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**What can be done to safeguard and promote Democracy  
based on the founding principles of the Union?**

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There is a good reason behind your choice of the topic for our today's meeting. In many circles, across Europe in the debates on the future of European integration the question of what is wrong with Europe, what is wrong with us dominates. These are challenging times, to say the least. It is legitimate to ask why, when we all realise that no Member State alone can deal with the challenges at stake in a globalised world, the discourse on national sovereignty, the intention of political elites to take the control back to national capitals are so strong. Take control back has been the buzzword of 2016. We all remember two years before the referendum in the U.K., British government had launched a comprehensive study based on a multitude of surveys where people spoke, where businesses took the floor. It was about identifying the competences of the European Union that should be repatriated to the United Kingdom. Not a single competence of that kind had been identified and the conclusion was that the division of competences between the EU and UK was more or less adequate.

Why so many opinion makers question the European public good ? Why national political leaders come to meetings of European institutions they are part of ( European Council or Council) with purely national agenda, reject European solutions to problems and on their way back home criticize Europe for its inaction ? The often heard statement that the Union "does not deliver" comes mostly from those who spare no effort to prevent Europe from delivering. Others question the Union competences or the way it functions. Why is it that we seem to forget that the European Union is a structured way of cooperating and that the "rules of the game", the aims and methods in which this cooperation takes place has been agreed upon by all Member States, in accordance with each Member States own constitutional order? National parliaments seem to have lost their institutional memory not respecting the fact that the Treaties, decided by unanimity have been ratified by them as institutions representing citizens of the European member states.

European integration is not cast in stone, it is a living phenomenon. We somehow missed the moment, when the initial legitimization narrative shaped when Europe was emerging from the war ashes with a vision based on forging lasting friendship and solidarity, became more or less irrelevant to younger generations and, unfortunately, also to new generations of European leaders. That weakening of legitimacy allowed the return of virulent nationalisms out of the margins into the mainstream of the European discourse.

We continue talking about democratic deficit in Europe. But this is no longer the problem of the "democratic deficit". This is something much more serious that can

threaten the survival of our European values, not only the institutions. And when our values are lost, we are lost.

Some of us continue to think that the European Union has such a strong construction that we may tinker with it here and there and it will still stand unmoved. It is not the case. And unfortunately, sometimes not the obvious evil is the most destructive. I think here of the hidden evil of good people who give in to bad impulses. And the stability of the EU construction depends not only on formal laws, treaties, regulation, intergovernmental relations, but most intimately, on the commitment of people to the values that inspired the founding generations. And this commitment is not obvious today. It cannot be taken for granted.

In this room, and also after the introduction by Enrique Baron Crespa, i know that I do not need to talk too much about the Treaties. But of course they matter. And it is also good to look into them from time to time. When we speak about democracy in the European Union, Title I (common provisions) and Title II (Provisions on democratic principle) which contain main provisions on founding principles of the Union, should be mentioned. Article 2 TEU is very clear about the core values of the Union, notably human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. The articles that follow list the objectives of the Union, the principle of conferral, of subsidiarity, of proportionality, of mutual sincere cooperation. The Union recognises the rights, freedoms and principles set out in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, as well as Fundamental rights, as guaranteed by the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms as they result from the constitutional traditions common to the Member States. Further on, in title II one can also find meaningful referrals to important democratic principles, such as the equality of Union citizens, representative democracy, participative democracy or transparency of decision-making. One might say that everything is there in the Treaties. Still democracy is in danger.

Why do we have to have this meeting and why do I repeat what seems obvious ? May be because we hear voices calling for reducing powers of the European Commission and return powers to the Member States? May be because one Member State is set to leave the European Union and " take the control back" has become the buzzword of 2016 ? May be because the respect of the rule of law is being questioned by one or another government ? May be because certain decisions by the European Court of Human Rights are considered by some as intrusions in national political choices? Or may be because so many human beings find themselves in absolutely devastating circumstances fleeing wars, poverty, and other disasters, and look for a better destiny? And we as Europeans do not want them.

