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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE PRESIDENTIAL TROIKA OF COSAC (26 November 2021) and MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE LXVI COSAC (29-30 November 2021); VTC format, Ljubljana

Delegations will find attached the minutes of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC (26 November 2021) (ANNEX I) as well as minutes of the meeting of the LXVI COSAC (29-30 November 2021) (ANNEX II); held through videoconference in Ljubljana, as prepared by the COSAC secretariat.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE PRESIDENTIAL TROIKA OF COSAC

Ljubljana, Slovenia, 26 November 2021

(held through videoconference)

PRESENT AT THE MEETING

CHAIRS: Mr Marko POGAČNIK, Chair of the Committee on EU Affairs, Slovenian *Državni zbor*; Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs, Slovenian *Državni svet*

Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*; Mr Jean-François RAPIN, Chairman of the Committee on EU Affairs, French *Sénat*; Ms Sabine THILLAYE, Chair of the European Affairs Committee, French *Assemblée nationale*; Ms Roberta METSOLA, First Vice-President, European Parliament.

Mr Antonio TAJANI, Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament, was unable to participate in the meeting.

AGENDA

- 1. Adoption of the agenda of the Meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC**
- 2. Approval of the draft programme of the LXVI COSAC**
- 3. Presentation of the 36th Bi-annual Report of COSAC**
- 4. Presentation of a letter from the Presidency**
- 5. Candidate interview for Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat for 2022-2023 and adoption of the Appointment Proposal for the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat for 2022-2023 by the Chairpersons of COSAC**
- 6. Letters received by the Presidency**
- 7. Any other business**

PROCEEDINGS

1. Adoption of the agenda of the Meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC

Mr Marko POGAČNIK, Chair of the Committee on EU Affairs, Slovenian *Državni zbor*, welcomed the delegations of the Presidential Troika of COSAC (hereinafter referred to as "the Troika"), and gave the floor to Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs, Slovenian *Državni svet*, who also welcomed participants. Mr POGAČNIK also congratulated Ms Roberta METSOLA, First Vice-President, European Parliament, on her recent nomination for the post of President of the European Parliament. He then referred to the agenda of the meeting of the Troika, which was adopted without amendment.

2. Approval of the draft programme of the LXVI COSAC

Mr POGAČNIK then referred to the programme of the LXVI COSAC, which would cover the following topics:

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- Session I: Achievements of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU;
- Session II: Working towards a European Perspective for the Western Balkans;
- Session III: The future role of young people in EU Decision-Making Processes and Beyond;
- Session IV: Conference on the Future of Europe.

The draft programme of the LXVI COSAC was thus approved without amendment.

3. Presentation of the 36th Bi-annual Report of COSAC

Mr POGAČNIK referred to the 36th Bi-annual Report of COSAC, which was drafted based on replies to the related questionnaire circulated to national Parliaments/Chambers on 26 July 2021, with 21 September 2021 set as the deadline for submitting replies. The report consisted of three chapters: the first one dealing with the digitalisation of Parliaments/Chambers during the pandemic and digital transition; the second chapter focusing on the future role of young people in decision-making processes and beyond; and the third and final chapter dedicated to the Conference on the Future of Europe. Mr POGAČNIK showed a short video clip produced by the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat, Mr Kenneth CURMI, showcasing some of the results of the report, and thanked him for his work.

Mr Luís CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chairman of the European Affairs Committee, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, echoed these sentiments and expressed his gratitude for the work done by the Slovenian Presidency and for the presentation of the report, while congratulating the current Permanent Member and wishing him the best for the future.

Ms Sabine THILLAYE, Chair of the European Affairs Committee, French *Assemblée nationale*, also echoed these sentiments.

4. Presentation of a letter by the Presidency

Mr POGAČNIK referred to the initiative of sending a letter by the Presidency addressed to the Institutions, showcasing the work and activities done by COSAC during the Slovenian Presidency, instead of a Contribution, which, given the circumstances, the LXVI COSAC would not be in a position to adopt.

Ms THILLAYE raised the issue of the need to look into the rules of procedure and the possibility of adopting contributions and conclusions via videoconference.

5. Candidate interview for Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat for 2022-2023 and adoption of the Appointment Proposal for the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat for 2022-2023 by the Chairpersons of COSAC

Mr KEKEC noted that the term of the current Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat, Mr Kenneth CURMI, was coming to the end on 31 December 2021. He thanked Mr CURMI for his excellent work and the Maltese *Kamra tad-deputati* for delegating Mr CURMI to this post.

Mr KEKEC stated that expressions of commitment to, and the Letters of Intent concerning the co-financing of the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat and related office costs for 2022-2023 had been received from all Chambers of all national Parliaments.

Mr KEKEC recalled the letter dated 20 July 2021, which was sent on 22 July 2021, inviting all national Parliaments to submit candidates for the post of the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat for 2022–2023 by 1 October 2021, a deadline extended to 15 October 2021. The Presidency received one candidacy from the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*.

The Chair presented the background note on the Appointment of the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat and mentioned that, in order to ensure fairness and transparency the Chair from the Parliament which submitted a candidate was invited to observe the interview. The candidate would be proposed to the Chairpersons of COSAC for appointment during the LXVI COSAC meeting.

In the absence of objections, the proposed procedure was unanimously accepted.

Mr KEKEC announced the decision taken unanimously by the Troika to propose Mr Bruno DIAS PINHEIRO from the Portuguese *Assembleia da República* to the Chairpersons of COSAC for appointment as the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat for the period 2022-2023.

6. Letters received by the Presidency

Mr KEKEC briefly referred to the letters requesting participation in the meeting received by the Presidency from the delegations of Kosovo,^{*} Georgia and the UK *House of Commons*, explaining the Presidency's decision to invite all delegations as they all had a reason to attend.

He therefore mentioned the following letters received by the Presidency:

- Letters from the Assembly of Kosovo, the Parliament of Georgia and the UK *House of Commons*, requesting participation;
- Letter from the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), also requesting participation - the Chair informed colleagues that the Presidency had invited the Director, Mr Michael O'FLAHERTY, to attend as an observer;
- Letter from Mr Ondřej BENEŠÍK, Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs of the Czech *Poslanecká sněmovna*, enclosing the Conclusions of the Meeting of the European Affairs Committees of the Visegrad Group countries, held in Prague on 6 September 2021, which were distributed and presented to COSAC.

7. Any other business

The Chairpersons thanked participants for their active contribution and wished the French colleagues all the best for their upcoming Presidency.

