MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE LIX COSAC
Sofia, 18-19 June 2018

IN THE CHAIR: Mr Kristian VIGENIN, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*

AGENDA:

1. Opening of the meeting of the LIX COSAC
- Opening address by Ms Tsveta KARAYANCHEVA, President of the Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*
- Welcome address by Mr Rumen RADEV, President of the Republic of Bulgaria
- Welcome address by Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, First Vice-President of the European Parliament
- Introductory remarks by Mr Kristian VIGENIN, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*
- Adoption of the agenda of the meeting of the LIX COSAC

2. Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters
- Information on the results of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC
- Presentation of the 29th Bi-annual Report of COSAC
- Letters received by the Presidency
- Procedural issues

3. Session I - 'Achievements of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU'
Speakers: Mr Boyko BORISSOV, Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria; Ms Lilyana PAVLOVA, Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU 2018
Moderator: Prof. Dr. Ingrid SHIKOVA, Professor at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"
Chair: Ms Ivelina VASSILEVA, Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*

4. Session II - 'Integration and connectivity of the Western Balkans - a new impetus to EU Enlargement Policy'
Speakers: Ms Ekaterina ZAHARIEVA, Deputy Prime Minister for Judicial Reform and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria; Mr Nikola DIMITROV, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; Mr Domagoj Ivan MILOŠEVIĆ, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Croatian *Hrvatski Sabor*
Moderator: Amb. Biserka BENISHEVA, Director for EU Affairs at PanEuropa Bulgaria
Chair: Ms Imren MEHMEDOVA, Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*

5. Session III - 'European Pillar of Social Rights - building a more inclusive and fairer Europe'
Speakers: Mr Luca JAHIER, President of European Economic and Social Committee (EESC); Mr Marcel HAAG, Director, Policy Co-ordination, I Directorate, Secretariat General, European Commission; Dr. Ľuboš BLAHA, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee, Slovak *Národná rada*
Moderator: Prof. Dr. Katia VLADIMIROVA, Professor at University of National and World Economy and New Bulgarian University
Chair: Ms Polina TSANKOVA-HRISTOVA, Member of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*

6. Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC
- Debate on the draft Contribution and draft Conclusions of the LIX COSAC

7. Session IV: 'A strong and effective Cohesion Policy post-2020'
Speakers: Mr Tomislav DONCHEV, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria; Ms Dana SPINANT, Director for Budget, Communication and General Affairs, DG REGIO, European Commission; Ms Iskra MIHAYLOVA, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development (REGI) of the European Parliament

Moderator: Ms Milena MILOTINOVA, Journalist, TV host, "Bulgaria ON AIR", Former Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria
Chair: Mr Petar PETROV, Deputy Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*

8. Session V: 'EU interparliamentary cooperation in the context of the debate on subsidiarity and proportionality'

Speakers: Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice President of the European Commission; Ms Danuta Maria HÜBNER, Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), European Parliament; Mr Bastiaan VAN APELDOORN, Chair of the Standing Committee on European Affairs, Dutch *Eerste Kamer*; Prof. Dr. Jur. Sc. Atanas SEMOV, LL.D., Professor at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Jean Monnet Chair
Moderator: Mr Kiril VALCHEV, Journalist, Host of "The Week" political broadcast, Darik Radio
Chair: Mr Kristian VIGENIN, Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*

9. Adoption of the Contribution and Conclusions of the LIX COSAC

PROCEEDINGS

1. Opening of the meeting of the LIX COSAC

Opening address by Ms Tsveta KARAYANCHEVA, President of the Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*; welcome address by Mr Rumen RADEV, President of the Republic of Bulgaria; welcome address by Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, First Vice-President of the European Parliament; and introductory remarks by Mr Kristian VIGENIN, Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*

Ms Tsveta KARAYANCHEVA, President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, welcomed participants to the final conference of the Parliamentary dimension of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, and noted that during this period the efforts of the Bulgarian Parliament were focused on finding consolidated solutions to the common challenges faced by Member States. Ms KARAYANCHEVA further noted the common theme running across the events held during the Bulgarian Parliamentary dimension: the future of Europe. The President of the National Assembly also highlighted a major focus of the Bulgarian Presidency: the EU integration of the Western Balkans and referred to the adoption of the Sofia Declaration during the EU-Western Balkans Summit held on 17 May 2018. Ms KARAYENCHEVA also listed some of the more challenging topics that still lay ahead, namely the discussions on the European Asylum Policy, the future of PESCO, the debate on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the future of the Cohesion Policy etc. The President of the National Assembly highlighted her support for a closer union where decisions were taken as close to the citizens as possible, based on the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality

Mr Rumen RADEV, President of the Republic of Bulgaria, welcomed the delegates to Sofia and noted that the debate was taking place during a very important time, and explained how in this unpredictable environment Europe was facing a growing number of challenges, both external and internal. Terrorism, migrant pressure and cyberattacks all threatened the security of the citizens. Moreover, Brexit, economic discrepancies between different regions, growing social inequality, and youth unemployment, undermined the core values and principles of Europe, namely integrity, unity and solidarity. Mr RADEV stressed the importance of active participation of national Parliaments as they provided political legitimacy of the dialogue and were the bridge between the European policies, national institutions and societies. The President spoke favourably of the priorities set by the Bulgarian government during the Presidency, especially since it had sought to bring back the focus to Western Balkans. He then reflected on dossiers that were successfully finalised in the field of security, social security and rights, the Digital Single Market, the launch of the preliminary dialogue on the future of the European budget and the Cohesion Policy. Mr

RADEV noted that while handing over the leadership to the next Presidency, Bulgaria would continue looking for balance on traditional and new policies. He believed that the key of Bulgaria's success was in promoting unity as a decisive factor for achieving effective solutions. He concluded his speech by thanking the officials and volunteers for their outstanding work during the Presidency.

Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, First Vice-President of the European Parliament, started her speech by thanking the Bulgarian Presidency for its great hospitality. Ms McGUINNESS expressed her satisfaction that so many key topics were going to be addressed during the COSAC Plenary meeting: the Future of Europe, the European perspective of the Western Balkans, social rights, the Cohesion Policy and interparliamentary cooperation.

Ms McGUINNESS also referred to the EU-Western Balkan summit organised by the Bulgarian Presidency, which defined specific steps to improve connections in the region and with the European Union, bringing the economies closer, improving economic stability and connecting people. The Vice-President congratulated the Bulgarian Presidency for the success of organising this event and adopting the Sofia Declaration: an important core point offering concrete solutions.

Ms McGUINNESS mentioned the European Parliament's position on the European Social model and the need to develop it further: a strong pillar of social rights should deliver a concrete and positive results for European citizens. Ms McGUINNESS touched upon the results of the 29th Bi-Annual report on the Social Pillar, noting that a majority of national Parliaments had agreed that there was a need for more coordination of Member States' social policies at EU level. On Cohesion Policy, Ms McGUINNESS noted that there were core elements that needed to be taken into account: focusing on the objectives, the achievement of results with European added value, as well as setting the right level of funding and financing in the future MFF.

Ms McGUINNESS reiterated that the European Parliament supported the fundamental principles such as subsidiarity and proportionality as a means to ensure that the Union's actions in areas of shared competence provided a real added value. She also referred to Dutch Prime minister Mark RUTTE who recently visited the European Parliament and reminded everybody of the importance to focus on core tasks in order to promote the Union's effectiveness, strength and identity. The Vice-President also mentioned the need to ensure the citizens that better times lay ahead.

On the cooperation between European Parliament and national Parliaments, Ms McGUINNESS suggested to go even further and have discussions between rapporteurs of the European Parliament and members of national Parliaments on the content of legislative files dealing with topics having a particular relevance.

Ms McGUINNESS stressed the importance of encouraging the citizens to express their views and participate in the upcoming elections for the European Parliament. It was of key importance to ensure that citizens took ownership of the politics of the European Union and were engaged in European debates. Ms McGUINNESS encouraged parliamentarians to be active and shed light on the cooperation between the European Parliament and national Parliaments and on how sharing different views could strengthen and improve future policies.

Ms McGUINNESS concluded her speech by referring to the Bulgarian Presidency motto "United we stand strong" which was particularly apt, noting how we could find unity in difference. The ability to cope with these differences and finding a way forward should be the common goal of all parliamentarians

Mr. Kristian VIGENIN, Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*, welcomed participants to the COSAC plenary meeting, especially the new Chairs participating at the COSAC plenary for the first time: Mr Christian BUCHMANN, Chair of the EU Committee of the Austrian Bundesrat, and Mr Angel TÎLVĂR who was attending COSAC for the first time as Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Romanian *Camera Deputaţilor*.

In his introductory remarks, Mr VIGENIN emphasized that, under the Presidency motto "United we stand strong", Bulgaria was committed to contributing to a more united, balanced and secure Europe. Mentioning

the forthcoming elections for the European Parliament, Mr VIGENIN acknowledged the intensive debates to be held on the EU's strategic issues such as the Future of Europe, the European budget after 2020, the reform of the Common European Asylum System and Common Security and Defence policy. Mr VIGENIN highlighted the importance of the interparliamentary cooperation and the exchange of information and positions on topical issues on the European agenda as well as the dialogue with citizens at European, national and regional level.

Adoption of the agenda

The Chair presented the draft agenda of the LIX COSAC, which was adopted without amendment. Mr Gunther KRICHBAUM, German *Bundestag*, suggested that in forthcoming conferences the political party affiliation of the participants taking the floor be made known and displayed on screen.

2. Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters

- Information on the results of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC

The Chair informed participants of the results of the Troika meeting held the day before.

- Presentation of the 29th Bi-annual Report of COSAC

Mr VIGENIN invited the Permanent Member of the COSAC secretariat, Mr Kenneth CURMI, to present the 29th Bi-annual Report of COSAC, which was based on Parliaments' replies to the related questionnaire circulated to delegations on 13 February 2018 with a deadline of 19 March 2018 for submitting replies.

Mr CURMI briefly referred to the three chapters of the Report: the first one was dedicated to the debate on the future of Europe; the second one dealt with the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2017 and the third one concentrated on the European Pillar of Social Rights. Mr CURMI also presented a short animated video summarising the main findings of the Report.