Some Member States question European decision-making processes, the existing "rules of the game" are being put in question. Yes, we should continuously seek improvements in the functioning of our democracies, on national and European level with the aim to increase our capacity to act, improve legitimacy and democratic accountability. But we should ensure that we also continue to respect fundamental rights and freedoms and the rule of law and, may I add, never lose sight of human dignity, for each and every individual.

For years, by virtue of their content, the meaning of the Treaties has been stretched to address emerging problems. This has added to the problem of democratic legitimacy and hampered the functioning of the European institutions. It has also raised uncertainties about the legal bases underpinning our institutional and democratic structure, and their capacity to act. The obvious solution - Treaty change - is a politically difficult issue to address and for which there seems to be no clear political will. In times when Treaties need a revision for the sake of improving efficiency and democratic legitimacy of the decision-making process, our duty is to at least look seriously into those areas where without treaty change European capacity to respond to people's fears and needs will remain limited.

Those of us who talk about the need of taking seriously the challenge of a new treaty, we have in mind also the fact that the current treaty is obsolete when it comes to the way the decisions are made in Europe. It does not allow for a more participatory process, does not give assurances to citizens with regard to their impact on decisions, giving them guarantee of being listened to, it does not provide sufficient access for individuals and civil society representatives to the decision making process. We need a system that would be a convincing credible alternative to the referendum mechanism.

We cannot have illusions, if we do not address relevant problems now, it is very likely that those Member States that really wish to complete the EMU will do so amongst themselves in the form of an intergovernmental treaty. Therefore, we are at a crucial stage when Treaty reform has become necessary and we should create the momentum to move forward on necessary reforms of the Eurozone. We should not leave the monopoly of proposing Treaty changes to Eurosceptics.

Treaties are not only a compromise between left and right , but also between many different national interests. Hopefully, a more democratic and open method of revision of the treaties will allow to limit this tendency.

Should the treaty change continue to be a taboo or should we stop shying away as political class from explaining to the citizens that treaty changes are nothing more than a normal way of making the Union effective, democratically legitimate and efficient in the constantly changing global world ? This is difficult because we failed and allowed the populists to capture the territory with their policy of "facts do not matter" and of false promises.

Of course, discussions on decision-making processes are never without controversy. There may not be great haste or big enthusiasm to embark immediately on Treaty changes, nevertheless this should not prevent us from analysing where our Treaties should be improved when eventually there is political will to do so. The Constitutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliament has launched the preparation of our position on the future treaty framework at the beginning of this terms. I hope that there will be sufficient majority to vote it positively in the months to come.

Political will among the Member States may be lacking though. An interesting case here is the passerelle clause. Member States could switch to more qualified decision-making or the use of the ordinary instead of a special legislative procedure,

if so desired, but this is not happening. Rather an opposite trend can be observed: the seeking of consensus in situations where a majority vote is the rule (or resorting to intergovernmental decisions or even international treaties instead of using the community method). It is true that a democracy should not turn into a tyranny of the majority, seeking consensus at all cost. It does not necessarily improve the democratic functioning of the Union either. Certainly not when other democratic principles may suffer as a result.

Another issue worth looking at is the article 7 of the TEU, a safeguard mechanism for the democratic functioning of the Union. Yet until now Member States have been hesitant to pinpoint each other under this article. The European Parliament is less shy in that respect and has recently adopted a legislative initiative report with recommendations to the Commission on the establishment of an EU mechanism on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights. The resolution adopted by Parliament on 25 October calls for a "Union Pact for democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights (EU Pact for DRF) in the form of an interinstitutional agreement laying down arrangements facilitating the cooperation between the Union institutions and the Member States in the framework of Article 7 TEU, integrating, aligning and complementing existing mechanisms". It elaborates on details of the EU Pact for DRF and it also lists some avenues for Treaty change.

The Committee on Constitutional Affairs has stated clearly that respecting the rule of law is a prerequisite for the protection of fundamental rights and is of particular importance within the Union since it is also a prerequisite for upholding all rights and obligations deriving from the Treaties and from international law.