^{*} 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.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE LXVI COSAC
Ljubljana, 29-30 November 2021
(held via videoconference)

IN THE CHAIR: Mr Marko POGAČNIK, Chair of the Committee on EU Affairs, Slovenian *Državni zbor*;
Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs, Slovenian
Državni svet

AGENDA:

1. Opening of the meeting of the LXVI COSAC

- Welcome address by the President of the Slovenian *Državni zbor*, Mr Igor ZORČIČ
- Welcome address by the President of the Slovenian *Državni svet*, Mr Alojz KOVŠČA
- Welcome address by the Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs of the Slovenian *Državni svet*, Mr Bojan KEKEC
- Adoption of the agenda of the meeting of the LXVI COSAC

2. Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters

- Information on the results of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC
- Presentation of the 36th Bi-annual Report of COSAC
- Letter from the Presidency
- Appointment of the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat for 2022-2023
- Letters received by the Presidency
- Procedural issues

3. Session I – ‘Achievements of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU’

Keynote Speaker: Mr Gašper DOVŽAN, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia

Chair: Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs, Slovenian *Državni svet*

4. Session II – ‘Working Towards a European Perspective for the Western Balkans’

Keynote Speakers: Mr Olivér VÁRHELYI, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement (via video message); Mr Gašper DOVŽAN, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia; Mr Branimir GVOZDENOVIC, Chair of the Committee on European Integration of the Parliament of Montenegro; Ms Slavjanka PETROVSKA, Member of the Committee on EU Affairs of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia

Chair: Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs, Slovenian *Državni svet*

5. Session III – ‘The Future Role of Young People in EU Decision-Making Processes and Beyond’

Keynote Speakers: Ms Roberta METSOLA, First Vice-President of the European Parliament; Mr Damir OREHOVEC, State Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia; Ms Biliana SIRAKOVA, EU Youth Coordinator

Brief contributions by: Ms Anja FORTUNA, Vice-President of the European Youth Forum

Chair: Mr Nik PREBIL, Deputy Chair of the Committee on EU Affairs, Slovenian *Državni zbor*

6. Session IV – ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’

Keynote Speakers: Mr Guy VERHOFSTADT, Member of the European Parliament; Mr Gašper DOVŽAN, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia (via video message); Ms Dubravka ŠUICA, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography; Ms Sabine THILLAYE, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the French *Assemblée nationale*; Mr Jean-François RAPIN, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the French *Sénat*

Chair: Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs, Slovenian *Državni svet*

PROCEEDINGS

1. Opening of the meeting of the LXVI COSAC

Welcome addresses by Mr Igor ZORČIČ, President of the Slovenian *Državni zbor*, Mr Alojz KOVŠČA, President of the Slovenian *Državni svet* and Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs of the Slovenian *Državni svet*

Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs of the Slovenian *Državni svet* informed colleagues that Mr Marko POGAČNIK, Chair of the Committee on European Union Affairs of the Slovenian *Državni zbor*, would be unable to co-chair the Plenary Meeting of LXVI COSAC due to exceptional circumstances. Mr KEKEC then welcomed the participants, especially new Chairs participating at the COSAC plenary for the first time, namely Mr Harris GEORGIADIS, from the Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon* and Mr Oliver SCICLUNA, from the Maltese *Kamra tad-Deputati*.

Mr Igor ZORČIČ, President of the Slovenian *Državni zbor* started his speech by emphasising the positive state of affairs with regard to vaccines and the Next Generation EU had brought optimism for economic, health and social recovery of the EU. However, in recent months there had been tensions in the EU and its external borders and in many countries citizens' trust in the responses to the crisis and the work of Parliaments and governments had declined as a result.

Mr ZORČIČ noted yet another deterioration of the epidemiological situation in Europe and stressed the need to adapt to the new reality brought on by the pandemic. In this context, he underlined the role of COSAC in addressing common challenges through interparliamentary dialogue.

Mr ZORČIČ welcomed the topics of discussion at the LXVI COSAC which corresponded to the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency. He highlighted the topic of the European perspective of Western Balkans and stressed the mutual interest of the EU and Western Balkans for stability and security in the region. In relation to this, he emphasized the role of national Parliaments and referred to the organization of the Western Balkans Speakers' Meeting during the Slovenian Presidency, which also focused on the future (role) of young people. Mr ZORČIČ also welcomed the intersection of topics in events organized by national Parliaments in the scope of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) and looked forward to the successful implementation of the conclusions of CoFE.

Mr ZORČIČ further thanked all the representatives in national Parliaments and the European Parliament, who had actively participated in the events during the Parliamentary Dimension of the Slovenian Presidency. In line with this, he mentioned further events organised by the Slovenian Presidency, namely the Conference on Digital Transformation in Education, the High-Level Conference on Asylum and Migration, the Meeting of the Secretaries General of the European Union Parliaments and the Conference of Speakers of the EU Parliaments. In light of recent events at the EU external borders, he called upon future presidencies to continue the dialogue on migration and asylum in the form of high-level conferences.

Mr ZORČIČ concluded that current developments required rapid measures, which however should be adopted by broad public and parliamentary support and should not restrict the rights and freedoms of citizens.

Mr Alojz KOVŠČA, President of the Slovenian *Državni svet* said the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic had revealed EU's lack of preparedness to such threats. Due to that the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency focused primarily on health, recovery and resilience. However, the current situation was also an opportunity to define clear priorities for a better common future.

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Mr KOVŠČA further focused on the security and stability in EU's neighbourhood, for which the continuation of the enlargement process with the Western Balkan countries was crucial. He stressed the need for enhanced political dialogue and economic cooperation with the Western Balkans and reaffirmed Slovenia's continued support and efforts in this matter.

Mr KOVŠČA also emphasized the role of young people for the future of Europe, stating that focus needed to return to ensuring quality education and training after the pandemic and to include young people in the decision-making processes, especially in the areas that directly affected them. In line with this, he also underlined the importance of cooperation between national Parliaments and civil society in areas of public interest and referred to the work of the Slovenian *Državni Svet* in this regard. He concluded by welcoming the inclusion of citizens, especially young ones, in structures of CoFE.

Mr KEKEC started his address by acknowledging the effects the Covid-19 pandemic had had on the future development of the EU, stressing that it was more important than ever for the EU to shape its future based on clear goals and priorities that enjoy broad public support.

Mr KEKEC further touched upon the CoFE. He stressed that in order to find common solutions the CoFE needed to reflect the diversity of the EU and ensure the dialogue goes beyond the capitals and urban centres. He welcomed the enhanced role of citizens, which gave them a unique opportunity to share their views and visions for the future of Europe and stressed the need for representatives on both national and European level to take these views into account. He also urged national Parliaments to play a more active role in promoting citizens' engagement, especially young people's, in the CoFE and called for involvement of representatives from Western Balkan countries. In conclusion, Mr KEKEC expressed his hope that the LXVI COSAC meeting would be an opportunity for a dynamic and constructive exchange of views on current challenges facing the EU and its citizens.

Adoption of the agenda

The Chair presented the draft agenda of the LXVI COSAC, which was adopted without amendment.

2. Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters

- Briefing on the results of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC

Mr KEKEC presented the results of the Troika meeting, held on 26th November.

- Presentation of the 36th Bi-annual Report of COSAC

The Chair thanked all the national Parliaments who contributed to the 36th Bi-annual Report, as well as the COSAC Secretariat for preparing the report. The main findings were presented in a video format shown during the meeting. The Chair then gave the floor to the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat, Mr Kenneth CURMI, for a few words on the report.

- Letter from the Presidency

Mr KEKEC explained that due to the online nature of the meeting, it was currently not possible to draft the Contribution or Conclusions of COSAC. The Presidency would therefore draft a letter on the COSAC work done during the semester, which would then be sent to the European institutions and circulated to the delegations.