- Letters received by the Presidency

The Chair referred to the following letters received by the Presidency:

- Letters from Mr Carles ENSENAT, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Andorra *Consell General*; letter from Mr Guillaume ROSE, Chair of the Monitoring Committee on Negotiations with the European Union, and Mr Stéphane VALERI, Speaker of the *Conseil National* of the Principality of Monaco; letter from Ms Mariia IONOVA, Deputy Chair of the Committee on European Integration of the *Verkhovna Rada* of Ukraine; letter from Mr Nikola LOVRINOVIĆ, Chair of the Joint Committee on European Integration of the *Parlamentarna Skupština* of Bosnia and Herzegovina; and letter from Ms Blerta DELIU-KODRA , Chair of the Committee on European Integration of the Assembly of Kosovo[*] regarding participation in COSAC. Following consultation with the Troika, letters of invitation had been sent out.
- Letter from Mr Marek ROCKI, Chair of the Foreign and European Union Affairs Committee of the Polish *Senat* on the conclusions of the meeting of the Committees on European Affairs of the countries of the Visegrád Group.
- Letter from Mr Vanino CHITI, former Chair of the Committee of the European Union Affairs of the Italian *Senato*, who is taking a rest from the active political life. The Presidency thanked him for his hard work in COSAC.

[*] This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with Resolution 1244 of the United Nations Security Council and to the opinion of the ICJ on the declaration of independence of Kosovo.

- Letter from Mr Michael SCHNEIDER, member of the Committee of the Regions and of the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and "Doing Less More Efficiently" who was invited to be a keynote speaker during Session IV dedicated on the future of the Cohesion policy. Mr SCHNEDER however had an unexpected engagement and would be replaced by Mr Michiel RIJSBERMAN, a rapporteur on the European Regional Development Fund.
- Letter from Mr Peep JAHILO, Secretary General of the Estonian *Riigikogu* and current Chair of the IPEX Board regarding the integration of the COSAC website within the IPEX framework. The issue has been addressed in the draft Conclusions.
- Following Mr VIGENIN's letter from 11th May to all COSAC delegations, in which they were asked to send their written contributions to the work of the Task Force, the Presidency has received several letters: In addition to the Czech *Senát*, Danish *Folketing*, and Dutch *Staaten-Generaal*, contributions were received also from the Finish *Eduskunta*, French *Assemblée nationale*, Latvian *Sejma*, Maltese *Kamra tad-deputati*, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, Romanian *Camera Deputaţilor* and Swedish *Riksdag*.
- Two letters from the Chairs of the committees on European Integration of the parliaments of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova: one in regard to the future Multiannual Financial Framework and the resources allocated for EU external actions; and another one asking if it would be possible to amend the COSAC Rules of Procedure in order to grant them the status of permanent observers to COSAC. The Presidency thanked the Chairs for expressing their interest and promised to initiate a more in-depth debate on the topic.

- Procedural issues

As Mr VIGENIN explained, the draft text of the Contribution and the Conclusions was circulated to delegations on Monday 4 June 2018. Amendments received from delegations by the deadline of noon, 8 June 2018 were, together with the initial text and a number of compromise proposals elaborated by the Presidency, included in a table, which had been submitted to the Troika.

Following a detailed examination of each amendment proposed, the Troika, on the basis of the Presidency's compromise proposals, drafted a modified text of the Contribution incorporating the Troika amendments, which had been drafted and distributed among the delegations.

The Chair also informed the delegations that they could submit additional amendments to the Troika compromise text by Monday, 18 June at noon. The compromise text and any new amendments would be discussed during the meeting of the Chairpersons in the afternoon.

3. Session I: Achievements of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU

Speakers: Mr Boyko BORISSOV, Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria; Ms Lilyana PAVLOVA, Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU 2018
Chair: Ms Ivelina VASSILEVA, deputy Chair of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*
Moderator: Prof. Dr Ingrid SHIKOVA, professor at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Ms VASSILEVA, deputy Chair of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*, opened the session by reiterating that Bulgaria took over the Presidency of the Council of the EU in a challenging time, with many key topics up to debate: the future of the migration policy; the MFF 2021-2027, Brexit; and the EU prospective for the Western Balkans, to mention a few. She underlined the good cooperation between the parliament and the government during the six months, noting that the Presidency was seen as a national cause, above party affiliation. Ms VASSILEVA gave a short overview of the six interparliamentary meetings held during the Parliamentary dimension of the Presidency and passed the floor to the moderator Prof. Dr Ingrid SHIKOVA.

Prof. SHIKOVA noted that if 2017 was the year of ideas for the future of Europe, 2018 was the year of decisions. President Jean-Claude JUNCKER spoke about the tail winds in his State of the European Union speech in September 2017 and Prof. SHIKOVA noted how, in her opinion, Bulgaria successfully used these tail winds during its Presidency by setting up and achieving ambitious and visible political goals. Prof. SHIKOVA highlighted the fact that Bulgaria was one of the most pro-European countries, quoting the last Eurobarometer research, and underlined the good relationship between the Bulgarian and EU institutions. In Prof. SHIKOVA's opinion, the Bulgarian Presidency would be remembered for the renewed hope it gave to the Western Balkans, and a spirit of pragmatism, realism and energy. She concluded her introductory remarks with the hope that both Bulgaria and its EU partners had learnt to look at each other with a new perspective.

Taking the floor, Mr Boyko BORISSOV, Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria, thanked the Bulgarian Parliament for its active cooperation during the Presidency. Mr BORISSOV said he would concentrate on a couple of more sensitive topics and would leave the more detailed information about the concrete dossiers to Minister PAVLOVA.

The Prime Minister first addressed the Western Balkans, noting the symbolic meaning of the Mostar Bridge which had taken 20 years and significant investment to be rebuild following its destruction. He also mentioned the recent agreement between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia on the latter's name. For years, this looked like an insurmountable challenge but now, thanks to the leaders of the two countries, Mr Alexis TSIPRAS and Mr Zoran ZAEV, and thanks to the mediation of Commissioner Johannes HAHN, the High Representative Federica MOGHERINI and the Presidency, a solution had been found. Mr BORISSOV also recalled the handshake between Mr Hashim THAÇI and Mr Aleksandar VUČIĆ during the Sofia Summit in May 2018, and admitted that while the path in front of the Western Balkans was long and difficult, the perspective was now clearer and there was a renewed sense of optimism and hope, especially for young people.

Moving on to the topic of migration, the Prime Minister underlined Bulgaria's efforts in securing the EU external border with Turkey: building a fence, mobilising both army and navy's resources, etc. In his words the migration pressure on the Bulgarian border for the past year and a half had been zero as Bulgaria was strictly adhering to its Schengen responsibilities. Mr BORISSOV also presented the Presidency's offer for a compromise text to the European Council on the 28 June: immediate prevention in the first place, followed by the closing of all external borders, with people being admitted only through the appropriate check-points. Countries, such as Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Spain that are on the front line of the migratory flows should be supported accordingly. People that are already in the EU should be integrated or otherwise sent back to their countries of origin. The Prime Minister stressed that the free movement of people within the EU should not be threatened and that rules must be obeyed when crossing an external EU border. European diplomacy had to improve when dealing with the sources of migratory flows.

Mr BORISSOV concluded that both topics should be dealt with sooner rather than later, warning that failure to act now would only postpone the inevitable problems to which a delayed solution would also be more costly. The Prime Minister called on the participants to help the Western Balkans in their ambition for EU membership, reminding them of the costs, both material and human, of the wars in the '90s. Compared to that, he claimed, EU accession would be a much cheaper process, especially considering that the total population of the Western Balkans region was slightly below Romania's, while its GDP was almost equal to Slovakia's.

The next speaker to take the floor was Ms Lilyana PAVLOVA, Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU 2018, who began her speech by thanking the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds of the Bulgarian Parliament and its Chair for their constructive attitude during the Presidency. Ms PAVLOVA underlined the importance of the Parliamentary dimension as a key

to the democratic legitimacy, especially when considering the ambitious tasks of the Presidency: building bridges, being a mediator, seeking compromises, consensus and results. She reminded that 2018 was the last full year before the next European elections and this brought some extra responsibilities for the Presidency: setting the date for the elections, reforming the regulation on the financing of the political parties, updating the Electoral law, and keeping citizens informed. Ms PAVLOVA thanked the European Parliament for its cooperation during the trilogue meetings and mentioned some of the key topics on which the Presidency had achieved results.

The Western Balkans were back on the European agenda; security and migration were about to be further discussed on 28 June by the European Council, with the Presidency suggesting a new approach based on prevention, solidarity and responsibility. Five of the seven Dublin dossiers were ready and the Austrian Presidency would be able to finish the reform. The Minister also referred to the social issues, referring to the reform of the directive on the posting of workers as a key success, with the mobility package still to be finalised. She spoke about the coordination between social security systems, the balance between personal and work life, lifelong learning and the citizens' dialogue initiatives. Following Estonia's lead with regard to the Digital Single Market, Bulgaria had dealt with cybersecurity, intellectual property rights and the digital services. She concluded by wishing success to the upcoming Austrian Presidency, noting the good cooperation and common priorities established between the two presidencies.

In the following debate, 17 participants took the floor:

Several speakers congratulated the Bulgarian Presidency for its objectives and the slogan adopted, noting how apt it was during the current times.

Mr Angelos VOTSIS, Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, underlined the illegal actions of Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, which, in his opinion, threatened the sustainability of the European project.

Mr Jean BIZET, French *Sénat*, highlighted the delicate economic environment, especially in the context of Brexit, calling for unity in order to preserve the internal market.

Mr Gunther KRICHBAUM, German *Bundestag*, expressed his disappointment with the limited time available for interventions from the parliamentarians. Mr Jaak MADISON, Estonian *Riigikogu*, echoed this, and lamented the fact that Prime Minister BORISSOV had already left and could therefore not answer questions relating to his recent visit to Moscow.

Ms Pia KAUMA, Finnish *Eduskunta*, turned her attention to the need for increasing the number of countries of origin with which there were agreements on repatriation of rejected asylum seekers in place. She also congratulated the Presidency for its focus on innovation, research and education.

Dr Richárd HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, expressed his support for the revitalisation of the relations with the Western Balkans. In his opinion, Serbia and Montenegro were the clear front runners for EU accession. With regard to migration, Dr HÖRCSIK insisted that the top priority should be the security of the borders, as the decrease of migrants on the Western Balkan route was due mainly to the building of fences at the Bulgarian and Hungarian borders respectively.

Mr Markus TÖNS, German *Bundestag*, however, noted that no walls could keep people out forever and the focus should be placed on long-term solutions such as providing more opportunities in the countries of origin.

Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Austrian *Nationalrat*, used the opportunity to briefly present the priorities of the upcoming Austrian Presidency, namely: 1) security and combating illegal migration; 2) prosperity and competitiveness; and 3) European prospective for the Western Balkans.