We are about to vote in AFCO two reports about the future of Europe with a strong emphasis on the democratic functioning of the Union. One of the ways of strengthening democratic legitimacy implies making all institutions more accountable to the citizens through their representatives acting at the level they are elected for. In light of the principle of division of powers, parliamentary control of the executive is one of the powers traditionally vested in parliaments, and a deeper European integration should thus provide for greater parliamentary involvement at both national and Union levels. Therefore, democratic accountability must be ensured at the level where decisions are taken. This means that at EU level it shall be secured by the European Parliament and at the level of the Member States by the national parliaments (in line with their respective constitutional provisions), in accordance with the subsidiarity principle. But the principle of subsidiarity must not be seen, what is mostly the case today, as an instrument to protect national interests against Europe. It is about orchestrating efforts between different levels of European governance with a common objective to deliver a European good.

Parliament has also criticized that the 'normal' agreed way of decision-making in the European Union through the "Community method" has been by-passed far too often during financial and economic crisis with European leaders resorting to the intergovernmental solutions. I mentioned it earlier. It makes it more complex to deliver accountability, the parliamentary control over the executive in a system in which such control takes place both at the level of the European Parliament and national parliaments, each within the limits of their respective competences. Risks to blur the boundaries of competences should be avoided. While such

intergovernmental solutions cannot always be avoided, these should however be an instrument of absolute ultima ratio and are only acceptable if they fulfil a number of conditions: They should aim to deepen the European integration. They may not modify primary law and must be in compliance with existing primary and secondary law. Furthermore, they should only be considered if a legislative procedure covering all EU Member States or an enhanced cooperation procedure failed or is likely to fail. They may not undermine the institutional balance of the Union and should hence respect the competences of the European Parliament . During the debates on the CETA we have often heard questioning of the EP democratic legitimacy.

The necessity of taking urgent and highly political decisions during the economic and financial crisis have resulted in many decisions being taken at the European Council level and not through the ordinary Treaty procedures, which puts into question both the democratic legitimacy of such decisions and the efficiency of existing procedures. The expansion of European Council's role into the legislative process should be curbed as it is not in line with the letter and spirit of the Treaties.

Furthermore, transparency arrangements are still suboptimal: Overall access to information and documents of the Council, including the Eurogroup, should be enhanced. Under the current Treaty framework steps could be made towards transforming the Council into a truly legislative chamber by reducing the number of Council configurations, which would help create a genuinely bi-cameral legislative system involving the Council and Parliament. The existing Council configurations could act as preparatory bodies similar in their function to Parliament's Committees. Of course, the new interinstitutional agreement on Better Law Making as well as a comprehensive and deep reform of the EP Rules of Procedure have opened space for transparency. Implementing new approaches is the common duty of European institutions.

·Majority ruling, while taking account of political minorities, is also a major characteristic of democracy. The many unanimity provisions in subsequent Treaties as regards decision-making in Council are a regular feature of discussion in our committee, also in view of the capacity to act of the Union. Where national parliaments need to ratify decisions or referenda are held, the decision-making system may become even more complicated, as the CETA example has shown. In current times there are several Member States that are weary that unwelcome decisions are imposed on them through decision-making on EU level by qualified majority and the council, in the interest of taking minority opinions into account, often seek consensus also when QMV is foreseen in the Treaties. This slows the process of decision making but it also reduces the quality of decision by taking it down to the lowest common denominator. At the end, what is supposed to be the best solution becomes at the best the second best option.

The passerelle clause (Article 48(7) TEU) should finally be put to use to transfer decision-making in the Council from unanimity to QMV in as many areas of decision-making as possible in order to facilitate the legislative process. Furthermore, the European Council should also decide to allow for the adoption of acts, now still decided according to a special legislative procedure, in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure to make it more democratically accountable.