- Appointment of the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat for 2022-2023

Mr KEKEC informed that the Presidential Troika of COSAC had conducted an interview with the only candidate for the position, Mr Bruno DIAS PINHEIRO from the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, and, in line with Article 9.3 of the Rules of Procedure, had unanimously decided to recommend him to the COSAC Chairpersons for appointment.

- **Letters received by the Presidency**

The Chair referred to the following letters received by the Presidency:

- Letter from Ms Rrezarta KRASNIQI, Chairwoman of the Committee on European Integration of the Kosovo* *Kuvendi*, requesting participation at the LXVI COSAC.
- Letter from Ms Maka Botchorishvili, Chairperson of the Committee on European Integration of the Parliament of Georgia, requesting participation at the LXVI COSAC.
- Letter from Sir William CASH, Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, UK *House of Commons*, requesting participation at the LXVI COSAC.
- Letter from Mr Ondřej BENEŠIK, Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs of the Czech *Poslanecká sněmovna* on the Conclusions of the Meeting of the European Affairs Committees of the Visegrad Group Countries.
- Letter from Mr Michael O'FLAHERTY, Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, requesting to participate at the LXVI COSAC as a keynote speaker in session three on the future role of young people in EU decision-making processes and beyond.
- Letters from Ms Eliane TILLEUX, President of the Belgian *Chambre des représentants*, and Ms Susana SUMELZO, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Spanish *Cortes Generales* expressing support for Mr Bruno DIAS PINHEIRO's candidature for the position of the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat for 2022–2023.

- **Procedural Issues**

Mr KEKEC also referred to the COSAC co-financing procedure for 2022-2023 and informed participants that Chambers of all 27 Parliaments had signalled their commitment for the next co-financing period.

Appointment and Introductory Speech by the newly appointed Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat

Mr Nik PREBIL, Deputy Chair of the Committee on European Union Affairs of the Slovenian *Državni zbor*, informed the participants about the appointment procedure for the position of the Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat for 2022–2023. He reminded participants that the second term of office of the current Permanent Member of the COSAC Secretariat, Mr Kenneth CURMI, would expire by the end of the year and thanked him for the work done during his term.

Mr PREBIL then informed colleagues that the Troika, with the exception of Mr Luis CAPOULAS SANTOS, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, had conducted an interview with the only candidate for the position, Mr Bruno DIAS PINHEIRO, nominated by the Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, during the Meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC. He informed the participants that, as per Article 9.3 of the Rules of Procedure, the Troika had unanimously decided to recommend him to the COSAC Chairpersons for appointment. In the absence of any objection, Mr DIAS PINHEIRO'S appointment for the period 2022-2023 was thus confirmed.

* 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.

3. Session I: Achievements of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU

Keynote Speaker: Mr Gašper DOVŽAN, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia

Chair: Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs, Slovenian *Državni svet*

Mr Gašper DOVŽAN, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia, opened the session by underlining the fact that the Slovenian Presidency was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and unforeseeable events, natural disasters, and crises in Afghanistan and Belarus. He stated that the Presidency had to face several challenges, and acted in accordance with its slogan "Together. Resilient. Europe.". He recalled that the Presidency successfully organized several informal meetings of Ministers and the EU-Western Balkans Summit, and achieved progress in EU's legislative work and in the adoption of Council positions.

First of all, on resilience and strategic autonomy of the EU, he pointed out the fact that the Presidency had focused on policies which were crucial to strengthen resilience of the single market and increase the strategic independence of the EU.

Secondly, he recalled that the Presidency had taken important steps towards building the European health union. He evoked the proposal for a regulation on serious cross-border threats to health, and on the European Health Emergency preparedness and Response Authority (HERA). Furthermore, the Slovenian State Secretary indicated that the European Union had to be better prepared for different types of crises, such as those concerning cybersecurity issues. A Directive on measures for a high common level of cybersecurity across the Union was expected to be adopted by the Council in early December. Mr DOVŽAN also emphasised the progress made in the approval of national recovery and resilience plans.

Regarding green transition, Mr DOVŽAN said the Presidency had prioritized the "Fit for 55" package. In order to facilitate progress on this matter, over 60 debates had been organized at the technical level, as well as a further 10 debates at the political level. Furthermore, Mr DOVŽAN focussed on digital transformation, recalling that the Presidency had successfully brought Member States' views into closer alignment on the proposals for Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act especially concerning the responsibilities that tech corporations and online platformshad to bear in this regard.

He noted that the CoFE had gained traction under the Slovenian Presidency and that it was an innovative process that allowed citizens to participate in the future of the EU. He stressed that the discussion should be open, inclusive and broad as possible to bring Europe beyond its capital cities. He also emphasized the important role of national Parliaments, and expressed his hope that the CoFE would continue to take place despite the pandemic.

The Secretary of State further underlined the issue of the rule of law, and recalled that the European Commission had presented its second report on the subject. The Slovenian Presidency had held the second annual rule of law dialogue at the General Affairs Council, during which it had stressed the importance of the principles of objectivity, non-discrimination and equal treatment of all Member States.

In addition, Mr DOVŽAN emphasised that a secure European Union was a priority for the Slovenian Presidency. He also mentioned the Migration and Asylum Pact, and recalled the different positions of Member States. With regard to this, he referred to the progress made on the Eurodac regulation.

Mr. DOVŽAN also noted the EU Western Balkans summit, held in Slovenia, which led to the adoption of the Brdo Declaration. He stressed the need to implement the Economic and Investment Plan to accelerate the digital and green transition of the Western Balkan countries. He further noted that the Declaration also reaffirmed the EU's commitment to the enlargement process and the commitment of the Western Balkan countries to the values of the EU, as well as the need to hold regular summit. The next summit would be held in the Czech Republic.

In conclusion, the State Secretary recalled that the Slovenian Presidency had made progress on a number of issues, but that there was still work to be done in the last month, and expressed his hope for positive results.

Following these introductory remarks, 20 speakers took the floor to discuss the main achievements of the Slovenian Presidency.

Several topics were discussed, including the issue of the pandemic and the European health union. Many speakers praised the responsiveness of the European Union to this health crisis. However, Ms Marina NIKOLAOU, Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, thought that the EU had not supported Member States enough in the field of health by providing insufficient budgetary support. Mr Didier MARIE from the French *Sénat*, welcomed the establishment of HERA as well as the Council/European Parliament agreement to strengthen the role of the European Medicines Agency in health crisis management. On the other hand, Ms Ellen SAMYN, Belgian *Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers*, insisted that health related policies should be organized at the national level.

A large number of speakers referred to the "Fit for 55" package. Mr Kacper PLAŻYŃSKI, Polish *Sejm*, spoke about the environmental objectives of the package, expressing his support for the use of nuclear energy, which was important for Poland. Ms Satu HASSI, from the Finnish *Eduskunta* congratulated the Slovenian Presidency for making the "Fit for 55" package a priority, adding that the COP26 had shown that the EU could have a leading position in environmental matters, and stressing that the EU had to keep its promises to fight global warming. Mr Ruairi Ó MURCHÚ, the Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, stressed the necessity for the EU to act in energy matters. Mr Oliver SCICLUNA, Maltese *Kamra tad-Deputati*, highlighted the important challenges facing small Member States in terms of economic recovery and sustainable development, and noted that different solutions should be found according to the specificities of the different Member States. Ms Guri MELBY, Norwegian *Stortinget*, expressed Norway's willingness to contribute with the EU on issues such as the electrification of maritime transport or CO2 capture.

