

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHAIRPERSONS OF COSAC
Vienna, Austria, 9 July 2018**

AGENDA:

- 1. Opening of the meeting**
 - Welcome address by Mr Wolfgang SOBOTKA, President of the Austrian *Nationalrat*
 - Welcome address by Ms Inge POSCH-GRUSKA, President of the Austrian *Bundesrat*
 - Introductory remarks by the Chair
- 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 Presidential Troika of COSAC
 - Draft agenda of the LX COSAC
 - Outline of the 30th Bi-Annual Report of COSAC
 - Letters received by the Presidency
 - Any Other Business
- 4. Priorities of the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the EU**

Keynote speaker: Ms Karoline EDTSTADLER, State Secretary, Federal Ministry of the Interior
- 5. Future and perspectives of the European Union**

Speakers: Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice-President of the European Commission; and Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, First Vice-President of the European Parliament

PROCEEDINGS

IN THE CHAIR: Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Chair of the Permanent Subcommittee on EU Affairs of the Austrian *Nationalrat* and Mr Christian BUCHMANN, Chair of the EU Committee of the Austrian *Bundesrat*

- 1. Opening of the meeting**
 - Welcome address by Mr Wolfgang SOBOTKA, President of the Austrian *Nationalrat*
 - Welcome address by Ms Inge POSCH-GRUSKA, President of the Austrian *Bundesrat*
 - Introductory remarks by the Chair

Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Chair of the Permanent Subcommittee on EU Affairs of the Austrian *Nationalrat*, welcomed all participants to the interim location of the Austrian Parliament and opened the Chairpersons' meeting, which was also the first meeting within the parliamentary dimension of the third Austrian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

In his address, Mr Wolfgang SOBOTKA, President of the Austrian *Nationalrat*, welcomed all participants in the Hofburg while pointing out that parliamentary cooperation had become especially important in current times as Europe was facing major challenges, such as the aftermath of the financial and euro crisis, the security crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, the setting of the new MFF as well as developments related to transatlantic relations. Mr SOBOTKA stated that even though the euro crisis had been overcome, the Banking Union had still not been fully achieved and the euro was not yet the key currency it had been expected to be. A stronger euro on the international stage would improve the negotiation capacities with third countries like Iran.

The President further reminded participants that terrorist attacks such as those that had happened at the editorial offices of “Charlie Hebdo” and the kosher supermarket had taken roots in the minds of European citizens and had led to an intensification of police and intelligence work to counteract such issues, including the emergence of foreign fighters and cybercrime. Concerning the migration crisis, Mr SOBOTKA emphasised that the effects could be felt on all levels: local, national and European. He called for stronger enforcement of legal acts concerning the Schengen regime, as well as the protection of external borders and integration, adding in this context that there should be a stronger focus on returning people to their countries of origin.

Concerning Brexit, Mr SOBOTKA drew attention to the most recent events which had taken place in the United Kingdom, above all the resignation of Mr David DAVIS, Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, noting that Austria was fully aware that the negotiations should end in October during its Presidency. He further stated that Mr Michel BARNIER had been able to bring about convergence among the 27 remaining Member States and that it was important to keep moving along the same lines with a joint position *vis-à-vis* the United Kingdom.

Mr SOBOTKA concluded his keynote speech by accentuating the particular importance of the Western Balkans to the Austrian Presidency and the necessity to give the region a European perspective, referring to Austrian scholarships and the Democracy Workshop project as examples. In the absence of the EU providing such a perspective, there was a strong possibility that the region would turn towards other countries such as Russia, Turkey and China, all of which had been offering their economic support for years.

Ms Inge POSCH-GRUSKA, President of the Austrian *Bundesrat*, underlined that the Austrian *Bundesrat*, as the Chamber representing the *Länder*, was the interface of the European Union and the Austrian citizens. Concerning the principle of subsidiarity, she noted that the European Affairs Committee of the *Bundesrat* was strongly committed to the European Affairs and exercised its right to participation, being one of the most active chambers when it came to subsidiarity checks. However, Ms POSCH-GRUSKA also declared that even if it was an important principle, it should not be abused to encourage nationalistic thinking.

She concluded her address by pointing out that citizens’ confidence in the European Union had to be strengthened and citizens’ involvement be placed in the foreground of the future development of the Union.

