



## **CONFERENCE TO COMMEMORATE THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PARLIAMENTARISM**

### **STRENGTHENING PARLIAMENTS TO ENHANCE DEMOCRACY**

León, June 30 and July 1, 2023

#### **Declaration of León on parliamentarism**

The Conference to commemorate the International Day of Parliamentarism took place on June 30 and July 1, 2023, in León, within the framework of the parliamentary dimension of the Spanish Presidency of the European Union during the second half of 2023. This Conference brought together Speakers, or their representatives, from the Parliaments of the Member States of the European Union, EU candidate countries, countries with a special partnership with the European Union and emerging democracies, to commemorate the International Day of Parliamentarism, stressing its historical roots. It was inaugurated by His Majesty the King of Spain and presided over by the Speaker of the Congress of Deputies, Ms. Meritxell Batet, and the Speaker of the Senate, Mr. Ander Gil. Professor John Keane, author, among other works, of *'The Life and Death of Democracy'* addressed the Conference as special guest. It was held at the Cloister of the Collegiate Church of San Isidoro de León, the same place where the Cortes of León met in 1188, recognized by the UNESCO as the first documented example of parliamentarism in history.



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## **Defence of European values and democratic institutions faced with the new challenges and threats to Democracy**

### The Speakers

1. Stress that we are at a crucial moment for the development and consolidation of democracy worldwide in the face of new challenges and threats.
2. Note with concern threats such as Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, the assault against parliamentary institutions, foreign interference in democratic and electoral processes, disinformation generated by social media that disrupts social debate and alters the democratic conversation, or challenges such as digitalization, artificial intelligence, the energy and food crisis, or the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Consider that there are national factors that play a role in the way these common developments are addressed which constitute real internal threats to democracy, such as the rise of extremism and populism, nationalism, protectionism, the deterioration of democratic quality in many countries, extreme polarization and the emergence of authoritarianism. And they recall that totalitarianism also uses democracy and parliaments for its establishment and consolidation.
4. Consider that the rise of authoritarianism and the tolerance thereof are at the root of Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, which they firmly condemn, since it is an attack against the territorial integrity of a country, which violates the Charter of the United Nations and, hence, breaches the most basic principles of international law. They support the continuation of financial, economic, humanitarian, and military assistance, as long as it is needed, until the full restoration and control of its internationally recognised borders; the effective implementation of sanctions against Russia; and the establishment of a special tribunal to prosecute the crime of aggression against Ukraine, noting the indispensable role of ensuring accountability for the prospects of durable peace. They additionally express hope for strengthened endeavours of the European Union and its international partners to promote dialogue based on the key values and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and the Helsinki Final Act that would lead to the end of the Russian military aggression and all hostilities when the circumstances so permit.



5. Deem that the promotion of democratic values, human rights and the Rule of Law in our societies requires limiting trade relations with totalitarian regimes, and particularly, the dependence on the supply of raw materials, basic foodstuff, essential products, medicines and technological products, and thus advocate for strategic autonomy as regards the production and diversification of supply chains and an increased cooperation with other regions such as Ibero-America, Africa or Indo-Pacific.
6. Understand that the assault against democratic institutions in several countries can be seen as a consequence of the current rise of populist and extremist movements, propelled by disinformation and false news.
7. Warn of the distortion of reality on the basis of which citizens have to take decisions in electoral processes, using the tools provided by social media. And they welcome the adoption of the new Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act of the European Union. They recognise that the benefits of digitalization are obvious, but its disproportionate and unbalanced use in the market to access such services may have a negative impact on democracy, fundamental rights and on the economy. They warn of the dangers for democracy of not agreeing on an international regulation of artificial intelligence, and welcome, in this regard, the work towards a European Artificial Intelligence Act.
8. Welcome the progresses made as regards the digital transformation of Parliaments, but they consider that liberal democracies require an in-person Parliament, with in-person speeches and debates. And they consider that digital literacy programmes aimed at the general population should be encouraged, so that no one is excluded from the democratic process, guaranteeing general access of the population to the Internet.
9. Support extending to all Parliaments initiatives such as the European Democracy Action Plan, based on the Action Plan against Disinformation, to stop disinformation campaigns and for the protection of the quality of information and of democratic systems and public debates.



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## **The importance of Parliaments to enhance Democracy**

### The Speakers

10. Declare that Parliaments are one of the main institutional pillars of representative democracies and of the Rule of Law. As Chambers directly elected by the people, they are at the heart of liberal democracy and must therefore be involved in all decision-making processes, in the face of the contemporary drift from “parliamentary” democracy to “governmental” democracy. Parliaments reflect and guarantee social pluralism and, above all, the political pluralism that cements social support and the democratic legitimation of the State’s institutions.
11. Support the strengthening of Parliaments as key element of the international strategy for the evolution of democracy. A robust and efficient Parliament contributes to political stability, economic development and to the quality of life of citizens.
12. Deem it necessary to improve the capacity of Parliaments to address a whole series of global strategic challenges, focusing particularly on the political involvement of women and young people.
13. On occasion of the International Day of Parliamentarism, on June 30, they warn of the need to recall the origins of parliamentarism to be able to understand the profound social change it entailed for the organization of medieval societies, understand its relevance for the subsequent constitutional development of all modern democracies and be aware of why democracy is the best of all possible systems of organization as opposed to the simple recipes of authoritarianism.
14. Acknowledge the deep historical roots of the Cortes de León, gathered in 1188 by the King Alfonso IX, in the very Cloister of the Collegiate Church of San Isidoro de León where this meeting is being held, with a view to commemorating that encounter, where the institutional presence of citizens in higher-level decision making, together with the king, the church and the nobility occurred for the first time, giving rise to modern Parliaments.
15. Underline the value of the Decreta of León, declared by UNESCO as Memory of the World, being the oldest known written information regarding the European parliamentary system and constitutional heritage, based on the respect of laws established by uses and customs and procedural and judicial guarantees that must protect citizens and private property, thus laying the first foundation stone



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of the Rule of Law and equality, given its profound resemblance to modern practices regarding parliamentary representation.

### **Parliamentary cooperation and development of Democracy**

#### The Speakers

16. Note that the Parliaments of the European Union, and many others, are increasingly involved in parliamentary diplomacy and in providing technical support to strengthen Parliaments worldwide, acknowledging that peer support is the most efficient way to share lessons learnt and transfer knowledge to developing Parliaments, which, in turn, results in a stronger democracy.
17. Recognize the progresses made as regards the different parliamentary cooperation projects with Inter pares (*Parliaments for Partnership*) for the effective development of democracy in the world, enabling a network of Parliaments with a view to their technical cooperation. Acknowledge the usefulness of all other types of capacity building programmes financed by the European Union or provided bilaterally by the Parliaments of the European Union.
18. Support the initiative from the European Parliament, as mentioned in the Conclusions of the Presidency of the Conference of Speakers of the European Union Parliaments held in Prague on 24-25 April 2023, aimed at drafting a “Charter on the role of Parliamentarism in an effective Democracy”<sup>1</sup> enshrining the fundamental principles and the key elements of modern parliamentarism, consubstantial to liberal democracies.
19. Pledge to continue working on this initiative with a view to the final adoption of this Charter at the Conference of Speakers of Parliaments of the European Union to be held in Madrid on April 21-23, 2024.

León, June 30, 2023

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<sup>1</sup> The principles of which were outlined in the speech delivered in León by Othmar Karas, First Vice-President of the European Parliament.