In addition to the issue of climate change, the speakers also discussed the progress of the Slovenian Presidency in the field of digital transformation. Ms Satu HASSI, Finnish *Eduskunta*, thanked the Slovenian Presidency for the progress achieved in the Digital Services Act and the Digital Market Act, as the digital transition was vital in Europe both for growth and for European values. Similarly, Mr Sergio BATTELLI, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, underlined the importance of continued work on digital files.

A large number of speakers also referred to the migration crisis. Mr Richárd HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, underlined that the migration crisis was one of the most important challenges Europe was currently facing and congratulated the Slovenian Presidency for including migration in the Brdo Declaration. He insisted that the European Union must help the Member States financially to ensure the security of the external borders of the European Union. Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, indicated that the negotiations on the Migration and Asylum Pact should be accelerated. Mr Dario Stefano, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, emphasized the need to protect the borders of the European Union.

Mr Harris GEORGIADES, from the Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, stated that Cyprus was aware of its duty to assist in the migration crisis and wished to do its part, but he recognized that this represented a significant responsibility in proportion to the size of the state. He warned about the instrumentalization of migration by Turkey and Belarus, and expressed support for the affected countries by stressing the importance of a strong and fair migration policy. Mr BATTELLI, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, emphasized that, with regard to migration policy, the principle of responsibility and solidarity had to be reconciled. Mr Didier MARIE, French *Sénat*, mentioned the migration situation in the English Channel, and the need for this pact, whose negotiations were currently at an impasse.

Several speakers also referred to the CoFE. According to Mr BATTELLI, it was necessary that the Presidency continued to ensure a high level of transparency by providing information to national Parliaments. Mr HAJDUKOVIĆ regretted the organizational problems but indicated that the exchanges were interesting and should continue.

Several representatives of national parliaments also expressed concern about the issue of the rule of law.

The question of enlargement towards the Western Balkan countries was also raised. According to Mr BATTELLI the Brdo Declaration would allow the enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans. Mr Ioannis BOURNOS, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, Mr HAJDUKOVIĆ and Ms Ana-Maria CĂTĂUȚĂ, Romanian *Camera Deputaților* expressed themselves in favour of the enlargement process. Ms Elvira KOVÁCS, Serbian *Narodna skupština*, underlined that Serbia strongly supported the EU enlargement process and thanked the Slovenian Presidency for making this issue a priority, underlining the work done at the EU-Western Balkans Summit. She believed that this was a good moment for the EU to redefine its enlargement policy and to strengthen the credibility of the procedures for entering the Union. Ms Arbëreshë KRYEZIU-HYSENI, Kosovar *Kuvendi i Kosovës*, thanked the Slovenian Presidency for supporting Kosovo's European integration process. She noted that Kosovo continued to be committed to advancing its European integration agenda. She also called on the Member States and the European Institutions to support visa liberalisation for Kosovo.

In his replies, Mr DOVŽAN thanked participants for the kind words addressed to the Presidency and stressed that work would continue for another month. He underlined that the Slovenian Presidency was the fourth during the pandemic, which had had an impact on legislative work, although there had been progress on a number of issues.

Furthermore, Mr DOVŽAN stressed the urgency of adopting the HERA framework, as it would allow for better management of the pandemic, protection of the integrity of national health systems as well as strengthening of strategic autonomy. With regard to the Directive on adequate minimum wages in the European Union, he noted that work on a common position was still in progress. Mr DOVŽAN also emphasised the need for continuous work towards a green and digital transformation of the European economy and referred to the "Fit for 55" package, the Artificial Intelligence Act, the Data Governance Act and the regulation of e-ID. On migration issues, he stressed the need to make progress in the fight against human trafficking, to help countries of origin and transit and to regulate migration to prevent criminal organizations from taking advantage of the weak position of migrants. Concerning the Western Balkans, he said intergovernmental conferences with Serbia and Montenegro were planned in December, adding that he hoped an agreement could be reached on the negotiating frameworks for Albania and North Macedonia.

Regarding the CoFE, Mr DOVŽAN hoped the process would be transparent and inclusive of youth in particular. He hoped the conclusions to come from the citizens and not from the institutions. Finally, he stressed the need to find long-term solutions to the rising energy prices and indicated that the European

Commission was working on the draft regulation on taxonomy, which should lay the groundwork for green transition and greater autonomy in energy matters.

4. Session II: Working Towards a European Perspective for the Western Balkans

Keynote speakers: Mr Gašper DOVŽAN, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia; Mr Branimir GVOZDENOVIĆ, Chair of the Committee on European Integration of the Parliament of Montenegro; and Ms Slavjanka PETROVSKA, Member of the Committee on EU Affairs of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia

Video message: Mr Olivér VÁRHELYI, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement

Chair: Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs of the National Council

European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Mr Olivér VÁRHELYI, started his message by confirming that there was a European perspective for the Western Balkans since the Thessaloniki Declaration of 2003. He noted that progress had been made, as enabled by the Stabilization and Association Processes, a policy based on jointly agreed criteria and conditions. He stressed that it would be for the benefit of all that both candidate and potential candidate countries, as well as the EU, gradually transformed that perspective and vision into a tangible reality. The region would remain a strategic priority for the EU, as confirmed both by the recent visit of European Commission President Ursula von der LEYEN to the region and by assurances given at the Western Balkans summit in Brdo in October 2021. In addition, he pointed out that the EU's political engagement was backed by an Economic and Investment Plan for the region which would have a real impact in the area and foster regional cooperation. The financial commitment would be about €1.1 billion in 2021, while overall there would be potential for nearly €30 billion of investments in the region, an equivalent of one third of the GDP of the region. Commissioner VÁRHELYI highlighted the European Commission's adoption of the annual enlargement package, fully aligned with the Commission's revised enlargement methodology and four principles: more credibility, predictability, dynamism and strong political steering. He referred to the thematic Clusters of Chapters and particularly stressed the importance of the rule of law; of the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration; and economic reform, noting that these were fundamental in the EU accession process. He underlined that progress in the Cluster "on fundamentals" should precede the opening of any other Cluster. To this end, the Commission would dedicate 5 percent more funding to the rule of law through the new IPA III assistance instrument. Commissioner VÁRHELYI stressed the importance of opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, seeing that both had delivered on reforms in this regard, and he appealed to the Council to adopt the negotiation frameworks. He also noted the Commission's support to making progress with the negotiations both with Serbia and Montenegro, and to open additional Clusters with Serbia. With respect to Kosovo* he supported visa liberalization and concerning Bosnia-Herzegovina he noted that the EU path was set, while finally highlighting the importance of good neighbourly relations. He concluded by noting that the enlargement process was both a technical and political process and that the EU national Parliaments and COSAC had a crucial role to play.

