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## **CONCLUSIONS OF THE CONFERENCE**

**presented by**

**Mr Tiny Kox, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,  
Mr Seán Ó Feargháil, T.D., Ceann Comhairle, Dáil Éireann, and  
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In the presence of Ruslan Stefanchuk, President of the Verkhovna Rada, the conference paid tribute to the courage of the Ukrainian people and to all the victims of the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Reaffirming their support for a full and rapid implementation of the Declaration of the Fourth Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, held in Reykjavik on 16-17 May 2023, the Speakers framed their exchanges around three themes which are impacting our democratic governance model and our democratic stability today.

### **Consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and role of national parliaments in Ukraine's reconstruction**

Affirming our deepest respect for the resilience of the Verkhovna Rada, which continues its functioning despite the large-scale aggression by the Russian Federation, we express our full solidarity with the Ukrainian people, and our unwavering commitment to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes, echoing the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe at the Fourth Summit.

The indomitable fight of the Ukrainians is not only to protect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of their country: they are defending the values shared by all European democracies and the very foundations of the international order which emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. Our determination in supporting Ukraine today will shape the future of Europe and the world tomorrow.

National parliaments can play a major contribution in setting the course of Europe's destiny. In this moment of threat to our core values, our parliaments are the guardians of democracy and the international law-based order. As parliamentarians, we are well-placed to show leadership and to explain to the public – to our own constituents – what are the real stakes of this war and why it must never be accepted as "the new normal". We must hold governments to account and avoid any weakening of resolve. We must act, through parliamentary diplomacy and inter-parliamentary dialogue, to rally allies in support of Ukraine, and to promote a revival of the multilateral system of global governance, firmly rooted in the rule of law and greater equality.

Parliaments have the budgetary oversight at national level to secure the support necessary for Ukraine to exercise its right of self-defence. We must also start already to mobilise the resources to finance the reconstruction of the Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, redress environmental damage, and restore the rich cultural and religious heritage of this proud country.

In this reconstruction, we are committed to the strengthening of Ukraine's democratic resilience and to preparing for its accession to the European Union as a full-fledged member. Inspiration can be drawn from the good examples of parliaments which have contributed to enhancing the institutional capacity of the Verkhovna Rada, through financial support, sharing of expertise and manifestations of solidarity.

The unspeakable human cost and trauma of the crimes being committed by the Russian Federation within Ukraine must be urgently addressed. Our parliaments must do everything in their power to alleviate the suffering of the Ukrainian civilian population, and to meet the needs of those who are displaced inside and outside Ukraine, including vulnerable persons such as children and women victims of sexual violence. We can

provide leadership in the solidarity amply demonstrated by our citizens, lending also our support to the efforts of those countries who play a major role in hosting people fleeing Ukraine. We must moreover address the wider consequences of the war for the whole world and work together to avoid a food crisis which is threatening already-vulnerable regions.

A strong response also means justice for the victims and accountability for the military and political leadership of the Russian Federation and the perpetrators of war crimes and human rights violations. We commend the Council of Europe for its role in setting up the Registry of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation Against Ukraine and affirm our support for the establishment of a compensation mechanism and the creation of a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression.

Above all, we re-affirm our commitment to and belief in a just and lasting peace for Ukraine, on the basis of President Zelenskyy's Peace Formula, as a precondition for prosperity, peace and democratic security in Europe.

### **The challenges to representative democracy in volatile times**

The challenges we are witnessing today to representative democracy are multiple, complex, and ever evolving, as tensions from conflicts, overlapping and unprecedented health, environmental and other crises, and transformative technologies confront our societies. There is an urgent need to enhance, reinforce, and even, perhaps, reshape our systems of governance to be fit for the world we live in, providing a firm bedrock on which to build effective responses to both the national and global issues that we face.

Our social climate is marked by low political trust, increased alienation, and weakened links between parliaments and the people they serve, all exacerbated by inequality, insecurity, corruption, and a transformed media environment. Polarisation – fueled by misinformation – poses a significant threat to the core principles of representative democracy, and in an era of rapid technological advancement, the spread of fake news and the manipulation of public opinion through social media have the potential to undermine the very foundations of democratic decision making.

In the face of such volatility, we must always recall and proclaim that our commitment to the fundamental principles of democracy remains enduring and unbreakable. The challenges before us will not lead us, or our societies, into any call for a retreat from these principles. On the contrary, they raise support for a new resolve, for action to reinvigorate democracy, for more democracy.

During this conference, we have highlighted the steps our parliaments are taking to strengthen the bases for strong and stable democracies and to uphold and promote the values of accountability, transparency, and representation that are at the heart of democratic governance.