Taking the floor, Mr LOPATKA then pointed out some practical issues before welcoming the Chairs who were attending the COSAC Chairpersons’ meeting for the first time, namely Mr Sergio BATELLI, Chair of the European Union Policy Committee of the Italian *Camera dei Deputati*; Mr Ettore Antonio LICHERI, Chair of the European Union Policy Committee of the Italian *Senato della Repubblica*; Ms Salima BELHAJ, Deputy Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the Dutch *Tweede Kamer*; and Mr Arto SATONEN, Chair of the Grand Committee of the Finnish *Eduskunta*.

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

Mr LOPATKA presented the draft agenda of the COSAC Chairpersons’ meeting, which was approved without amendment. Four Parliamentarians took the floor.

Ms Gabriela CREȚU, Romanian *Senat*, stated that delegates should also register their political party for the next COSAC plenary meeting.

Ms Salima BELHAJ, Dutch *Tweede Kamer*, expressed her support for the topic of transparency in the Outline of the 30th Bi-annual Report of COSAC, as well as the draft programme of the LX COSAC in November. She further stressed that after the COSAC meeting, the Dutch *Staten-Generaal*

together with the Danish *Folketing* were going to send a letter to President of the European Council Donald TUSK, Rotating President of the Council Sebastian KURZ, and President of the Eurogroup Mário CENTENO to give a more detailed answer on the four proposals that had been presented during the LVIII COSAC in Tallinn.

Mr Richárd HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, thanked the Austrian Presidency for supporting the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrád Group and for the attendance of Mr SOBOTKA at the informal meeting of the speakers of Visegrád countries in June 2018.

Mr Jean BIZET, French *Sénat*, mentioned that, concerning the choice of topics in future COSAC meetings, he had sent a letter to Mr BUCHMANN regarding the role of national Parliaments in the process of negotiating and concluding trade agreements.

3. Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters

- **Briefing on the results of the Presidential Troika of COSAC**
- **Draft agenda of the LX COSAC**
- **Outline of the 30th Bi-annual Report of COSAC**
- **Letters received by the Presidency**
- **Procedural issues**

Mr LOPATKA referred to the Presidential Troika meeting that had taken place the previous evening and presented the draft agenda of the LX COSAC meeting to be held in Vienna on 18-20 November 2018, explaining that there would be four topics on the agenda: the state of play of the Austrian Presidency; a transparent European Union closer to its citizens in light of the upcoming elections to the European Parliament; climate policy and the Energy Union; and the state of play of Brexit.

The Chair mentioned some of the invited keynote speakers at the plenary session: Mr Gernot BLÜMEL, the Austrian Minister for European Affairs, Arts, Culture and Media; Mr Josef MOSER, the Austrian Minister for Constitutional Affairs, Reforms, Deregulation and Justice; Mr Maroš ŠEF OVI, the Vice-President of the European Commission for the Energy Union; and Mr Michel BARNIER, the EU chief negotiator for Brexit.

Following the presentation of the agenda of the plenary session, Mr LOPATKA went on to outline the 30th Bi-annual Report of COSAC. The report would be divided into three chapters. The first chapter would deal with the role of national Parliaments in ensuring transparency and bringing the EU closer to its citizens by taking into account best practises of Parliaments/Chambers in their openness towards their citizens on the one hand, and by focussing on Parliaments'/Chambers' views on the work and the outcome of the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and "Doing Less More Efficiently" on the other. Chapter two would focus on Parliaments'/Chambers' discussions on climate policy and the Energy Union as well as the 2020 climate & energy package and the way onwards. The third chapter would emphasise the state of play of Brexit and its implications for the future of the EU.

The Bi-annual Report would be based on the replies to the questionnaire, which would be sent to delegations on 27 July 2018. Replies would be expected by 18 September 2018.

As a fourth and last point, Mr LOPATKA outlined the letters received by the Presidency, reporting on the Troika's discussions held the previous day.

4. Priorities of the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Keynote speaker: Ms Karoline EDTSTADLER, State Secretary, Federal Ministry of the Interior

Mr Christian BUCHMANN, Chair of the EU Committee of the Austrian *Bundesrat* presented the topic of the first session and gave the floor to Ms Karoline EDTSTADLER, State Secretary, Federal Ministry of the Interior. She noted that this was the third presidency of the Council for Austria; the country had held it in 1998 and 2006. Following the Lisbon treaty, the Parliamentary dimension had changed dramatically and Austria was looking forward to a deepened partnership with national Parliaments.

