

Mr Vidar HELGESEN, Minister for European Economic Area and European Union Affairs

It is a privilege to represent the Norwegian Government at the opening of this conference, which takes place at a critical time for Europe – a Europe in which national borders are being violated and territory annexed in a way unseen since the Second World War. This is a challenge to our shared European security.

We see a Europe with a neighbourhood in the Middle East where bestiality and terror is the order of the day and presents a more direct threat than we have seen before. There are bonds of blood and belonging between the streets of Europe and the scenes of conflict in the Middle East. This is a particular challenge to Europe.

At the heart of those challenges, be they Ukraine, Iraq or, to the south of Europe, Libya, lies that of weak or non-existent institutions, making countries vulnerable to internal and external pressures. Parliaments are the mother of institutions. The importance of parliaments is often undervalued in international relations and often insufficiently attended to in international aid programmes. The European experience – the fact that integration in Europe is a matter of integration between not only governments but legislatures and political parties – is a critical part of the fabric of European peace and prosperity, and this conference is one piece of the fabric.

Parliaments are also bearers of democratic values and principles, and the themes of the conference fully reflect that.

Europe has followed a painful but often proud path to arrive at today's shared institutions to uphold the rule of law, democracy and human rights. Our rules and institutions are still challenged, and we see that even within the European Union with this week's police raids against civil society in Hungary. In many countries we see disfranchised citizens, not least young people, losing trust in democracy. While we cherish and discuss the principles of democracy we must work harder to strengthen the practices of democracy.

Parliaments operate at the crossroads of principles and practices of democracy and therefore are critical to building and rebuilding citizens' trust in democracy. A major factor in the building of democracy is delivery by democracy – its ability to improve people's daily lives. The quality of delivery depends largely on the quality of parliaments. The delivery aspect of democracy is often determined at the crossroads of political competition and political consensus building – a crossroads at which Presidents of Parliaments find themselves continuously.

Political competition – people's ability to choose their leaders – is critical to democracy. Equally important is the political ability to build shared national ambitions, which are critical to building sustainable institutions that can deliver for citizens.

The role of parliaments and of Presidents of Parliaments in this regard is more critical than ever. These issues are reflected on your agenda and I wish you every success in your important deliberations at this vital time for Europe.