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**NOTE**

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From: General Secretariat of the Council  
To: Delegations

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Subject: Minutes of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC and minutes of the Chairpersons of COSAC, held in Sofia, on 21-22 January 2018

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Delegations will find attached the minutes of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC (ANNEX I) as well as the minutes of the meeting of the of the Chairpersons of COSAC (ANNEX II), held in Sofia on 21-22 January 2018, drawn up by the COSAC Permanent Secretariat.

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE PRESIDENTIAL TROIKA OF COSAC**  
Sofia, Bulgaria, 21 January

**2018 PRESENT AT THE MEETING**

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

Mr Jaak MADISON, Deputy-Chair of the European Union Affairs Committee, Estonian *Riigikogu*, Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Chair of the Standing Sub-Committee on European Affairs of the Austrian *Nationalrat*, Mr Edgar MAYER, Chair of the EU Committee of the Austrian *Bundesrat*; and Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, Vice-President, European Parliament.

**AGENDA**

- 1. Adoption of the agenda of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC**
- 2. Approval of the draft programme of the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC**
- 3. Debate on the draft programme of the LIX COSAC**
- 4. Approval of the outline of the 29th Bi-annual Report of COSAC**
- 5. Letters received by the Presidency**
- 6. Letters sent by the Presidency**
- 7. Any other business**

**PROCEEDINGS**

**1. Adoption of the agenda of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC**

Mr VIGENIN welcomed the delegations of the Presidential Troika of COSAC (hereinafter referred to as "the Troika").

The agenda of the meeting of the Troika was adopted without amendment.

**2. Approval of the draft programme of the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC**

Mr VIGENIN outlined the topics on the programme of the meeting that would take place the following day.

The first session would focus on the “priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU” and would be presented by Ms Lilyana PAVLOVA, Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

The second session would deal with “the future of the European Union - strength in unity” and would be presented by Ms Iliana IOTOVA, Vice-President of the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice-President of the European Commission and Ms Iskra MIHAYLOVA, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development, European Parliament.

Finally, the third session would focus on “the role of EU macro-regional strategies for sustainable development, stability and security”, with Ms Denitsa NIKOLOVA, Deputy Minister of Regional Development and Public Works of the Republic of Bulgaria and National Coordinator for the EU Strategy for the Danube Region; Mr Raul MÄLK, Ambassador-at-Large for Baltic Sea Region, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia and Chair of the National Coordinators group of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region; and Ms Audrone PERKAUSKIENE, Head of division, Regional Cooperation and the OSCE, European External Action Service, as keynote speakers.

After the Chair noted a slight change in the speakers’ order of appearance during the first session, the draft programme of the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC was approved without amendment.

### **3. Debate on the draft programme of the LIX COSAC**

The Chair informed the Troika members that the LIX COSAC would take place on 17-19 June 2018 in Sofia. He then outlined the five sessions of the draft programme and the keynote speakers.

The first session would focus on the achievements of the Bulgarian Presidency; the second session would deal with the integration and connectivity of the Western Balkans; the third session would address the European Pillar of Social Rights; the fourth session would tackle the future of the Cohesion Policy; and the fifth and final session would focus on the role of the EU Interparliamentary cooperation in the context of the debate on subsidiarity and proportionality.

Mr VIGENIN stated that these topics were of key importance to the future of the European Union and expressed his hope that First Vice-President TIMMERMANS would join the debate for the last session, in order to include the work completed by the Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing Less More Efficiently” in the discussion.

The debate closed without any interventions, and the Chair promised that an updated agenda would be sent subsequently.

### **4. Approval of the outline of the 29th Bi-annual Report of COSAC**

Outlining the structure of the 29th Bi-annual Report of COSAC, Mr VIGENIN reported that the first chapter would be divided in two sections: one focusing on the work of the “Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and "Doing Less More Efficiently"” and the expectations of the national Parliaments in this regard, while the other would pay special attention to the possibility of future enlargement of the Union and on the respective opinion of Parliaments on the topic. The second chapter would focus on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027. The third chapter would deal with the “European Pillar of Social Rights”.

The questionnaire would be distributed by 13 February and the replies would be expected by 19 March 2018.

Ms McGUINNESS praised the outline and the topics chosen for the 29th Bi-annual Report of COSAC, but added that it was important to ensure that people were aware of the feedback of national Parliaments and the contents of the report, and to ensure that the findings are distributed and hopefully taken on board. She concluded by pledging the EP’s assistance in achieving this and establishing wider acknowledgement of the report.

The Chair welcomed and agreed with these sentiments, and stressed the importance of the way questions were formulated.

## 5. Letters received by the Presidency

The Chair referred to the following letters received:

- Letters from Ms Tamar KHULORDAVA, Chair of the Committee on European Integration, *Parliament of Georgia*, Ms Jóna Sólveig ELÍNARDÓTTIR, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Icelandic *Althingi*, Mr Olemic THOMMESSEN, President of the Norwegian *Storting*, Mr Thomas AESCHI, Member of the National Council, President of the EFTA/EU Delegation, Swiss *Assemblée fédérale*, and Ms Blerta DELIU-KODRA, Chairwoman of the Committee on European Integration of the Assembly of Kosovo<sup>1</sup>, requesting participation in COSAC meetings.
- A letter from Mr Jean BIZET, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the French *Sénat*, requesting an additional item to be included on the agenda of the LIX COSAC regarding the participation of national Parliaments in the process of negotiating trade agreements between the EU and third countries.
- A letter from Mr TIMMERMANS in reply to the Troika's letter of 6 December 2017 on the possible extension of the composition and timeframe of the Task Force's work.
- Letters from Mr Toomas VITSUT, Chair of the EU Affairs Committee of the Estonian *Riigikogu* and Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Chair of the Permanent Subcommittee on EU Affairs at the Austrian *Nationalrat*, informing the Presidency about their respective participation in the Task Force.
- A letter from the Dutch *Tweede Kamer* addressed to Mr Jean Claude JUNCKER, President of the Commission, and Mr TIMMERMANS, on the Task Force.
- A paper from the Czech *Senát* on "How to better apply the principle of subsidiarity and the subsidiarity control mechanism".

After consultation with the Troika, the Parliaments requesting participation had been invited as special guests. Georgia however, had not registered.

The Chair also noted that, during the meeting, only delegations from EU Member States would have both names and flags of their countries on their tables, because of concerns raised by some countries, especially Serbia, with regard to Kosovo's participation. Considering the fact that five Member States did not recognize Kosovo, and given that Spain had also become sensitive to the issue, the proposed arrangement was deemed the best way to ensure participation while respecting sensibilities, thus prompting the decision to do without flags and names for non-Member States.

With regard to the letter sent by Mr BIZET, the Chair noted that there were no plans to include this as a separate item, but encouraged Mr BIZET to raise this topic during the 5th session.

As for Mr TIMMERMAN's letter on the Task Force, the Chair noted that this stated that neither timeframe nor participation would be extended. Also with regard to the letters from Mr VITSUT and Mr LOPATKA, the Chair had informed Mr TIMMERMANS accordingly.