Ms EDTSTADLER referred to some of the challenges of our time, including intense international competition; continuing warfare and its consequences in the neighbourhood; global migration flows; climate change; and the treats of terrorism and radicalisation. All of these crises had had a negative impact on the confidence of European citizens. The main goal of the Austrian presidency would therefore be to strengthen the EU and bring it closer to the citizens, reflecting the motto chosen by the presidency: “A Europe that protects”.

The State Secretary noted the importance of the upcoming elections for the European Parliament in 2019, underlining the role both national Parliaments and the European Parliament played as mouthpieces for citizens. She highlighted the need to rely on the principle of subsidiarity focussing on the big issues where joint solutions could be found, while having smaller issues dealt with at regional level. In this regard, Ms EDTSTADLER looked forward to the outcome of the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing Less More Efficiently”, and referred to the Conference on subsidiarity, to be organised by the Austrian presidency in Bregenz on 15 and 16 November 2018.

Ms EDTSTADLER briefly presented the three key priorities of the presidency: 1) security and fight against illegal migration; 2) prosperity and competitiveness through digitalisation; and 3) stability in the neighbourhood, bringing the Western Balkans and South Eastern Europe closer to the European Union.

The first priority would be the topic of a Summit in Salzburg in September 2018, which would focus on strengthening the external borders and FRONTEX as a key pre-condition for building on a common European asylum system. Concerning the second priority, Ms EDTSTADLER noted that the European Union was a leading trade power and the largest single market in the world; however, its relative share in the international trade had dwindled. The State Secretary pointed out the need to finalise the Digital Single Market, create a modern and balanced framework and safeguard fair competition rules, in order to counter that trend. On the third priority, Ms EDTSTADLER echoed Commissioner Johannes HAHN’s words when he said that the Union should export stability rather than import instability. She noted that the Western Balkans had been reliable partners during the migration crisis and it was important to offer them a European perspective. Ms EDTSTADLER also welcomed the newly-found solution of the name dispute between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In terms of geography and security, the Western Balkans were part of Europe, but full-fledged accession to the Union could only be possible after they had satisfied all the necessary requirements. Nevertheless, Western Balkans membership of the European Union would bring greater unity on the continent.

Ms EDTSTADLER mentioned two of the big challenges faced by the Austrian presidency: the negotiations on the future Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and Brexit. On the MFF she noted that the negotiations had just started and the main goal was to achieve greater efficiency and meet the current challenges. With regard to Brexit, the main goal was to finalise the agreement in a timely and orderly fashion.

The State Secretary concluded her speech by emphasising the strengthened cooperation with national Parliaments as well as the important conferences that would take place during the parliamentary dimension. She also noted how close cooperation lead to important contributions and this was particularly important in view of the European elections to be held in 2019.

In the debate which followed, 20 speakers took the floor. There was a general support for the priorities of the Austrian Presidency of the EU Council.

One of the most debated priority was security and the fight against illegal immigration. Mr Jean BIZET, French *Sénat*, Mr Václav HAMPL, Czech *Poslanecká sn movna*, and Mr Jaak MADISON, Estonian *Riigikogu*, called for the strengthening of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency FRONTEX and for further progress in the reform of the Common European Asylum. Mr Richárd HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgy lés*, welcomed the European Council conclusions on migration, which represented a paradigm shift from mandatory migrant relocation and resettlement schemes to an effective control of EU external borders. He also called for the restoration of the Schengen area by suppressing the internal temporary border controls within it. Mr Jarosław OBREMSKI, Polish *Senat*, concurred with this vision. On the other hand, Ms Margarida MARQUES, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, Mr Joris BACKER, Dutch *Eerste Kamer der Staten-Generaal*, Mr Sergio BATTELLI, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, Mr Glenn BEDINGFIELD, Maltese *Kamra Tad-Deputati*, and Ms Soraya RODRÍGUEZ, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, called for solidarity and a European collective response to the migration crisis, in accordance with international law and without “dehumanising” the migrant question. Mr Marc ANGEL, Luxembourgish *Chambre des députés*, pleaded for the reform of the Dublin regulation and for further burden sharing among EU Member States. Lord WHITTY, UK *House of Lords*, suggested to combine both visions: strengthening the EU external borders while keeping the defence of liberal values and human rights. Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, European Parliament, concurred with this view while stressing the need for finding the right balance between the strengthening of the EU’s external borders and the respect for international law obligations and for fair common rules relating to the return of migrants staying irregularly.