Mr Atis LEJINS, Latvian *Saeima*, turned his attention to the issue of gas supplies, lamenting that, for years, Eastern and Central European countries had paid more for their gas than Western countries. He called for more transparency on this topic and supported the Commission's proposal for extending the rules on internal gas suppliers to external suppliers.

Ms Regina BASTOS, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, noted the difficult European context and congratulated the Bulgarian Presidency for focusing on a number of social issues, such as the posting of workers directive, tackling youth unemployment, and the development of digital skills. Her sentiments were echoed by Mr Angel TÎLVĂR, Romanian *Camera Deputaţilor*, who also supported the reform of the financing of the political parties.

Mr Mindaugas PUIDOKAS, Lithuanian *Seimas*, spoke about the hybrid threats and the need for coordinated European responses. He underlined that PESCO should be open for cooperation with third countries, as well as the need to build rapid response teams capable of handling large scale cyber-attacks. Mr PUIDOKAS also expressed his support for the Austrian Presidency and its priorities.

Mr Siegbert Frank DROESE, German *Bundestag*, raised the question of a possible accession of Bulgaria to both the Schengen area and the Eurozone and how this could be squared with President Emmanuel MACRON's views on deepening the integration first before allowing new members.

Ms Soraya RODRIGUEZ RAMOS, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, underlined that the European project had been founded on the safeguarding of human rights and this should not be forgotten when discussing migration. No one was allowed to breach international law, said Ms RODRIGUEZ RAMOS, and migration should be handled in an effective and humane way.

Baroness Sandip VERMA, UK *House of Lords*, focused on digital services and combatting fraud, supporting the Presidency efforts in these areas and expressing willingness to continue partnership after Brexit and tackle these issues together.

Mr Malik AZMANI, Dutch *Tweede Kamer*, used the opportunity to thank the Presidency for the possibility to host a side-event on transparency during the lunch break. On the topic of migration, he noted that border control was not enough, there had to be common solutions, in line with the treaties.

Ms Liliana TANGUY, French *Assemblée nationale*, welcomed the results of the Western Balkan summit held on 17 May 2018 and the Sofia Declaration. She also spoke about the benefits of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the new regulation on e-commerce, and welcomed the Presidency efforts to maintain cohesion across Europe, including during the second phase of the Brexit negotiations.

Ms PAVLOVA then took the floor to answer some of the questions that had been raised. She thanked the participants for their support and underlined that the Presidency had always looked for unity and tried to build bridges. Bulgaria was looking for the things that united us instead of those that separated us, and that spirit had guided the Presidency in its relations with Russia, Turkey and the Western Balkans.

4. Session II: Integration and connectivity of the Western Balkans – a new impetus to EU Enlargement Policy

Speakers: Ms Ekaterina ZAHARIEVA, Deputy Prime Minister for Judicial Reform and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria; Mr Nikola DIMITROV, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; Mr Domagoj Ivan MILOŠEVIĆ, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Croatian *Hrvatski Sabor*
Moderator: Amb. Biserka BENISHEVA, Director for EU Affairs at PanEuropa Bulgaria
Chair: Ms Imren MEHMEDOVA, Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*

The Chair of the session, Ms Imren MEHMEDOVA, Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie,* reminded the participants that the Enlargement policy had been one of the oldest and most successful Union policies, an efficient means for economic growth and prosperity for Member States and candidates alike. She underlined the historical, geographical and cultural links between the Western Balkans and the European Union, noting, however, the importance of respecting the European values and carrying out the necessary reforms with the support of the civil society as an indispensable pre-condition for future accession.

Amb. Biserka BENISHEVA, Director for EU Affairs at PanEuropa Bulgaria, the moderator for this session, highlighted the key role played by national Parliaments in accepting further enlargement, noting in this the importance and timeliness of the meeting. A European future for the Western Balkans was a strategic investment in the security of the EU, she said, which was the reason the Bulgarian presidency chose it as one of its main priorities. Amb. BENISHEVA briefly recalled the latest developments in the accession process and presented the keynote speakers for the session.

Ms Ekaterina ZAHARIEVA, Deputy Prime Minister for Judicial Reform and Minister of Foreign Affairs, started her address by congratulating Mr Nikos KOTZIAS, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece and Mr Nikola DIMITROV, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and their respective Prime Ministers for signing the agreement on the name dispute the day before. She further added that it was time for friendship, peace and prosperity in the region and that the signing of the agreement had given a first positive impetus for which the Bulgarian presidency would be remembered.

Ms ZAHARIEVA highlighted that a secure and stable Western Balkan region was a prerequisite for a safe and secure Europe, with the EU being the biggest trade partner of the Western Balkan region and its biggest foreign direct investor. But she also explained that, beyond the Sofia summit, there was a lot more to do in the area on connectivity between the Western Balkans and the EU and between the Western Balkan partners themselves. Among the various aspects of connectivity, security and fighting crime and corruption were central ones. In this context, Ms ZAHARIEVA added that the main priority of the European External Action Service was targeted at the Western Balkans. The strategy that was announced by the Commission in February was a comprehensive document with a long-term perspective comprising specific projects.

Ms ZAHARIEVA referred to the upcoming General Affairs Council of 26 June, where the enlargement report would be discussed, with the conclusions expected to launch negotiations with Skopje and recommendations regarding Tirana. Ms ZAHARIEVA further noted that agreement on the name dispute should be ratified the following week, as the next possibility would be in 2020 because of the European elections.

Ms ZAHARIEVA urged the European Parliament and all Member States to support the European aspirations of the two countries, while also stating that the other countries had not been forgotten. The 25th and 27th of June would mark the opening for two additional chapters for Serbia and one for Montenegro.

With respect to Kosovo*, Ms ZAHARIEVA stressed that there had been a positive development, as the two presidents had shaken hands in Sofia and had stated that the difficult negotiations would be continued between Belgrade and Pristina. Also, Bosnia and Herzegovina had been able to submit the answers to the questionnaire after many years and Kosovo* had managed to ratify the demarcation agreement with Montenegro. Concluding, Ms ZAHARIEVA expressed hope that the momentum would be preserved throughout the upcoming presidencies.

Mr Nikola DIMITROV, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, thanked the Presidency for the invitation to address the COSAC plenary. He recalled that the last days had marked a special moment for his country with a historic investment in the future, and whereas that geography and history could not be changed, that there was always the possibility to shape the future. Mr DIMITROV also explained how, despite initial scepticism towards the treaty, it had eventually been embraced.

In addition, Mr DIMITROV thanked the Bulgarian presidency for bringing the spotlight back on the Western Balkans, as the region was not really on the margins of Europe but on the margins of political attention. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia had received a positive report after learning lessons about the importance of free media, an independent judicial system and being responsive to public opinion.

Summing up, Mr DIMITROV explained how the region was striving to become more economically attractive and better connected. In this context, he also referred to the fact that Sarajevo could only be reached via Vienna, another indication of the lack of the interregional connectivity. He closed his address by stating that while his country was still not ready to join the EU, it wanted to have access to the instrument of the accession process in order to not be forever locked in the waiting room for EU and NATO accession.

Mr Domagoj Ivan MILOŠEVIĆ, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, echoed the previous speaker's gratitude for putting the spotlight back to the Western Balkans and the enlargement policy. He informed that Croatia would assume the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2020, adding that enlargement would certainly also be among the priorities then. That is why there would be another summit in Croatia in 2020.

While acknowledging that the strengthening of the connectivity of the Western Balkans should be a goal, Mr MILOŠEVIĆ declared it should not become a substitute for enlargement. To him, the three big challenges for the EU were external migration, internal migration and social economic development. On external migration, Mr MILOŠEVIĆ explained that the region could not cope with a massive influx of migrants in turning it into a hot spot, due to the lack of institutional infrastructure and economic power. He stated that enlargement could not happen overnight, but the EU and its Member States needed to support pre-accession and enlargement processes.

On internal migration, Mr MILOŠEVIĆ referred to another huge challenge for the EU, namely the millions of young and ambitious people leaving the East and South of the Union, which threatened the economic and political development of all countries. In this context he expressed his concern with regard to arguments against a strong cohesion policy and abundant financial convergence support by other Parliaments/Chambers. As for the Western Balkans, while it might seem that borders would stop immigration, in reality it would only serve to slow it down. The common goal here should be membership in the EU for the Western Balkans, based on individual merits and fulfilment of membership criteria.

On the social and economic development of the EU and the Western Balkan region, Mr MILOŠEVIĆ pointed out that the EU should not hesitate to support, both financially and institutionally, the infrastructure and transportation connectivity as well as the digital and social-economic connectivity. The fact that 73% of the total volume of international trade of the Western Balkans was with EU countries showed the level of integration. He strongly believed that further hard work on integration should not be substituted by any custom unions of the Western Balkans. Mr MILOŠEVIĆ further added that the accession process and membership should not be a final goal but rather a tool to build institutions and social-economic strength, which would not stop once a country had become a full member of the EU.

Mr MILOŠEVIĆ finished his keynote by urging the other Parliaments/Chambers to ensure an individual assessment of progress and an individual approach to each candidate and potential candidate in the Western Balkans.

Thirty-seven parliamentarians took the floor in the ensuing debate, many of whom congratulated the Bulgarian Presidency on its success in giving a new impetus to the enlargement policy and the situation of the Western Balkans as it was very important for peace and prosperity in the region but also for the EU to give every country a prospect of Europe.

Mr Jean BIZET, French *Sénat*, acknowledged the concerns and willingness in the Western Balkans to join the EU, but also the fact that the region was surrounded by various states that were not interested in the security and stability of the region, like Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Ms Danuta HÜBER, European Parliament, stated that the process of enlargement would not be complete without the Western Balkans. Addressing concerns relating to further integration of the region, she argued that there were more jihadists

coming from Member States than from the Western Balkan region, even if the perception in Member States was a different one.

Mr Peter LUYKX, Belgian *Chambre des représentants*, added that the Western Balkans were important for the security of Europe and that it was essential to explain that to the European citizens and countries, without rushing in an ill -organised enlargement, which would hurt both sides. Mr Mindaugas PUIDOKAS, Lithuanian *Seimas*, stated that it was important for the Western Balkan region to solve bilateral issues and welcomed the EU enlargement package as well as the Commission opening negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro. Mr João Pinho de ALMEIDA, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, pointed out the historical and geographical issues in the Western Balkan region as well as the importance of peace and prosperity and underlined that each country should be given a chance. Mr Piotr APEL, Polish *Sejm*, said that a serious discussion about any concerns was needed as well as proven support by the EU and its Member States. Dr Richárd HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, pointed out that as long as the Western Balkans could not join the EU, the unification of Europe was not concluded. Mr Tibor BANA, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, pointed to the issue of national minorities, especially in Serbia.

