

Dear President of the IPU,

Dear Colleagues,

As the vice-president of the Baltic Assembly, I have the honour to represent the inter-parliamentary cooperation organization of all three Baltic states - Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania - here today after a break of several years, and I think that I have the full right to speak here today, based on our Baltic experience, about parliamentary diplomacy, about its opportunities and limitations.

About 35 years ago, the people of the Baltic states, occupied at that time by the Soviet Union, showed to the whole world how, based on the principles of parliamentary diplomacy, the order of affairs can be changed not only in one country, but even in some part of the world.

At that time, firstly by jointly organized solidarity action - the "Baltic Way" – in which two million people, standing hand-by-hand, connected the capitals of our countries, we signalled the rest of the world that we want to regain our independence by following the path of parliamentary diplomacy.

As the next step, a few years later, by organizing democratic elections, we managed to bring the process, started in the Baltics, to the *de facto* and *de jure* independence of our countries regained through parliamentary diplomacy. This made it possible to make our people's lives more fulfilling, ones in which human rights are respected, laws are democratically adopted and followed, in which governance in all branches of power is organized on the principles of democracy. In the previous days, one of the speakers from this podium already said: "Parliamentary democracy begins with democratic parliamentary elections, there are no democratic elections, there is no parliamentary democracy as such". And I can only agree with that.

In the context of today's geopolitical events, it can be said that more than 30 years ago, we - Baltic States were lucky to take advantage of that not-so-long period of time, when our neighbouring country Russia also tried to follow the path of democratic development and at least respected the principles of parliamentary diplomacy in its foreign policy. Unfortunately, that period has long since ended, and the biggest sufferer from it now is Ukraine.

As I said before, there is no parliamentary diplomacy without democratic elections. We, parliamentarians of the Baltic States, based on our historical experience, have already told you, dear colleagues, many times in various international forums, that today parliamentary diplomacy is a foreign word in Russia, and we must not forget that.

I know that it is sometimes hard to understand that diplomacy alone will not stop the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Diplomacy has serious limits when addressing Russia or similar countries.

But parliamentary diplomacy has a major role to play in building bridges for peace, which in our Baltic region means ensuring unselfish help to Ukraine. It is in our power to help other countries to understand the role of supporting Ukraine. We, parliamentarians from the Baltic States, who know very well such regimes like the ruling today in Russia and Belarus, have to shed light on the aggressive and often violent activities of Russia and the support to them coming from Belarus. But, unfortunately, there are still not enough politicians with such experience and understanding.

In the Baltic States, we know well that it is not possible to form any kind of trustful relationship with Russia's current ruling regime. So, this is the clear limitation of parliamentary diplomacy for us.

This is the added value that the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic parliaments can bring to international efforts to promote peace and international security. Russia started to withdraw its troops from the Baltic States only 30 years ago. For this reason, we completely understand why Ukrainians are determined to get every last Russian soldier out of their country and why they are committed to regaining every meter of their land. There is no life, no freedom, and no development under Russian control and influence.

Dear Colleagues,

We must keep Ukraine on the international and national agendas. We as parliaments must ensure that the urgent needs of Ukraine are met in a quick and efficient way. While we allow countries to grossly violate international law, there will be no peace for us.

Thank you!