The stability in the neighbourhood in view of bringing South-Eastern Europe closer or the EU was another highly debated priority. Most Members agreed that the stability of the Western Balkans was essential for the stability of the European Union, while Mr BIZET asked for further progress addressing the specific challenges the Western Balkans faced, in particular the need for fundamental reforms and good neighbourly relations. Other Members, such as Mr OBREMSKI and Mr HÖRCSIK, focused on opening EU’s door to further accessions as soon as possible.

Mr OBREMSKI called for a speedy accession to the EU of Serbia, Montenegro and Albania. Mr Gunther KRICHBAUM, German *Bundestag*, emphasised the importance of keeping Bosnia and Herzegovina on the EU’s agenda. Mr HAMPL underlined the interconnection of security and stability between the EU and the Western Balkan region. Ms Ivelina VASSILEVA, Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*, supported the Austrian Presidency priority concerning the Western Balkans as a guarantee for peace and stability in the region and on the European continent.

Mr Adrijan VUKSANOVIC, Montenegrin *Skupština*, and Ms Elvira KOVACS, Serbian *Norodna Skupština*, praised the efforts made by both the precedent Bulgarian Presidency as well as the current Austrian Presidency to offer a European perspective to the Western Balkans.

Members expressed general support on the priority relating to securing prosperity and competitiveness through digitalisation.

Mr OBREMSKI supported the EU’s ongoing work concerning the digital economy. Mr BIZET saluted the efforts done in the area in view of enshrining it in the EU’s industrial strategy and competition policy.

Another two issues that were discussed within this session were Brexit and the negotiations on the MFF after 2020.

On Brexit, the debate was influenced by the recent news coming from the UK government, whereby a Brexit Chequers meeting of the UK government had called for a softer Brexit approach.

Mr Terry LEYDEN, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, expressed his concerns concerning the Brexit process, in particular on the possibility of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and on the impact to the EU's future and of Ireland in particular. Ms McGUINNESS, Mr BIZET and Mr HAMPL expressed similar concerns. Mr HÖRCSIK was of the view that Brexit, together with the migration crisis, was a test case for the EU's unity. Lord WHITTY hoped that the UK government would be clear in the Brexit negotiations and that the EU would be flexible.

With regard to the MFF after 2020, Mr BIZET proposed to maintain the current funding level of the CAP and cohesion policy. Ms Gabriela CREȚU, Romanian *Senat*, asked about the possibilities of having an agreement on the MFF during the Austrian Presidency, as Romania would have, for the first time, the Presidency of the Council of the EU afterwards, and needed to be prepared in that area.

Ms EDTSTADLER was grateful for the open discussions held during the session and asked for the support of Parliamentarians to ensure the success of the Austrian Presidency.

The State Secretary emphasised the importance of restoring the Schengen area by ensuring that an effective EU external border management was in place. She also pleaded for fundamental reforms of the Dublin regulation, as shown by the refugee crisis of 2015 and its consequences. She was of the view that security and migration were connected issues and hence there was a need to have a resilient system to tackle migration crisis. She supported EU's accession to the European Convention of Human Rights.

On Brexit, she noted that time was running out and underlined the importance of a fair withdrawal agreement in order to keep UK as a partner in the future UK-EU relationship.

On the MFF, the State Secretary noted that negotiations had just started and that two of the most important criteria were the European added value of an EU programme or policy and the expected efficiency gains.

The State Secretary concluded by stating that the Austrian Presidency would focus on building bridges between east and west, north and south, and would act as an honest broker seeking solutions.

5. Future and perspectives of the European Union

Keynote speakers: Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice-President of the European Commission, Ms. Mairead McGUINNESS, First Vice-President of the European Parliament

Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice-President of the European Commission, started his address by highlighting that the core of the problem being faced was that the promise of convergence inherent to any social contract, be it in a member state or at the European level, had been strongly undermined by the series of crises the EU and its Member States had been facing for the last 15 years. The migration crisis, for example, underlined the lack of convergence between Member States and the lack of trust between them. He explained that the way forward depended on the quality of future proposals, the audacity of national leaders to advocate European solutions, in cases where national ones were no longer sufficient, and the working methodology adopted.

