

“The Saxon State Parliament in Europe”

Speech by the President of the State Parliament, Dr. Matthias Rößler, at the opening of the liaison office of the Saxon State Parliament in Brussels, 7 September 2016

(Address)

Many thanks for the warm reception. I am delighted to be in Brussels today – at the heart of the European Union. The European Union, dear ladies and gentlemen, represents many things: It is a break with the past and the peaceful unification of the people of Europe. It is the most successful European political project in history. For each of us it is the only realistic option for co-determining the future of world events in the 21st century. And: as stated by Commission President Juncker, it is “not in a good condition”. At present, the EU is looking for its borders – externally, but especially internally. Euro crisis, refugee crisis, and the result of the British referendum call upon not only the heads of states and governments, but also European civil society, to think about how we wish to manage our coexistence in this continent in the future.

Heinrich von Brentano once called such a European policy an “unsuccessful endeavour”, that could be realised only “at the expense of the justified national interests” of the member states. Instead, “plurality in unity” should be the aim of European integration policy.

Ladies and gentlemen, in a unified Europe, the national states and the regions are – and remain – the political home of the citizens. The pluralism originating from them also stabilises the EU, when it forms the basis of prudent European policies. There will always be national and regional egotisms, but what is ultimately decisive is how these are balanced out. The same applies to egotisms held in general by European unity over diversity at the expense of justified national and regional interests. In recent months we have experienced painfully where each of these can lead.

In my view, the nation and the region do not contradict integration, as long as these are cleverly balanced. This requires above all culture of subsidiarity at European level that is much more distinct than it has been to date, as well as respect for the

national identity of the member states and the regions. But this also presupposes a serious dialogue between Brussels and the regions, which we in the Saxon State Parliament aim to conduct more strongly in the future.

Therefore we not only need closer collaboration between the regions and the EU, but also a stronger influence to be exerted by the regions on the EU. Diversity in unity must be maintained and promoted. I am certain: The objective of an “ever closer union of European people” will be supported by citizens only when the European institutions concentrate on the essentials and, in their own interests, follow the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. The added value of a European regulation over national or regional solutions must be clearly evident. I am glad that the Commission now shares this view and has been taking steps in the right direction since 2014.

The German state parliaments follow the principle of subsidiarity. They know which matters can best be regulated locally and which at a higher level. State parliaments are close to the – usually regional – problems of people. Their deputies are closer to the citizens than other parliamentarians could be. Ultimately, the states are the key agents when it comes to implementing European law. They are seismographs that show how EU policies reach the citizens and how European regulations affect the lives of people locally. And it is primarily the regional level that can give citizens a better understanding of European integration. The Saxon State Parliament therefore involves itself actively in European politics – in an engaged, sometimes critical, but always a constructive manner. And, mind you, it does so as a democratically elected constitutional body, not as some kind of lobbyist.

Ladies and gentlemen, Saxony lies at the heart of Europe and is part of a free Central Europe that has shaped the culture and science, economics and politics of our continent in a very special manner. For this reason, the Free State of Saxony traditionally maintains close relationships with Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia and Hungary. Against this background, it was a matter close to my heart when I set up the “Central European Forum at the Saxon State Parliament” in 2011. At its annual conferences it provides a dialogue platform on which to exchange ideas on the questions that are key to the future of Central Europe in the EU: freedom and

civil society, solidarity, the significance of Central European culture and tradition, and Central Europe as a community of values. I am especially pleased that we conduct this dialogue in cooperation with Central European parliaments – for example with the Czech senate, the state parliament of Lower Austria, or the Hungarian national assembly, which will host this year's conference on 23 September.

Dialogue is one thing, influence is another. Most of the laws passed by us in the Saxon State Parliament are shaped by European law. Therefore it is important for us to get an early insight into events at EU level. That is why we have decided, along with our cooperation in the Committee of the Regions and in CALRE, to set up our own liaison office in Brussels. We are convinced that the strengthening of the Saxon representation in the EU through our advisor, Thomas Starke, will contribute to the Europeanisation of the state parliament, and can only be good for the European credentials of our Free State. I am therefore delighted about the close cooperation that has been established in such a short time between your office, Mr Kuhl, and our liaison office.

In contrast to many regions in Europe, the German *Länder* have the status of states. In terms of their populations, many of them correspond with medium-sized EU states. Consequently, they rightly have a say in European legislation, via the Federal Council, and pursue their interests in Brussels.

We, as a state parliament, wish to use the possibilities provided by the Lisbon Treaty regarding the drafting of European policy and legislation to a greater extent than before – as a kind of “integration watchdog”. This means in the first instance an early warning system and associated questions of subsidiarity and proportionality. Our main aim, besides attaining information about European developments, is to maintain the interests and scope of state legislation, to defend against unjustified interventions and restrictions and – I emphasise this – to conduct a productive dialogue.

In parallel, we want to expand our contacts and information networks at EU level. The Saxon State Parliament is the eighth German state parliament to do so with a liaison office in Brussels. Not in competition with or distinct from the existing representations, but rather in close cooperation and for our mutual benefit. Our

advisor for European Affairs, Thomas Starke, will act as a communicator in Brussels, as well as between Brussels and Dresden. Not least, the liaison office of the Saxon State Parliament is the contact point in Brussels for Saxon parliamentarians at all levels.

You know, a common saying is: If you don't knock, you cannot be allowed in. Which makes sense, because one cannot be heard. Dear Mr Starke, just knock, be heard here in Brussels by the Saxon State Parliament. I wish you well in this endeavour and I wish the Saxon representation continued success.

Thank you very much.