



**Joint Committee on European Union Affairs**

**Report**

**Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC**

**Vienna, Austria**

**8-9 July 2018**

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**An Comhchoiste um Ghnóthaí an Aontais Eorpaigh**

**Tuarascáil**

**An Cruinniú de Chathaoirligh COSAC**

**Vín, an Ostair**

**8-9 Iúil 2018**

**32ENUA0017**



## **BACKGROUND**

The meeting of the COSAC Chairpersons under the Austrian Presidency took place in Vienna on 8-9 July 2018. COSAC is a Conference of the Committees of the national parliaments of the European Union Member States which deal with European Affairs. It is the principal forum for co-operation between committees of European Union 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 focuses on consideration of the draft agenda for the forthcoming plenary meeting, as well as discussing other issues. This Chairpersons meeting considered the draft Agenda for the plenary meeting to be held in Vienna in November.

## **DELEGATION**

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

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 co-chaired by **Mr Reinhold Lopatka**, Chairperson of the Permanent Subcommittee on EU Affairs of the National Council of Austria and **Mr Christian Buchmann**, Chairperson of the EU Committee of the Federal Council of Austria.

The main speakers at the meeting were:

- **Mr Wolfgang Sobotka**, President of the National Council (*Nationalrat*)
- **Ms Inge Posch-Gruska**, President of the Federal Council (*Bundesrat*)
- **Ms Karoline Edtstadler**, State Secretary, Federal Ministry of the Interior
- **Mr Frans Timmermans**, First Vice-President of the European Commission
- **Ms Mairead McGuinness**, First Vice-President of the European Parliament

In addition to procedural issues, the meeting was divided into two thematic policy sessions;

Session 1. Priorities of the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Session 2. Future and perspectives of the European Union

The LX Plenary Meeting of COSAC will take place on 18-20 November 2018; the draft programme for the plenary meeting was presented to attendees at the Chairpersons' Meeting.

## **OPENING OF THE MEETING**

Delegates were welcomed to the conference by **Mr Wolfgang Sobotka**, President of the National Council and **Ms Inge Posch-Gruska**, President of the Federal Council.

**Mr Sobotka** outlined the importance of Parliamentary co-operation in challenging times for the European Union. He discussed the challenges posed to the Union by terrorism, cybercrime, migration and Brexit. The ongoing negotiations for the post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework, transatlantic trade relations and efforts to provide an enhanced European Perspective for the Western Balkans were also issues which he believed would form the context of the Austrian Presidency. Mr Sobotka expressed his optimism for the future of Europe despite the ongoing challenges, highlighting the importance of the work of National Parliaments in facilitating convergence and cooperation between Member States.

**Ms Posch-Gruska** explored the topic of subsidiarity in her welcoming address. She stated that the Austrian Federal Council was active in carrying out subsidiarity checks, emphasising the importance of subsidiarity for citizen participation in EU-decision making. At a time of reduced citizen confidence in the EU, Ms Posch-Gruska felt it was important not to abuse subsidiarity for nationalistic purposes; interparliamentary dialogue could serve to move this debate forward.

**Mr Lopatka**, Chair of the Permanent Subcommittee on EU Affairs of the Austrian Parliament, extended a special welcome to new Chairpersons attending the COSAC Chairpersons' meeting for the first time. He proceeded to outline the programme for the meeting and to present the draft Agenda for the next plenary meeting.

## **ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA AND PROCEDURAL ISSUES**

The draft Agenda for the meeting was approved. Mr Lopatka updated the delegates on the Presidential Troika meeting held the previous evening.

Mr Lopatka presented the draft Agenda for the LX COSAC Plenary meeting, to be held in Vienna, 18 – 20 November 2018. The draft Agenda includes four sessions covering: 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 outline of the 30<sup>th</sup> Bi-annual Report of COSAC, to be based on the questionnaire, was detailed and, finally, Mr Lopatka described the letters received by the Presidency.

## **SESSION 1: PRIORITIES OF THE AUSTRIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

The keynote speaker for the first session was **Ms Karoline Edtstadler**, State Secretary, Federal Ministry of the Interior.

Ms Edtstadler commenced her address by explaining that Austria was taking on its third presidency of the Council of the European Union at a particularly challenging time. She expressed the view that collective action was needed to face the challenges head on, and to re-establish the trust of citizens. For the State Secretary, national parliaments played a key role in representing citizens, and shaping EU policy through the subsidiarity process. She stated that small issues should be dealt with at regional level, while larger issues needed joint solutions. She informed the meeting that the Austrian Presidency will be holding a high-level conference on subsidiarity on 15-16 November 2018.