Mr TIMMERMANS informed parliamentarians that on 10 July 2018, the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and "Doing Less More Efficiently" would present its recommendations on a new way of working to the President of the European Commission, Mr Jean-Claude JUNCKER. Mr

TIMMERMANS thanked Mr LOPATKA for being an integral and important part of the Task Force. Without getting into details, Vice-President TIMMERMANS outlined some of the concrete solutions offered in the report, namely an improvement in drafting new legislation, a more effective implementation of the existing legislation, and engagement with national Parliaments, regional Parliaments and local authorities.

In addition, Mr TIMMERMANS referred to some of the challenges Europe was facing, such as globalisation; a U.S. President who wanted a divided Europe; and growing threats from China and Russia.

The Vice-President also argued that the answer to the changes brought by the fourth industrial revolution was a collective Europe that concentrated on positive and concrete results.

In conclusion, Mr TIMMERMANS stressed the quality of what was being delivered could not be guaranteed without the full participation of national Parliaments, something that went well beyond the control of subsidiarity and proportionality. He advocated a change of attitude both in Brussels and in Member States if EU citizens were to become really involved again. The way forward was to engage collectively and take shared ownership of the European agenda. The Vice-President also expressed his hope that the Task Force report would be discussed in future reunions, that it would enable a dialogue with the European Parliament on its results, and that it would increase the legitimacy at citizens' level.

Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, First Vice-President of the European Parliament, started by stressing that elected representatives are judged by the way they deal with challenges and not by the idea that they can prevent them from happening nor by the illusion that they can absolutely insulate the citizens from the fact that the world is a harsh place, in which the European Union represented a safe haven. She continued by quoting a recent Eurobarometer research showing that two thirds of the European citizens felt more positively about the Union now than in the '90s. Ms McGUINNESS argued that Brexit, one of the biggest challenges the EU was currently facing, was probably the reason why citizens and politicians alike were receiving more information about the benefits of the Single Market and the Custom Union.

Ms McGUINNESS stressed her serious commitment to a dialogue with national Parliaments, both personally and on behalf of the European Parliament, whose members had the same job, all of them having been directly elected by and representing the same citizens. She noted how the time for political reflection was almost over and politicians should think not only about addressing the challenges but also about coming up with a plan. In this regard, Ms McGUINNESS found the meetings organised under the Presidency very useful as their agendas did not depend on the breaking news at the moment but allowed for a more in-depth discussion.

The Vice-President expressed her belief that the European Parliament would work on the conclusions of the Task Force. She supported an increased involvement of the national Parliaments in the legislation process but she also noted that it was impossible for one person to be aware of every policy as there were constant changes in every area. Furthermore, she underlined the necessity to better engage with national Parliaments at the start of as well as and during the process of drafting legislation, and not merely during the implementation phase. In order to improve the dialogue and cooperation, Ms McGUINNESS suggested using existing structures, such as common political groups, in a more effective way.

Ms McGUINNESS welcomed the symbolic visit of the Federal Chancellor, Mr. Sebastian KURZ, to Ireland, and highlighted the need to find a road to compromise in the Brexit negotiations, so as to minimise the damage for the European Union and the United Kingdom.

In conclusion, Ms McGUINNESS expressed her hope that, even if national interests usually dominated the European elections, there would be an opportunity to speak about the bigger, global issues that are European challenges, and the duty of the European Union, as a strong global partner, to continue to show leadership.

Mr LOPATKA then opened the debate, during which 21 speakers took the floor. Topics like security, migration, Brexit, MFF or economic policies featured recurrently, together with notions like fundamental rights, subsidiarity and the role of national Parliaments.

Most of the Members pleaded for a stronger Europe, restored on a solid and predictable basis, as stressed by Mr Jean BIZET, French *Sénat*, with statesmen who were able to take proper actions, a wish expressed by Mr Gunther KRICHBAUM, German *Bundestag*, and where Member States were able to offer common answers to the challenges that they faced, as suggested by both Ms Ivelina VASSILEVA, Bulgarian *Narodno sobranie*, and Ms Salima BELHAJ, Dutch *Tweede Kamer*.