While the Parliament elections in 2014 created a precedent in the election of Commission President through the "Spitzenkandidaten" process, the role of the European Parliament in the election of Commission President should be further strengthened. It should be codified by reinforcing the formal consultations of the political groups with the European Council President, as foreseen in Declaration 11 annexed to the Final Act of the Intergovernmental Conference which adopted the Treaty of Lisbon. The intention was to ensure that the European Council takes full account of the election results when presenting a candidate to be elected by the European Parliament.

Apart from these reports which AFCO drafted in view of its competence for "the institutional aspects of the European integration process, in particular the preparation, initiation and proceedings of ordinary and simplified Treaty revision procedures" and "the implementation of the Treaties and the assessment of their operation", and also when looking at one of the core characteristics of democracy, namely the exercise of power by citizens, clearly one of the most important AFCO dossiers that comes to mind is EU electoral law.

Parliament adopted a Resolution on the Reform of the European Electoral Act last year (11 November 2015), containing also proposals amending the 1976 Electoral Act on the basis of Article 223(1) TFEU. Parliament states clearly that its reform proposals aim at "reinforcing the concept of citizenship of the Union and electoral equality, promoting the principle of representative democracy and the direct representation of Union citizens in the European Parliament, in accordance with Article 10 TFEU". In its proposed wording for the Electoral Act Parliament states e.g. explicitly that Members of the European Parliament shall represent all Union citizens. Many Members have received letters on obstacles that EU citizens encounter in practice when exercising this right. Therefore, in order to ensure that all Union citizens can also exercise its right to vote, Parliament has proposed the insertion of a new article which imposes a clear obligation on Member States to that end, specifying that this includes those living or working in a third country. In this sense, Parliament tries to do justice to the principle of legal equality.

Parliament also introduced an article on incompatibility of the mandate to the EP with inter alia that of member of the government of a Member State, member of a national or regional parliament or assembly, member of Committee of the Regions. This is important in view of the principle of separation of powers.

In view of the principle of free and fair elections, Parliament also underlined that Member States shall not officially make public the results of their count until after the close of polling. In order not to influence the voting between one country and another due to possible different polling days, it furthermore asks that "first official projections of the results shall be communicated simultaneously in all Member States at the end of the electoral period " and states that no exit poll-based forecasts may be published prior to this.

Unfortunately, many national parliaments, as well as governments in the Council are against making the elections to the European Parliament more European in spirit and in content. It is actually amazing how in these times when linking citizens with Europe once again proves fundamental for our common better future and in the

times when once again European Parliament is the institution with the highest rate of public approval, national leaders act against this link.

Union is not only the Union of states. It is the Union of citizens. We have never forgotten citizens. The European Union has since its very inception and throughout its history had the citizens at its core. The commitment of Europe has always been to its citizens.

But, there is a long history of our, politicians' mistakes that have eroded the depth of attachment of people to the ideal of Europe. Now, the continuation of the European project as a stable and credible Union depends, more than ever on the commitment of the people, of the citizens to the values and principles that have justified its own foundation. Our duty is to be with people in this effort to bring their commitment back.

We have to understand better that citizens have never been so aware, so knowledgeable as they are nowadays. So we must act accordingly. We must also understand better the risk related to the fact that citizens can be also influenced by all kinds of populist debates, which very often instil fear and distrust. The campaign that preceded the British referendum is a glaring proof of exactly this.

Citizens are worried about their rights as workers, about their security, about the environment, about the impact of globalisation, about energy supply security, and also about the enormous uncertainty that now surrounds the economic and financial systems - challenges, the whole extension of which cannot be tackled by any Member State on its own.

Dialogue with citizens and restoring citizens' trust requires also further transparency and more participation of citizens in the processes of decision-making. We can also see that the appetite of the citizens for democracy has strongly evolved over last years. People want to participate in European decision making.

We have to take into account that our societies have changed over the decades of European integration. For years now European citizens have been subject to anti European narrative but also anti globalization one. Inspired by populists with strong vested interests, often organized citizens turn against TTIP and demonstrate lack of support for CETA. Governments do not act against this trend, far too often show lack of leadership and follow the voters.

