

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHAIRPERSONS OF COSAC
Berlin, Germany, 14 September 2020
(held via videoconference)

AGENDA:

- 1. Opening of the meeting**
 - Welcome address by **Dr Dietmar WOIDKE**, President of the German *Bundesrat*
 - Introductory remarks by **Mr Guido WOLF**, Chairman of the Committee on European Union Questions of the *Bundesrat*, German *Bundesrat*
- 2. Adoption of the agenda of the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC**
- 3. Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters**
 - Briefing on the results of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC
 - Letters received by the Presidency
 - Topics and organisational aspects of the LXIV COSAC
 - Procedural issues
- 4. Report by the German Federal Government on the priorities of the German Presidency**
Keynote speaker: Mr Heiko MAAS, Federal Foreign Minister of Germany
- 5. Dealing with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and lessons learned**
Keynote speaker: Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, Executive Vice-President of the EU Commission for a European Green Deal

PROCEEDINGS

IN THE CHAIR: Mr Guido WOLF, Chairman of the Committee on European Union Questions of the *Bundesrat*, German *Bundesrat*; and Mr Gunther KRICHBAUM, Chairman of the Committee on European Union Affairs of the German *Bundestag*

1. Opening of the meeting

- Welcome address by **Dr Dietmar WOIDKE**, President of the German *Bundesrat*
- Introductory Remarks by **Mr Guido WOLF**, Chairman of the Committee on European Questions of the *Bundesrat*, German *Bundesrat*

Mr Guido WOLF, Chairman of the Committee on European Union Questions of the German *Bundesrat*, opened the meeting. He thanked the preceding Croatian Presidency held under the unprecedented circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic and expressed his gratitude to Mr Domagoj MILOŠEVIĆ, former Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, for his commitment. Mr WOLF then gave the floor to Dr Dietmar WOIDKE, President of the German *Bundesrat*, to deliver his welcome address.

Dr WOIDKE welcomed participants to the meeting and emphasized the importance of the COSAC Chairpersons Meeting as a platform for inter-parliamentary exchange, especially against the background of the ongoing pandemic. He noted that 3 October 2020 marked the 30th anniversary of the German reunification, an event which illustrated that only a unified Europe was a strong Europe. He explained that the European principles of unity and diversity were important to the work of the German *Bundesrat*, the second legislative organ in the Federal Republic of Germany next to the German *Bundestag*. The President concluded by stressing the need to take responsibility and work together at a European level, in line with the slogan of the German EU Council Presidency: "Together for Europe's recovery".

Mr WOLF also welcomed his colleagues and congratulated the newly appointed Chairs among the participants: Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, and Mr Dario STEFANO, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*. He congratulated Ms Mairead McGUINNESS on her nomination as EU Commissioner-Designate for Financial Stability, Financial Services and the Capital Markets Union. He thanked Ms McGUINNESS for her work within the COSAC platform and gave her the floor.

Ms McGUINNESS thanked the Chairpersons and the team at the European Parliament for the good collaboration. She said that working well together was even more important during a pandemic: it had to be assured that parliaments could continue their essential work despite that challenge. National Parliaments were also going to be vital in ensuring the passing of the Recovery Fund which needed to be ratified by the national Parliaments. She emphasised the importance of the role of national Parliaments given their closeness to European citizens.

2. Adoption of the agenda for the Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC

Mr WOLF presented the draft agenda of the COSAC Chairpersons' meeting, which was approved without amendment.

3. Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters

- **Briefing on the results of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC**
- **Letters received by the Presidency**
- **Topics and organisational aspects of the LXIV COSAC**
- **Procedural issues**

Mr Gunther KRICHBAUM, Chairman of the Committee on European Union Affairs of the German *Bundestag*, referred to the Presidential Troika meeting that had taken place on 13 July 2020 via videoconference, during which the Troika had decided to adhere to the Rules of Procedure and the interpretation of the provisions agreed to in 2005 by inviting candidate countries and, in the case of other non-EU Member States, only those delegations affected by the discussion and subjects of the meeting. Furthermore, an invitation did not automatically grant the right to take the floor given the limited speaking time available.

