

Address by the President of Italy's Chamber of Deputies, Mr. Roberto Fico, to the Vienna World Conference of Speakers of Parliament.

Fifth motion: Emergency measures imposed by the government must always be subject to parliamentary approval and ongoing scrutiny.

We live in an era marked by a succession of crises. Environmental disasters, financial crises, and armed conflicts have given rise to situations of emergency that have posed challenges to our democracies, which have often found it necessary to respond with exceptional measures. The most recent of these crises, the catastrophic Covid-19 pandemic, has brought about a global health emergency that we are still trying to counter in every way possible.

In such situations, it is only natural that a nation's executive branch should be first to respond and take the necessary measures. **Yet I am also firmly of the opinion that Parliaments, too, must be involved in the management of emergencies from the very beginning, and that they should fully exercise all their policy-setting and oversight powers on the action of their respective Governments.** It is precisely because the necessary measures are so wide-ranging and have such potential to impinge on citizens' rights that Parliaments need to take the lead in verifying that the measures are in compliance with constitutional principles and the requirements of necessity and proportionality.

The rules governing parliamentary participation in crisis management vary according to the constitutional provisions of the country in question. Some constitutions include express rules for dealing with states of emergency and specify what forms of parliamentary action are envisaged in such circumstances. Other constitutions, such as Italy's, contain no specific rules for emergencies, and postulate that even for the management of extraordinary situations only ordinary instruments of governance should be used. **What all democratic countries must always uphold, however, is the principle of the continuity of Parliament even in moments of gravest national emergency. For it is**

precisely at times of gravest crisis that Parliaments are most indispensable, being representative assemblies that speak for and guarantee the rights of all citizens.

Of course, every new crisis is unique and will inevitably catch us unprepared. It is when we find ourselves in these situations that we come really to understand the vulnerability of what we consider normal and to appreciate the importance of continually innovating our democratic systems to deal with constantly changing situations.

The most recent major crisis, namely the Covid-19 pandemic, exemplifies the point. Italy was the first European country to suffer widespread contagion from the disease. At the very earliest stage, my country dealt with the emergency with ordinary instruments of governance already provided for by civil defence laws. Accordingly, it was with reference to civil defence legislation that the Italian Government declared a state of emergency and adopted the first measures to contain the disease. It soon became clear, however, that the scope of the measures that the situation warranted would require the direct involvement of Parliament. Parliament therefore took action by approving decree laws. These are emergency legislative instruments that are issued directly (and with immediate effect) by the Government and must be approved and enacted into law, within 60 days of their issuance, by Parliament, which may also amend them.

Using this procedure, the governance of the Covid emergency in Italy was largely "parliamentarised," in the sense that Parliament determined the general content and the limits of the legislation introduced to deal with the health crisis. Subsequently, the state of emergency itself was extended by means of ordinary legislative measures approved by Parliament. Both on the Floor of the House and in Committees, Parliament continued assiduously its almost daily scrutiny of Government action, through parliamentary questions and interpellations, as well as fact-finding activities on the progress of the infection. **Even during the worst periods of contagion, the in-presence activity of Parliament never ceased, thanks to a complete reorganisation of the premises in order to comply with health protection measures.** We thus secured an important bulwark for the defence of democracy in the management of the emergency, which also

sent a symbolically vital message of hope to a public looking for a way out of the tunnel of the pandemic.

During those dire months, the Italian Parliament needed to measure its activities against those of other parliaments that were likewise dealing with the Covid emergency. The information exchange networks among European and world parliaments proved invaluable for this purpose. Also very useful in this respect was the Inter-Parliamentary Union's compilation and dissemination via its website of parliamentary best practices during the pandemic.

I therefore find it symbolically very fitting that that the Inter-Parliamentary Union should be the promoter of the first major in-presence international parliamentary conference, which is being held here in Vienna, and for which I should like to express my great gratitude also to the Austrian Parliament for its perfect hospitality.

I firmly believe that no democracy can save itself without the solidarity of and connection with other democracies. I hope our meeting will make a renewed and decisive contribution to reinforcing this awareness among all countries.