On 28 October 2015 the Committee on Constitutional Affairs adopted a resolution the European Citizens' Initiative, the instrument which offers to the citizens a new political right. It is a unique and innovative agenda-setting tool for participatory democracy in the European Union. In view of persistent difficulties with its implementation Parliament has called for a revision of the Regulation on the citizens' initiative with a view to make it more user friendly. You may recall that this instrument confers on EU citizens the right, on the basis of at least one million statements of support from at least one quarter of the Member States, to ask the Commission to submit, within the framework of its powers, an appropriate proposal on matters on which citizens consider that a legislative act is necessary to implement the treaties. The irony of this case is that the European Parliament itself does not possess the right of legislative initiative and can ask but cannot force the Commission to make a

proposal for a revision of the Regulation. This lack of a parliamentary right of initiative is considered by some as forming part of the much talked about "democratic deficit" of the Union. The Commission has not responded positively to this initiative of the EP.

Meanwhile, we have finalized a new Inter Institutional Agreement on Better Law-Making. The European Parliament had called for it in order to take into account the new legislative environment created by the Treaty of Lisbon, consolidate current best practices, and bring that agreement up to date in line with the 'better law-making' agenda. In this Agreement provisions have been incorporated for the Commission to give "prompt and detailed consideration to the requests for proposals for Union acts made by the European Parliament or the Council pursuant to Article 225 or Article 241 TFEU respectively". Furthermore the Commission must give detailed reasons if it does not submit a proposal. This IIA also contains new provisions on joint multi-annual and annual programming, which is another new tool to influence the legislative agenda. The new Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Law-making contains also other provisions that aim to strengthen the democratic life of the Union. Provisions on stakeholder consultations aim to improve the inclusiveness of decision-making for instance, and the joint database on the state of play of legislative files, which is to be created, was agreed to make the decision making process more transparent.

A crucial element of democracy is that citizens can control their leaders. The Spitzenkandidaten process of the 2014 European parliamentary elections for the first time led directly to the nomination of the candidate for President of the Commission. The Committee on Constitutional Affairs stresses the importance of this new development, made possible under the Lisbon Treaty, as a way to ensure that the European Council takes full account of the European election results when presenting a candidate for Parliament to elect. Parliament's resolution on electoral law also takes up this point and contains a proposal for a joint constituency in which lists are headed by each political family's candidate for President of the Commission. Under a proposal just made by the Committee on Constitutional Affairs Parliament's Rules of Procedures should furthermore be altered so that the vote on the election of the Commission President will be by roll call vote instead of secret ballot.

In view of being able to ensure proper control over the Commission, who as guardian of the Treaties should see to the correct application of Union law, Parliament has also made a proposal, already in the previous legislature, for stronger Parliamentary inquiry rights. European Parliament should be granted specific, genuine and clearly delimited powers which are more in line with its political stature and competences, including the right to summon witnesses, to have full access to documents, to conduct on-the-spot investigations and to impose sanctions for non-compliance.

I personally think these are fundamental issues if we want to win public support to the European integration. People may accept measures imposing constraints, even not liking them, if they are convinced those measures are necessary and were taken by or under the control of those they elected. They don't accept them if they consider that they don't have any means of influencing those who adopt them.

Let me say a few words on the member states that joined the EU in 2004 and later. Central East European states have been recently seen as this part of the Union where democracy is in danger. The transition to democracy and market economy in post-communist countries very quickly focussed on economic aspects, leaving the political change to its own dynamics. We underestimated the complexity and the time needed for political reforms to occur and to mature. To have a sustainable democracy, political dialogue and political culture matter. We need to invest more in this dimension of democracy.

It is also important to note that European Union member states have different political structures. There are federal member states, there are strongly regionalised member states. There are unitary states. There are also regions with legislative competences. Decisions on these internal structures are purely national competence. Even electoral systems vary strongly within the Union, including elections to the European Parliament.

There are also large disparities between member states with regard to the involvement of national parliaments in European decision making. And of course, these issues are politically very sensitive.