### **(i) Priorities**

- *Security and the fight against illegal migration*

Ms Edtstadler outlined the proposals of the Austrian Presidency to fight against illegal migration, including reforming the Common European Asylum System, reforming the Dublin Regulation, and strengthening external borders through investment in the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX). She expressed the view that the conclusions of the European Council Summit in June 2018 were a step in the right direction, but that there were issues which still needed to be clarified. The Austrian Presidency will be holding a Summit on security and migration in Salzburg in September 2018.

- *Securing prosperity and competitiveness through digitalisation*

Ms Edtstadler noted that while Europe had the largest single market in the world, its share in global output was dwindling. In order to remain competitive, in her view, Europe needed to avoid excessive regulation, continue its work on the issue of digital taxation and complete the digital single market.

- *Stability in the European Neighbourhood – EU perspective of the Western Balkans/South Eastern Europe*

Regarding stability in the European Neighbourhood, Ms Edtstadler referenced the European Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Mr Johannes Hann, who stated that it was important for the EU to export stability rather than import instability. She noted that the Western Balkan states have been reliable partners for the EU, and that it was important to offer them incentives for progress towards accession. The recent agreement between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia regarding the dispute over the latter's name was a step in the right direction.

**(ii) Brexit and the proposals for the post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework**

Ms Edtstadler finished her address by discussing the challenges posed by Brexit and by the ongoing negotiations for the post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). She emphasised the need for an orderly and timely Brexit, which would give Member States sufficient time to ratify the final agreement. She expressed the wish that the UK would remain a close partner with the EU. She stated that the negotiations on the post-2020 MFF were still in the early stages, but that it was important that the final proposals emphasised efficiency and EU-added value.

**(iii) Debate**

In his intervention, **Senator Terry Leyden** spoke on the Presidency priorities in general and Brexit in particular. **Senator Leyden** congratulated Austria on its third presidency, and thanked the Austrian Presidency for its hospitality.

Senator Leyden thanked the delegates for the support of their Member States for Ireland during the Brexit negotiations, and expressed his concerns with regard to the Brexit process and the possibility of a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Senator Leyden wished the Austrian Presidency success with their Presidency Priorities.

In the discussion that followed, a number of delegates commented on the issue of **fighting illegal migration**, and the need to focus on strengthening external borders. The Italian delegation emphasised the need for the EU to change its approach for emergency management of migration to systematic management and the need for increased collective action and increased investment in Africa and the Middle East to stem migration at its source.

Considering the Western Balkans, a number of delegates expressed their support for the potential enlargement of the EU into the Western Balkans. The delegates from the Parliament of

Montenegro and the National Assembly of Serbia thanked the Austrian Presidency for its support of a European Perspective for the Western Balkans.

## **SESSION 2: FUTURE AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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

Mr Timmermans began his address by stating that the changes which he had seen in Vienna since his first visit to the city 40 years ago reflected the changes which had taken place across Europe since the 1970s. He expressed the view that these changes were 90% positive, but that over the last 15 years the convergence which has been achieved by the European Union Member States had been undermined. Mr Timmermans discussed the unrest caused by the effects of globalisation and that while the urge may be to “take back control”, the challenges of globalisation are supra-national and require Member States to work collectively to find joint solutions. In order to restore confidence in the European Project, he felt that leaders need to advocate for European solutions, and promote the idea put forward by French President Macron of “European Sovereignty”.

Mr Timmermans discussed the work of the European Commission’s Taskforce on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing less more efficiently”. The Taskforce’s report had been given to Commissioner Juncker, and was due to be published the day after the meeting. Mr Timmermans highlighted the report’s recommendation that the European Commission engage more with National Parliaments, Regional Parliaments and local authorities in order to bring the legislative process closer to the citizen.

### **(ii) Ms Mairead McGuinness, *First Vice-President of the European Parliament***

Ms McGuinness expressed the view that while the European Union was currently facing challenges, it would always face challenges. It was important to deal with challenges and not to try and insulate citizens from them. She referenced the fact that according to Eurobarometer, two thirds of EU citizens are more optimistic about the European Union than they were in the 1980s. The UK’s decision to leave the EU, and the subsequent negotiations regarding a Withdrawal Agreement had raised public awareness of the workings of the EU and the details of the customs union, the single market and the free movement of people.

Ms McGuinness discussed the need for increased engagement between the European Parliament and National Parliaments, as well as the need for increased involvement of National Parliaments in the legislative process. She suggested that the structures that are already in

place for interparliamentary engagement could be better used. Regarding the recommendations of the Taskforce on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing less more efficiently”, Ms McGuinness believed that it is necessary for national parliaments to be more involved throughout the legislative process, not just at the implementation stage. However, she also noted that due to the large amount of ongoing legislative proposals and their often highly technical nature, it was not always possible for anyone, including national parliaments, to fully engage with the details of every proposal as they changed constantly. The European Parliament tried to address this challenge by having a number of specialised committees with the remit and expertise to deal with specialist issues. She urged delegates to contact the European Parliament’s Committees if they have any concerns about a proposal, and to engage with the European Parliament throughout the legislative process.

