



## MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHAIRPERSONS OF COSAC

PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC, 10 - 11 JULY 2022

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## **PROCEEDINGS**

IN THE CHAIR: Mr David SMOLJAK, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Czech *Senát*; Mr Ondřej BENEŠÍK, Chair of the European Affairs Committee of the Czech *Poslanecká sněmovna*.

### **1. OPENING OF THE MEETING**

#### **Welcome speech by Mr Miloš Vystrčil, President of the Czech *Senát***

Mr Miloš VYSTRČIL, President of the Czech *Senát*, welcomed the delegations to the *Sénat* of the Czech Republic and mentioned that this Chamber has been one of the most active in scrutinising legislation at the European Union (EU) level. He recalled the context of the gas crisis that occurred during the former Czech Presidency in 2009, and regretted that the EU did not learn from that experience. In fact, he said that although the right path to follow had been clear then, particularly with regard to the concerns about not deepening the energy dependence on totalitarian regimes, the same energy crisis was currently being faced again. He considered that the main problem of Europe was not about knowing what the right solutions were, but about not being able to implement them. He reminded delegates of the motto of the Czech Presidency: “Europe as a task“ inspired by the speech of the former Czech President Václav HAVEL, which should be interpreted in the sense that it was also Europe’s task to set an example for others to follow. He therefore urged the Parliaments/Chambers to help Europe by all possible means to start fulfilling this task.

#### **Opening remarks by Mr David Smoljak, Chairman of the Committee on EU Affairs - Senate**

Mr David SMOLJAK, Chairman of the Committee on EU Affairs of the Czech *Senát*, began by appreciating the Czech Presidency motto and clarified that, in his view, the “task“ Václav HAVEL referred to also meant common responsibility for Europe's future and for maintaining our European values. He compared the COSAC delegations, including himself, to relay racers and expressed his hope that this common race would be successful because there were only two possible results: either winning together or losing together.

#### **Opening remarks by Mr Ondřej Benešík, Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies**

Mr Ondřej BENEŠÍK, Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs of the Czech *Poslanecká sněmovna*, thanked the French Presidency for the excellent work and for the flexibility shown in very challenging times. He expressed his optimism regarding the cooperation within the Troika, and stated that the situation in Europe had dramatically changed, and that the meaning of security had taken on a whole new dimension. He also mentioned the issue of food security which a year ago was about its quality, whereas these days it concerned ensuring the sufficiency and affordable prices. Mr BENEŠÍK added that the very existence of energy sources was now being addressed, while a year ago the discussion was about which one was preferable to choose. He emphasised the need to give solutions to citizens who justly expected it. He urged delegates to think of Europe in

a much broader way than just the EU, referring not only to the countries cooperating with the EU economically, but also to the the new candidate countries, in particular Ukraine and Moldova, and to the Western Balkan countries, that needed a European perspective. He further noted that Georgia should not be forgotten since, in recent times, Georgia was the first country attacked by the Russian Federation. In a broader context he also mentioned the Strategic Compass initiative that put together like-minded democratic countries, and underlined the need for Europe's active role in a global world. He urged Europe to bear in mind the transatlantic and transpacific links, but also the potential for cooperation with South American or South African partners. Mr BENEŠÍK also expressed his belief that the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC could contribute to help Europe overcome the current crisis.

## **2. PROCEDURAL AND OTHER GENERAL MATTERS**

### **Adoption of the Agenda of the Meeting**

Mr SMOLJAK presented the draft agenda of the Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC that was adopted without amendment. Afterwards the Chair welcomed delegates attending the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC for the first time: Mr Franc BREZNIK, Chairman of the Committee on EU Affairs of the Slovenian *Državni zbor*, Ms Marija GOLUBEVA, Chairperson of the European Affairs Committee of the Latvian *Saeima*, Mr Raoul BOUCKE, Deputy Chairman of the European Affairs Committee of the Dutch *Tweede Kamer*, Mr Pieyre-Alexandre ANGLADE, Chairman of the Committee on the Affairs of the European Union of the French *Assemblée nationale*, and Mr Kacper PŁAŻYŃSKI, Chairman of the EU Affairs Committee Polish *Sejm*. Mr SMOLJAK added that in accordance with the Rules of Procedure of COSAC the Czech Presidency had invited the new candidate countries Ukraine and Moldova. He welcomed and congratulated delegates of Ukraine and Moldova, namely Ms Ivanna KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE, Chairperson of the Committee on Ukraine's Integration into the European Union of the *Verkhovna Rada*, and Mr Adrian BĂLUTEL, Member of the Standing Committee on Foreign Policy and European Integration of the Moldovan *Parlamentul Republicii*. Both were given the floor for a short introduction.

Ms KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE said she was feeling privileged to be able to represent, for the first time at the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC, a nation that has bravely stepped up against the Russian aggression and proved that values matter. She thanked everyone who helped Ukraine and supported its application to become a member of the EU. She noted that Ukraine was very thankful for the decision of the European Council held in June 2022 to grant Ukraine and Moldova status as candidate countries, as recommended by the European Commission. She underlined that the decision was taken on the basis of merit because, since the historic Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine had proven to be able to make significant changes and delivered the results requested. She stated that the decision of the European Council in June 2022 was also taken against the backdrop of the tragedy that took place in the heart of Europe and that it was a tribute to

the Ukrainian army which was defending the whole of Europe, not just Ukraine. She said the candidate status gave Ukraine a historical chance to transform itself and to be able to live in accordance with European values for which Ukraine fights, being that now there was a legal obligation from both sides (Ukraine and the EU) to ensure that the country would become part of the Union. She said Ukraine was happy to be able to enrich the European project with its additional beliefs, knowledge and courage, once it would win the war. She stated, for that to happen, Ukraine needed Europe to be united and to have a clear position as it was the case during past months. She pledged to preserve Europe's unity in maintaining the rules-based international order, its procedures, honour, dignity and respect. Finally, she expressed her hopes that, with the help of Europe, Ukraine would be able to win the war and restore itself as a sovereign, independent, self-sufficient country, totally recovered in its borders.

