



**Joint Committee on European Union Affairs**

**Report**

**Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC**

**Sofia, Bulgaria**

**21-22 January 2018**

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**An Comhchoiste um Ghnóthaí an Aontais Eorpaigh**

**Tuarascáil**

**An Cruinniú de Chathaoirligh COSAC**

**Sóifia, an Bhulgáir**

**21-22 Eanáir 2018**

**32ENUA0015**



## **BACKGROUND**

COSAC, the Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of Parliaments of the European Union, is the principal forum for co-operation between committees of the national parliaments dealing with European affairs. COSAC Plenary meetings are held twice a year and normally take place in the country holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Each Plenary meeting is preceded with a Chairpersons' Meeting, which is intended to consider the draft agenda for the forthcoming plenary.

## **DELEGATION**

The Joint Committee on European Union Affairs was represented by the **Vice-Chairman of the Committee, Senator Terry Leyden**.

The Vice-Chairman was accompanied by Stephanie Bollard, Policy Advisor to the Committee.

## **SUMMARY OF THE COSAC CHAIRPERSONS' MEETING**

The Meeting of the Chairpersons' of COSAC was chaired by the Chairperson of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds, National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria **Mr Kristian Vigenin**.

The main speakers at the meeting were:

- **Ms. Tsveta Karayancheva**, President of the National Assembly of Bulgaria
- **Ms Lilyana Pavlova**, Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU
- **Ms Iliana Iotova**, Vice-President of the Republic of Bulgaria
- **Mr Frans Timmermans**, First Vice-President of the European Commission
- **Ms Iskra Mihaylova**, Chairperson of the Committee on Regional Development, European Parliament
- **Mr Raul Mäik**, Ambassador-at-Large for Baltic Sea Region, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, Chair of the National Coordinators group of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
- **Mrs Denitsa Nikolova**, Deputy Minister of Regional Development and Public Works of the Republic of Bulgaria, National Coordinator for the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region

- **Ms Audrone Perkauskiene**, Head of division, Regional Cooperation and the OSCE, European External Action Service

The meeting was divided into three thematic keynote sessions;

- Priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency;
- The Future of the European Union- Strength in Unity; and
- The Role of European Union macro-regional strategies for sustainable development, stability and security

The draft minutes of the meeting were circulated to national parliaments on 7 February 2018.

The next meeting, the Plenary Meeting of COSAC is due to take place on 17-19 June 2018, the draft programme of which was circulated to attendees at the Chairpersons' Meeting.

## **OPENING OF THE MEETING**

Delegates were welcomed to the conference by the President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria **Ms Tsveta Karayancheva**. The President noted the many advantages of COSAC as a platform, including as a forum for the expression of European Union values, participation in democratic oversight, and discussion of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. President Karayancheva welcomed the programme for Bulgaria's Council of the European Union Presidency, noting that it was ambitious and interesting.

The Chairperson of the meeting, **Mr Kristian Vigenin** commended the outgoing Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Estonia, for its achievements. Mr Vigenin stated that he hoped that Estonia, Austria and Bulgaria could continue building on Estonia's progress through its work with Estonia and Austria as part of the Presidency Troika.

Mr Vigenin also announced the proposal from the Troika meeting that COSAC would establish a Working Group, comprised of up to two representatives from each parliament accompanied by one member of staff, to contribute to the work of the European Commission's newly established taskforce on subsidiarity, proportionality and "doing less more efficiently".

## **SESSION I:**

### **PRIORITIES OF THE BULGARIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

The keynote speaker for the first session was the Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union **Ms Lilyana Pavlova**. Minister Pavlova commenced her speech by noting that after extensive stakeholder consultation, the Bulgarian government had agreed on four priorities for its presidency of the Council of the European Union.

**(i) The Future of Europe and of the Young People – economic growth and social cohesion**

Minister Pavlova noted that the Future of Europe should be considered against the backdrop of Brexit, the post-2020 budget and the new Multiannual Financial Framework, the first draft of which will be presented in May 2018. The Minister stated that Bulgaria planned to hold a series of debates on the issue of the Future of Europe, looking at the balance between the budget deficit left by the UK's exit from the European Union and the need for additional funding for traditional policies, as well as for new policies and new challenges. A high level meeting with European Union finance ministers will be held on 9 March 2018.