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<sup>1</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with Resolution 1244 of the United Nations Security Council and to the opinion of the ICJ on the declaration of independence of Kosovo.

The letter from the Dutch *Tweede Kamer* and the paper from the Czech *Senát* would be shared with the rest of delegations.

Mr LOPATKA had also asked to discuss the European Parliament's decision and the possibility of sending a letter to its President, Mr Antonio TAJANI, and the Chair asked Ms McGUINNESS for the European Parliament's position regarding this.

Ms McGUINNESS replied that the Conference of Presidents had unanimously agreed not to participate on institutional grounds. She stressed that the European Parliament was however not against the idea of having a Task Force or discussing the important topics suggested, but rather, the refusal to participate was made on the grounds of a well established principle: "Whereby no Member of Parliament should take part in any capacity in working groups or advisory fora set up by the Commission where these bodies dealt with subject matters in which the Parliament was co-legislator."

Ms McGUINNESS pointed out that the European Parliament's position on subsidiarity and related issues featuring for debate by the Task Force would be reflected in its AFCO and JURI Committees' report on the Interinstitutional Agreement on Better law-making to be adopted in plenary in May. Annual reports on the principle of subsidiarity were also being drawn up by JURI. In AFCO, an implementation report largely dealing with subsidiarity and proportionality would soon be adopted. While the principle position of the European Parliament upheld by the Conference of Presidents was that there was no place for the European Parliament as part of the Task Force because of its institutional role, Ms McGUINNESS noted that it was still interested in its work. She personally believed the voice of national Parliaments was important in the exchange with the Commission on the principle of subsidiarity, and hoped that the Task Force would identify any areas where more power could be given back to Member States or otherwise. She added that the European Parliament, represented in the Troika would be supporting the work of the working group within COSAC and would facilitate the holding of its meetings in Brussels.

Mr LOPATKA replied that the European Parliament's refusal to participate did not mark a good start for the Task Force. He underlined the importance of showing how the European Parliament, COSAC and Regions were working together in a way that citizens would see there was a common goal shared by all.

Mr MAYER said the Task Force was a step in the right direction, and the European Parliament's decision made it look like the European Parliament was against the itwith their decision. If the European Parliament was interested in the work, it should join the Task Force.

Mr MADISON welcomed the idea of having a Task Force and agreed with his Austrian colleagues. He noted that the European Parliament was a very important part of the future of the EU, and hoped that it would at least work in some way with the Task Force. At the same time, he also respected the decision of the European Parliament.

Mr VIGENIN said the Commission itself had not presented the Task Force in an ideal way and obviously, without consultation with the European Parliament, but also noting that, on the other hand, it was true that non-participation would lessen the credibility of the results of the Task Force, as the European Parliament would not need to commit to anything agreed. He hoped that the European Parliament would find the way to at least follow the work of the Task Force and give some recommendations that could be taken into account in its work.

Ms McGUINNESS appreciated all comments and remarks and promised to convey them back to the European Parliament. She said that there was a common understanding on how to do this work, but noted that there was a precedent and explained how a similar invite had been made in the past and the European Parliament could not participate for the same reasons. Ms McGUINNESS was aware that timeframe was also short, and so invited colleagues to use all the resources available in the European Parliament on the topics at hand. While noting the importance of looking into ways of supporting the working group, she stressed that rules were necessary and it was important to stick to them. Nevertheless, the European Parliament would be deeply interested in whatever results the Task Force came up with, and it was the will of President TAJANI to engage the Task Force, as he had stated in plenary. She referred to the exchange held during December plenary between the President of the Commission and the President of the European Parliament, in which the latter stated the will of the Parliament to cooperate and to engage.

## **6. Letters sent by the Presidency**

The Chair referred to the following letters sent:

- Letter from Mr VIGENIN outlining his vision of how the working group, which the 58th COSAC had invited the Bulgarian Presidency to set up, should be composed.

The Chair explained how in that letter he proposed to have the working group composed by one representative of each member accompanied by one staff member. He informed the Troika that he had been approached informally, especially by bi-cameral parliaments, regarding this arrangement, and asked for views on the composition of the working group, in particular with regard to possible pressure from bi-cameral parliaments, and whether it would be possible to have an extra member for the bi- cameral parliaments.

Mr MADISON agreed with this idea, but asked whether it would be two members for two chambers, or for all chambers. He concluded that, for the Estonian Parliament, it did not matter.

The Austrian delegation supported the proposal but questioned whether a Working Group with 56 members would be too big.

Mr VIGENIN expressed his opinion that this was still manageable, and that, in the name of fairness, it would be best to invite Parliaments to send up to two members. Only one meeting was being foreseen, but if there were need for another, the Presidency would coordinate with the Troika and decide.

The first meeting of the Task Force would take place on 25 January 2018.

## **7. Any other business**

No other business.

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHAIRPERSONS OF COSAC**  
Sofia, Bulgaria, 22 January 2018

**AGENDA:**

1. **Opening of the meeting**
  - Welcome address by Ms Tsveta KARAYANCHEVA, President of the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*
  - Introductory remarks by Mr Kristian VIGENIN, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds of the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*
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 LIX COSAC
  - Outline of the 29th Bi-Annual Report of COSAC
  - Letters received by the Presidency
  - Procedural issues
4. **Priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU Keynote speaker: Ms Lilyana PAVLOVA, Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU**
5. **The future of the European Union – Strength in Unity Speakers: Ms Iliana IOTOVA, Vice President of the Republic of Bulgaria; Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice President of the European Commission; and Ms Iskra MIHAYLOVA, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development [REGI], European Parliament**
6. **The role of EU macro-regional strategies for sustainable development, stability and security**  
**Speakers: Ms Denitsa NIKOLOVA, Deputy Minister of Regional Development and Public Works of the Republic of Bulgaria, National Coordinator for the EU Strategy for the Danube Region [EUSDR]; Mr Raul MÄLK, Ambassador-at-Large for Baltic Sea Region, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, Chair of the National Coordinators group of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region; Ms Audrone PERKAUSKIENE, Head of division Regional Cooperation and the OSCE, European External Action Service (EEAS)**

**PROCEEDINGS**

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

**1. Opening of the meeting**

- Welcome address by Ms Tsveta KARAYANCHEVA, President of the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*
- Introductory remarks by Mr Kristian VIGENIN, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds of the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*

Mr Kristian VIGENIN, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds of the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*, welcomed all participants to Sofia and opened the Chairpersons' meeting, noting that it also marked the beginning of the parliamentary dimension of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU. He then gave the floor to the President of the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*.

Ms Tsveta KARAYANCHEVA, President of the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*, welcomed all participants to the official opening of the first Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, while also pointing out the importance of COSAC, having established itself for 30 years as a platform for the participation of Parliaments/Chambers in the decision-making process of the European Union. She further described it as a guarantee for the involvement of EU citizens in the democratic oversight on European institutions, in relation to compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

Taking the floor, Mr VIGENIN then pointed out the awareness of the responsibility of the Bulgarian Presidency's parliamentary dimension in times of overlapping crisis and challenges, where national Parliaments and their members played a key role in ensuring the accountability and legitimacy of EU actions before their citizens. He further noted that the members of the European Union could only be strong if they stood united and lived up to the expectations placed on them, especially in the areas of security, economy, social inclusion, environmental protection and climate change.