Mr KRICHBAUM referred to the letters received by the Presidency, whereby a number of Parliaments/Chambers had requested to participate during the COSAC meeting(s). For this particular meeting, the delegations of Switzerland, Norway and Iceland had been invited as they were members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and partly of the European Economic Area (EEA) and because a session dedicated to the immediate repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic was on the agenda. Georgia had also requested to participate in the Chairpersons Meeting, but had not been invited for the above-mentioned reasons due to the lack of a direct thematic connection to the measures taken on European Union level. The United Kingdom had been invited in line with its financial commitments and contribution to COSAC previously agreed to and lasting till the end of the same year.

Mr KRICHBAUM further referred to the letter from the Presidency on the LXIV COSAC Plenary sent to the COSAC Chairpersons on 10 September 2020. He said that even in the event that attending the meeting in person was possible at the end of the year, the German *Bundestag* could not welcome the usual 350 participants due to restrictions related to the pandemic. At best, it would be possible to host a limited number of 3-4 participants per delegation in Berlin, with the intention of making the meeting available by means of videoconference to those unable to travel. For the same reasons the

language regime had to be limited. For the virtual part it would possibly be only English. It was decided to hold the meeting as an Extraordinary Chairpersons Meeting.

Mr KRICHBAUM referred to the main topics on the agenda: review of the German Presidency with German Federal Chancellor, Ms Angela MERKEL, exchange on the future of Europe with President of the European Commission, Ms Ursula von der LEYEN (tbc), lessons learned and Cooperation in the EU in the event of pandemics and in health care, with Mr Jens SPAHN, German Federal Minister of Health (tbc) and Mr Andrea AMMON, Director of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. In parallel, break-out sessions on the reinvigoration of the European economy, especially in view of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the subtopics "Environmental and Climate Protection" and "Digital Change" would to be discussed in-depth, followed by a session on the EU's partnership with Africa with the former Federal President of Germany, Mr Horst KÖHLER. One time-slot had been reserved in order to be able to debate a topical matter of current particular interest to be named at short notice.

Mr KRICHBAUM reminded participants of the questionnaire related to the 34th Biannual Report, sent on 24 July 2020. Deadline for replies to the questionnaire was 25 September 2020. In addition, he announced that several informal exchanges were going to take place. The Chairpersons of COSAC had been invited to an exchange with EU Chief Negotiator, Michel BARNIER on 17 September and presumably on 1 October with Executive Vice-President of the European Commission, Margrethe VESTAGER. A meeting with Commissioner for Justice Didier REYNDERS on the Rule of Law was planned for the end of October.

4. Report by the German Federal Government on the priorities of the German Presidency

Keynote speaker: Mr Heiko MAAS, Federal Foreign Minister of Germany

Mr Guido WOLF, Chairman of the Committee on European Union Questions, German *Bundesrat*, gave the floor to Mr MAAS, Federal Foreign Minister of Germany, to present the priorities of the German Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Mr MAAS noted that the programme of the German Presidency had initially been planned before the virus outbreak. Despite the pandemic, to which there had been a quick and responsive response, he stressed that the German Presidency did not wish to be a purely corona-crisis Presidency, as there were policy areas in which decisions were imperative, notwithstanding the pandemic crisis. Therefore, work was being done on several issues and open dossiers as the German Presidency tried to pave the way for the Portuguese and Slovenian Presidencies. He emphasised that finding a consensus on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and its sectoral programmes was the key priority of the German Presidency. Mr MAAS stated that the agreement of the European Council of 21 July 2020 on the MFF and the recovery plan was a historic and very important moment for the EU and its citizens, because it proved that the EU acted in solidarity when it mattered. He informed the parliamentarians that the negotiations with the European Parliament in this area had started at the end of August and that the intention was to conclude them as soon as possible, despite the known difficulties.

Mr MAAS referred to the negotiations between the European Union and the United Kingdom as a second major priority of the German Presidency. He expressed his concern about what would happen as of January 2021 and noted that the Internal Market Bill proposed by the UK Government would undermine the Northern Ireland Protocol, and would constitute a violation of international law. Mr MAAS informed participants that the 8th round of EU-UK negotiations had taken place the week before and dealt with very important areas such as competition and fisheries, but no concrete progress had been achieved. He reassured the parliamentarians that under the leadership of Mr Michel

BARNIER, EU Chief Negotiator, the EU was still aiming at retaining close relations with the United Kingdom, but was also preparing for a no-deal scenario at the end of the transitional period, including contingency plans.

