Ravenna, 16 May 2003

Speech by Pat COX on the occasion of the Third Meeting of the Presidents of the Parliaments of the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative

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Dear Vice-President of the Italian Senate, Mr Fisichella,
Dear Mr President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and dear friend Pier Ferdinando Casini,
Honourable Speakers of the Parliaments of the Adriatic-Ionian Region,
Authorities, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me and Mr Dimitrakopoulos and Mr Imbeni to attend the meeting of the Speakers of the Parliaments of the countries of the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative and to have the opportunity to speak about parliamentary co-operation with a view to European integration. We all know what countries of South-Eastern Europe have gone through in the past decade, and in particular the ordeals, which you all have had to live through; around 230,000 victims, resulted from these cruel conflicts which took place in the middle of Europe. But nonetheless, yours are countries which, in their current phase, bring us a clear message of change and, therefore, of hope. The European Parliament strongly supports the policy of the Union seeking to develop a European perspective for the Western Balkans. Therefore, the idea of fostering an enhanced co-operation within the Adriatic-Ionian Region to give it a strong parliamentary dimension is of paramount importance.

- First, concerning its participating countries: Slovenia is set to become a Member State of the EU on 1 May 2004; Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro are potential candidates for EU-membership; Italy and Greece, as Members of the European Union which ensure the present and next Presidency of the Council of the European Union, attach high priority to the Western Balkans region. The initiative to convene this meeting today in the historical Adriatic town of Ravenna is a clear proof of this attachment.

This gives the European integration of the region a further strong impetus. The first EU-Western Balkans summit to take place next month in Thessaloniki is further evidence of the EU’s strong interest in the EU-integration of all countries of the region.

- Second, concerning the subjects covered: environment, culture, tourism, combating crime etc. are all areas of direct concern to the citizens in your countries, citizens, whom we, the parliamentarians directly represent. It is therefore a basic requirement of democracy that parliamentary relations are strengthened in our dealings with countries of South Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, which in turn represents a vital contribution to democracy, respect of human rights, as well as political and economic stabilisation.
This shows again why it is important to further develop the parliamentary dimension of the Adriatic Ionian Initiative, inaugurated a year on the occasion of the first meeting of the speakers of your parliaments in Zadar (Croatia) in April 2001. Parliamentary co-operation should also be increased among the respective committees of our Parliaments as well as with other parliamentary fora, in order to encourage exchange between delegations and to share experience in all relevant matters.

But, even if closer co-operation among all countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region with the EU is very important, their regional co-operation is equally essential.

That is why the European Union strongly encourages regional co-operation, which is a vital part of the Stabilisation and Association Process of Western Balkans.

As I have already said, without regional co-operation, political stability of the region, economic recovery and European integration cannot be achieved.

Within this evolving network of co-operation in the region, the Adriatic Ionian Initiative occupies a prominent place. It complements the efforts of the EU and the other regional initiatives and is increasingly becoming a cornerstone of the EU stabilisation and integration policy in this part of Europe.

We also attach great importance to co-operation with other regional organisations, in order to reach common objectives of peace, security, stability and prosperity.

In this context, I very much welcome the presence here of the representatives of the Parliamentary Conference of the Baltic Sea with whom, the European Parliament maintains excellent co-operation. The Baltic dimension will become an essential element of the EU with the accession of the Baltic States and Poland.

I can only express my sincere satisfaction that our relations continue to materialise.