These steps include nurturing citizen engagement. Facilitating the active participation of citizens by increasing our outreach, creating new models for citizens' interaction and participation, and finding ways to strengthen the link between elected representatives and their constituents are being explored across many national parliaments. Steps to bring parliaments closer to the people, to enhance transparency, to simplify and explain legislative processes: these all aim to bridge the link, and possible disconnect, between citizens' expectations and parliaments' responses.

A cornerstone of the legitimacy of the democratic process is the holding of free and fair elections. This includes securing public confidence in election results, and exploring initiatives to improve voter turn-out, such as by holding multiple votes on the same day, exploiting technological advances for secure online elections, and lowering voting age-limits.

We must also urgently tackle the problem of disinformation, and the external threat posed to our democracies through malign foreign interference. Building societal resilience by promoting media literacy, preserving media freedom, supporting fact-checking, and strengthening legislation to hold social media companies responsible for content on their platforms are countermeasures for interference with – and efforts to undermine – our democratic processes.

We, as parliamentarians, must be leaders in upholding our core principles, in creating and in championing the public institutions which our societies deserve. We will strive to be exemplary in embodying democratic culture and values, respecting the roles, remit, and prerogatives of all parts of the democratic machinery and always adhering to the highest ethical standards of public office and public service.

## **Equality and diversity in public representation – the participation of young people, women and ethnic and social groups as members of parliament**

*Are we doing enough to ensure diversity and equality in public representation? Are we representative of the people we represent?* The questions raised by the Speaker of the Dáil Éireann at the opening of the conference, echoed through our exchanges as we shared our experiences of representative democracy and measured our progress.

We agreed that equality in public representation is fundamental for achieving true democracy, and that the exercise of democratic rights can only be sustainable if it is based on representativity. Several speakers recalled that an ideal society possesses an open political culture based on trust. And winning this trust requires that our electorates can see themselves, and their concerns, represented in the political class. We need to join the dots between politics, policy and our populations.

The lack of confidence in the work of parliaments is particularly evidenced amongst young Europeans. Perceived inaction on the issues on which they are calling us out – saving our environment and ensuring equality for all in society – inevitably leads to the frustration and disinterest which we witness today.

Young people are a clear minority in public life, despite the fact that the under 35s represent more than half of the world's population. Innovative practices, such as Slovenia's "Illustrated Constitution" comic book given to all primary schoolchildren, and youth parliaments to prepare young people for representation, can inspire us.

Intersectionality – cross-cutting social disadvantage – has particularly severe consequences among young people. Belonging to certain groups in society, poverty and lack of access to education, cumulate to build walls blocking access to political participation. As parliaments, we must call for inclusive education systems which provide genuine opportunities for all, and which inspire and empower the upcoming generation as informed, active citizens equipped to shape society for the good.

The Reykjavík Principles for Democracy call for "full, equal and meaningful participation in political and public life for all, in particular for women and girls, free from violence, fear, harassment, hate speech and hate crime, as well as discrimination based on any ground". The Parliamentary Assembly's new Vigdís Prize for Women's Empowerment, named after the world's first woman president, aims to showcase successful initiatives to support women in taking their rightful and equal place in all fields of society, on their own terms.

*"Nothing about us without us"*. No decisions with an impact on young people, women, persons with disabilities, ethnic and other minorities should be taken without the voice of their representatives being heard, but too often those who are most affected are missing from the negotiating table. We heard good examples of inclusion in decision making from member States, and also from our Observer parliament Mexico, where indigenous peoples, minorities, young people and non-binary persons are all represented in parliament.

Inspired by the pre-conference event on hate speech and threats of violence against elected representatives, and the Parliamentary Assembly's initiative #NotInMyParliament, we agree that it is a priority for us all to combat this scourge, which is a deterrent for many to participate in public life. We need to show the lead in a concerted effort, involving all stakeholders including political parties, law enforcement agencies and the media, especially social media. The Parliamentary Assembly's new Charter of European political parties for a non-racist and inclusive society is another tool for us as politicians.

So how then to push for more progress? Our women speakers, many of whom are the first women to hold this position in their parliaments, have brought their ideas, including the need to aim consciously for positions of power while challenging the traditional models of such power in our political life. In some countries, quotas or reserved seats in parliaments are seen to have helped to transition towards better representation of women, national minorities, indigenous peoples and other minority groups. Emphasis on dialogue and scientific research to convince of the benefits to society of a fully-representative parliament have worked too, for example in Sweden. Investment in practical measures to adapt parliamentary infrastructure, working methods, rules of procedure and working language is needed, to enable real representativity of all groups in society, for example young parents and persons with disabilities. Gender budgeting is a tool which has proved its worth.

The health, climate and conflict crises we are going through are unprecedented and must inspire us to re-think our decision-making processes and to reinvent a democracy where all of society pulls together. It is about getting people excited about democracy as a means of action for a better future!