Mr MAAS also introduced the other priorities for the German Presidency, that included the green recovery and digital transition of the EU, and stressed the importance of maintaining digital sovereignty and the importance in this respect of the EU's relations with China and the United States, also in view of shaping democratic processes. He also referred to the migration and asylum policies, an area where Member States had diverging views. He welcomed, in this respect, the European Commission proposals expected in late September and expressed his hope that the German Presidency would be able to make progress in this area, also as means of preparation for the Portuguese Presidency. Similarly, Mr MAAS stated that he looked forward to the discussions in the Council on the first Commission report on the Rule of Law and encouraged national Parliaments to use the opportunity to discuss the report which would be available in September.

With regard to EU Foreign Policy, he stressed the need to act together as a Union, stating that this was one of the priorities of the German Presidency. He mentioned as examples the situation in Belarus, the relations with Turkey and the situation in Lebanon. He highlighted that the German Presidency would pay attention to the situation between Turkey and Greece and Cyprus, build the foundations in the next European Council to prevent escalation of the situation and use all available mechanisms to reach a diplomatic solution. In addition, the Minister shared his concerns with respect to China and the situation in Xinjiang and in Hong Kong, referring to the concurrent discussions on trade, economic relations and human rights issues being held between the EU leaders and the President of the People's Republic of China. Mr MAAS stated that the German Presidency was also very keen to deepen the relations with Africa and was seeking to organize a summit meeting with the African Union to define a common strategy for the coming years. Finally, with respect to Western Balkans, he expressed his support for the accession process for Albania and North Macedonia and said that the German Presidency wanted to create an adequate basis for the future Presidencies to make concrete progress.

During the debate that followed, 13 speakers took the floor. In their interventions, parliamentarians expressed overall their support for the German priorities and praised the ambition shown by the Presidency. Also many of the speakers wished good success to Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, outgoing First Vice-President of the European Parliament in charge of national Parliaments, in light of her nomination as EU Commissioner-Designate.

A number of speakers referred to the EU's relations in the international context and commented on the current geopolitical situation and on the EU's relations with third countries. Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Austrian *Nationalrat*, congratulated the German Presidency for the interventions with respect to Belarus, tensions between Turkey and Greece and Cyprus and the poisoning of Russian opposition politician and activist, Alexei Navalny. Ms Gabriela CREȚU, Romanian *Senat*, noted that multilateralism was fundamental and called for the German Presidency and the High Representative to work towards eliminating Member States' divide and for redefining common positions towards China and Russia. She also questioned the ability of post-war international organisations to adapt to today's challenges and specifically asked about the German position in view of a World Trade Organization (WTO) reform. Mr Gediminas KIRKILAS, Lithuanian *Seimas*, stressed the important role of the EU as a global actor and called for concrete action to help Belarus towards a democratic process, in particular to fight repression of citizens and media and to organise new democratic elections. In this regard, he informed the Chairs of a draft letter he had prepared and that he would distribute after the meeting for co-signing, and asked for their support. Mr Dimitrios KAIRIDIS, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, focused on Turkey and described the behaviour of Turkey's President as

provocative and aggressive. Besides the tension created in the Eastern Mediterranean, Mr KAIRIDIS listed some examples, such as the Turkish decisions about Hagia Sofia and Turkish interference in Syria, in Libya and in Israel as well as Turkish support of Alexander Lukashenko and Nicolás Maduro and finally asked the German Presidency to explain how this behaviour from a candidate country could be reconciled with what the EU represented.

