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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Council

Subject: The future of food and agriculture – external convergence
*- Information from the Slovak delegation on behalf of the the Bulgarian,
Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish and Romanian delegations*

Delegations will find in the Annex a note from the Slovak delegation with regard to external convergence, supported by the Bulgarian, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish and Romanian delegations, to be dealt with under "Any other business" at the "Agriculture and Fisheries" Council on 10-11 December 2023.

The future of food and agriculture – external convergence

Information from the Slovak delegation supported by Bulgarian, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish and Romanian delegations

1. Taking into account the presented report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the Summary of CAP Strategic Plans for 2023-2027 with aim to assess the joint efforts and collective ambition in achieving the overall impact of the CAP, we would like to draw attention to one of the objectives of the CAP reform, **in particular to continue with full external convergence**. This plays an important role in ensuring fair, sustainable and competitive agriculture in the EU.
2. Despite the ambitions of past revisions of the CAP, it has not been possible to arrive to a fair distribution of CAP support in the form of direct payments to all European farmers. Even in 2027, direct payments per hectare in some Member States will not reach 90 % of the EU average. **We therefore call for the reopening of discussions to accelerate full external convergence across Member States.**
3. The EU agricultural sector is currently facing a number of challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and last but not least, various natural disasters. At the same time, agriculture and food systems must be transformed to meet ambitious climate, environmental and animal welfare goals.
4. Adequate efforts are needed to reduce the gap in direct payments per hectare, as these contribute to food security, fight against climate change, protection of biodiversity and natural resources and the maintenance of agricultural activity in all geographical areas, as well as addressing the challenges of maintaining jobs in rural areas, generational renewal and rural depopulation. Historical indicators that have determined originally the level of payments are becoming less important in the context of changing agricultural landscape and changing economic conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for a more flexible and active approach to support our farmers.

5. We cannot deny that the Common agricultural policy is a primary policy contributing to the development of the agri-food and forestry sector and also to achieving the aims of the European Green Deal. On the other hand, EU farmers need a level playing field and a fair approach in achieving high production standards and sustainable food systems, while taking into account the social dimension. We therefore consider opening the discussions to accelerate full external convergence and ensuring a level playing field and equal conditions for all EU farmers to be substantiated. Full external convergence is not only a financial adjustment, but also a strategic step that will not only contribute to the resilience of our agricultural sector, but also strengthen the unity and cohesion of the European Union.
6. In the light of the above, we call on the European Commission to:
- a) Strengthen the position of farmers, through full external convergence of direct payments, thereby guaranteeing a fair level of beneficiaries' income, and contributing to the stabilisation of the sector's income.
 - b) Assess the impact of persistent divergence of direct payments on EU farmers in relation to all the challenges they are facing.