Without any doubt sustainable democracy requires an ongoing parliamentary contribution. The EU is the only existing international political entity with legislative power entrusted to a multinational democratically elected parliament. This reality has an essential impact on the general institutional model and framework of the Union.

This institutional unusual structure has induced the specificity and the working methods of the European institutions and of course of the European Parliament.

The logic of the political conflict in EU is not a fight between a majority supporting a government and an opposition. One could think that governments would naturally align themselves by ideological affinities (conservatives, liberals, social-democrats). This trend exists, but it is often by-passed by the need to defend national interests, which vary enormously according to different dossiers. This requires a permanent effort of conciliation and doing it not at the cost of the quality of law in order to allow reaching the necessary majorities. In practice, this process is so deeply interiorised by national delegations that the council almost never votes, reaching most decisions by consensus. The same is true in case of the European Commission. This culture of dialogue and compromise is a distinctive feature of the European Union and can certainly contribute to building successful democracies well rooted in the hearts of their peoples.

We all are aware of the provisions of the Treaties concerning the role of national parliaments in the European decision making process, as well as of the difficulties that national parliaments face to exercise their prerogatives and of possible alternatives that have been advanced by some to overcome those difficulties.

We need a parliamentarian European network. Rather unfortunately, there is a background of kind of "competition" between national parliaments and the EP. Some national parliamentarians rather assume that the EP is sort of stealing competences from them. Some European parliamentarians see the national

parliaments as a threat to their role. This is not the right approach. National and European parliamentarians have both a decisive role to play in what concerns ensuring the democratic legitimacy of the decisions that are taken at European level, their transposition to national level and their implementation.

Member States transfer competences to the Union. These transfers are all endorsed by national parliaments when they ratify the treaties. These competences are to be exercised, within the limits of those transfers, by the European institutions. Democratic legitimization requires that elected representatives of the peoples have a decisive word in the adoption of the European legislation. This is the role of the European Parliament. But the Union is also a union of States, and these have also a decisive word to say in the adoption of the European legislation, via the Council in which all States are represented on equal terms.

Thus, representatives of citizens and of the states have a decisive word to say in all decisions taken at European level, with still a clear predominance of the States (many important decisions are taken by the Council by unanimity with the EP having a minor role).

How can the voice of national parliaments be heard in that process? Creating new institutions or procedures that lead to a tripartite mechanism of decision would only render the decision-making, already so cumbersome, more and more complicated. And it would not really add from the point of view of democratic legitimacy.

In fact, the best means for national parliaments to have a word to say in European affairs is via the scrutiny of the action of their respective governments as part of the branch of legislative power that represents national interests. Some of the national parliaments have developed very accurate mechanisms to influence and scrutiny the action of their governments in the Council. Others did not (yet?) follow that path. It is in fact undeniable that through the scrutiny of the action of their own executive national parliaments may exercise de facto an important influence over the European legislative process.

In short, everyone must act within their own sphere of competences. The EP is a decisive actor in the legislative process at European level. But the national parliaments have a very important role to play in controlling the action of their government as part of the other branch of the legislative power of the EU.

This was precisely the conclusion of a rather exhaustive discussion on this issue that we had with the representatives of the national parliaments during the Convention. In addition, we then agreed in devising a role for national parliaments in preventing that the EU bypasses its competences, acting ultra vires.

This was mainly done by giving national parliaments a right of veto in what concerns the "passerelle clauses" (Council acting by unanimity, with consent of the European Parliament, decides passage from unanimity to QMV or from special legislative procedure to ordinary legislative procedure). There are also specific mechanisms allowing national parliaments to be fully informed about all the legislative initiatives taken at the level of the EU (no decision by Council or the EP before 8 weeks after the sending of legislative proposals to national parliaments- protocol 1). There is

specific mechanism allowing national parliaments to intervene in the procedure in case they consider that the principle of subsidiarity was put into question by those initiatives.

I do not discuss the right of veto of any national parliament concerning the use of "passerelle clauses". I just would like to say that I consider it somehow redundant. I cannot conceive that a government of a democratic country would approve a decision of such importance against the majority of its own parliament.