The agreement in the European Council in July 2020 on the recovery plan was praised by a number of participants who agreed that this was a historic move achieved during the German Presidency. However, Ms Dita CHARANZOVÁ, European Parliament, noted that Members of the European Parliament could not accept the European Council's political agreement on the 2021-2027 MFF as it stood, as flagship programmes were at risk of not being allocated adequate funds. The European Parliament would therefore be prepared to withhold consent. Both Ms CHARANZOVÁ and Mr Dragomir STOYNEV, Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*, highlighted the importance of the new own resources decision and underlined that in some cases this had to be ratified by the national Parliaments of the Member States by the end of the year. Ms CHARANZOVÁ called on the Council Presidency to invest in supporting a smooth ratification process in the different Member States. On his part, Mr STOYNEV thanked the Chairs who had already signed the letter he had previously proposed, addressed to the President of the European Commission regarding the active involvement of the national Parliaments of the Member States in the drafting procedure for the regional recovery and resilience plans and the territorial just transition plans. Ms Emmanuela ROSSINI, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, laid great emphasis on the need to finalise the legal acts for the recovery funds to allow the national plans to be put in place in a timely fashion. Ms Satu HASSI, Finnish *Eduskunta*, who in her intervention focused specifically on the topic of climate protection as a top EU priority, expressed her wish that the decisions on the recovery package would be soon finalised and drew the attention to the fact that these funds would allow for big investments to support the green goals and climate law and to enable climate neutrality. Ms HASSI urged the EU to be ambitious on this.

The Conference on the Future of Europe (the Conference) was another topic addressed by some speakers, including Mr LOPATKA, Ms CHARANZOVÁ and Mr Richárd HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*. Both Mr LOPATKA and Ms CHARANZOVÁ called for the Conference to start its work as soon as possible. While Mr HÖRCSIK informed about relevant discussions currently taking place in Hungary and Mr LOPATKA stated that the Austrian parliamentarians asked the Austrian government to promote the involvement and role of national Parliaments in the Conference, which must produce substantial results and ensure the adequate participation of national Parliaments. Ms CHARANZOVÁ reminded that the three institutions have to work together towards a Joint Declaration to define the concept, structure, scope, timing and objectives of the Conference. She enquired about the concrete steps envisaged by the German Presidency in order to move on with the mandate for the Conference.

Other topics that participants addressed, and as particularly stressed by Ms ROSSINI, included the digital transition, social cohesion and the need to review internal regulatory frameworks in order to be able to respond to global challenges; the accession processes of Albania and North Macedonia, where Mr HÖRCSIK called for more attention to be paid to these candidate countries, and the migration and asylum policy. Mr Joris BACKER, Dutch *Eerste Kamer*, expressed his concern about the ability of FRONTEX to face the responsibilities they have, also in light of the latest incidents in the Greek islands and called on the German Presidency to make concrete progress in this area. Mr Marko POGAČNIK, Slovenian *Državni zbor*, drew attention to the High Level interparliamentary conference on migration and asylum organised with the Parliaments of the Trio Presidency in November 2020. He further referred to the Declaration signed by the Parliaments of the Presidency Trio, as an important confirmation that the Parliaments shared common goals. Ms Sabine

THILLAYE, French *Assemblée nationale*, elaborated on the topic of the rule of law and called Member States to hold a fair dialogue on this, while warning that not respecting the rule of law inside the EU would affect the Union's international credibility.

Finally, Lord KINNOULL, UK *House of Lords*, expressed his hope that a mutually beneficial agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union could still be reached, and reassured colleagues that his Committee would respect international law and work hard to mend any damaged relations.

In his replies, Mr MAAS emphasised that the German Presidency was working intensively on a Joint Declaration for the Conference on the Future of Europe with the intention of starting the Conference during the German Presidency. He agreed that national Parliaments had a crucial role to play in this respect and that the civil society had to be involved as well. Mr MAAS laid particular emphasis on the topics of the Conference. He stated, for example, that social issues, such as the discussion on minimum wage, would play a major role and that discussions on such topics could provide an opportunity for the EU to restore the proximity between the EU and the people and to correct the impression harboured by some citizens, especially created during the financial crisis, that the EU only looks after large corporations. He also agreed that the MFF and own resources decisions are linked in the discussions and that the German Presidency was focusing on the negotiations. With respect to the role of the EU in the international environment and multilateralism, Mr MAAS admitted that the reality is that there are many developments around various regions of the world, such as the worrisome situation in Belarus and the tensions between Turkey and Greece and Cyprus. But he assured participants that the German Presidency was working on a concrete position for the EU and possible sanctions in the case of Belarus and towards a common EU position on Turkey, to be sought in the forthcoming European Council of 24 September. In this respect, the Minister stated that the EU could not accept that Turkey pushes borders unilaterally. Finally, with respect to climate protection, he stressed that although a lot of businesses had been hit by the pandemic, there was also an opportunity for restructuring and for promoting new tools and emphasised that he looked forward to relevant proposals coming from the European Commission. He thanked everyone for the support shown to the German Presidency and concluded that it was important to have ambitious goals even while recovering from the crisis.