**(ii) Security and Stability in a Strong and United Europe**

Minister Pavlova noted that achieving consensus on the issue of migration policy was a challenge, that while there were diverging views among Member States on how to reform the Dublin Regulation, progress could only be achieved through solidarity. Issues that would need to be discussed included the impact of the influx of migrants, the use of all of the mechanisms within the European Union to address challenges posed by mass migration and the need to invest in Africa to address the foundational issues of mass migration from the continent. The Minister expressed her hope that progress could be made towards agreement on migration policy during Bulgaria's presidency.

**(iii) European Perspective and Connectivity of the Western Balkans**

Minister Pavlova noted that a European perspective of the Western Balkans was a special focus for Bulgaria. The Minister stated that Bulgaria felt that it had something to give to its neighbours in this regard. It was Bulgaria's view that the Balkan states were part of Europe, but that they have had difficult past and needed support. She emphasised that establishing peace, security and prosperity in the Western Balkans region was essential in order for the Balkan states to meet the commitments and objective criteria for membership of the European Union. The

Minister acknowledged that European Union accession should remain an important part of the Western Balkans' engagement with the Europe Union, but that Bulgaria did not want to create unrealistic expectations for its neighbours. A summit will take place on 17 May 2018 in Sofia to discuss the issue further.

**(iv) Digital economy and skills for the future**

Minister Pavlova highlighted Bulgaria's appreciation of the work done by the Estonian presidency in the area of the digital economy and the Digital Single Market. Significant progress had been made, but there were still issues to work on, such as legislative issues and cybersecurity. Minister Pavlova noted her view that digital technology was a niche that Bulgaria could focus on in the Balkans to encourage young people to who had migrated to return from abroad. It was highlighted that 31% of professionals in the digital technology sector in Bulgaria were women, which was the highest rate in Europe.

**(v) Debate**

A large number of the representatives of National Parliaments expressed support for the aims of the Bulgarian presidency.

Chairperson of the European Union Committee of the Federal Council of Austria Mr Edgar Mayer noted the need to focus on security without limiting freedoms. Concerns and viewpoints regarding security and the need to reform the current migration policy were also expressed by a number of other delegates.

Delegates from Slovenia, Hungary, Turkey, the Czech Republic and Greece expressed their support for the emphasis on enlargement policy. Chairperson of the European Integration Committee of the Parliament of Montenegro Mr Adrijan Vuksanovic expressed appreciation for the support of Bulgaria in its aims for European Union integration for the Western Balkan states. Mr Vuksanovic noted that European Union membership was a key strategic goal for Montenegro, and that it was making progress in working towards a clear roadmap, and fighting the particular issues of corruption and organised crime.

Minister Pavlova thanked members for their support of the aims of the Bulgarian Presidency. The Minister noted that she was aware of challenges raised by delegates, and that there were certain issues on which there was not unanimous agreement. The Minister stated that she

hoped that Bulgaria, in its role holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, could serve as a balancing power between different viewpoints.

## **SESSION 2:**

### **FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION – STRENGTH IN UNITY**

**(i) Ms Iliana Iotova, *Vice-President of the Republic of Bulgaria***

Vice-President Iotova stated that this was a difficult time for the European Union, citing a range of challenges including the perceptions of citizens that there was a large European Union bureaucracy, and a loss of enthusiasm amongst citizens for the European project. In this context, the Vice-President referred to the Future of Europe White Paper proposed by European Commission, which outlined the challenges faced by the European Union and a number of potential scenarios for the state of the European Union by 2025. The Vice-President expressed the opinion that while there had been a White Paper and speeches by European leaders, that there had been no civic dialogue. Vice-President Iotova stated that there was a perception amongst citizens that bureaucracy had replaced vision, and that there was a lack of ideas for the Future of Europe, especially in the context of the post 2020 budget.

Vice-President Iotova noted that while all European Union Member States were in favour of solidarity, that there was disagreement on a number of important issues, such as a common migration policy. The Vice-President added that while the European Union policy was not to focus on any further enlargement. Bulgaria hoped that by drawing attention to its neighbours in the Western Balkans that it could add value to the European Union enlargement project.

**(ii) Mr Frans Timmermans, *First Vice-President of the European Commission***

Mr Timmermans acknowledged the current challenges for the European Union, noting that there were links between political choices and the current migration and environmental issues. He noted that the financial crisis had led to divergence within and between nations, and that the narrative of “taking back control” was not limited to the UK. He emphasised the need to present the European Union to citizens in a way that shows potential future progress while still enabling effective national sovereignty.