The challenge now is also to move from subsidiarity as a defensive attitude to active political dialogue. In what concerns subsidiarity, I hear often critics that the mechanisms that were put in place for the national parliaments to control the respect of subsidiarity and proportionality of European legislation are too cumbersome, and render very difficult for national parliaments to really exercise their powers. The issue of subsidiarity is often used as a pretext to express political opposition to a specific legislative initiatives. I think we would all gain if we concentrate on debating those political divergences instead of hypothetical violations of subsidiarity. This would certainly enrich the process of elaborating European legislation and contribute to bring out legislative texts more adapted to the real needs of our citizens.

I believe that the fact that the ceiling for the launching of the yellow card procedure was reached in very few cases stems not only from the difficulties that the deadlines or the minimum ceilings create for national parliaments. I think that it is mainly due to the fact that the European institutions have become very concerned about respecting subsidiarity. The Commission has put in place strict internal procedures to ensure that proposals that it drafts respect the principle (every proposal put forward for a legislative act must contain a justification that it is in conformity with the principle of subsidiarity). The EP has also put in place its own internal procedure to verify that legislative draft acts respect subsidiarity. The Council must have its own mechanisms. Moreover, the institutions know that the legislative proposals will be closely scrutinized by national parliaments.

We shouldn't forget that the Council, which has a decisive role in the adoption of European legislation, is composed by a minister of each member state and it is only natural that national governments be interested in ensuring that subsidiarity is respected. In addition, national governments are, in general, accountable before their parliaments. As such, I do not conceive easily that a national government would ignore the position of its national parliament on such an important issue. Less can I envisage that if the national parliaments of a majority of Member States had a real problem concerning subsidiarity, their respective governments would adopt it in Brussels, despite that opposition.

This impression is reinforced by the fact that national parliaments have at their disposal another important instrument for reacting against any abuse of subsidiarity by the European institutions (which can be used by any national parliament individually and there is no deadline). This is the right to ask their governments to present before the ECJ, on their behalf, an European legislative act that would have been adopted in violation of the principle of subsidiarity (protocol 2 article 8). This prerogative has never been used until now.

I would stress that the role of national parliaments is particularly important to ensure the parliamentary scrutiny in areas in which today the main decisions are taken at European level mainly by the executive: the economic governance, external policy and security policy. No one should doubt that if we want to address effectively the challenges facing us in these areas we have to find new ways of deepening our cooperation. Even if we can make steps in the direction of more "community" decision-making procedures (for instance, reinforcing the role of the EP concerning the main decisions taken in the framework of the European Semester), I think these are areas that will always require a specific participation of national parliaments. We already have some embryonic structures in that sense, like the Conference of Article 13 or the conference on CFSP. But we should reflect jointly on how to improve them, always with the aim of ensuring a full parliamentary control over decisions that affect the life of our citizens, without loopholes, whatever the level they might be taken at.

AFCO Committee recently adopted a general revision of the EP Rules of Procedure to make Parliament operate better, to clarify the rules, to improve transparency. Some modifications result from wider changes such as the 2016 Inter-institutional Agreement on Better Law-Making, or changes resulting from the report on the procedures and practices regarding Commission hearings.

We propose modifications that aim at enhancing transparency for first reading agreements and applying the Inter-Institutional Agreement on Better Law Making notably as regards the interinstitutional programming. We propose new provisions on thresholds required for various procedures in Parliament, on gender equality, on the conduct of MEPs (foreseeing sanctions if they use defamatory, racist or xenophobic language) and last but not least a number of transparency and accountability issues. Some of them derive from discussions around another AFCO draft report, still to be voted to strengthen transparency, accountability and integrity in the EU institutions, e.g. on lobbying and a legislative footprint.

To conclude, let me say that safeguarding and improving democracy is a daily task of the European Parliament and, in particular, the AFCO committee. As MEPs we must continuously strive to improve the way we function for the benefit of the citizens whom we represent. And I would like to end by underlining in that context that in our decisions we may never lose sight of the human dignity of each and every individual.