After presenting some of the key topics of the parliamentary dimension of the Bulgarian Presidency, namely the enlargement process towards the Western Balkans region, the next European budget and the macro-regional strategies for the Danube and Black sea regions, Mr VIGENIN welcomed the Chairs who were attending the COSAC Chairpersons' meeting for the first time, namely Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Committee of European Affairs of the Slovenian *Državni zbor*, Mr Jonas ERIKSSON, Chair of the Committee on European Union Affairs of the Swedish *Riksdag*, and Mr Guido WOLF, Chair of the Committee on European Union Questions of the German *Bundesrat*.

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

Mr VIGENIN 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 Presidential Troika of COSAC**
- **Draft agenda of the LIX COSAC**
- **Outline of the 29th Bi-annual Report of COSAC**
- **Letters received by the Presidency**
- **Procedural issues**

Mr VIGENIN referred to the Presidential Troika meeting that had taken place the previous evening and presented the draft agenda of the LIX COSAC meeting to be held in Sofia on 17-19 June 2018. Mr VIGENIN explained that there would be five topics on the agenda: the achievements of the Bulgarian Presidency; the integration and connectivity of the Western Balkans; the European Pillar of Social Rights; the future of the Cohesion Policy post 2020; and the role of the EU interparliamentary cooperation in the context of the debate on subsidiarity and proportionality.

The Chair added that the Presidency hoped that the First Vice-President of the European Commission, Commissioner for Better Regulation, Interinstitutional Relations, the Rule of Law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, would join the plenary session of the COSAC for the fifth session to continue the discussion on the ‘Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing Less More Efficiently”’, that was chaired by him.

Other invited keynote speakers at the plenary session would be the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations, Mr Johannes HAHN; the Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, Ms Marianne THYSSEN; and the Commissioner for Regional Policy, Ms Corina CREȚU.

Following the information on the agenda of the plenary session, Mr VIGENIN went on to outline the 29th Bi-annual Report of COSAC. The report would be divided into three chapters. The first chapter would address the future of the European Union by focusing on national Parliaments’ expectations of the ‘Task Force on Subsidiarity, Proportionality and “Doing Less More Efficiently”’ on the one hand, and by seeking the opinions of national Parliaments on the topic of a possible enlargement of the Union on the other. Chapter two would focus on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021-2027, mainly on the Cohesion Policy post 2020 and the EU Budget in the aftermath of Brexit. The third chapter would emphasise the European Pillar of Social Rights by paying special attention to the best practises to strengthen and improve the parliamentary scrutiny over social issues.

The Bi-annual Report would be based on the replies to the questionnaire, which would be sent to delegations on 13 February 2018. Replies would be expected by 19 March 2018.

As a third point, Mr VIGENIN outlined the letters received by the Presidency.

The next item presented by Mr VIGENIN was the set-up of the COSAC working group to facilitate regular and comprehensive discussions related to the work of the Task Force. Mr VIGENIN explained that during the Troika meeting the previous day, it was decided that the fairest approach would be to open participation to two representatives of each parliament, accompanied by one staff member. He furthermore noted that the meetings would be held in Brussels as the European Parliament had agreed to host them on its premises. The Chair explained that more details would be available after the first meeting of the Task Force on the 25th of January and promised that invitations to the meetings of the working group would be sent out well in advance in order to facilitate the arrival of the parliamentarians involved.

Mr Malik AZMANI, Dutch *Tweede Kamer*, criticized the late stage of the establishing of the Task Force and the tight work timeframe, but also stressed the importance of an efficient, transparent and well-structured working group, and confirmed the participation of the Dutch Chamber.

Mr Václav HAMPL, Czech *Senát*, reminded his colleagues of the Czech paper that formulated recommendations to the Task Force. He clarified that the paper was not to be understood as a mandate for the members of the Task Force but rather as a contribution to its work at an early stage. Mr HAMPL explained that the goal would be to send the paper to the Task Force by the end of January.

Mr Kyriakos KYRIAKOU-HADJIYIANNI, Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, condemned the participation of Kosovo<sup>2</sup>, as it had not been recognised by all Member States. Furthermore he expressed the Cypriot objection to Kosovo's participation in future meetings.

Ms Gabriela CREȚU, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Romanian Senat, could not understand the need of continuing discussion about the composition and work of the Task Force, given that this was a consultative body and not a decision-making one. She also remarked that currently national Parliaments seemed to be doing more, less efficiently.

#### **4. Priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union**

Keynote speaker: Ms Lilyana PAVLOVA, Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2018

Mr VIGENIN underlined that, on 1 December 2017, the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie* had adopted a formal position on the priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency on the basis of public meetings and discussions with standing parliamentary committees and representatives of the government, civil society, and social partners. Mr VIGENIN expressed his approval that the position had been properly reflected by the government in the final draft of the Programme of the Presidency. He used the opportunity to thank Ms Lilyana PAVLOVA, Minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and former parliamentarian, for the constructive cooperation during the last months, before giving her the floor.

Ms PAVLOVA began her speech by noting the importance of the good coordination and partnership between the government and the Bulgarian Parliament in elaborating the priorities of the first Bulgarian Presidency: the first draft of the priorities had been put forward in June 2017 and in the following six months more than 200 discussions had taken place, some of which with the participation of the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*.

Referring to the motto of the Bulgarian Presidency, “United We Stand Strong”, Ms PAVLOVA noted how this message was now more relevant than ever before in Europe. The Minister explained that there were four key priority areas for the Bulgarian Presidency, which were as open and flexible as possible.

The first priority was the future of Europe and young people, with special attention paid to the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the aftermath of Brexit. Ms PAVLOVA underlined the importance of listening to all Member States and in this regard a series of debates were about to start. The Minister explained that Bulgaria was looking to strike a balance between having 10-15 billion euro less in the next MFF while at the same time having sufficient funds to both support traditional policies like the Cohesion Policy and Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), but also responding to new challenges such as security, migration, external action, climate change, and others. She informed the delegates that a High-level conference on the future MFF would take place in Sofia on 9 March 2018, during which the European finance ministers would try to find a

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<sup>2</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with Resolution 1244 of the United Nations Security Council and to the opinion of the ICJ on the declaration of independence of Kosovo.

common ground on how to achieve more with less, through, *inter alia*, a discussion on own resources. Ms PAVLOVA expressed her hope that the draft MFF would be adopted soon after its publication in May, having in mind the elections coming up in 2019.

Ms PAVLOVA then turned her attention to the second priority of the Bulgarian Presidency: security and stability, noting that this included how to ensure a more efficient external border control, as well as the proper functioning of the existing security systems. The debate on this topic would start at the end of the week with the first informal Council on Justice and Home Affairs. Ms PAVLOVA referred to a “Friends of the presidency” working group that had been created in order to work on the reform of the asylum system. She acknowledged that there were still diverging views on the matter and that this was one of the most challenging topics, as already four presidencies had worked on it. The Minister called for an assessment of the aftermath of the migrant crisis, as well as the use of all mechanisms and funds to make investments in Africa; in her view, it was time to reach an agreement and she therefore hoped that this would happen during the Bulgarian Presidency.