Mr Gašper DOVŽAN, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia, stressed that sustainable development, as well as stability and prosperity of the Western Balkans were vital for the region and were also in the interest of the EU. The accession process would be the EU's strongest tool for transforming the region and promoting democracy, rule of law and freedom of the media. For this reason, the Slovenian Presidency had prioritised the revival of the enlargement process, one of the main messages at the October 2021 EU-Western Balkans Summit. Mr DOVŽAN also referred to the Bled

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Strategic Forum, a leading international conference in Central and South-Eastern Europe. With respect to the Summit, he highlighted the Brdo Declaration which confirmed the EU's commitment to the enlargement process, although he pointed out that Slovenia had wished for an even more ambitious text. Mr DOVŽAN noted that the EU-Western Balkans Summit should become regular and that the forthcoming Czech Presidency would organize the next one in autumn 2022. He referred to the EU funds available to the region but also to the common challenges the EU and the region faced, such as migration, climate change, cyber threats as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. In this respect, he underlined the importance of cooperation and coordination, the need to improve connectivity, to implement the common regional market and the Green Agenda. Finally, Mr DOVŽAN stressed that it was important that the EU remained credible and left the door open for full EU membership. He also warned that other actors would be ready to seize the opportunity to expand their influence and interests in the region and he highlighted, amongst other things, that the Slovenian Presidency wished to reach an agreement on the negotiating framework for Albania and North Macedonia as soon as possible.

Mr Branimir GVOZDENOVIĆ, Chair of the Committee on European Integration of the Parliament of Montenegro, thanked Slovenia for the efforts to underline the importance of the EU enlargement policy and to acknowledge the need for stable and sustainable development of the Western Balkans during its EU Council Presidency. He stressed the importance of implementation and constant reinforcement of the European values in the Western Balkans as well as the need for greater activity of the EU to support the Western Balkans overcoming obstacles in the integration process. He noted the differences among the Western Balkans countries and referred to the negotiating Chapters closed by Montenegro. In May 2020, Montenegro had accepted the new enlargement methodology. Mr GVOZDENOVIĆ expressed the view that, in line with the assessment of Montenegro being a frontrunner in the EU accession process, there should be individual measuring of the progress achieved in the negotiating process. He noted that Montenegro expected to be a fully-fledged Member State in the coming years, and more than 70 percent of its citizens supported membership. However, in order to maintain this support, the concrete benefits of the negotiation process had to be made known to the citizens. Mr GVOZDENOVIĆ highlighted the importance for Montenegro to ensure the same level of EU values and standards of living through the negotiation process. He also appealed for more intensive dialogue from all sides, including constructive dialogue to resolve bilateral disputes. In addition, he acknowledged the important support the EU had provided to the Western Balkans in fighting the pandemic. And he also observed that further assistance was expected to fund necessary key infrastructural projects. He concluded by underlining the importance of aligning national legislation to the EU acquis and that interparliamentary cooperation had a central role with a view to improving the European perspective of the Western Balkans.

Ms Slavjanka PETROVSKA, Member of the Committee on EU Affairs of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, acknowledged that the Western Balkans were very high on the EU's political agenda. However, she raised concerns about the timetable of the process and the actual reward for the countries fulfilling certain goals. In particular, she was concerned about the people of Albania and North Macedonia who had waited too long for the reward of EU membership. She stressed that starting negotiations would have a positive impact on society and most importantly would restore the EU's credibility. She urged the EU to give incentives to the Western Balkans to improve, and not to allow space for euroscepticism to grow.

During the ensuing debate, 21 speakers took the floor. The majority of the speakers welcomed the Western Balkans Summit organised in October 2021 and noted that it offered the opportunity for the EU to reconfirm its commitment for the European perspective of the Western Balkans and to support the economic

development in the region. Some speakers also referred to the opportunity the Summit offered to strengthen cooperation in the fight against the pandemic.

Mr Evangelos MEIMARAKIS, European Parliament, expressed understanding for the concerns of the countries about the pace of the accession process but pointed out the strong political message sent from the EU during the Summit. He emphasised that the EU had to strengthen its presence and influence in the area that had always been marked by instability. He said that the EU had the duty to maintain close cooperation with these countries, to proceed fast because the conditions were ripe to make clear commitments, and to combat the growth of populism and anti-European views. He also referred to the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) and underlined the relevance of enlargement in this framework.

Both Mr MEIMARAKIS and Mr Simone BOSSI, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, warned about the risk that third countries like China, Russia or Turkey could strengthen their influence in the region to the detriment of the EU, a concern also expressed by Mr Kacper PLAŻYŃSKI, Polish *Sejm* and Ms Isabel MEIRELLES, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, with respect to China and Russia. In this context, Mr Davor Ivo STIER, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, said that, in his view, these non-EU actors did not oppose the Western Balkans' EU Membership, but would rather attempt to influence the EU through this region. Therefore, he stressed that it was crucial that Western Balkan countries aligned with the EU's foreign policy, a point also stressed by Mr Angel TÎLVĂR, Romanian *Senat*, who also called for tangible examples of the Western Balkans aligning their foreign policy and acting accordingly. Ms Laima ANDRIKIENĖ, Lithuanian *Seimas*, raised the question of whether, given recent events aimed at destabilising the region, the EU should take into account, along with the technical criteria, also the strategic orientation of the candidate countries. Ms Marietta GIANNAKOU, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, also urged Western Balkans to stay away from those who tried to destabilise them and to focus on their European course. She noted that although the path to accession appeared complicated, previous experience proved that those who were really committed to this process would make it at the end.

Mr Claude KERN, French *Sénat*, focused in particular on the significance of ensuring long-term stability in the region and on the need for the countries to work towards convergence among them and not only alignment with the EU, and to resolve issues between them before joining the EU. The same was stressed by Ms MEIRELLES, who called for bilateral issues existing in the region to be resolved before accession, including regarding North Macedonia and Albania. Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Austrian *Nationalrat*, also underlined the importance for the EU to strengthen stability in the Western Balkans area and Mr MEIMARAKIS underlined that the good neighbourhood principle was non-negotiable for the area. Ms Ellen SAMYN, Belgian *Chambre des représentants/ Kamer van volksvertegenwoordigers* highlighted the fragile situation in Kosovo* and Bosnia-Herzegovina and said that despite the negotiations for an agreement, this point should not escape the EU's attention. Mr Stefan MUSOIU, Romanian *Camera Deputaţilor*, emphasised his country's support for a credible enlargement policy, especially in the context of the increased volatility in the region. Ms ANDRIKIENĖ welcomed a high-level mediation between Bulgaria and North Macedonia and facilitation of the Kosovo* and Serbia dialogue. Mr Ruairí Ó MURCHÚ, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, also stressed the need for the Western Balkan countries to improve their relations and emphasised that cooperation and dialogue were absolutely necessary, while also drawing a parallel with the situation in Ireland after Brexit.