Mr WOLF concluded the debate by thanking Mr MAAS and promised to pass on to the Minister the comments and questions that were made when the Minister was no longer present.

5. Dealing with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and lessons learned

Keynote speaker: Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, Executive Vice-President for the European Green Deal, European Commission

Mr Gunther KRICHBAUM, Chair of the EU Affairs Committee, German *Bundestag*, gave the floor to Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, Executive Vice-President for the European Green Deal, European Commission.

Mr Frans TIMMERMANS began his intervention by underlining the crucial role of parliaments at this stage in the recovery phase, both with regard to the translation of the decisions by the European Council into concrete measures, requiring ratification in national Parliaments, and the establishment of national programmes as quickly as possible and by 15 October, to enable the launch of the plans as soon as possible.

He noted that even before the pandemic, the European Commission was aware that the future would be based on a different growth strategy and therefore the European Green Deal was developed. A combination of challenges, such as the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis, the industrial

revolution and quickly changing international relations, meant that there was a need to restructure how society and economies were organised.

Mr TIMMERMANS stated that before the pandemic there was still a choice as regards the implementation of the green recovery and taking decisions regarding restructuring and investment, but the pandemic had changed that completely. The pandemic has provided a unique opportunity to mobilise finances to invest in recovery towards the economy of the future and parliaments' role was critical in this regard.

He continued by arguing that repeating the mistakes of the previous crisis, with money channelled to sectors of the economy that were struggling but had no future, would do a huge disservice to the society and especially to future generations by loading extra debt on their shoulders, while at the same time not delivering on a resilient and future-proof economy and society. Therefore, the Green Deal was the growth strategy, while the recovery would have to be based on the necessity to ascertain that the investments made actually delivered a resilient and future-proof economy with new and better jobs and, at the same time, ensured that no one was left behind.

Mr TIMMERMANS noted that because of a combination of challenges which included the pandemic, the climate crisis, the biodiversity crisis, the industrial revolution and geopolitical changes, our societies would change regardless of whether action was taken or not. The choice was therefore between being masters of such a transition or having the transition imposed. He stressed the importance of reinventing and redistributing within societies in order to create a just and fair society where nobody was left behind, underscoring the necessity to act immediately, as there would not be another opportunity in the near future to mobilise this amount of funds for restructuring and recovery, and underlined the absolute need for commitment and support from the national Parliaments. On the other hand, he reassured participants that the European Commission was open to a dialogue with the national Parliaments and the national governments.

Mr TIMMERMANS concluded by expressing his firm belief that if Europe took the lead and showed that was able to bring about climate neutrality by 2050, other parts of the world would follow, since the consequences of the climate crisis were being felt everywhere and everybody would need to adapt. He emphasised that what is at stake is whether the EU could remain in the lead or whether it would be led by others without being able to shape its own future.

In the following debate, 11 speakers took the floor, with a vast majority of them welcoming the measures the European Union had taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ms Dita CHARANZOVÁ, Vice-President of the European Parliament, began by acknowledging that the European Commission was confronted at the beginning of its term with one of the most dramatic crises in the history of the European Union, which had made it clear that cooperation and solidarity was the only way towards a stronger Union and a successful recovery. She stressed that the COVID-19 crisis had made the President von der LEYEN's Commission priorities for green and digital transformation even more important and underlined the need to support these priorities with adequate financing. The crisis had showed that fast transformation was possible, as experienced in the realm of digitalisation, with schools switching to e-learning, shops shifting to online sale etc. Ms CHARANZOVÁ concluded by underlining the role of the Conference on the Future of Europe in the post COVID-19 crisis lessons learning process, emphasising the need for involvement of citizens and a bottom-up approach. She called for in-depth reflection on how to become more effective and democratic as a Union.