The third priority, the European perspective and connectivity of the Western Balkans, was according to Ms PAVLOVA one which the Bulgarian Presidency was hoping to be remembered for. She underlined that peace and stability in Europe were important, and the Western Balkans were part of Europe. The Minister noted that the region had had a difficult and challenging past, both economically and politically and it was time for those countries to have a clear perspective of their European future. Ms PAVLOVA stated that the Presidency did not want to give false signs or promises to the countries of the Western Balkans; these would still have to satisfy all the criteria for accession. She reiterated that those countries would not receive an accession date over the following six months; they would still need to keep to their commitments. Ms PAVLOVA called for an objective assessment of each state, a process that could take years. The Minister also noted that peace and prosperity required connectivity, which was why the Presidency was coupling political commitments and perspectives with connectivity and its many facets: transport, energy, education (with a focus on young people), and digital connectivity. Ms PAVLOVA informed the delegates that there would be a summit of the heads of state on 17 May 2018 in Sofia, which would issue a declaration calling for the integration of the Western Balkans in the common EU transport corridors and in the system of economic development in the region.

The fourth priority of the Bulgarian Presidency was the digital economy, digital skills and the digital market. Ms PAVLOVA praised the Estonian Presidency for the significant progress it had achieved on those topics, noting that there were still a lot to work on, with the Presidency having inherited more than 120 legislative files from Estonia. She promised that the Bulgarian Presidency would do its best in order for the Digital Single Market (DSM) to start functioning in 2018. There were 15 legislative files in total that needed to be adopted in this regard and the Presidency hoped to reach compromise on the proposals aimed at personal data protection, free flow of data, copyright and cyber security in the coming months. She also informed the delegates of a digital week called WebIt to be held towards the end of the Bulgarian Presidency. More than 2000 participants were expected and Ms PAVLOVA expressed her hope that this would mark the start of a well-functioning digital market.

The Minister concluded her intervention by sharing some facts about Bulgaria: its digital sector marked a growth in revenues of more than 600% and 31% of the professionals in the sector were women, which was one of the highest rates in Europe. Ms PAVLOVA noted that Bulgaria took pride in its stable economic indicators: growth of 4%; zero budget deficit; national debt of less than 26%, among the top three in the EU.

In the following debate, 20 delegates took part.

Ms Ivelina VASSILEVA from the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie*, started by noting that after eleven years of EU membership, Bulgarians remained one of the most convinced EU-optimists. She also underlined the active participation of the Bulgarian *Narodno sabranie* in the adoption of the Programme of the Presidency and its support for the main priorities.

A number of representatives joined in expressing their support for the priorities: Mr Kamal Izidor SHAKER, Slovenian *Državni zbor*; Mr Richárd HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*; Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Austrian *Nationalrat*; Ms Izabela KLOC, Polish *Sejm*; Mr Václav HAMPL; Mr Ondřej BENEŠÍK, Czech *Poslanecká sněmovna*; and Ms Maria TRIANTAFYLLOU, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, spoke in favour of the European perspective for the Western Balkans. Mr SHAKER said that the Bulgarian priorities recently received a very positive response by the Foreign Affairs Committee and the European Affairs Committee of the Slovenian *Državni zbor*. Mr HÖRCSIK noted that the Bulgarian Presidency, followed by the Austrian one, and together with the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrád Group, provided a good opportunity for the enlargement process.. Mr LOPATKA stated that the Western Balkans had been at the core of the Austrian foreign policy and the European perspective for them should be kept. Mr HAMPL noted that the region was very important for the security and stability of Europe. Both he and Mr BENEŠÍK expressed willingness to contribute, if necessary, towards the completion of this goal. Ms TRIANTAFYLLOU noted that the EU strategy for the region should be inclusive and result-oriented, while at the same time motivating the less prepared countries to continue with the reforms. Mr Jean BIZET, French *Sénat*, also expressed support for the Presidency's efforts in the region and underlined that priority should be given to the promotion of the rule of law and the enhancement of institution building.

Mr AZMANI noted the ambitious agenda of the Presidency and asked what the Bulgarian strategy would be as an honest broker.

Mr Adrijan VUKSANOVIĆ, *Skupština Crne Gore*, stated that EU membership was Montenegro's ultimate goal, and they were looking for a clear roadmap. With three already closed chapters, they expected to open the rest by the end of 2018.

Mr Mehmet Kasım GÜLPINAR, Turkish *Büyük Millet Meclisi*, expressed his hope that the Bulgarian Presidency would contribute to the relations in the neighbourhood and to boosting Turkey-EU relations. Despite some difficulties lately, the EU membership remained a strategic goal for Turkey, he said.

Mr Rubén MORENO, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, reiterated the position of Spain in regards to the inclusion of the “territory of Kosovo” in the enlargement process. He underlined that the process should focus on the most prepared countries, Serbia and Montenegro. In the meantime, the EU should help Albania and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia catch up with them, and in any case, accession should be an option only for those countries that had been recognised by all Member States, which was why the format of the Western Balkan Six (WB6) was not acceptable. Mr MORENO said that Spain would not take part in the summit on 17 May 2018, if the main topic was enlargement; however, if enlargement was put aside and the focus was on connectivity, Spain would study the opportunity to participate, after a consultation with Serbia.

Many delegates spoke about the second Bulgarian priority: security, stability and defence. Mr HÖRCSIK noted the importance of safeguarding the EU’s external borders and praised Bulgaria’s efforts in this area. Mr BIZET echoed this sentiment and called for an effective migration policy. Ms KLOC spoke about a more effective return policy and better border protection, while also stating opposition to the relocation system as proposed so far. Mr Jean-Louis BOURLANGES, French *Assemblée nationale*, noted that solidarity also meant more support for the integration of migrants and this should be reflected in the next MFF. Mr Jaak MADISON, Estonian *Riigikogu*, expressed his hope that by the end of the Bulgarian Presidency a consensus on the Dublin reform would have been reached and noted that solidarity should go together with sovereignty. Ms Soraya RODRIGUEZ, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, said that a balance between short-term and long-term solutions for migration needed to be found. Ms Regina BASTOS, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, called for a strong Europe in terms of security and defence, but also for more solidarity. Ms Mairead McGUINNESS, European Parliament, insisted that closing the borders and doing nothing else was not the solution, referring to Africa in particular.

Mr Edgar MAYER, Austrian *Bundesrat*, informed the delegates about a summit dedicated to homeland security that would be held in Vienna in September 2018, focussing on combatting terrorism; protecting external borders; migration; prosecution; and cyber space.

Some delegates took the floor in support of the priority relating to the digital agenda. Mr MADISON noted the work done by the Estonian Presidency and expressed his hope that Bulgaria would succeed in finalising many of the remaining digital files. He was joined by Ms RODRIGUEZ, Ms KLOC and Mr MAYER who strongly welcomed continued work on DSM, and Mr BIZET, who stated his support for the initiatives on cyber security and the digital agenda as a whole. Ms McGUINNESS said she was impressed with the Bulgarian records in the field.