Mr LOPATKA gave several examples of cooperation projects between the EU national Parliaments and some of the Western Balkans Parliaments and emphasized how these twinning projects could strengthen the capacity of these Parliaments to exercise EU related tasks in the accession process, a point also highlighted by Mr STIER who welcomed support for the institutions of these countries. Ms SAMYN noted

that most of the countries in the Western Balkans region did not satisfy the requirements of democratic system, rule of law, human rights, or free media and needed to work on relevant reforms. Mr MUSOIU also noted that fulfilling the agreed criteria, especially in fundamental areas of law, would be the basis for modernisation and progress towards accession. Mr Constantinos EFSTATHIOU, Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, emphasised that the accession of countries to the EU was a constant effort of harmonisation, respect and support for the values of the EU. Specific reforms would be necessary in the Western Balkans concerning society, politics and the administration, as it has been the case for all countries that acceded to the EU. Mr Ó MURCHÚ noted that the Western Balkans had to work on any requirement to deal with democratic deficits and that the EU needed to provide all help required in achieving this.

Ms MEIRELLES expressed the view that the time had come to commit to a new calendar for the accession process. Mr Angel TÎLVĂR, Romanian *Senat*, said that the EU should continue motivating the Western Balkans and highlighted the economic support provided by the EU which should enable the region's countries to move towards green and digital transition as well as regional convergence. He also underlined that democratic reforms were crucial for enhancing the region's resilience. Mr BOSSI too expressed the view that a positive message should be sent to the candidate countries in order to motivate further reforms and referred in particular to Albania and North Macedonia, calling for the opening of the formal negotiations at least for these two countries, a point also made by Mr STIER. Ms ANDRIKIENĚ referred in particular to the support that should be shown to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Despite supporting the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU, Ms MEIRELLES alerted colleagues to the potential consequences it might bring in terms of migration. In contrast, Mr Zoltán TESSELY, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, stated that in his view, major issues, such as migration, could be dealt with more easily if Western Balkans were part of the EU. He expressed his support for the enlargement process of the Western Balkans for both economic and security reasons. As a neighbour of the Western Balkans, he stressed that Hungary sympathised with their concerns and supported the endeavours of the people of the region and especially the wish to speed up or open the formal negotiations with some of the countries, and this support had also been expressed by all Visegrad countries.

Mr Neale RICHMOND, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, expressed concern about the lack of real progress made with respect to the Western Balkans accession. In this respect, he noted the responsibility borne by both the EU on the one hand, and the Western Balkans on the other hand. He urged the EU to move faster and the Western Balkans countries to demonstrate resistance to populism and to make genuine progress to meet the accession criteria. Mr PLAŻYŃSKI, expressed concerns about the high level of organised crime and corruption in the region and said that it was crucial that the EU pooled its experience in this field to assist the countries in this area. Mr STIER also spoke about social integration and stated that some practical actions, such as measures in the area of roaming, could help by reducing the differences between EU citizens and citizens of the Western Balkans.

Mr Helmut SCHOLZ, European Parliament, expressed the view that in order to achieve full reconciliation and regional integration, the different realities of the countries needed to be looked at. He noted that many stakeholders and the citizens of the region expected living conditions to improve after accession, but he underlined that enlargement policy should not be about enlarging the region of influence of the EU but about shaping together a future relationship, and therefore the EU also needed to be ready for this integration. In the same spirit, Ms Emanuela ROSSINI, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, stressed the need to act together in order to accompany development in the region and called not only for the Western Balkans to change but also for the EU to evolve. Ms ROSSINI also highlighted that through this process the EU would become the privileged partner for the Western Balkans, that it was crucial that there would be

cooperation in the area of defence policy, and that fake information and interferences in the region would be prevented.

The last speakers of the debate were representatives from the Western Balkans. Ms Simonida KORDIĆ, Montenegro *Skupština Crne Gore*, drew attention to the Open Balkans Initiative, focusing particularly on the local level, aiming to increase trade and circulation of capital, creating more job opportunities, and easing cross-border communication between the Western Balkan countries. Moreover, she noted that this regional cooperation provided immediate benefits to the local population and strengthened institutional capabilities. Ms Elvira KOVÁCS, Serbian *Narodna skupština*, emphasized that the accession process should be evaluated based on individual merit, amongst other things, and expressed the hope that by the end of the year Serbia would make formal progress in the negotiations especially regarding the opening of two Clusters. Ms Maka BOTCHORISHVILI, Parliament of Georgia, explained that the framework of cooperation between the EU and Georgia was different to that for the Western Balkans and elaborated on the applicable Eastern Partnership and Association Agreement. She observed that Article 49 of the TEU (eligibility criteria) remained unchanged.

In his closing remarks, Mr DOVŽAN, noted that the exchange confirmed that it had been necessary to place the Western Balkans among the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency. It was essential to accelerate and revive the process of enlargement negotiations. He emphasized that the Western Balkans were surrounded by EU Member States and that it was crucial to continue with a credible EU enlargement policy in order to avoid instability in the neighbouring region. He also noted that the Western Balkans representatives had symbolically participated in the CoFE Plenary discussions. He announced the organization of two intergovernmental conferences with Montenegro and Serbia in December 2021 and expressed the hope that some negotiating Chapters for Serbia would open and that an agreement between Bulgaria and North Macedonia would be reached in order to proceed with the negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.

Mr GVOZDENOVIĆ noted that the challenges in the region would be easier to overcome if the Western Balkans were included within the EU's applicable rules. He considered that the key issue would be for the Western Balkans to remain in the focus of the EU because there were various entities interested to exert influence in the region.

Ms PETROVSKA shared the concerns raised during the discussion about increased organised crime and corruption but stressed that this could be handled successfully in the frame of the negotiations, especially where North Macedonia and Albania were concerned. In addition, she highlighted that good neighbourhood relations were important and a condition for accession, while noting that this required mutual effort.

5. Session III: The Future Role of Young People in EU Decision-Making Processes and Beyond

Keynote speakers: Ms Roberta METSOLA, Vice-President of the European Parliament; Mr Damir OREHOVEC, State Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia; Ms Biliana SIRAKOVA, EU Youth Coordinator

Brief contributions by: Ms Anja FORTUNA, Vice-President of the European Youth Forum

Mr Nik PREBIL, Deputy Chair of the Committee on EU Affairs of the National Assembly

Ms Roberta METSOLA, Vice-President of the European Parliament, started her intervention by referring to the youth as the centerpiece of the European project, and emphasizing the importance of effective communication with citizens. Ms METSOLA briefly presented the results of the recent youth survey, requested by the European Parliament, which indicated that 55 per cent of the respondents were not familiar with the EU and its workings. On the positive side, it was highlighted that nine out of 10 respondents stated

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that they discussed politics with friends or relatives. Ms METSOLA also noticed the importance of listening to young people at every level, and alluded to the European Parliament Euroscola programme, the European Youth Event, and the youth consultation process in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe, as forms of involving the youth in the decision-making process. The Vice-President also highlighted the work of the educational institutions and teachers as critical partners in achieving this goal and the necessity of ensuring active European citizenship in the curriculums. Ms METSOLA finished her intervention by expressing the need for greater attention to ideas expressed by young people, especially bearing in mind their constant exposure to news and information.