Concerning a possible accession date in 2025, Mr Simon SUTOUR, French *Sénat*, stressed the importance of keeping to this date. At the same time, he also expressed his concern on the difficult situation in Kosovo* as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mr Dragan SORMAZ, Serbian *Narodna skupština*, added that the idea of 2025 being a possible accession year created a strong incentive for candidate countries. Mr Siegbert Frank DROESE, German *Bundestag,* pointed out that only one third of the Member States thought that an accession was a real possibility for 2025, even if President Juncker saw it as a given fact. In this context the instrument of privileged partnership should also be put forward. Ms Liliana TANGUY, French *Assemblée nationale*, stressed that the Western Balkans could not be held at the EU's door forever, but the region also had to face up to some of the challenges. Mr Bojan KEKEC, Slovenian *Državni svet*, referred to the many problems of the region that had backfired and the numerous conflicts that had erupted. Still, the Slovenian *Državni svet* wanted to make sure that the enlargement process continued as it was the greatest tool for further stability.

Ms Gabriela CREŢU, Romanian *Senat*, highlighted the transformative power of accession, whilst acknowledging that it was not a solution for all domestic problems. She also stated that those countries that were preparing at the moment to join the EU would most certainly join a transformed Union once they achieved accession. Ms Mariia IONOVA, Ukrainian *Verkhovna Rada*, expressed hope for an open door policy for countries with intention from the Eastern European Partnership. She also asked COSAC to initiate relevant amendments in the Rules of Procedures, so that guest countries would not need to ask each Presidency for participation in the respective conferences and meetings. Ms IONOVA ended her address by thanking the EU and its Member States for the sanctions against Russia.

Ms Anne LOUHELAINEN, Finnish *Eduskunta*, called for better decision-making and less bureaucracy in the European Union, especially concerning the topic of the Western Balkans. She wished the countries negotiating accession lots of courage to develop their rule of law and to increase confidence in democratic decision making. Mr Bernard DURKAN, Irish *House of Oireachtas*, announced the strong support for the enlargement process as the countries needed to know the EU was on their side, as they might otherwise turn towards other alliances. The European project had been the first and biggest peace process and should be allowed to continue.

Various speakers congratulated Greece and on signing the agreement, putting an end to the name dispute and making a welcomed step in the right direction. Mr Angelos VOTSIS, Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, stated the strong support of Cyprus in this matter and underlined that the agreement should be welcomed by all of the Member States. In this context he also pointed out the critical trends in Turkey and its search to increase its power in the Western Balkan region. Ms Ioanneta KVVADIA, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, named it as a historical decision to overcome two national positions. She stated that the issue of and relating to sea borders were not the sole responsibility of the Greek, Italian and Spanish Member States. Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, Austrian *Bundesrat,* added that the agreement showed that more progress could be achieved if the nationalist ideas of the Western Balkans could be overcome. He further underlined that the

Western Balkan region had always been a central discussion in Austria and appealed to all Member States to accept Kosovo* as a country and sign agreements.

Mr Maximos CHARAKOPOULOS, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, criticized that the solving of the name issue went against a lot of Greek citizens' opinions and did not solve any problems. Further enlargement should happen only if it does not undermine the cohesion of the EU.

Mr Vaclav HAMPL, Czech *Senát*, declared that both Czech chambers were in favour of an EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans, as they were convinced that peace and stability in the region were in everybody's interest. He announced the Czech support for the new name of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, as it had bolstered the spirit of compromise.

Mr Jaak MADISON, Estonian *Riigikogu*, stressed that it should be made clear that the reforms the EU wanted were for the good of the Western Balkan region and not the EU. The Member States as well as the institutions should agree on the way the Union was heading, before promising countries they would be able to enter the EU. Mr MADISON urged the Austrian delegation to continue with this topic during their upcoming presidency.

Ms Concepción DE SANTA ANA FERNÁNDEZ, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, stated that Spain was against including Kosovo* in the enlargement process, and against the 'Western Balkans 6 format', as it included the countries of the region and the territory of Kosovo* on equal footing, despite there being no legal or institutional basis behind that format, and called for a clear distinction between the enlargement process and the political strategy for the Western Balkans, emphasizing that enlargement should focus on countries adequately prepared for it. Nevertheless, as a signatory to the Sofia declaration, Spain was committed to the development and prosperity of the Western Balkans and supported the European integration perspective.

Mr Genc POLLO and Ms Klajda GJOSHA, Albanian *Kuvendi i Shqipërisë*, pronounced the hope for a positive decision concerning Albania to open accession negotiations during the next European Council meeting, as it would be vital for consolidating the Albanian democracy, rule of law and for strengthening the institutions. Ms Elisa SPIROPALI, Albanian *Kuvendi i Shqipërisë*, added that Albania had created a positive momentum in the last year and further stressed the historic location and claim for a strong European identity of her country. Ms Pia KAUMA, Finnish *Eduskunta*, complimented Albania and Montenegro on the progress made in the areas of rule of law and security and called the European Commission to start with negotiation talks.

The Earl of Kinnoull, Hon. Charles HAY, UK *House of Lords*, promised that the UK would continue to support the discussion about the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU even after Brexit, and reminded parliamentarians of the Western Balkans Summit to be held in London in July.

Ms ZAHARIEVA thanked all speakers and pointed out that the priority to the Western Balkans was a very important one, especially when focusing on fighting organised crime and corruption and establishing rule of law. Concerning the chronology of the opening of the different chapters she explicitly stated that Chapter 23 and 24 had to be opened at the beginning of the negotiation process and closed at the end, as the most sensitive chapters took the most time for reforms. At the end of her answer she underlined that it was the right moment for the next steps even if there were still certain concerns.

Mr DIMITROV deplored the criticism of members of the Greek opposition, that the agreement between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia had been a national capitulation. Europe had been made essentially with the goal of European integration. He added that, like Robert Schuman had once said, Europe could not be built in a day and with a single plan. Mr DIMITROV also underlined that starting talks did not equate to admission, but that there was a period of ten years in between.

Mr MILOŠEVIĆ strongly underscored the fact that for a stable, secure and prosperous European Union, integration, connectivity and future enlargement of and with the Western Balkans was in everyone's interest. He pointed out that there were many challenges in front of us, but there was the need to move faster together in the same direction.

5. Session III: European Pillar of Social Rights - building a more inclusive and fairer Europe

Speakers: Mr Luca JAHIER, President of European Economic and Social Committee (EESC); Mr Marcel HAAG, Director, Policy Co-ordination, I Directorate, Secretariat General, European Commission; Dr. Ľuboš BLAHA, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee, Slovak *Národná rada*
Moderator: Prof. Dr. Katia VLADIMIROVA, Professor at University of National and World Economy and New Bulgarian University
Chair: Ms Polina TSANKOVA-HRISTOVA, Member of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*

The Chair of the Session, Ms Polina TSANKOVA-HRISTOVA, Member of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*, stressed the importance of this topic in the context of the current debate on the Future of Europe. In her view, the positive strengthening of social Europe increased citizens' awareness of the benefits of the European project. She mentioned Bulgaria's support toward the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which she described as a joint responsibility of the EU and Member States alike, taking into account the differences in the Member States and the subsidiarity and proportionality principle. The successful implementation would enable the EU to keep and adjust its social model to changing industrial relations. The Chair underscored the efforts of the Bulgarian Presidency in this field, including in the discussions on the future MFF.

Prof. Dr Katia VLADIMIROVA, Lecturer at the University of National and World Economy and New Bulgarian University, who was the moderator for the session, argued that the development of a social Europe set up the basis for a stronger Union providing better living and labour conditions for the European citizens, while fighting the informal economy. The moderator emphasized the need to ensure social justice by sharing resources and reducing the divergences between the regions and social groups of the EU. She referred to the high expectations of Bulgarian citizens concerning the 20 areas of the European Pillar of Social Rights, for which inclusive education and gender equality were pre-requisites.

Mr Luca JAHIER, President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), outlined the need for close cooperation between COSAC and the EESC and the role of national Parliaments in the implementation of the Social Pillar. In the current context of nationalistic populist trends, demographic changes and raising inequalities, which led to citizens' mistrust, the EU had to deliver on a social dimension that had been long time neglected. The President went on to present the EESC's longstanding actions in this field, referring to specific opinions and debates. While welcoming the proclamation of the Social Pillar in 2017, the EESC called for its implementation, which would address the imbalances between the economic and social policies, provided that significant financial support and legislative action was ensured.

He stated that the Pillar of Social Rights should be one of the guiding lines in the negotiation of the next MFF, explaining that the EESC asked for a roadmap for implementation and a clear division of tasks between all actors. He stressed the role of Member States and the importance of public investment with a social objective and current spending, especially in low-income countries. More public investment could be directly supported with the use of existing EU instruments. He called for appropriate taxation policies, and an effective fight against tax fraud, tax avoidance and aggressive tax planning, which would generate additional means for financing the Social Pillar. The President hoped the implementation of the Social Pillar would be closely linked to the EU strategy on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Mr JAHIER pointed out that the 20 indicators of the new social scoreboard proposed by the Commission in the framework of the European Semester should be aligned with the 20 principles of the Social Pillar. He explained that the social inclusion strand of the ESF should be enhanced and that a minimum 30% of ESF+ should be earmarked to combatting poverty and social inclusion.

He called on the prompt and joint action of all actors, within their respective roles, warning that protraction or inaction would increase citizens' frustration directed indistinctively towards EU and national politics.

MARCEL HAAG, Director, Policy Co-ordination, I Directorate, Secretariat General, European Commission, recalled the context in which the Social Pillar was created, and said that this should serve as a compass for designing policy responses that address economic, societal and technological changes effectively. The Commission presented its proposal in April 2017, after a thorough public consultation, and the Social Pillar was jointly proclaimed in November 2017 at the Social Summit in Gothenburg, sending a strong message on EU unity.

Mr HAAG explained that the Pillar of Social Rights built upon 20 key principles, structured around three categories: equal opportunities and access to the labour market; fair working conditions; social protection and inclusion. He mentioned that its implementation was a shared political commitment of both the EU and its Member States, within their respective competences. Mr Haag clarified that the Pillar did not change the existing divisions of competences and powers between the Union and the Member States, largely responsible for social policies, which gave national Parliaments a key role in the implementation of the Pillar.