On the future of the EU, Mr MADISON noted that the White Paper of the President of the European Commission, Mr Jean-Claude JUNCKER was a good start for the discussion but there were different ways forward and the debate should continue. Mr MAYER called for building upon the good economic developments and spreading them across the EU. Ms RODRIGUEZ said that there were still challenges, such as the high level of unemployment and low growth of salaries and there was a need to extend public services like education and healthcare that had been cut back during the crisis. She called for social and economic cohesion and a strong social pillar of rights in order to adjust our societies to the technological changes, a position shared by Ms BASTOS. Ms Áslaug Arna SIGURBJORNSDÓTTIR, Icelandic *Alþingi*, expressed support for the emphasis the Presidency was putting on young people. Mr BIZET and Ms KLOC expressed support for the preservation of the Cohesion Policy and the CAP, with Mr BIZET suggesting to explore the idea of own resources in the next MFF and Ms KLOC saying that direct payments were ensuring the proper functioning of the single market of agricultural products. Mr BIZET also called for more attention to the situation in Ukraine and Russia.

A number of delegates spoke about Brexit. Mr MAYER noted that Brexit would be among the

challenges of the Austrian Presidency and in this regard, the motto of the Bulgarian presidency was very suitable. Mr LOPATKA said that the decision of the UK was a clear mandate for the EU to work harder toward reform and reiterated that Austria would help in shaping the future relationship between the Union and the UK. Ms KLOC stated that Brexit was a concern and that dialogue, mutual respect and consensus were important. Ms McGUINNESS noted that sometimes Member States and European institutions struggled with consensus, the definition for which was a situation where nobody would win but the outcome would still be beneficial to all. She also underlined that, despite Brexit, Europe was not closing in itself but looking outward, further noting that young people tended to be more supportive towards the EU and this enthusiasm should be harnessed.

Regarding the macro-regional strategies, which would be discussed during the third session of the meeting, Mr MAYER expressed full support for the Danube strategy and Ms KLOC noted that a Carpathian strategy was needed as well.

Ms PAVLOVA thanked the delegates for their support, saying that she was fully aware of the huge challenges ahead. There were certain topics on which there was no agreement yet and the Presidency had the ambition to be the balancing power, and act as an honest broker. Concerning the announced summit on the Western Balkans on 17 May 2018, she underlined that it was not an enlargement summit but an EU perspective summit. Bulgaria did not want to create false expectations, she reiterated. Ms PAVLOVA concluded by stating that finding a common approach and understanding, reaching consensus would be the main priority for the Bulgarian Presidency. In her view, this meant seeking a maximum number of supporting entities, whether this was in the form of a vote in the European Parliament or the Council or a trialogue.

## **5. The future of the European Union – Strength in Unity**

Speakers: Ms Iliana IOTOVA, Vice President of the Republic of Bulgaria; Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice President of the European Commission, Ms Iskra MIHAYLOVA, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development (REGI), European Parliament

The Chair opened the session by stating that Bulgaria was holding the Presidency at the end of the current legislative cycle, a time for actions with a clear European added value for the EU citizens. He underlined the role of national Parliaments in the debate over the democratic legitimacy of the European Union and the need for solidarity and cohesion as confirmed by the Rome Declaration. The Chair stressed that Bulgarians continued to be strongly pro-European and optimistic about the future of the EU.

Ms Iliana IOTOVA, Vice President of the Republic of Bulgaria, assured participants of Bulgaria's strong and active position on all major topics ranging from security and funding of the EU against the backdrop of Brexit, to the relations with the UK and EU's leadership on the global scene. She deplored that the Rome Declaration was signed at a time when citizens expressed dissatisfaction with the EU and lost the natural enthusiasm which had supported its development. Ms IOTOVA also noted the lack of dialogue with civil society.

She also deplored the consequences of the lack of solidarity among Member States and advocated for a European project based on specific policies, rather than on theoretical policy discussions. Ms IOTOVA demonstrated how the lack of public discussion on the budget of the EU post-2020 led to legitimate concerns of citizens, and how current proposals, such as increasing the contribution to the EU budget, could gain legitimacy only if discussed in due course with citizens. The replacement of the Cohesion Policy by new financial instruments also called for a wide public debate. She stressed that citizens not only expected action in the fight against terrorism, but also in areas such as unemployment, social disparities, environment protection and tax fraud.

On migration, the Vice President lamented the lack of a common European asylum system, after more than two years of negotiations, and the fact that the Agreement with Turkey was not functioning as it should, especially with regard to readmission. Those issues needed urgent action, Ms IOTOVA argued, noting also that Member States seemed to be willing to observe the principle of solidarity only provided other countries did the same, which led to a divided Europe.

Concerning security, the Vice President referred to the stringent need of discussing the issue of the European Bureau of Investigation, the greater coordination of EU's security forces, or the idea of involving the European Public Prosecutor in fighting terrorism. Speaking about defence, Ms IOTOVA underlined the need to ensure that all Member States were involved in the discussions on an equal footing, to avoid new division, and a "new Schengen", a sensitive topic for Bulgaria.

She explained that by making enlargement a priority, Bulgaria chose to put the spotlight on a region, which was crucial for the stability of the continent. The Vice President believed that adding more value to the common project of EU enlargement by reaching out to the Western Balkans would be a success story for the EU as a whole.

Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice President of the European Commission, started his address by arguing that EU action should be calibrated on the interlinked challenges the EU was currently facing, namely the global impact of the fourth industrial revolution on societies and the environment, the new strategic environment which was marked by a new vision of the US administration on international stability, and the European environment surrounded by insecurity. Action, he stated, was also necessary for addressing the unfulfilled promise of convergence, which eroded support for EU and national politics alike.

Mr TIMMERMANS highlighted the need to present the EU as an instrument allowing citizens to regain control and instill into them the belief in a future of potential progress, something which could be achieved by highlighting the benefits of the fourth industrial revolution, by working on the circular economy and the digital market packages, by reducing pollution, and by putting convergence in and between the Member States at the core of the discussion on the MFF.

On migration, the First Vice President clarified that many Member States shouldered responsibility when it came to relocation, which in the end was only a small, albeit essential, element of a bigger strategy. The failure of the Dublin system showed it was necessary to reform it, so that burden would be fairly shared. He explained that the major challenge herewould be posed by migrants not entitled to international protection, and who needed help to remain in their countries. The Union could promote sustainable development in the countries of origin and strengthen cooperation on security and border protection.

Mr TIMMERMANS informed parliamentarians that on 25 January the Task Force would meet for the first time. He invited all delegates to give input, within the tight framework in place, to ensure that substantial outcome would feed into the discussions on the Future of the EU and its tasks, and on the priorities of the next MFF.

The Vice President argued that sovereignty should not be construed as a legal or symbolic notion, but as a capacity to act to solve problems for citizens and societies. Echoing President Macron's view on sovereignty, which meant giving the EU the capacity to act there where it needed to act on behalf of its Member States and its citizens, he said the involvement of national Parliaments in that process was indispensable.