With regard to security, defence and foreign policy as part of a stronger Europe, Mr Arto SATONEN, Finnish *Eduskunta*, was of the opinion that the European Union should be a safer place, with suitable defence capacities. His words were echoed by Mr BIZET's request for a resilient European defence policy, and in the statement made by Ms Gabriela CREȚU, Romanian *Senat*, asking for consistent European policies in the fields of defence and foreign affairs. Moreover, Ms Margarida MARQUES, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, pointed out that defence should be a priority and reflected as such in the next MFF, while Mr Václav HAMPL, Czech *Senát*, stressed the need to increase the European influence on the international scene, both diplomatically and militarily, and to make better use of the existing capacities.

The issue of migration served as a bridge between the external and internal actions that the European Union was expected to take in order to enhance the safety of its citizens. Mr Ettore Antonio LICHERI, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, said that resolving the migration crisis was one of the main priorities and asked for a correct follow-up of the last European Council's conclusions. In addition, Mr Bojan KEKEC, Slovenian *Državni svet*, and Ms Izabela KLOC, Polish *Sejm*, raised concerns about the protection of the EU's external borders and asked for concrete actions in those areas. Mr Richárd HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, highlighted the need of stopping the migratory flows and stressed that the future of the European Union required a solution to that problem, too. His proposals were relayed by Ms Maria TRIANTAFYLLOU, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, who stressed that, in order to stop migratory flows, the European Union needed to take actions and put an end to any current wars.

As migration, security and stabilization of the European neighbourhood go hand in hand, some Members expressed their support for the enlargement policy. Ms TRIANTAFYLLOU, for instance, said that the European Union must continue with its enlargement, with Mr Michael VON TETZSCHNER, Norwegian *Stortinget*, supporting this idea, even though Norway was not a candidate country. As a Member hailing from a candidate country, Ms Marija CATOVIC, Montenegrin *Skupština*, seized the occasion and pleaded for her country's European Union membership, arguing that Montenegro could contribute to European safety and stability. Ms Elvira KOVACS, Serbian *Narodna Skupština*, similarly stressed the importance of enlargement towards the Western Balkans, provided that the European Union stayed strong and stable, especially after Brexit, and that the countries from the Western Balkans were ready to join when they were asked to.

Brexit and its latest developments were mirrored in the debate, not only in the context of the enlargement policy, but also as an issue of relevance in and of itself. Mr KRICHBAUM, on one hand, wished to know the European Commission's position on the matter and underlined the indivisibility of the four fundamental European freedoms. Mr HÖRCSIK stressed the need for the 27 Member States to stay united and Mr VON TETZSCHNER mentioned that Norway was also following the negotiations with great interest, both when it came to the actual withdrawal as well as to the future

relations between the European Union and the United Kingdom. On the other hand, Mr Terry LEYDEN, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, voiced concerns about the negotiation process, noting that an extension of the withdrawal period was necessary in order to make sure an agreement was reached. Mr LEYDEN proposed, in addition, the creation of an economic zone between Ireland and the United Kingdom, with the European Union's support.

Brexit-related economic concerns were raised when discussing proposals for the next MFF. In this respect, Mr BIZET stressed that both the cohesion policy and the common agriculture policy should remain ambitious and efficient, while Mr HÖRCSIK asked that their budgets be not reduced, especially for those Member States who made significant progress during the last years. Mr KEKEC echoed similar sentiments when highlighting the success of the cohesion policy over the last years, while Ms TRIANTAFYLLOU clearly identified the cohesion policy as the key to the regions' security. In addition, Ms KLOC and Ms CREȚU both stated that the preservation of the cohesion policy should be a top priority, with Ms KLOC going even further and, expressing her concern with regard to the budgetary cuts, especially in the agriculture field, and pointing out the need to complete the process of convergence under the next MFF.

The next MFF was not approached only from the perspectives of the cohesion and common agriculture policies: Mr LICHERI, for example, pleaded for a future MFF that allowed tackling poverty and encouraged research and investment programmes. Ms CATOVIC explained that the next MFF should also take into account future enlargements, while Ms MARQUES highlighted that ongoing debates should first clarify what the challenges were and then how to finance them. Ms MARQUES also identified convergence as a problem that still needed to be solved and continued her intervention by drawing attention to the way the Economic and Monetary Union was to be completed. Finally, Ms MARQUES underlined the need to reduce the differences between the Members States from the Eurozone and the rest.