Mr Bojan KEKEC, Slovenian *Državni svet*, welcomed the German Presidency priorities and noted that the German Presidency was taking place at a very important time for further development of the European Union. He noted that Slovenia would face these challenges during its Presidency in the second half of 2021. Speaking of the COVID-19 pandemic, he underlined the need to learn from this crisis and prepare better for the future, while pointing out the current shortcomings, namely the

inability to quickly respond to key challenges and crises as well as the lack of relevant strategic assessment and forecast.

Ms Felicia GAUDIANO, Italian *Senat*, began by noting that the pandemic had revolutionised the way life and work were conducted and had boosted the use of digital tools in everyday life. At the same time, the pandemic caused many enterprises to go bankrupt since they could not go online, for example in the transport sector, catering, clothing, and tourist industry. On the other hand, sectors which were able to use new technologies and go online had seen increases in their revenues. Therefore, the balance between the need to ensure maximum safety of people through smart working and the need to ensure employment in the strategic sectors of EU Member States had to be achieved, and it was necessary to reflect on the economic and personal costs of this new way of work which had direct impact on the vital sectors of European economies.

Mr Constantinos EFSTATHIOU, Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, stated that the pandemic had proved that the model on which societies and economies were built during the last 20 years needed to change, and national parliamentarians had to be involved in the process. Referring to the current situation in Belarus and Turkey's aggression towards Greece and Cyprus, Mr EFSTATHIOU underlined that the European Union had to be rigid towards anyone who infringed European principles.

Ms Annika QARLSSON, Swedish *Riksdagen*, considered that an open internal market and fewer restrictions at the borders were needed for the recovery of the European economy and the creation of a more resilient Europe, as the exchanges between the Member States was beneficial to all, adding that Sweden strongly believed that the European Union should return to this state as soon as possible and open internal borders.

Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, underlined that movement of goods, services and people had to be preserved as much as possible, and while it was understandable that some Member States feared the spread of COVID-19, he stressed that closure of borders should be a last resort response to the pandemic. More coordinated strategies and responses were needed for battling the COVID-19. Furthermore, the economies of some Member States were heavily dependent on tourism and closing the borders would have more economic repercussions in the European Union that could be seen from the present perspective.

Mr Richárd HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, was of the opinion that since the outbreak of the pandemic, the most important task had been to save lives and protect the most vulnerable. He reported on the current situation regarding the COVID-19 in Hungary, where the school and academic year began in September, and noted that most citizens had access to protective equipment, while maintaining social distance remained crucial. Regarding the economic recession caused by the pandemic, the Hungarian Government and the National Assembly had adopted rapid and effective measures, including tax concessions and a general moratorium on loan payments to protect jobs. Despite the harsh criticism, the Hungarian response to the pandemic was successful. Mr HÖRCSIK stressed that, in the past six months, Hungary faced a sort of coordinated political attack, ripe with misleading information. In conclusion, he referred to the recent border control issue, where since September foreign nationals were not allowed to enter Hungary, with exception of transit, diplomatic and business trips and emphasised that, as a consequence, the Hungarian measures did not block but rather guaranteed the smooth operation of the economy.

Ms Emanuela ROSSINI, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, referring to the lessons learned from the pandemic, underlined the need for a more coordinated action by each Member State on the European level, and for a joint response to the health crisis. Each Member State should seize the opportunity and develop an effective national recovery plan. Many key sectors required a European coordinated action, for example innovation technology, energy, transport, infrastructure, and the transition to a sustainable production. She welcomed the idea of integrating the new own resources in the EU budget in order to reduce pressure on national contributions and increase trust in achieving strategic reform

targets in the long-term perspective. She concluded by welcoming the launch of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Mr Jean BIZET, French *Sénat*, welcomed the measures the European Union had taken in response to COVID-19 pandemic, emphasising their importance for the survival of the European Union. He expressed concerns for a range of EU measures taken, as a response to the economic and health crisis, that could create potential distortions of competition, for example in the area of state aid in the fields of energy or the environment.

