its institutions closer to the citizens, which is the sine qua non condition of the broad citizen support, of the broad public support, which we badly need.

And the feedback of these debates is of particular importance. The Commission pays due attention to the reports of the national parliaments, the conclusions and also the answers to the questionnaires. We understand that the overwhelming majority of the national parliaments has participated in the debates and has found them useful and a success. We have also got the messages of critics, like the problem of the lack of translation of the documents, such as annexes, indictables or non-priority proposals, into all official languages. In order to involve the national parliaments even more we have decided to let you know the Annual Policy Strategy, which is the first step towards the Annual Legislative and Working Programme. The Commission adopted the Annual Policy Strategy for 2008, the year to come, on 21 February and sent it to the European Parliament and the European Council, but also to the national parliaments. My colleague, Vice-President Margot Wallström presented it to the COSAC meeting on 15 May in Berlin. She underlined that while the year of 2007, this year, highlighted the 50 years of European integration commemorating the Rome Treaty; the next year, 2008, will highlight the future of the European Union.

We hope to reach an agreement on a new treaty, including the institutional reforms. 2008 will be characterised by important developments, such as a number of member states joining the Schengen system, some members joining the Euro-zone, next year we will start review of the new multi-annual financial framework between 2007 and 2013, and next year, we will continue to work for the implementation of the five-year strategy prosperity, solidarity, security and sustainability and also on the implementation of the re-launched Lisbon strategy of Growth, Jobs and Competitiveness in close partnership with the member states. Implementation of the energy and climate change strategy, which was adopted by the European Council in March on the basis of the proposal presented by the European Commission, will be also high on the political agenda of the Community next year. On 8 March the Commission adopted the annual report on our relations with national parliaments, the realisation of the ten-target action plan and the Commission has concluded that greater voice to the national parliaments means greater voice to the public, to the citizens. I am convinced that we have established the organisational framework for a continuous and open dialogue. I am convinced that the coinciding debate on the Annual Legislative and Working Programme in the national parliaments will be even more successful on this basis.

To conclude, I want to draw your attention to a problem, which does not look very important, but it is. Today, many people, not only in the new member states, but also in the old ones; when they speak about the European Union they use third person plural. They say Brussels wants us to do this; Brussels does not want us to do that. They speak about the European Union as "they"; somewhere in Brussels far away from our country. But what is Brussels? Brussels is the capital of Belgium, one of the member states. Brussels can be called the capital of the European institutions, of the European Union, though not all the institutions are located in Brussels, but most of them. But it is certainly not the Commission that takes the main decisions. It is the Council, where all member states are represented, defending their national interests, trying to find the compromise between the national interests. And major decisions are made together with the European Parliament. There are now more than 800 members of the European

Parliament representing not only the member states, but also the political families in Europe. They say yes or no to certain proposal of the Commission. So Brussels is not the European Union. The European Union is 27 member states; the European Union is more than 480 thousands, we can say nearly half a billion citizens, half a billion people all over Europe. So I do hope that one day, when people, politicians and even the representatives of the media speak about the European Union, they will use the first person plural, and not the third person plural, they will say "we, the European Union".

Thank you very much.