Mr Damir OREHOVEC, State Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia, pointed out the diversity of young people in Europe and the fact that one of the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency was the creation of youth civic spaces. He considered these safe, open and inclusive civic spaces essential in order to include young people in the decision-making processes and ensure meaningful participation. Mr OREHOVEC also referred to the EU Youth Strategy and to the European Youth Conference and its recommendations, and highlighted the importance of giving concrete feedback to young people and of the diversity of the decision-making process. He also emphasized that a green, resilient and digital Europe would only be possible to achieve if the young people were heard and if a partnership between policy makers and young people was established, increasing the democratic process. Mr OREHOVEC concluded by alluding to the work developed by the trio of the presidency in this matter, to the work of the Youth Council in Slovenia and its notification on all the laws and rules that affect young people and the active role of young people at local level. He also said that it was very relevant to give the youth the necessary tools for the future, both through formal and non-formal education, and congratulated the European Commission for choosing 2022 as the European Year of Youth.

The EU Youth Coordinator, Ms Biliana SIRAKOVA, described her function as aiming to enhance cross-sector cooperation and giving youth a voice in policy decisions. She referred to an event where 25 young ambassadors had met to exchange views, representing Europe's diversity, and to launch concrete ideas on the future of Europe. This group also embodied the main reasons why they should be included in the decision-making process: they were more connected and mobile than other generations, they were digital natives, active citizens, supporters of non-traditional forms of participation and with a positive view of EU, innovators, defenders of people and climate. Ms SIRAKOVA pointed out the importance of improving youth participation, as a multi-level process, as well as the EU youth dialogue, the Conference on the Future of Europe, the New European Bauhaus, and round tables. She also shed light on the need to launch opportunities and space for young people to speak, giving them the chance to participate in the processes with meaningful follow-up, stressing that it was not enough to listen to what they had to say, but it was just as important to also act upon their ideas.

Ms Anja FORTUNA, Vice-President of the European Youth Forum, considered that the participation of young people in the decision-making process was crucial for democracy in our society. She referred to the lack of opportunities for young people in the decision-making process in the EU and the lack of young parliamentarians. Ms FORTUNA pointed out that the decisions taken were not future proofed and did not reflect the needs of the youth, presenting examples of forms of youth participation. The final words were dedicated to the need to act at national and EU level on this topic, especially bearing in mind that EU policies were intersectoral - such as climate change and jobs - and that youth was a source of innovation and motivation.

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On the same note, Mr Nik PREBIL, Deputy Chair of the Committee on EU Affairs of the Slovenian *Državni zbor*, said that confidence and trust in young people should be a priority, allowing them to participate in the decision-making process and giving them a voice to actively participate. Young people should not be left behind and should not be underestimated. He also alluded to the lack of investment in digital transformation and the need to find solutions for accommodation, access to jobs, social security and environmental issues. Mr PREBIL raised the issue of the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in the Member States and referred to the Conference of the Future of Europe as an opportunity to show what young people really wanted for the future. He finished his intervention by saying that young people should be constantly engaged in the decision-making process, to adopt a social consensus, which was the foundation for an effective and safe EU.

During the debate that followed, several parliamentarians underlined the importance of encouraging young people to actively participate in the decision-making process, the importance of the Conference on the Future of Europe in this regard, and the need of political parties to encourage young people to participate in young policy making (Mr Helmut SCHOLZ, European Parliament; Mr Ruairi Ó MURCHÚ, Irish *Houses of Oireachtas*; Ms Sabrina RICCIARDI, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*; Mr Carlos BRÁS, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*; Ms Anca DRAGU, Romanian *Senat*; Ms Susana SUMELZO, Spanish *Cortes Generales*).

Some parliamentarians pointed out the major challenges young people faced nowadays, such as access to education, youth unemployment, low wages, less security and housing problems (Ms Susana SUMELZO, Spanish *Cortes Generales*), as well as the attention needed to ensure the financial means of NGOs and youth organizations, more active participation of young people in the parliaments and public institutions and the use of their input by governments (Ms Anca DRAGU, Romanian *Senat*).

Some of the participants in this debate referred to the experience gained in their own country. Mr Andrius MAZURONIS, Lithuanian *Seimas*, referred to the final stage of the adoption of a constitutional amendment to allow young people to participate in politics from the age of 21, suggesting also a quota system for youth in political parties leadership. Mr Daniel MILEWSKI, Polish *Sejm*, presented the Conference that took place in Warsaw, organized by the Parliament, between Visegrad countries, which was focused on the need to listen to young people, highlighting also the important role young politicians could play in this regard. Ms Vladimira MARCKINKOVA, Slovak *Národná rada*, pointed out that young people helped establish freedom and democracy in her country, as well as the importance of creating platforms among young people to participate in EU dialogue. Ms Sabrina RICCIARDI, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, referred to specific activities targeted at schools to get the young people involved in the decision-making process and the legislative process, teaching them human and democratic values. Ms Emanuela ROSSINI, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, also referred to the possibility given to young people to present their vision to the recovery of the economy and the outcome of the national youth council event, where advisers worked in the government to act as a think-tank to determine the impact on young people of several laws. Mr Marko PAVIĆ, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor* shed light on the decreased youth unemployment rates through the funds to create companies in Croatia and the youth organisations that produce policy papers and research in this area.

Mr Helmut SCHOLZ, European Parliament, congratulated the Presidency for including this topic on the agenda and stated that it was not enough to create platforms, it was necessary to take the concerns of young people seriously. He also alluded to the European Parliament Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) report on citizen's dialogues and on the instruments concerning citizens' participation in the EU decision-making, including youth.

Mr BRÁS noted the importance of the European citizenship and the role of schools in teaching the fundamental values and principles of the EU.

Ms Gerta DURAKU, Albanian *Kuvendi i Shqipërisë* pointed out that, despite the heavy presence of young people in parliament, she noted the need for young people to gain experience in important decision-making in Albania, and suggested the creation of workshops to give a wide experience to all youth in the Western Balkans in this matter. On the other hand, Mr Nemanja JOKSIMOVIĆ, Serbian *Narodna skupština*, mentioned the opportunities for youth mobility, programs like Erasmus+ and the importance of youth conferences and EU youth dialogue.

Mr OREHOVEC took the floor again to sum up that all agreed that young people were part of the present and the future of the EU, and more actions needed to be taken to engage the youth in the decision-making process. Ms SIRAKOVA called for more strong youth programs, increased budgets for this area, more inclusion, education for citizenship and implementation of ideas from forums, including this one.

Mr PREBIL ended this session by echoing that the exchange of practices was crucial, considering that Western Balkans countries needed an opportunity to participate in the whole process itself and that young people should have their representatives in the national Parliaments.