Ms Rudina HAJDARI, Albanian *Kuvendi*, thanked the COSAC Members for placing the Western Balkans in their focus and informed them about the state of play of Albania's accession process, noting that the country was still awaiting the date of the Intergovernmental Conference to kick-start the accession negotiations. Reforms were progressing, with efforts aimed at combating trafficking and corruption.

Ms Danuta JAZŁOWIECKA, Polish *Senat*, considered the Green Deal an ambitious programme, with its successful implementation depending on a good evaluation of the European Union's strengths and weaknesses. She asked Mr TIMMERMANS about the problems he was facing among the Member States with regard to the implementation of the Green Deal and for his opinion on overcoming difficulties caused by the pandemic.

In his replies, Mr TIMMERMANS first focused on the Western Balkans, emphasising the importance of the region, since there was no long-term stability and prosperity in Europe without the integration of the countries of the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic structures. In the framework of the recovery and the Green Deal, he suggested to the candidate countries in the region to align as closely as possible with the European Green Deal and take the measures that lead in the same direction of creating climate neutral by 2050 by focusing on the energy union, modernising energy generation, and limiting the use of coal, as these measures would help to create a positive dynamic for the integration of those countries into the European Union. The more the Western Balkans countries stayed behind, the more difficult it would be for them to integrate in the European Union. On the other hand, by taking the right measures, the Western Balkans countries could also help the European Union to achieve its goals.

Referring to the questions made by the representatives of the Polish *Senat* and the French *Sénat*, Mr TIMMERMANS underlined the need for creating a level playing field across the European Union, because not every Member State was in the same position, with some Member States having larger funds in terms of what they could mobilise for the recovery. Unequal recovery between the Member States posed a challenge to the internal market. Therefore, the Conclusions of the European Council bore a historic importance because, by clearly referring to pan-European solidarity, they provide the possibility to create the right level playing field, thus ensuring equal recovery across the European Union, with both the economy and society on track with regard to green and digital recovery.

Speaking of other challenges, he pointed out that the position between the Member States in terms of the energy mix was varied. Some Member States faced much bigger challenges in stopping the production and use of coal and moving towards more sustainable energy generation. Recalling the experience in the Netherlands during its transition from coal-dependent energy fifty years ago, he acknowledged that this transition was not entirely successful. Those lessons learned now need to be applied in the regions which planned to phase out coal and seek out other opportunities. This was why the Just Transition Fund was of huge importance for the successful transition in these Member States.

Taking Poland as an example, Mr TIMMERMANS underlined that Silesia presented a big challenge but also a big opportunity. The take-up of sustainable energy in Poland was remarkable, both in terms of offshore wind possibilities in the Baltic Sea, but also solar energy. Poland had a very intense engineer education system with world-class engineers that could play a huge role in the economy of

the future. Because of the demographic development, there was a huge need of skilled labour force across the European Union.

Mr TIMMERMANS concluded that the transition was possible and it could be achieved if no one was left behind and opportunities for everyone were created. The first step in the process would have to be national Parliaments ratifying the decisions of the European Council on the Next Generation EU and the Multiannual Financial Framework. He underlined that there was no time to waste, as the citizens expected the EU to recover from the pandemic.

Mr KRICHBAUM concluded the session by agreeing with Mr TIMMERMANS that no one should be left behind, stressing that the citizens expected the EU to bring the solutions which were needed.

Mr WOLF stressed the importance of working together and showing solidarity to find concrete and effective solutions to the current challenges, especially in the midst of an unimaginable crisis. He further underlined the need for there to be a European capability to act and solve problems because this was necessary for people to accept and support Europe and believe in a European future. Mr WOLF concluded by thanking all participants and underlining the importance of spontaneous exchange of ideas on various topics, and looked forward to future discussions.

Mr KRICHBAUM reiterated that physical meetings could not be replaced by virtual exchanges, and assured colleagues that the Presidency would strive to organize a live COSAC meeting. He urged the participants to inform the Presidency of their intention to attend the meeting in person if such a meeting were to take place. Mr KRICHBAUM concluded by thanking everyone for their participation and apologizing for the technical issues, remarking that the latter pointed out that the digital transition was indeed a challenge for Europe.