He added that there was an important role to be played at the EU level as well, and the Commission was making full use of the instruments provided to it by the treaties to take the Pillar forward, in the areas for which the EU had a mandate to propose legislation. Mr Haag referred to recent proposals on work-life balance, access to social protection, or on transparent and predictable working conditions. Within the European Semester, the Commission identified challenges in the employment and social field and prepared country-specific recommendations to address them, while the Council had the final word on this matter. Strengthening the social dimension in the EU financial funds and programmes was a key aspect of the implementation, as shown by the proposal for the next MFF. In addition to strong focus on investment, the EU proposed a new cluster of funds dedicated to investing in people, social cohesion and values. This cluster would include the European Social Fund+, the extended Erasmus+, the reinforced European Solidarity Corps, etc.

Dr. Ľuboš BLAHA, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Slovak *Národná rada*, stated that the Social Pillar was important for the survival of the EU unity and social peace. He argued that the rise of extremism and social frustration brought about by globalization, liberalization and deregulation, compromised the European social model, which could not be sustainable if huge class inequalities persisted; he called for a return to the roots of EU integration with a strong social emphasis.

In his view, the Social Pillar repeated the same social rights enshrined in the European Social Charter, and the Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union, to which three improvements were added, namely on the social rights of homeless people, the right to paid leave, and the fight against the poverty of the working class. He regretted the weakening of the principle of co-determination in the companies, the more pro-market wording of the Social Pillar and the lack of more social advantages for mothers regarding pensions and retirement. He then went on to question the overall changes and trends in the European social policy, and stressed the contradiction between the adoption of the Social Pillar and the reduction of the budget for cohesion policy in the next MFF. While welcoming the Commission's proposal on the coordination of social security systems, he condemned the initiatives of some Member States to index the family benefits for children who lived abroad while workers paid contribution in their countries. He concluded by saying that the main tools for the implementation of the Pillar were the EU cohesion and structural funds and regretted that the EU proposed the reduction of resources for the poorest people and regions. He further argued that the Social Pillar had been reduced to mere words without the appropriate financial resources.

Twenty-six parliamentarians took the floor in the ensuing debate. In their interventions, parliamentarians called for a more inclusive and just social Europe which was the basis for a modern and successful EU. Delegates argued that the EU had the collective task to implement the Social Pillar's principles and thus to make its benefits more visible to citizens and counter extremism.

Mr Georgios GEORGIOU, Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, echoed Dr BLAHA's words and called for the return to the vision of a united Europe, deploring the multi-speed EU and the gap between North and South. Mr Antonio GÓMEZ-REINO VARELA, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, advocated the need to work harder to tackle inequality and poverty and build a Europe of persons and peoples. He deplored the lack of sufficient redistribution and austerity policies. Ms Ioanneta KAVVADIA, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, outlined the successful efforts of Greece to move from financial supervision to financial emancipation, which translated into progress for workers. She welcomed the agreement with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which she deemed conducive to a safe environment for business in the Balkans. Mr Maximos CHARAKOPOULOS, *Greek Vouli ton Ellinon*, elaborated on the situation in Greece, namely the high unemployment rates, the mass migration and brain drain. He called for strong family policies, as migration could not solve the demographic challenges. Along the same lines, Mr Jacek KURZĘPA, Polish *Sejm*, referred to the Polish programmes of sustainable development and to the functioning of social justice in practice in Poland, through benefits for children and mothers. Mr Jaak MADISON, Estonian *Riigikogu*, warned that redistribution amounted to socialism, which was bound to end badly; he wondered how many of the supporters of equality would adopt the Estonian system of ensuring 18-month paid salary for mothers, and stated that the demographic problem could be addressed by family-friendly policies.

Ms Virginija VINGRIENE, Lithuanian *Seimas*, talked about EU's collective task in the implementation of the Social Pillar and duty of Member States to uphold the social principles. She underlined that there was no one-size-fits-all solution and that the distribution of competences at EU, national, and local level, as well as the subsidiarity principle together with the autonomy of social partners should be duly considered. Ms Concepción DE SANTA ANA FERNÁNDEZ, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, called on the EU to provide solutions to fight social exclusion and restore confidence, and stressed that in all the debates on cohesion and convergence, the particularities of Member States should be duly taken into account. Ms Sabine THILLAYE, French *Assemblée nationale*, believed that social Europe was a concept, not a reality and that social harmonization was needed but difficult to achieve, as the negotiations on the Posted Workers Directive showed. In her view, the problem was that national models were competing with each other, a situation which required real political willingness.

Mr Patrik BJÖRCK, Swedish *Riksdag*, agreed that it was important to consider the specific labour market model of each country and that the responsibility of the implementation lied mainly with the Member State. He described the Swedish experience of handling transition thanks to strong social security networks. He also stressed changes should be embraced as opportunities not threats.

Mr Jean BIZET, French *Sénat*, argued that the Single market could only fulfil its potential if there was a gradual move towards social Europe to tackle the distortion of competition and spread EU values in all Member States. He argued in favour of the harmonization of social systems in order to avoid social tourism. He warned that the digitalization of the economy and the energy transition could have a negative impact on some citizens. Ms Margarida MARQUES, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, agreed that the digital transition should not lead to discrimination. She called for the inclusion of the Social Pillar in the European Semester and for sufficient resources. Ms Petra DE SUTTER, Belgian *Sénat*, underscored the need to provide for social investments, binding measures, strong instruments and financial incentives. She suggested that four areas of social public expenditures should be exempted from the corrective and preventative arm of the Stability and Growth Pact, as well as the inclusion of the social scoreboard in the European Semester. Mr Markus TÖNS, German *Bundestag*, shared the view that a sustainability chapter,

similar to the one included in all EU international free trade agreements, should be imposed on Member States and that cuts to a successful policy such as the Cohesion policy should be avoided. Mr Atis LEJINS, Latvian *Saeima*, described the positive role of cohesion funds on the economic growth of Latvia, the improvement of social and economic conditions that slowed down emigration and called for remittances not to be factored in the next MFF Cohesion Funds. Mr Bernard DURKAN, Irish *Houses of Oireachtas*, talked about Ireland's successful tackling of the economic recession and deplored the fact that social policy and social housing have been neglected for so long.

Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, Austrian *Bundesrat*, called for more focus on social aspects and for the budget to be adjusted accordingly, for more social jurisdiction and a European Labour Office. In his view, it was necessary to secure the principle of equal pay for equal work, and to tackle labour law breeches, rather than circumvent them by using the Posted Workers Directive. Mr Svein Roald HANSEN, Norwegian *Stortinget*, mentioned the need for an EU strategy for combatting work-related crime and for ensuring that the proposed European labour authority respected the different national labour market models. He dwelled on the Nordic model, based on fully functioning cooperation between employees, employers and government, as the recent successful pension reform showed. Ms Ulrike HILLER, German *Bundesrat*, also mentioned the role of social dialogue, solidarity and the need for the EU to raise the profile of its actions also at regional level. In her view, the aim was not to have a uniform social model, but offer prospects for improving the standard of living of all Europeans. To this end, she suggested the creation of a common European unemployment benefit. Mr Gerard CRAUGHWELL, Irish *Houses of Oireachta*s, echoed the statements on the need of strong trade unions and regretted that contracts of indefinite duration were turned into zero-hour contracts. He called for the EU to take action at the appropriate level in the field of health and education. In his view, delivering the message of EU's achievements to citizens on the ground was key to counter populists. Ms Gabriela CREȚU, Romanian *Senat*, also referred to the existence of a single market and of 28 different systems, which led to unfair competition and inequalities exploited by populists; she regretted the lack of political will for a change and pointed to EU's income redistribution problem. She also stressed the possible adverse effects on the fourth industrial revolution on a system in which social benefits were linked to having a job. Mr Angel TÎLVĂR, Romanian *Camera Deputatilor*, also called for strengthening cooperation on education to build future for the youth; he urged to focus on a fair Europe, as the promotion of economic convergence would solve social problems.

Mr Bastiaan VAN APELDOORN, Dutch *Eerste Kamer*, focused his intervention on the need to find practical ways for achieving strong social rights legally enforceable, possibly by referring to the European Social Charter of the Council of Europe into the guidelines for impact assessments or by integrating it into the EU legal order by EU accession to it. The Earl of Kinnoull, Hon. Charles HAY, UK *House of Lords*, welcomed the focus on subsidiarity and the need to adapt rules to national specificities and supported Mr APELDOORN's suggestion.

Ms Mariia IONOVA, Ukrainian *Verkhovna Rada*, referred to Ukraine's progress in its cooperation with the EU and of its undisputable European aspiration; she mentioned upcoming commitments, which included the creation of a customs, digital and energy union. She referred to the recent legislation adopted to tackle the situation of internally displaced persons

Baroness Sandip VERMA, UK *House of Lords*, defended the European model and wished the UK would retain a strong relation with all Member States following the UK's exist and that workers' rights would be equal regardless of their country of residence; she referred to recent UK commitments on pay-gender parity and harassment rights.

In his replies, Mr HAAG stated that, when drawing up the Social Pillar, the Commission had worked closely with the Council of Europe and experts from the International Labour Organization. He pointed to possible significant, political and legal obstacles to accede to the European Social Charter of the Council of Europe.

He welcomed the consensus on the need to step up efforts in the field of social policies and took note of the diversity of views expressed on practical solutions. He stated that the Single Market should be supported by strong social safety nets. The EU needed to become a convergence engine and the Single Market needed to be based on rules perceived as fair. Regarding implementation of the Social Pillar, Mr HAAG believed this was a challenge for both the European and national level.

Mr Luca JAHIER welcomed the debate and rejected the view that the Social Pillar was mere words; he mentioned the EU treaties' extensive provisions on social Europe. In his view, the Social Pillar was a much-needed political act to establish a balance and perceived consensus between Member States in this field. On the Future of Europe, he mentioned the need to clarify the way forward on the identity of Europe in line with the values of Article 2 TEU and the commitment to achieve a highly competitive social market economy, as provided in Article 3 TEU. On implementation, he mentioned the importance of legal proposals, but also of the European Semester in the framework of which the social scoreboard would become binding. He outlined the key role of the budget, which would indicate a real commitment to deliver on the Social Pillar and its roadmap. He concluded by showing that expenditure in the social sector was a key social investment for building a resilient and solid capacity to be competitive.

6. Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC

- Debate on the draft Contribution and draft Conclusions of the LIX COSAC

Mr VIGENIN informed that the draft Conclusions and Contribution were circulated on Monday 4 June 2018. Since then, the Presidency had received amendments from national Parliaments. He further informed the Chairs that, following the discussion during the Troika meeting on the day before, delegations had received a modified document, as well as the amendments tabled until the deadline of noon of that day. Referring to the guidance with regard to adopting the Contribution and the Conclusions, he underlined that, in those cases where amendments had not been resubmitted on the Troika text, it was considered that consensus was reached.