6. Session IV: Conference on the Future of Europe

Keynote Speakers: Mr Guy VERHOFSTADT, Member of the European Parliament; Mr Gašper DOVŽAN, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia (via video message); Ms Dubravka ŠUICA, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography; Ms Sabine THILLAYE, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the French *Assemblée nationale*; Mr Jean-François RAPIN, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the French *Sénat*

Chair: Mr Bojan KEKEC, Chair of the Commission for International Relations and European Affairs, Slovenian *Državni svet*

Mr Gašper DOVŽAN, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia and co-chair of the CoFE's Executive Board, underlined the important role of the national Parliament's committees of European Affairs in the CoFE. He stressed the need for a real debate on the future of the EU, especially after the recent crisis that had hit the European continent. He recalled that the CoFE was a unique project for the renewal of European democracy and that the Council was doing its utmost to ensure that the debates were fruitful. He also spoke of the need for the process to be transparent and inclusive and regretted the CoFE's lack of visibility among European citizens.

Mr Guy VERHOFSTADT, Member of the European Parliament and co-chair of the CoFE's Executive Board, spoke about the CoFE process and particularly the importance of the citizens' panels. He underlined that those panels would have to formulate recommendations, which would then be debated in plenary by Members of the Plenary. Mr VERHOFSTADT also proposed the organization of a meeting between the representatives of the national Parliaments and of the European Parliament in CoFE at the margins of the February Plenary session in order to strengthen cooperation and synergy between them. Mr VERHOFSTADT welcomed reflexion on the role of national Parliaments in the European legislative process, including a more positive and proactive subsidiarity check. He also spoke in favour of the right of legislative initiative for the European Parliament, of the Lead Candidate process and of the establishment of transnational lists for the European elections, and called for deliberations about Council unanimity.

Ms Dubravka ŠUICA, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography and co-Chair of the CoFE's Executive Board, spoke about the innovative potential of the CoFE due to the

involvement of citizens in the European Citizens' Panels. She praised the "level of preparation" and "sense of responsibility" of the participating citizens. Ms ŠUIČA also emphasised that the role of the Plenary was to debate the outcomes of the European Citizens' Panels and stressed the need for the results of these Panels to be taken into account in the final conclusions.

Ms ŠUIČA furthermore mentioned the multitude of events organized at the national level and thanked the national Parliaments for their organization of events in the framework of the CoFE. She also expressed concern about the low level of citizen participation, especially on the Multilingual Digital Platform and urged colleagues to raise awareness of the CoFE among their constituents, especially among young people, who would be directly affected by the outcome of the event.

Ms Sabine THILLAYE, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the French *Assemblée nationale*, recalled the important role of national Parliaments in the CoFE. She stated that, even if the French Government initiated several events for promoting the CoFE, it was also up to the national Parliaments, helped by the media, to engage citizens in the territories. Ms THILLAYE finally called for this Conference to be used to define minimum standards for monitoring the decision-making of the executive during Council meetings.

Mr Jean-François RAPIN, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the French *Sénat*, mentioned the short timeframe of this CoFE, which, in his opinion, would diminish the results and promote European self-interest and not citizen participation. He recalled that Europe was struggling to create a sense of belonging among its citizens and that it was constant interaction that was the key to reconnecting with them.

Following these introductory remarks, 27 speakers took the floor to talk about the organisation, proceedings and key issues of the CoFE.

Parliamentarians thanked the Slovenian Presidency for the efforts that had been made to organise this event despite the pandemic. Mr Luis CAPOULAS SANTOS, Portuguese *Assembleia da República* welcomed the beginning of topical discussions in the CoFE and expressed the need for its continuation beyond the initial deadline. However, some representatives, namely Ms Lucia PUTTRICH, German *Bundesrat* and Mr Ruairí Ó Murchú, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, stressed the lack of transparency with regard to CoFE's workings, especially in the working groups, and the lack of information about the ongoing process. On a similar note, Ms Riina SIKKUT, Estonian *Riigikogu*, Chair of the Digital Transformation Working Group, and Mr Dimitris KAIRIDIS, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, Chair of the Migration Working Group, lamented the lack of rules regarding the contributions they had to provide and advocated for more working time and meetings before the final deadline. Mr Helmut SCHOLZ, European Parliament, advocated for more cooperation between the Plenary and the Citizens' Panels.

The vast majority of representatives expressed concern about the low outreach and citizens' engagement in the CoFE. The CoFE should be a chance to innovate democratically and to take better account of the citizens' aspirations. notably Ms Lucia PUTTRICH, German *Bundesrat*, emphasized the effects of the pandemic on the participation of citizens and called for national representatives to be able to represent their views. Ms Fabíola CARDOSO, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, stressed the need for an even greater involvement of young people in the CoFE and called for better civic education in schools to raise their interest in European matters. Mr Sergio BATTELI, Italian *Camera dei deputati* pointed out the role of digital technologies to increase citizens' participation in the CoFE and European decision making processes at large.

Another point raised was the possible modification of treaties. Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor* explained that the first contributions of the citizen's panels were moving towards Treaty

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changes and questioned the preparedness of Member States and Institutions for this. Biljana BORZAN, European Parliament called for the embeddedness of the European Pillar of Social Right in the Treaties.

The issue of balance of competences between the European Union and Member States was raised. Mr Zoltán BALCZÓ, Hungarian *Országgyűlés* and Gerolf ANNEMANS, European Parliaments called for the CoFE to focus on establishing a Union based on cooperation that respects the national identities of citizens and the sovereignty of Member States. In line with this Mr José María SANCHEZ, Spanish *Cortes Generales* touched upon the issue of the primacy of European Union law..

Several representatives also stressed the need to strengthen European democracy. Mr Rubén MORENO Spanish *Cortes Generales*, transnational lists for European elections. Mr Dario STEFANO, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, called for the use of COSAC to establish a dialogue between national Parliaments and the European Parliament on legislative texts prior to votes. Other proposals included the organisation of meetings on legislative proposals between relevant European Parliament and national Parliament committees, parliamentary scrutiny of Council ministerial meetings, reducing the size of the Commission and giving additional powers to the regions.

Following these interventions, the keynote speakers took the floor again to react.

Mr VERHOFSTADT supported the demands for transparency and better functioning of the working groups. He said that he would speak about this at the next meeting of the CoFE Executive board. On the other hand, Mr VERHOFSTADT dismissed the criticism of the short timeframe for the conclusions of the CoFE, pointing out that the pressure of time would on the contrary stimulate the debates and proposals. Following this intervention.

Ms ŠUICA touched upon the transparency of the CoFE and stated the written summaries of the working groups would be prepared by the Common Secretariat together with the chairs and in consultation with the members of each working group. She also recalled the publication of two interim reports regarding the Multilingual Digital Platform. Regarding potential Treaty changes Ms ŠUICA recalled that the Joint Declaration contains a commitment for EU Institutions to follow-up on the proposals of the CoFE in full respect of their competences.

Mr DOVŽAN assured the Slovenian Presidency had done its utmost to ensure transparency and inclusiveness of the CoFE. He called for continued work on these matters and welcomed the agreement on the involvement of Western Balkan countries. He also expressed hope the CoFE would result in concrete proposals, based on the ideas of citizens, that could be implemented and that some of these would focus on empowering national Parliaments within the EU.

Mr RAPIN expressed his concern that the short time frame would lead to a loss of efficiency, whereas the subjects dealt with were of great importance and complex.