In conclusion, Mr TIMMERMANS stated the Commission would need to work on those tasks beyond the current mandate, with the help of national Parliaments. He reiterated his call for input for the works of the Task Force, promising feedback, and he expressed the Commission's confidence in the success of the Bulgarian Presidency.

Mr VIGENIN informed Mr TIMMERMANS that a formal working group had been established within COSAC in order to prepare participation of the COSAC representatives to the Task Force and to provide constructive input to it.

Ms Iskra MIHAYLOVA, Chair of the Committee on Regional Development (REGI), European Parliament, argued strongly in favour of securing the closeness of EU citizens to its policies and institutions, which was fundamental for the EU's future, as shown by Brexit. The EP had been actively upholding the EU's values in the field of migration, security, border protection and environment policies.

Ms MIHAYLOVA commended Vice President TIMMERMANS for his availability and the close and frequent contacts with the European Parliament. Referring to the Task Force, she expressed her conviction that the European Parliament could substantially contribute to its work based on its constant work on the Future of Europe undertaken in each committee and in plenary.

Ms MIHAYLOVA outlined the main reports and resolutions of the European Parliament on the future of the cohesion policy. She also referred to the trends of the future development of the EU: ensuring greater flexibility of the EU budget, by the use of structural funds to recover from natural disasters; the extension of the European Strategic Investment Fund beyond the capabilities of the EU budget, involving the private sector; the extension of the budget for support programmes for structural reform. She explained that REGI was working on the General regulation of the package of the Economic and Financial Union and that the revision of the financial framework until 2020 would lead to simplification and better coordination of policies.

Ms MIHAYLOVA added that changing the General Regulation to support the Youth Employment Strategy would grant more flexibility in using the limited resources of the MFF, and praised the European Parliament's swift action in mobilising funds in this field. Referring to a recent interparliamentary committee meeting organised by REGI she noted proposals submitted by national parliamentarians. Among the agreed principles for the future policies of growth, employment and investment, she mentioned: using resources to achieve results with high added value, linking community support to the reform process, a better European Semester mechanism, the flexible management of financial resources, the effective use of the instruments of the Strategic Investment Fund and the financial instruments for increasing the proportion of economically effective funds and a balance of grants through the structural funds and other instruments, the possibility to complement and combine resources.

In addition, she underscored the importance of simplification, efficient control, rule of law, and transparency of the EU institutions and national governments. Ms MIHAYLOVA stated that the EP expected the new MFF proposal to be political, and to present a model of future policies; she also looked forward to the outcome of the Task Force. She concluded by stressing that the European Parliament stood ready to use the remainder of the term to negotiate a common vision or at least to prepare the ground work for the next legislature.

Twenty-one parliamentarians took the floor in the ensuing debate, many of whom referred to the Presidency's motto, which they believed illustrated the spirit in which current challenges should be addressed.

Many speakers called for collective efforts and immediate action toward addressing the EU's current and future challenges based on the EU's core values. Ms BASTOS, reaffirmed the importance of including young people in the labour market, deepening the European Monetary Union (EMU), with a focus on the European Monetary Fund and Deposit Guarantee Scheme, working together on migration, security, defence, and the Brexit negotiations, as well as developing the European pillar of social rights. On this last aspect, Mr HÖRCSIK, warned against the possible legal complications posed by the Commission's legislation on matters of national competence. Mr BIZET, commended the EU's timely action on third generation international trade agreements, which would set global standards and enhance the EU's global power.

Ms VASSILEVA, argued in favour of deeper integration and stressed the tangible effects of traditional policies on development and living standards. She referred to crucial aspects of the MFF debate, such as tackling the impact of Brexit or the investment policy leading to increased convergence. Mr Guido WOLF, German *Bundesrat*, said the proper resources had to be made available. Mr SHAKER, also mentioned that the discussions on the next MFF would need to be very thorough, as its structure was about to change significantly. Mr HÖRCSIK, stressed the need to increase the EU budget, and stated Hungary's readiness to increase its contribution to safeguard the future of EU's key policies. Ms TRIANTAFYLLOU believed progress was needed in the field of employment and investment; the negative impact of Brexit on the EU budget could be offset by agreement on own resources. In her view, the Eurozone should be accessible to all the Member States that met the criteria.

Mr Glenn BEDINGFIELD, Maltese *Kamra tad-Deputati*, called for a pragmatic approach on migration, security, fight against terrorism, digital agenda, energy capital, capital market and banking Union, trade, innovation. Ms KLOC, suggested action on improving the energy mix and on climate change. Ms Gabriela CREȚU, Romanian *Senat*, called for a genuine balance between risk control,

*i.e.* austerity, and risk sharing, namely Cohesion Policy. She called for defining concrete measures, including in the framework of the Conference of Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance in the European Union or of the COSAC working group.

Mr BOURLANGES, said the competences conferred upon the EU by the Member States and parliaments, as well as the existing voting rules, limited the capacity of the EU to act on foreign policy, defence, the European army, tax harmonisation, etc.

Mr Terry LEYDEN, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, thanked the Member States for showing solidarity with Ireland on the issue of the border between UK and Ireland during the Brexit negotiations.

On migration, Mr Jaroslaw OBREMSKI, Polish *Senat*, called for actions aimed at the situation in Africa and the Middle East, but also referred to the war in Ukraine, and the situation of Ukrainians forced to migrate to Poland. Ms TRIANTAFYLLOU believed the EU should help solve the migration crisis collectively, and find solutions to conflict in its neighbourhood and the situation in Cyprus. Mr KYRIAKOU-HADJIYIANNI, similarly called for solidarity, humanitarian assistance, equitable burden sharing, and diplomacy for ensuring security and stability in the EU neighbourhood.

Delegates from the Western Balkans thanked Bulgaria for its support and hoped the next presidencies would also put enlargement high on the agenda. Mr Artan GRUBI, *Sobranie* of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, argued the EU could be complete by including the six countries of the Western Balkans, and expressed hope for an upcoming positive progress report, unconditional recommendations and a date to start negotiations. Mr Nikola RAKOČEVIĆ, Montenegro *Skupština*, described the EU perspective as Montenegro's main strategic goal for which there was no alternative. He stressed that it was crucial for the future of the EU that both Member States and candidate countries implement EU values. Ms Gordana ČOMIC, Serbian *Norodna Skupština* argued that Serbia was willing to contribute to both the stability, prosperity and security of the EU, but also to the rule of law, media freedom and human rights.

Other delegates (Mr SHAKER, Mr OBREMSKI, Mr LEYDEN, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*) expressed their support for future enlargement.

In their interventions, Mr SHAKER, Mr LEYDEN, Mr KYRIAKOU-HADJIYIANNI, and Mr MAYER, mentioned the ongoing national debates on the Future of Europe. The latter noted the increased support of the Austrian public and government towards EU membership and the preference for the scenario 'doing less, more efficiently'.