Mr VIGENIN explained the voting system, reminding participants that each parliaments had two votes with the vote split for bi-cameral parliaments.

Following an animated debate, the draft Conclusions and an amended text of the draft Contribution of the LIX COSAC were agreed upon.

7. Session IV: 'A strong and effective Cohesion Policy post-2020'

Speakers: Mr Tomislav DONCHEV, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria; Ms Dana SPINANT, Director for Budget, Communication and General Affairs, DG REGIO, European Commission; Ms Iskra MIHAYLOVA, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development (REGI) of the European Parliament
Moderator: Ms Milena MILOTINOVA, Journalist, TV host, "Bulgaria ON AIR", Former Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria
Chair: Mr Petar PETROV, Deputy Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*

Mr Petar PETROV, Deputy Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*, noted that Cohesion policy was very important topic to Bulgaria; and expressed his concerns on the new proposal by the Commission to increase the national co-funding, decrease the applicable periods and cut the cost on Cohesion within the EU budget, which would render the programme ineffective. Mr PETROV was of the opinion that such measures would place Member States into a situation where they would have to achieve results with limited resources and more

restrictive rules. Mr PETROV expressed his support for the European Commission proposal making the GDP the main criteria for funding under the Cohesion policy.

Ms Milena MILOTINOVA, journalist, TV host, Former Member of the Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*, introduced the keynote speakers while noting that the Cohesion policy discussion would be one of the important debates in the forthcoming year. Ms MILOTINOVA added that under the Commission's new proposal funding under the Cohesion policy for Bulgaria would increase by 8%. Referring to the difficulties Bulgaria went through during the previous period, Ms MILOTINOVA expressed satisfaction that those problems had been overcome.

Regarding the debate during COSAC Plenary meeting Ms MILOTINOVA expected the main focus to be on the linking the Cohesion policy funding with the Member States' respect for the rule of law.

Mr Tomislav DONCHEV, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria, described the Cohesion policy as one of the core EU policies. Mr. DONCHEV noted that the debate should rather be called the debate on the Future of Europe, as it showed how united the EU would be in finding a solution to Europe's "identity crisis". Mentioning some of the main issues Europe was currently facing, Mr DONCHEV argued that the solution would be a united and common approach to the Union's future. He believed the European project to be a successful one, but stressed the need to find a solution to preserve it. He also emphasized the importance of dialogue with citizens, to whom the role of the Cohesion policy should be further explained. Mr DONCHEV acknowledged the difficulties in making the added -value and the specifics of Cohesion policy understood; yet, in order to gain citizens' support that effort must be undertaken. Mr DONCHEV highlighted the need to simplify the implementation of the policy and found it worrisome that entrepreneurs found it easier to borrow money from banks rather than applying to grants under the EU's financial instruments. Mr DONCHEV stressed that administrative control must be maintained, but that it needed to be smart and efficient, using the appropriate technology. In conclusion, Mr DONCHEV suggested that spending under the funds should be linked up to reforms in various sectors. He expressed hope that in the course of the negotiations, the best ways to reach consensus and compromise would be found.

Ms Dana SPINANT, Director for Budget, Communication and General Affairs, DG REGIO, European Commission, outlined the context in which the European Commission made its proposal for the next Cohesion policy post-2020, agreeing with the fact that the proposal was made in a period which was budgetary and politically challenging, mostly because of the departure of United Kingdom. In this context, Ms SPINANT stated that European Commission made a proposal for a balanced, modern, solid and coherent Cohesion policy, which should help implement the programmes with better results. Among some of the key features of the proposed post-2020 Cohesion policy, Ms SPINANT highlighted that the policy should be targeting all EU regions, with the largest funds being allocated to transition regions or least-developed ones; the policy would thus be better aligned with the political priorities of the European Union, be more flexible, comprising a mid-term review which would allow adapting the investment choices, substantially simplified, and with a greater reliance on the national controls and audits. Ms SPINANT explained that the reason behind the increase of national co-financing had been the need to raise national ownership.

In conclusion, Ms SPINANT stressed the importance of making the joint necessary effort to achieve the agreement on the European Commission's proposal before the European Elections in May 2019, as any delay would mean a very late implementation of the programmes.

Ms Iskra MIHAYLOVA, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development of the European Parliament, noted that the European Parliament had been preparing the position of the upcoming proposals of the European Commission for post-2020 budget from last year. Ms MIHAYLOVA mentioned two resolutions on future MFF proposal and on Own Resources initiative, adopted in the European Parliament by a large majority of the European Parliament. On the content of the proposal, Ms MIHAYLOVA was delighted to

say that the proposals of the Commission were very close to the expectations and the requirements of the European Parliament. Listing some of these expectations, Ms MIHAYLOVA pointed out the need for more flexibility, more citizen-oriented action and more focus on fewer priorities. Ms MIHAYLOVA noted that the legislative package proposed by the European Commission would increase complementarity between financial instruments and give the opportunity to combine cohesion funds with new financial instruments. Ms MIHAYLOVA pointed out that territorial cooperation had been of great importance to the European Parliament, and was delighted to see that collaboration between regions had been strengthened. Ms MIHAYLOVA reassured that the European Parliament was mobilised to start the negotiations as a series of meetings and consultations were currently underway. By the beginning of summer, the European Parliament would have a clear distribution of responsibilities in the different committees, with a list of rapporteurs on legislative files and the list of the committees submitting their opinions. Ms MIHAYLOVA pointed out that the European Parliament would do as much as possible to reach the first reading of the legislative file and to take the discussion up to the next legislative level.

Mr Michiel RIJSBERMAN, Regional Minister of the Province of Flevoland, Rapporteur on European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), started his speech by stressing the role of the debate for the cities and regions. Mr RIJSBERMAN believed the Cohesion policy to be an effective tool to influence citizens of the European Union, even if it sometimes seemed to be outdated and too complicated to understand. Mr RIJSBERMAN was surprised to learn that Cohesion policy was not in the ten priorities presented by the current European Commission. Mr RIJSBERMAN explained how the Committee of the Regions, together with many regions and individuals, had started the Cohesion alliance, representing 97% of the European population, to campaign for the importance of the Cohesion policy. With regard to the new proposal by the Commission, Mr RIJSBERMAN appreciated the effort to make it more flexible and simple. Despite those improvements, Mr RIJSBERMAN pointed out several elements which were of dissatisfaction to the Committee of the Regions, and referred to the detachment of the rural development from the Common Provisions Regulation, the gradual separation of the ESF from the Cohesion policy, the reduction of the European envelope for the European territorial cooperation and the deletion of the INTERREG Europe. Mr RIJSBERMAN also highlighted that, in the proposal, the issue of the European Semester did not properly address the concerns raised, and that the rules of the partnership had not been reinforced. On the total budget, Mr RIJSBERMAN found it worrisome that there was an up to 15% decrease for the Cohesion policy and that up to 10% of the budget might be used on the new instruments by the Member States, to the detriment of cities and regions. Mr RIJSBERMAN stressed the importance of a strong Cohesion policy in order to show citizens that the European Union delivered results. He invited the members of national Parliaments to safeguard the Cohesion policy.

In the following debate, 20 participants took the floor.

The vast majority of speakers underscored the importance of the Cohesion policy as one of the key policies of the European Union.

Mr Simon SUTOUR, French *Sénat,* drew attention to the need to ensure sufficient funding for the Cohesion policy and to remove the counterproductive blockages to implement the projects under the Cohesion policy. He referred to the joint position of the French regions and German *Länder* on the European Semester; he added that the country-based recommendations were addressed to the Member States but carried out by the regions, which meant the respective macroeconomic conditionality could not be a precondition for the spending of structural funds. Mr Markus TÖNS, German *Bundestag*, appreciated the stress on the importance of the regions and Cohesion policy by Mr RIJSBERMAN and restated the need to maintain that focus so that the successful policy could be continued. Ms Regina BASTOS and Ms Margarida MARQUES, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, were of the opinion that the Commission's proposal to decrease the Cohesion policy would be a clear injustice for the poorest regions and felt that Portugal would be affected the most. In their view, the Commission's proposal was not a good starting point for the beginning of negotiations. Mr Maximos CHARAKOPOULOS, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, was also concerned regarding the decrease of the Cohesion policy, namely the decrease in the funds for the Common Agriculture Policy, a sector which had suffered from increases in taxation, cost of insurance, and the

embargo of goods in Greece. He expressed Greece's rejection to any proposal to reduce farm subsidies and limit CAP budget.

Ms Izabela KLOC, Polish *Sejm*; Mr Atis LEJINS, Latvian *Saeima;* and Mr Andrius KUBILIUS, Lithuanian *Seimas,* expressed their willingness to increase the level of national contributions but also expressed their concern with regard to the reduction of the Cohesion policy, stating that the level of financing should remain at an adequate level. Mr KUBILIUS also mentioned the need for safety nets for those countries transitioning from net receivers to contributors. Mr LEJINS pointed out the readiness to increase the Latvian contribution to the security of borders, science and innovation and reduce the direct payments made for the Common Agriculture policy. On the other hand, Mr Bernard DURKAN, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, invited Member States to revise their position on Common Agriculture Policy, as it gave food to 500 million European citizens and European farmers needed support. Mr Angelos VOTSIS, Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, was interested in knowing more about any plans to allocate the possible excesses in some sectors to other areas, if needed.

Mr Rainer ROBRA, German *Bundesrat*, lamented the decrease of the Cohesion policy priorities from 11 to five, as well as the increase of the co-financing rates up to 50%. Mr Adam KALOUS, Czech *Poslanecká sněmovna* reiterated the right for Member States to distribute the funding on the basis of the national priorities and the need for flexibility by Member States when implementing the Cohesion funding. Mr Stefan SCHENNACH, Austrian *Bundesrat*, was overall satisfied with the Commission's proposal but pointed out that Cohesion policy funds have to be maintained at the current level. Mr Gerard CRAUGHWELL, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, stated the need to maintain the Cohesion policy funding at the same level and was grateful that the European Commission continued to fund the peace process in Northern Ireland. Ms Sabine THILLAYE, French *Assemblée nationale*, drew attention to the need of modernizing the Cohesion policy and the eligibility criteria, which, apart from the GDP criteria, should also take into account other indicators like unemployment; low level of education; climate change; and the hosting and registration of migrants.

Ms Simone SUSSKIND, Belgian *Sénat*, raised the importance of communication with citizens in light of the forthcoming European elections.