Commercial policy and new developing markets were also tackled during the debate. Mr SATONEN pleaded for a strong European commercial policy, for a good understanding of the gains that the digital market could deliver and for suitable answers to climate change. Similarly, Mr BIZET stressed that, since the European Union had not come up with proper solutions against unemployment, the way forward was a strong commercial policy, a digital single market and an energy union, while also focussing on research and sustained reindustrialisation, with full support from the European competition policy. Mr KEKEC shared similar views, calling for investments in industry and new technologies. Mr VON TETZSCHNER stated that Norway's participation in the Single Market was vital and that the future of the European Union was also important for his country.

The future of the European Union was also pictured in terms of respect for human rights. Mr Michael O'FLAHERTY, Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, expressed the wish to consolidate the link between the national Parliaments and his Agency and to give a new impetus to mutual visits. In addition, Mr O'FLAHERTY suggested that the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the studies carried out by his Agency or its database be more frequently used by national Parliaments.

As to involvement in the policymaking process, many speakers highlighted the positive contribution that national Parliaments could offer when dealing with challenges that the European Union was facing. Mr LICHERI said national Parliaments' involvement in the future of the European Union was indispensable, and in this respect Mr BIZET suggested that the role of the national Parliaments be strengthened, especially in those fields where European action did not bring much added value. Mr Rainer ROBRA, German *Bundesrat*, went even further, explaining how COSAC could play a greater role in this regard, especially through the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality in times when Brexit, the migration crisis or the commercial policy with the United States of America were raising many concerns. In this respect, the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and "Doing Less More Efficiently" was referred to by a number of speakers, including Mr ROBRA and Ms VASSILEVA,

who reminded that this Task Force's report was not the end, but the beginning of a longer process. Mr Jarosław OBREMSKI, Polish *Senat*, underlined the necessity to give more powers back to the national Parliaments. On the other hand, Ms CREȚU stressed that delegating responsibilities and capacities back to the Member States was not a solution to the current problems.

Political statements relating to the future European elections made their way through the debate as well. Mr ROBRA qualified these elections as a maturity test, while Mr HAMPL warned about the dangers of euro-scepticism and about the demagogues who did not restrain from taking advantage of easy political targets, such as non-educated individuals. Raising questions about the future of Europe in the context of the post-Bratislava Declaration, Mr Martin KLUS, Slovakian *Národná rada*, also mentioned the constant underestimation of the European project by nationalists and the risks implied by the reintroduction of the customs control along the continent.

In his replies, Mr TIMMERMANS started by reminding that while many Member States had celebrated the centenary of their independence, European values were still vulnerable. In these troubled times, the consequences of "doing nothing" could be great, and it was therefore important to replace nationalism with civic patriotism.

For the First Vice-President of the European Commission the problem of migration was imminent, substantial and highly political and could not be tackled with partial solutions. In this respect, the message delivered to the participants was that those who thought a strengthened protection of our external borders was the key answer, without taking into account the reform of the Dublin system, were misguided.

About the MFF, Mr TIMMERMANS stated that the compromise proposed by the European Commission reflected and took into account all the divergent national interests.

On Brexit, it was shown that all the 27 Member States stood united behind the Chief Negotiator Michel BARNIER and that the best solution, in the current circumstances, was the one that would do as little harm as possible.

Mr TIMMERMANS also stressed that the Treaties provided not only rights, but also obligations. In this respect, all Member States should be treated equally and none of them should stop respecting their obligations, including those concerning the independence of the judiciary, the rule of law or the separation of powers.

In the context of the upcoming European elections, Ms McGUINNESS began by stressing the need to remind citizens what the European Union stood for, to encourage young people to vote and to make sure that the political groups of the next European Parliament would be able to find common grounds for discussions and for reaching good compromises.

The First Vice-President of the European Parliament said more money was needed for the MFF. She reminded colleagues that, with regard to the commercial policy, trade agreements were negotiated based on the prior mandate given by Member States.

Finally, Ms McGUINNESS underlined the importance of respecting human rights, including the freedom of religion. In this respect, religious dialogue should consistently be encouraged.

Concluding the meeting, Mr BUCHMANN thanked participants for the lively debate and referred them to the meetings of other committees within the Parliamentary Dimension, including the plenary of COSAC to be held on 18-20 November 2018 in Vienna.