Ms VASSILEVA opposed the idea of a two-speed Europe and mentioned Bulgaria's commitment to deeper integration through efforts to join the European Exchange Mechanism and Schengen, and to support the structured cooperation in defence and the EPPO. For Ms Gabriela CREȚU, euroscepticism was rooted in the reduced output legitimacy of both European and national politics, and the feeling citizens of newer Member States had of exclusion from the plans of a more united Europe.

Ms KLOC similarly stated that while Poland was a strong supporter of European integration, it was sceptical about the idea of a two-speed Europe as it ran against unity. She called for the rebuilding of trust and more involvement of national Parliaments in the discussions on the future of Europe. Mr HÖRCSIK, stressed that traditional sectorial policies' objectives were laid down in the treaties and rejected the proposals to connect them with unrelated policies, such as migration or the rule of law. In reply, Mr WOLF, argued it was important to find a way and ensure the EU remained a community based on the rule of law and that its values were at the core of its action. Ms TRIANTAFYLLOU agreed and urged everybody to fight intolerant views.

Several delegates raised the issue of ensuring democratic legitimacy and proper communication with the citizens. Ms Gabriela CREȚU, Romanian *Senat*, called for the provision of "new European public goods" and the promotion of a good social-sensitive globalization, urging the need to replace technocratic legitimacy with real democratic contribution. Mr KYRIAKOU-HADJIYIANNI recalled that completing the Banking Union and deepening financial integration should be done by securing the democratic legitimacy and the role of national Parliaments. Mr Bastiaan VAN APELDOORN, Dutch *Eerste Kamer*, raised the issue of lack of transparency in the decision-making in the Eurozone and questioned the compatibility of actions based on pulled sovereignty with the democratic accountability within EMU. Mr BEDINGFIELD underlined it

was important to listen to all ideas, including criticism, adding that communication needed to be linked with delivery and implementation. Ms McGUINNESS, European Parliament, called for a more optimistic perspective and focus on the achievements of the EU, but also for caution with using the slogan “Take back control” of the Brexit referendum, which had no positive outcome for the citizens. Ms Lolita ČIGĀNE, Latvian *Saeima*, referred to EU’s success stories, which should be a showcase of further integration, in a world increasingly unilateral. Brexit showed communication was crucial, and national Parliaments had to take their direct responsibility for correctly and objectively informing citizens; she quoted the recent debate held in Latvia on relocation and resettlement of migrants

Several delegates (Ms BASTOS, Mr OBREMSKI, Mr WOLF, Mr LOPATKA) welcomed the creation of the Task Force, highlighting the important role played by national Parliament's in the scrutiny and shaping of the EU's future, with the hope that it would place the subsidiarity principle at the centre of the decision-making process, ensuring decisions were taken at the right level and bringing citizens closer to the EU. Mr MAYER, and Mr Wolf regretted the European Parliament, one of the most important players in European democracy was not part of it, but hoped a common solution could still be found. Ms McGUINNESS echoed Ms MIHAYLOVA’s stance that the European Parliament would cooperate, as it was both its duty and wish. She assured delegates that the EP’s approach towards the Task Force was positive, and that while participation in the way envisaged by the Commission was not possible in light of an established principle preventing the European Parliament to take part in bodies set up by the Commission, its cooperation would be constructive. Ms IOTOVA welcomed the optimism shown on further developing the European project and counted on the outcome Task Force for shaping the future direction of the EU and distinguishing between European and national competences; she hoped the European Parliament would join in and underscored that national Parliaments’ expertise should be duly taken into account. In response to the expressed wish by Western Balkans delegates for a European perspective, she hoped enlargement to the region would become reality. She stated the EU was a Union of values, mainly solidarity, willingness to stay together, but also human rights, which, as the recent Bulgarian debate on the Istanbul Convention showed, needed to remain a top priority.

Mr TIMMERMANS reiterated that pulling sovereignty at the European level was the only answer to facing the big challenges the EU needed to address. He added that Brexit showed EU-bashing could have dramatic consequences, but also a better understanding of interlinked destinies of Member States and the emergence of a European demos.

He reiterated the invitation to the EP to join the Task Force and could not understand its decision. Discussion on subsidiarity was a two-way street, and there was a need for a clear understanding of what was unnecessary in the EU’s current action, before deciding whether there was too much of it or not enough.

Mr TIMMERMANS said the EU was nothing but a community based on the rule of law; the respect for the treaties and the law was not an option, but an obligation. He warned delegates who rejected the idea of a two-speed Europe that advocating for an *à la carte* Europe on certain issues would bring about exactly that: rejecting such a Europe would imply accepting that the fundamentals of the Union are unbreakable. While acknowledging the need for reform of the judiciary, the Vice President stated clearly that reform should not put an end to the independence of the judiciary, which was essential for the functioning of the internal market and the uniform application of the EU law across the Union, or threaten the separation of powers, which was essential in a treaty-based organisation like the EU.

Ms MIHAYLOVA believed the debate was the expression of the irreversible link between national Parliaments and the European Parliament; in her view, their cooperation was a tool to bring citizens closely to the EU and needed to be included as a component of each policy. Although the EP was not a member of the Task Force, she mentioned the positive track record of cooperation between it and the Commission on the Commission's Working programme. She agreed communication of EU's action should be the most important objective, because even revolutionary solutions would fail to trigger positive repercussions if they were not properly communicated and get citizens' backing.

## **6. The role of EU macro-regional strategies for sustainable development, stability and security**

Speakers: Ms Denitsa NIKOLOVA, Deputy Minister of Regional Development and Public Works of the Republic of Bulgaria, National Coordinator for the EU Strategy for the Danube Region [EUSDR]; Mr Raul MÄLK, Ambassador-at-Large for Baltic Sea Region, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, Chair of the National Coordinators group of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region; Ms Audrone PERKAUSKIENE, Head of division Regional Cooperation and the OSCE, European External Action Service (EEAS)

Introducing the session, Mr VIGENIN stressed the timely nature of this debate and said that EU macro-regional strategies could help achieve sustainable development, security and prosperity. He also informed participants that Bulgaria held the chairmanship of the Danube macro-regional strategy and that Estonia was the chair of the strategy for the Baltic Sea region.

Ms Denitsa NIKOLOVA, Deputy Minister of Regional Development and Public Works of the Republic of Bulgaria, and National Coordinator for the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, emphasised a common European approach in the four macro-regional strategies, pointing out that these acted as planned forms of transnational cooperation that went beyond the European Union and represented a political instrument of coordination and implementation of a wide variety of policies, which enabled certain measures to be taken in order to overcome common challenges in a bottom-up approach. When speaking specifically about the Danube Strategy, Ms NIKOLOVA pointed out its uniqueness in building relationships and fostering cooperation between the Member States from the Danube region. Its principle – Europe without borders – also denoted involvement from pre-accession countries.

Ms NIKOLOVA then went on to address the three main principles of macro-regional strategies: no new financing; no additional structures; and no additional legislation. The main principles of support were therefore the already existing mechanisms and financing tools. Despite the strategies being unique in themselves, there were nevertheless some common streaks that were connected to the structures of governance and to financing. The biggest challenges, according to Ms NIKOLOVA, were aspects related to political engagement and coordination. The need for common strategic projects and the necessary financing to implement these projects were among the main issues to be addressed.