Some of the participants in the debate used the opportunity to underline the need to link structural funding to the development of the rule of law (Mr Gunther KRICHBAUM, German *Bundestag*, Ms Marie GRANDLUND, Swedish *Riksdag;* Mr. TÖNS; Mr Martinus Van ROOIJEN, Dutch *Tweede Kamer;* Ms THILLAYE; Mr Anne MULDER, Dutch *Tweede Kamer).*

Some of the speakers concentrated on the need to reduce the overall budget (Mr VAN ROOIJEN), stating that the ceiling for expenditures should be 1% and the priority should be given to environment, climate change and jobs and the reduction should come from the Cohesion policy and CAP (Ms GRANDLUND).

In his replies, Mr DONCHEV stated that the legislative package presented by the Commission contained improvements compared to the previous periods, and reminded the participants that the EU allocated between one third and 50% of its spending to the social area, and that in order to maintain that level Europe had to introduce reforms and innovation and play a stronger role in the global scene. Mr. DONCHEV reiterated the need for EU policies to be closer to the citizens, a condition for the survival of the European project. Remedying to current communication deficiency was in his view as important as setting the goals and implementing EU policies.

Mr Michiel RIJSBERMAN welcomed the broad support of parliamentarians for the Cohesion policy. He acknowledged the hard job national leaders would face during the negotiations for the new budget with the aim of reaching a compromise. He was optimistic on the result and reiterated his stance on the need to have a strong position towards regions and cities.

Ms SPINANT pointed out that in light of the variety of positions and remarks made by participants on the Commission's proposal, she could conclude that the Commission presented the right balance with its proposal for the next budgetary term. On the remarks made with relation to cutting the national envelopes,

Ms SPINANT referred to the need to take into account the intensity of aid, as in some countries it was above the EU average. Ms SPINANT stated once more that Cohesion funds must return to the pre-enlargement levels, as Member States from 2004 had already met their investment needs in terms Cohesion funding of infrastructure, environment and transport. On simplification, Ms SPINANT declared that, throughout the Cohesion policy cycle, from planning to programming, management and control, improvement would be tangible. Ms SPINANT added that the obligations for both managing authorities and beneficiaries must be strengthened. She also highlighted the importance of attracting citizens with an overall positive message prior to the European elections with the adoption of the next MFF and Cohesion policy. Ms SPINANT invited the participants to focus in order to achieve an early agreement on the proposals for the next MFF.

Ms Iskra MIHAYLOVA thanked the delegates for their active participation and providing different views on the future of the Cohesion policy. Ms MIHAYLOVA promised to convey to the Regional Development Committee of the European Parliament the comments made during the debate, as they would feed in the negotiation and the preparation of the positions of the European Parliament, with the aim of achieving results with European added value. Concerning the rule of law, Ms MIHAYLOVA was of the opinion that a solution must be found by which the former is respected, while also safeguarding the rights of the final beneficiaries. Ms MIHAYLOVA concluded by referring to the inextricable links between the future of the Cohesion policy and the process of reforms at the European and national level.

8. Session V: 'EU interparliamentary cooperation in the context of the debate on subsidiarity and proportionality'

Speakers: Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice President of the European Commission; Ms Danuta Maria HÜBNER, Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), European Parliament; Mr Bastiaan VAN APELDOORN, Chair of the Standing Committee on European Affairs, Dutch *Eerste Kamer*; Prof. Dr. Jur. Sc. Atanas SEMOV, LL.D., Professor at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Jean Monnet Chair
Moderator: Mr Kiril VALCHEV, Journalist, Host of "The Week" political broadcast, Darik Radio
Chair: Mr Kristian VIGENIN, Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, Bulgarian *Narodno Sabranie*

The Chair opened the session by stating that the debate on subsidiarity and proportionality had enjoyed a new impetus thanks to the work of the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and "Doing Less More Efficiently". He pointed out that five meetings of the Task Force had taken place up until then, and that the report was being finalised. Mr VIGENIN thanked the ten Parliaments/Chambers who had submitted their contributions and pointed out that the debate on this topic should not end with the report of the Task Force but should rather become a long-term process.

Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice-President of the European Commission, assured participants that the Task Force was not a one-time thing and would not end with 15 July, but rather could be seen as an evolution of the current way of working. He further stressed that the goal was not finding a new definition of subsidiarity and proportionality, but rather an increase of the buy-in of national and regional bodies. The First Vice-President called on national Parliaments to further come up with ideas and amendments for the final report that would be reflected in the State of the Union Address to be delivered in September.

Mr TIMMERMANS also underlined that a fundamental debate on competences and a redefinition of the treaties would be a waste of time, and that the Task Force was rather looking at practical solutions to make sure that citizens' ideas and concerns were better reflected. The First Vice-President referred to a number of issues, especially migration and external/internal security that could not be solved by Member States alone but rather on the European level. In these policy areas, change could only be achieved by working together. In conclusion, Mr TIMMERMANS stated that, following the presentation of the report of the

Task Force, work and discussions in the fields of subsidiarity and proportionality would continue during the Austrian and Romanian presidencies.

Ms Danuta Maria HÜBNER, Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), European Parliament, started her address by highlighting the fundamental role of the treaties for the different roles and powers of the institutions, including national Parliaments, in the European legislative process. She further stressed that interinstitutional agreements on better law-making had strongly strengthened the rules, standards and practices concerning subsidiarity and proportionality. Ms HÜBNER added that the European Parliament and national Parliaments had the joint responsibility of ensuring the democratic legitimacy of the process.

Concerning the principle of subsidiarity, Ms HÜBNER, referred to the long history of the principle throughout European integration and stressed that the real challenge was the implementation of subsidiarity by turning it into a practical concept reflecting EU political values; subsidiarity was not about doing what one wanted at local, regional, national and European level, but rather about doing one's part in achieving the common objectives at all levels. She stated that the work of the Task Force was highly appreciated although the format made it impossible for the European Parliament to participate. In this context, MS HÜBNER added that the European Parliament, the European Commission as well as the Council had developed rules and practices to respect subsidiarity from the early stage of legislation onwards, as well as having a joint declaration every year on annual working programme where subsidiarity was given due prominence.

Regarding the early warning system (EWS), Ms HÜBNER highlighted the need for improved dialogue between national Parliaments and European institutions, higher intensity of contacts, better exchange of documents in addition to a better focus of interparliamentary meetings. At the same time, this should not lead to more lengthy legislative processes. She further explained that a more focused dialogue on the future of Europe would make it possible for the EWS to truly focus on subsidiarity rather than serving as the only channel for the comments on the political priorities and future of Europe.

Mr Bastiaan VAN APELDOORN, Chair of the Standing Committee on European Affairs, Dutch Senate, argued that discussions on interparliamentary cooperation in the context of subsidiarity and proportionality were touching the core business of COSAC, stressing that the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality were a necessary condition for the democratic legitimacy of EU governance as decision-making should be as close as possible to the citizens and in proportion to the democratically chosen goals. It was important not to leave all work to the Task Force alone but rather see it as a contribution to work in progress.

Referring to efforts made by COSAC toward bolstering the role of national Parliaments in the EU, especially with regard to the yellow card procedure, he also underlined that there was a need for cooperation with the European Commission with the support of the European Parliament. He welcomed a European Parliament resolution that recognised the obstacles national Parliaments faced but at the same time he also called for concrete measures such as the exclusion of the recess period from the eight weeks deadline to the subsidiarity check.

Mr VAN APELDOORN also criticized the fact that responses of European institutions to actions of national Parliaments often gave the impression that their views were not taken seriously. The Dutch *Eerste Kamer*, like other Parliaments/Chambers, did not issue reasoned opinions very lightly, as it was assumed that the Commission had done its work in deeming a proposal to be in line with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. On the other hand it was also expected from the Commission to assume that national Parliaments had done their work as well, by engaging in an open and proper dialogue with them. He further condemned the long periods of time the Commission took to issue a response and also the fact that no detailed answers were given, whereas governments usually managed to respond within four to six weeks.

In this context EU institutions should not be surprised that on certain proposals a dialogue with the government is often preferred over one with the Commission.

In order to improve relations, Mr VAN APELDOORN said trust would need to be built. That improvement has already started with the increased availability of Commissioners to come to the capitals to explain policy and proposals, and the promise of faster and more detailed replies to reasoned opinions. He further welcomed the proposal made by the Danish delegation to the Task Force for a code of conduct on good and timely response to national Parliaments within the political dialogue. After that eight week period, the main task of national Parliaments in EU decision-making was controlling and scrutinizing their governments during Council negotiations. Mr VAN APELDOORN highlighted the importance of transparency and the work which the Dutch delegation, with the support of many others, had done to put the issue of transparency high on the agenda by thanking those delegates that had attended the successful side session the day before. Parliaments/Chambers should be pro-active because the problem wouldn't go away by itself but needed collective pressure. On that note he recalled that 26 Parliaments/Chambers had signed a letter with four questions on transparency and democratic control and had sent it to the presidents of the European institutions, but had not received any point-by-point answer from the Council until now.

Mr VAN APELDOORN concluded by saying that national Parliaments could be more effective in influencing EU decision-making if a more collective approach were to be adopted. For instance, national Parliaments could share priority lists as well as information as clusters of interest on specific topics or as national rapporteurs: at the start of the eight week period Parliaments/Chambers could exchange information through IPEX and through the permanent representatives in Brussels. He further pointed out that Parliaments/Chambers needed to continue to strive for an EU decision-making in which national Parliaments could play their key role to ensure that EU governance was democratically legitimate and in line with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

Prof. Atanas SEMOV, Professor at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Jean Monnet Chair, started his keynote speech by pointing out that the main principle of the EU was to take decisions closer to the citizens; an objective that should be achieved through the principle of subsidiarity. Having said that he proclaimed the need to ask ourselves if that main principle was being followed and more importantly if citizens agreed and stopped thinking that Brussels was too far away. He further stressed that to better understand the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality the European Union, as well as the national Parliaments, had to insist on the principle of legitimate trust and legitimate confidence, meaning trust in democracy. People have to trust the EU legislation to be their own and not Brussels legislation.

Prof. SEMOV welcomed the report on the achievements of the Bulgarian presidency on enhancing the legitimacy of Europe, especially in light of the upcoming European Parliament's elections. He stressed that the debate on the budget and the financing of European parties was not enough and that the principle of proportionality had to be enforced as institutions still took measures that went beyond what was necessary. The feeling of overregulation by Brussels was especially dominant when looking at the Dublin regulation and the GDPR.