Mr Timmermans described migration as an “acute crisis”, noting that dealing with it was a significant challenge going forward for Europe. He stated that it was his opinion that relocation policies had not been a failure, and that relocation was part of a broader European Union migration strategy. Mr Timmermans emphasised that European Union member states needed to support each other in dealing with migrants, that Greece and Italy had sought support from the European Union when overwhelmed, but did not receive it. Part of the broader strategy for dealing with migration should include supporting international sustainable development and working with third countries to stem migration at the source.

Mr Timmermans highlighted the need to review which policy areas should be handled at European Union level and what could be better left to member states and to regions. The Taskforce on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing Less More Efficiently” was established by the President of the European Commission, and held its first meeting on 25 January 2018.

**(iii) Ms Iskra Mihaylova**, *Chairperson of the Committee on Regional Development, European Parliament*

Ms Mihaylova stated that speaking at the COSAC Chairpersons’ meeting gave her an opportunity to present the position and the work of the European Parliament’s Committee on Regional Development (REGI) relating to the future of the European Union. When the current European Parliament was formed in 2014, there was a challenge from Eurosceptic MEPs. In order to counter this, Ms Mihaylova stated that the work of the European Union, including policies on security, migration, environment and climate change, needed to be brought closer to the citizen. Ms Mihaylova noted that the European Parliament and its committees would contribute to the work of the Subsidiarity Taskforce.

Ms Mihaylova stated that the REGI Committee had to find a way of presenting the benefits of the goals, policies and projects of the European Cohesion policy clearly to the citizens of the European Union. The REGI Committee continued to work with national parliaments and on reports in a number of areas relating to Cohesion policy, such as economic development, regional development and the environment. Reports and legislative opinion completed by the REGI Committee were adopted by the plenary and continued to contribute to the vision of the future of Europe. Ms Mihaylova discussed the REGI Committee’s view that increased flexibility should be built into European budgets in order to deal with challenges with limited resources,

such as enabling further use of European Union structural funds for recovery from economic or natural disasters and extending European Union strategic investment funds to mobilise projects which go beyond European Union funding.

**(iv) Debate**

**Senator Leyden, Vice-Chairperson of the Houses of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs**, congratulated the members of the Bulgarian delegation on the beginning of its presidency, and wished the delegation ongoing success. Senator Leyden also thanked the other delegations present for their solidarity with Ireland on the issue of the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland in the context of the Brexit negotiations, and expressed support for the expansion of the European Union, including the accession of Montenegro.

Chairperson of the Standing Committee on European Affairs of the Dutch Senate Mr Bastiaan Van Apeldoorn expressed concern regarding the growing democratic deficit and democratic accountability, stating that with a single currency it could be difficult for Eurozone countries to exercise national sovereignty. A number of delegates expressed the view that European Union decision making needed to be brought closer to the citizens.

The head of the delegation from Cyprus Mr Kyriakos Kyroakou-Hadjjiyianni noted that a stronger and safer Europe would needed to focus on equitable border sharing, humanitarian work and reaching a political solution to bring stability to conflict zones. A number of delegates expressed their views on European migration policy, with the majority stating that they wished to work together to find the best solution, while keeping the European Union safe and secure.

Chairperson of the Committee on European Affairs of the Parliament of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Mr Artan Grubi stated that the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was looking for a positive, affirmative approach to European Union membership. Mr Grubi noted that he would like the European Union to be a presence stronger than Russia in the Western Balkans.

**OTHER POINTS**

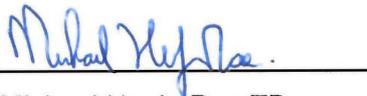
**(i) Subsidiarity Taskforce**

The European Parliament was invited to nominate three members to participate in the Taskforce on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing Less More Efficiently” established by the European Commission. However, the European Parliament chose not to participate in the Taskforce. The First Vice-President of the European Parliament Mairead McGuinness addressed the COSAC chairpersons’ meeting to explain that it was an established principle that European Parliament did not take part in groups in this manner. She emphasised that the European Parliament would cooperate with the Taskforce, but that its engagement would be on “another level”. A number of delegations expressed regret at the European Parliament’s decision not to participate in the Taskforce.

The Senate of the Czech Republic submitted a position paper to COSAC containing recommendations on how to better apply the principle of subsidiarity. The delegation requested support for their position paper from the other National Parliaments taking part in COSAC.

**(ii) Kosovo**

Delegates from Cyprus and Spain expressed their objection to the participation of Kosovo at meetings organised by Bulgaria in its role as holder of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Delegates from the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo were invited to the COSAC Chairpersons’ meeting but did not attend.



Michael Healy-Rae TD

Chairman, Joint Committee on European Union Affairs

25 April 2018