### **(iii) Debate**

In the debate that followed, a number of delegates emphasised the importance of adequately funding Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy as part of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework. Other delegates expressed the view that it was vitally important to protect the integrity of the Schengen area and that the EU needed to contribute more to ending the conflicts which cause mass movement of people.

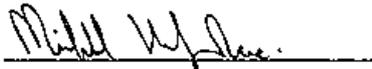
**Senator Leyden** thanked Mr Timmermans and Ms McGuinness for their contributions and stressed that Brexit was the most significant challenge to the EU since its foundation. **Senator Leyden** argued that Brexit had created a complicated economic situation for the border region between Ireland and Northern Ireland, and he lamented the lack of progress made in the negotiations, and expressed the view that imaginative solutions may be required in order to avoid a hard border. He suggested that an extension to the timeline of the negotiating period may be needed in order to avoid a “no-deal” Brexit.

### **(iv) Closing Remarks**

In his closing remarks, Vice-President Timmermans reiterated the need for Member States to work together and to find compromises to address common challenges. He emphasised the need for adherence to the treaties, stating that it was not possible to have “à la carte” solidarity. Describing Brexit as “unspeakably sad”, he stressed that the European Commission’s approach to Brexit was to manage the consequences and “do the least amount of harm as possible”, and that the proposals put forward by the British government would be analysed according to those principles.

First Vice-President McGuinness stressed the need to motivate citizens to actively engage with the EU, and to encourage people to come out and vote in the 2019 European Parliamentary elections. She queried that whether the technical terms of 'subsidiarity' and 'proportionality' resonated with people, and suggested instead there was a need to engage with people on the fundamental values of the EU and the need for solidarity. Ms McGuinness emphasised the need for compromise, detailing that without consensus it was not possible to move forward.

The meeting was concluded by Mr Buchmann.



Michael Healy-Rae TD

Chairman, Joint Committee on European Union Affairs

19 September 2018



## Appendix 1: Meeting Programme



REPUBLIC OF AUSTRIA  
Parliament

# Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC

**Vienna, 8 – 9 July 2018**

Draft Programme

Sunday, 8 July 2018

14:00 – 19:00      Arrival of delegations and registration at the hotels

16:45                Departure from the hotels

17:00 -  
approx. 18:00      **DemocracyQuarter WalkingTour**  
Visit of the interim location of the Austrian Parliament during the renovation of the historic Parliament building

18:15                Return to the hotels

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**Meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC**

17:40                Departure from the hotels

18:00                Meeting of the Presidential Troika  
*Venue: Parliament-Hofburg, Room 5*  
*Entrance: Pavilion Bibliothekshof*

Departure for the dinner

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18:45                Departure from the hotels

19:30                **Dinner hosted by Mr Reinhold Lopatka, Chairperson of the Permanent Subcommittee on EU Affairs of the National Council and Mr Christian Buchmann, Chairperson of the EU Committee of the Federal Council**  
**Dinner speech by Ms Karoline Edtstadler, State Secretary, Federal Ministry of the Interior, on “The global responsibility of the EU”**  
*Venue: Restaurant Kahlenberg, Am Kahlenberg 2-3, 1190 Vienna*

approx. 22:30      Return to the hotels

Monday, 9 July 2018

8:00 Departure from the hotels

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8:30 **Opening of the meeting of the COSAC Chairpersons**

*Venue: Parliament-Hofburg, Großer Redoutensaal*

*Entrance: 1010 Vienna, Josefsplatz 4*

**Welcome addresses:**

**Mr Wolfgang Sobotka**, President of the National Council

**Ms Inge Posch-Gruska**, President of the Federal Council

Chairperson's introductory remarks

8:45 Adoption of the agenda

**Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters**

- Briefing on the results of the Presidential Troika of COSAC
- Draft agenda of the LX COSAC
- Outline of the 30<sup>th</sup> Bi-annual Report of COSAC
- Letters received by the Presidency
- Others

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9:15 **Session 1: Priorities of the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union**

**Keynote speaker:**

**Ms Karoline Edtstadler**

State Secretary, Federal Ministry of the Interior

Debate

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10:30 Coffee break

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11:00

**Session 2: Future and perspectives of the European Union**

**Keynote speakers:**

**Mr Frans Timmermans**

First Vice President of the European Commission

**Ms Mairead McGuinness**

Vice President of the European Parliament

**Ms Ulrike Guérot**

Head of Department for European Policy and the Study of Democracy

Danube University Krems

Debate

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12:55

Chairperson's closing remarks

Family photo

13:00

**Lunch**

*Venue: Parliament-Hofburg, Dachfoyer*

14:30

Return to the hotels

Departure of delegations