Ms NIKOLOVA said that the discussions surrounding the future of Cohesion Policy post 2020 should involve macro-regional strategies. She further noted that the current chairmanship of the Danube Strategy coupled with the Presidency of the Council of the EU gave Bulgaria the opportunity to draw up the European agenda and to enrich existing practices with new expertise. The fact that the Danube region was connected with other regions through opportunities and challenges, translated into a global added value. Ms NIKOLOVA highlighted nine common projects ranging from transportation to innovation, and said that special attention would be paid to cultural heritage and tourism due to its ability to improve regional economies, noting the upcoming

International Travel Forum taking place in Sofia on 17-18 October 2018.

In her capacity as the national coordinator of the Danube Strategy, Ms NIKOLOVA addressed the coordination mechanism on the national level and said that it gave an opportunity to apply all financial instruments developed on EU level. In the same vein, she showcased a number of projects that had already been implemented at different levels together with different Member States.

Concluding, Ms NIKOLOVA said that despite the initial success, the Danube Strategy nevertheless needed a number of operational measures so that it could develop further. She therefore called on national Parliaments to contribute to the improvement of macro-regional strategies by finding common solutions to common challenges.

Mr Raul MÄLK, Ambassador-at-Large for Baltic Sea Region, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, Chair of the National Coordinators group of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, began his intervention by praising the Bulgarian Presidency and the EU institutions for having given macro-regional strategies recently such a prominent role. He first gave a brief historical and factual overview of the Baltic Sea Strategy and went on to discuss the policy areas, which the strategy covers, among which he highlighted the Save the Sea initiative due to the polluted nature of the Baltic Sea. The aim of the aforementioned initiative is to have the sea in a good environmental condition by 2021.

Mr MÄLK continued by outlining the strategy's achievements, which he categorised into five areas: policy making; actions in different policy areas, often related to national or supranational financing; creating and developing networks; initiating and implementing projects and building on their results; and communication of macro-regional cooperation. He surmised that the best results have been had in the area of policy discussions, networks and communities around projects. With regard to specific policy areas, the biggest strides had been made in marine environment protection, scientific cooperation, transport and energy. Mr MÄLK also noted that thanks to the Annual Forums the wider public was now better informed about the Baltic Sea Strategy and that the next Annual Forum was to take place in Tallinn in June 2018.

Concerning challenges faced by the Baltic Sea Strategy, Mr MÄLK called for macro-regional strategies which were better integrated into wider EU and Member State level policies. International cooperation in smaller countries had proved to be somewhat low due to limited resources but the November ECOFIN Conclusions with regard to Cohesion Policy were a step forward in this regard. Further, on a positive note, the Baltic Sea Strategy has good cooperation with territorial cooperation programmes and with national coordinators as well as with the INTERREG Baltic Sea Committee.

Looking towards the future, Mr MÄLK pointed out that in light of the new programming period of the next MFF, it was clear that stakeholders were more prepared to integrate macro-regional strategies into forthcoming policies. However, it was not clear whether there would be a EU2030 Strategy *in lieu* of the EU2020 Strategy. A further point was made about taking into consideration, if not strengthening further, Regulation (EU) No [1303/2013](#) and its Article 27 point 3.

Ms Audrone PERKAUSKIENE, Head of division Regional Cooperation and the OSCE, European External Action Service, focussed her presentation on the EU's regional cooperation efforts and perspectives in the Black Sea area. Following the Bulgarian and Romanian accession to the EU and in light of the strategic importance of the Black Sea, the European Union developed the Black Sea Synergy Initiative, whose aim was to focus the political attention to the regional level but also to develop cooperation within the Black Sea region, and was intended as a coherent long-term undertaking aiming to bring prosperity to the region.

The initiative adopted a bottom-up approach and was open to all states in the vicinity of the Black Sea, having a wide-ranging scope covering different policy areas – environment, transport, energy, education, civil society.

Despite the challenging geopolitical landscape of the region, progress had nevertheless been made in the implementation of the practical aspects of the synergy initiative, among which Ms PERKAUSKIENE mentioned improving environmental monitoring of the Black Sea and cultivating a more open civil society dialogue. The Black Sea Synergy Initiative had however not reached the potential that envisaged ten years ago. In light of this, the EU was reflecting on how to take forward the existing cooperation in the Black Sea region and stimulate more interest from Member States and other players in the field.

Ms PERKAUSKIENE drew on three additional aspects that should be taken into consideration: 1) despite difficulties and tensions in the region, there's a need to develop a regional cooperation component as a platform to address transnational challenges; 2) complementarity with other frameworks in the region; 3) the opportunities offered by the Lisbon Treaty have to be better used to ensure coherence with internal and external EU instruments.

Five participants intervened in the debate.

Mr HÖRCSIK, highlighted the success of the Hungarian Presidency on the Danube Strategy with regard to fostering discussions on energy, security, transport, development and green connectivity of the region. He pointed out that a strong cooperation demonstrated why it was necessary to increase financial support and called for increasing national contributions in this respect.

Mr Bojan KEKEC, Slovenian *Državni svet*, viewed good infrastructure and sustainable development as the most important elements for the further development of macro-regional strategies. In this vein, he conveyed the proposal of five countries (including Slovenia and Bulgaria) from the region in question to establish a new Alpine transport corridor.

Ms KLOC, called for a stronger commitment towards the Danube region, the Black Sea and the Carpathian strategy, which would stabilise the region. She also referred to the infrastructure projects from the Polish point of view and stressed the need to improve inland waterways.

Ms Roxana MÎNZATU, Romanian *Camera Deputaților*, pointed out the unique opportunity presented by the forthcoming Troika whereby all three would be members of the Danube Strategy. She hoped these instruments would be put high on the agenda, which in turn would help augment cohesion. She also noted however that the Member States should not be the only ones investing in the priorities of the macro-regional strategies but also that the European Commission should assume a more proactive role in the coordination and stimulation in the strategies.

Ms VASSILEVA, recommended to have clearer targets in the macro-regional strategies in question and addressed the importance of infrastructure – increasing connectivity and communications as well as digital infrastructure. She also expressed her hope that, together with Austria, they would be able to provide better content and look for additional sources of financing for all projects in the Danube Strategy.

When responding to the remarks made during the debate, Ms NIKOLOVA said that it was necessary to place more effort into enhancing macro-regional strategies by a few simple steps: improved communication and improved joint coordination mechanisms; synergy between the institutions but also on the macro-regional level; obtaining more funding; and high political will and commitment on all levels. Mr MÁLK concluded by calling on the national parliamentarians to look at better integrating national plans with macro-regional strategies. Ms PERKAUSKIENE referred to the great strides made in the Baltic Sea Strategy and pointed to the lessons learnt. She concluded by saying that common challenges could be solved through cooperation and encouraged to take stock of best practices.

Concluding the meeting, the Chair referred to the meetings of other committees within the Parliamentary Dimension, including the last one in June, and thanked participants for the lively debate.