Prof. SEMOV pointed out that everybody knew that efficiency was a corner stone of subsidiarity. The new mechanism of prior consultations with national Parliaments had led to drafts submitted by the Commission which were much more in line with the principle of subsidiarity. Nevertheless, reactions by national Parliaments were still lacking, and in cases where there had been a reaction, the Commission did not pay enough attention. Prof. SEMOV concluded by questioning whether three yellow cards in 11 years were enough.

Twenty participants took the floor during the ensuing debate.

Mr Jean BIZET, French *Sénat*, stated that Brexit should be an opportunity to rethink how the EU operated and the way it dealt with subsidiarity. The subsidiarity principle should not be confused with a limited vision of sovereignty. Regular usage of subsidiarity had led to a better understanding of the concept itself and the commission should be more reactive to national Parliaments and justify any use of legislative tools. He added that monitoring delegated and implemented acts was essential and the orange card system should be further considered. Mr Jaroslaw OBREMSKI, Polish *Senat*, stated that the deadline for the yellow card was too short, a sentiment echoed by Ms Sabine THILLAYE, French *Assemblée nationale*, proposed to extend the current eight weeks deadline to a 12 weeks deadline to have enough time for proper analysis and coordination. She lamented the fact that the subsidiarity check was very often abused to express political disagreement, and such replies should therefore be formalised accordingly as part of the political dialogue. The Commission should be required to respond in a reasonable period and its reply should be made public. He was glad Mr TIMMERMANS had declared his openness in dealing with the issue, and hoped the Commission would turn into a real partner. Mr OBREMSKI stressed that the green card and red cards needed to be truly considered, while he also claimed that he had a lot of respect for the Task Force. Mr Peter LUYKX, Belgian *Chambre des représentants*, welcomed the launch of the Task Force, as well as the involvement of local and regional governments in the EU. The key to the subsidiarity issue lay in increasing the role played by the regions. Mr LUYKX reminded the participants that the EU was a network of Member States and regions, so dialogue with the latter was necessary. He lamented the fact that Europe was silent about the arrests of Catalan politicians.

Mr Hans-Peter PORTMANN, Swiss *National Council*, pointed out that Switzerland was a reliable partner in promoting democracy, rule of law, human rights and prosperity in Europe and the world and that it participated on a voluntary basis in the EU resettlement programmes and in the European asylum support office. It had contributed close to 30 billion euros to the EU infrastructure and numerous projects and was the third most important trading partner of the Union. Mr PORTMANN further underlined that 1.4 million EU citizens lived in Switzerland and that Europe was not only the EU. Therefore, participation as guests in COSAC meetings was very much appreciated. Mr PORTMANN suggested that COSAC open its agenda to partnership issues.

Mr Arunas GELUNAS, Lithuanian *Seimas*, questioned whether Brussels had too much power and whether Member States' views were taken into consideration when revising legislation. The principles of subsidiarity and proportionality could become a powerful tool of manipulation in the hands of populists. National Parliaments expected their views to be taken into consideration when legislation was revised. Dialogue must be strengthened, especially through the use of the green card. Ms Maria Luis ALBUQUERQUE, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, welcomed the timely discussion and noted that Parliaments/Chambers expressed similar concerns. The main concern, however, should be to consolidate the Union in order to better fight populism and learn to manage citizens' expectations of what Europe could do for them. Parliaments had a responsibility to defend the EU. Mr Bernard DURKAN, Irish *House of Oireachtas*, supported the work of the Task Force. He stated that the sharing of sovereignty has always been an important and sensitive issue but it should be looked at as complementary to each other's sovereignty. Populism was the biggest threat at the moment in this regard, and parliamentarians should engage in that debate.

Ms Margarida MARQUES, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, welcomed both the Task Force and the discussion about it and raised the question of whether the Commission planned to carry out an evaluation of contributions by national Parliaments. She also stressed that a communication strategy was needed to dispel of myths about Brussels. Mr Christian BUCHMANN, Austrian *National Council*, thanked Vice-President TIMMERMANS for the pragmatic approach shown towards the Task Force. When it came to solving the main issues such as migration, external borders, completing the internal market, digitalization Member States and regions needed to maintain a level of high competence in these areas while also ensuring that gold plating was avoided. Powers should remain within the regions and the EU should tackle the overarching issues, he added.

Ms Pia KAUMA, Finnish *Eduskunta*, stated that the importance of subsidiarity and proportionality may be overstated. In the *Eduskunta*'s experience, breaches of these principles were quite rare. She suggested that the best way to address the concerns of national Parliaments was to ensure policy coordination between Parliaments/Chambers and governments before Council meetings. That would require more transparency in Council decision-making. On doing less more efficiently, Ms KAUMA was of the opinion that the Juncker Commission had shown the correct way forward, and stressed that when it came to EU legislative proposals, the reason why action at EU level provided added value had to be demonstrated.

Mr Rasmus NORDQVIST, Danish *Folketing*, said that it was important to understand that the discussion was as much about subsidiarity as it was about the dynamics between the European and national institutions. The Danish Parliament had put forward a number of ideas that hopefully the Task Force would look into, including a new green card for national Parliaments, as well as an enhanced yellow and orange card procedure and that was not just limited to subsidiarity. The Commission should be looking towards national Parliaments and their opinions. He also referred to a proposed code of conduct. With regard to transparency, he called for more access to documents from the Council and hoped to hear more about the work of the Task Force. Ms THILLAYE suggested that National Parliaments ought to be able to call on the EU to legislate, and in this regard she proposed that there was a right of initiative: a third of Parliaments/Chambers would thus be able to oblige the Commission to write a reasoned reply if it chose not to follow up on the former's demands, and half of all national Parliaments would oblige it to table a proposal within one year.

Mr Gerard P. CRAUGHWELL, Irish *Houses of Oireachtas*, complimented Mr TIMMERMANS for his work on the Task Force and the level of cooperation and discussion shown. He called for a "marketing programme" for Europe and bringing responsibility down to the local authorities. Mr CRAUGHWELL was clear with regard to treaty changes, saying it was imperative to do nothing to cause a treaty change of any sort as he feared what referenda could do to the European project.

Mr Vaclav HAMPL, Czech *Senát*, welcomed the expressed determination for continuity, and praised the Commission for setting up the Task Force. COSAC had been discussing the need for concrete projects for a number of years. A number of technical projects had been proposed but the more important ideas focused on the fact that if a yellow card was issued then there must be a tangible effect. This need would not mean that national Parliaments had more power but rather ensure that they improved democratic legitimacy and the perception thereof by the European citizens. Furthermore, the Commission should reply concretely to yellow cards.

Ms Izabela KLOC, Polish *Sejm,* said the main goal should be the democratic renewal of the European Union. Integration should be founded upon the needs of the sovereign Member States. The European project could not be detached from democratic national communities, European law could not be the beyond the impact of national Parliaments. She agreed with Mr VAN APELDOORN that the yellow card was not efficient at all and that national Parliaments had zero impact on the legislative work in Brussels, with the directive on posted workers being a perfect example.

Mr Kelvin HOPKINS, UK *House of Commons*, was certain of friendly cooperation between the UK and the EU.

Mr VIGENIN replied, hoping that the UK would at least be able to participate in future events.

Mr Piotr APEL, Polish *Sejm,* expressed dismay that people were afraid of democratic tools like referenda. The key question therefore was whether the EU was heading towards the direction of democracy or technocracy. He urged colleagues to deal with the problem of convincing citizens, as it was important to make people feel well about the EU, and not be afraid of referenda.

Mr Jaak MADISON, Estonian *Riigikogu*, said the Task Force was a step in the right direction, and thanked the Czech *Senát* for concrete proposals on how to reform the EU and ensure more transparency and also thanked Austrian colleagues. He stated that "doing less more efficiently" was a "copy and paste" example, directly from the Juncker proposed scenarios, and that it was a pity that other scenarios from the Juncker proposal had not been discussed, as it seemed that whereas Mr JUNCKER had suggested five, he had only picked one. He lamented the fact that the red card had disappeared because of Brexit, and hoped it would find its way in the Task Force report.

Mr Toomas VITSUT, Estonian *Riigikogu*, expressed thanks to the Chair for a constructive atmosphere at COSAC and urged colleagues to do as much as possible and as little as necessary.

Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, European Parliament, said her job was to have a dialogue with national Parliaments. She stressed how all parliamentarians were elected by citizens and that there was much in common between MPs and MEPs, and how citizens were sceptical about politics. Parliamentarians had a duty to defend their profession and played an important role in democracy. She further expressed dismay on how subsidiarity was sometimes seen as a way to stop Brussels rather than a tool for progress.

Prof SEMOV noted the commitment everybody had towards improving the mechanism of control in implementing the subsidiarity and proportionality principles. He was not sure that extending the deadline would be the solution, however, and that the Commission should be more sensitive when national Parliaments expressed certain concerns, even when they did not reach the thresholds.

Mr VAN APELDOORN welcomed the good debate showing lots of agreement on ways forward. However, he disagreed with the Portuguese colleague, especially when it came to the "myth of democratic deficit", which was no myth at all, but rather a very real feeling felt by many citizens. This was partly because of transparency, or rather the lack of it: citizens needed better access to information. In this regard, he thanked the Czech and Danish delegations for their support on transparency. Mr VAN APELDOORN suggested that the Green card be explored more in COSAC.

Mr TIMMERMANS warned against blaming Brussels for all things bad, while taking credit for all things good, and stressed that subsidiarity should not be abused. It was not an instrument to influence policies that were not welcome by national Parliaments. The directive on posted workers was after all done through an agreement at the Council level. Citizens were worried about their future, especially given certain developments like the fourth industrial revolution. Mr TIMMERMANS stressed that sovereignty was not just the power of stopping things but also the power to shape things. The only way to materialise sovereignty was through collective responsibility.

9. Adoption of the Contribution and Conclusions of the LIX COSAC

The texts of the Contribution and Conclusions of the LIX COSAC were unanimously adopted with no amendment.

After thanking the organisers of the meeting and the participants, Mr VIGENIN gave the floor to Mr BUCHAMANN who informed the delegations about the upcoming meeting of the COSAC Chairpersons in Vienna on 8-9 June 2018, as well as the LX COSAC on 18-20 November 2018.

Mr BUCHAMANN thanked the Chair and the Bulgarian Presidency for the organisation of the LIX COSAC and for the hospitality. He informed participants that the slogan for the Austrian Presidency would be "A Europe that protects". He was aware that Brexit would need to be addressed during COSAC, and so would the Multiannual Financial Framework. The Austrian delegation looked forward to welcoming delegates to Vienna in July and in November.

Mr VIGENIN then closed the conference.