Mr Adrian BĂLUTEL, Moldovan *Parlamentul Republicii* thanked for the invitation and welcomed the candidate status granted to the Republic of Moldova as a historical decision for the country and for the aspiration of its citizens to live in a better place, with better perspectives. He noted that European integration was, above all, a matter of transformation of the country and that, against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this decision gave hope to its people on becoming part of a free world. He stated that the Republic of Moldova knew very well what it meant to have Russian troops on its territory, and to deal with Russian interference in its media, democracy and good governance. He noted that the candidate status was the foremost occasion to work on the transformation process of Moldova, on strengthening the economy and, last but not least, could be seen as a possibility to continue helping Ukraine by welcoming tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees. He added that the economic downfall of Moldova caused by the Russian aggression was very harsh and that it had consequences for every single person in the country. He said that the assistance coming from the EU was therefore crucial in these tragic times. He concluded by thanking the EU for advocating for Moldova to become a candidate country and added that Moldova was looking forward to contributing to the work of COSAC and defending European values.

### **Presentation of the results of the COSAC Presidential Troika Meeting**

Mr SMOLJAK informed the delegations about the results of the COSAC Presidential Troika Meeting, noting the approval of the agenda of the COSAC Chairpersons' meeting, the approval of the outline of the 38th Bi-annual Report of COSAC and of the draft agenda of the LXVIII COSAC.

### **Provisional agenda for the LXVIII COSAC**

Mr SMOLJAK presented the adopted draft agenda of the LXVIII COSAC, which was endorsed by the Troika and that would take place in Prague from 13-15 November 2022. He then introduced the five thematic sessions which would be covered during the meeting: the first session would be dedicated to an overview of the Czech Presidency of the Council

of the EU; the second session would discuss the Future of the EU; the third session would address the issues of the Strategic autonomy of the EU; the fourth session would be dedicated to a state of play on Ukraine, namely on reconstruction and migration; and the fifth and final session would focus on the European Perspective of the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries.

### **Outline of the 38th COSAC Bi-Annual Report**

Mr SMOLJAK presented the outline of the 38th COSAC Bi-annual Report, stating that the first chapter of the Report would focus on the Conference of the Future of Europe (CoFE), in particular the participation of the Parliaments/Chambers in the works of the Conference and their internal procedures related to it. It would also gather positions taken by Parliaments/Chambers on the conclusions of the CoFE related to institutional matters and democratic procedures, including citizens' participation. In its second chapter, the Bi-annual Report would look at the proposals arising from the two COSAC Working Groups (WGs)<sup>1</sup> set up during the French Presidency. He specified that the Czech Presidency would like to get the views of the Parliaments/Chambers on the individual proposals contained in the conclusions of these WGs and their implementation. The last chapter of the Bi-annual Report would be devoted to the relationship between the EU, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in the context of the Conclusions of the June 2022 European Council. It would look at whether and how Parliaments/Chambers have debated the Russian aggression against Ukraine or their involvement in the accession process.

Mr SMOLJAK stressed that, on the basis of the approved outline for the 38th Bi-annual Report, a questionnaire would be sent to the delegations on 20 July at the latest, with replies expected by 19 September 2022. That would allow for the 38th Bi-annual Report to be drawn up on time for the LXVIII COSAC in November. Mr SMOLJAK drew the attention of delegations to the fact that the replies to the questionnaire and the findings of the Report would form the basis for the political deliberations regarding the Contribution and Conclusions to be adopted by the LXVIII COSAC. Therefore, he encouraged Parliaments/Chambers to pay appropriate attention to the questionnaire in order to facilitate that future work.

### **Letters received by the Presidency**

Mr SMOLJAK referred to the following letters received by the Presidency requesting invitation to attend the COSAC meetings:

- Mr Benedikt WÜRTH, President of the Swiss delegation for relations with the European Parliament, Swiss *Assemblée fédérale*;
- Mr Masud GHARAHKHANI, President of the Norwegian *Stortinget*;

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<sup>1</sup> Working group on the role of national Parliaments in the EU; Working group on the place of values at the heart of the sense of belonging to the European Union.

- Lord Charles KINNOULL, Chair of the European Union Committee, UK *House of Lords*;
- Bjarni JÓNSSON, Chair of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Icelandic *Althingi*;
- Ms Maka BOTCHORISHVILI, Chair of the Committee on European Integration of the Georgian *Sakartvelos p'arlament*<sup>1</sup> ;
- Mr Pere LÓPEZ AGRÀS, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Legislative Committee of Andorra, only for the COSAC Plenary, for which a positive answer is being prepared;
- Ms Rrezarta KRASNIQI, Chairwoman of the Committee on European Integration, Kosovo<sup>2</sup> *Kuvendi i Kosovës*.

Mr SMOLJAK said that, following consultation with the Presidential Troika, invitations would be sent to all the above-mentioned Parliaments. Finally, the Presidency received a letter of confirmation from Ukraine to attend the COSAC Chairpersons meeting.

#### **Presentation of the outcomes of the COSAC Working Groups by representatives of the European Affairs Committees of the French Parliament**

Mr SMOLJAK gave the floor to the representatives of the European Affairs Committees of the French Parliament to present the outcomes of the COSAC WGs.

Mr RAPIN first thanked the Czech Presidency for the opportunity to present the outcomes of the WGs that were established within the COSAC during the French Presidency in the first half of 2022. He noted that the French Presidency wanted to strengthen COSAC and to give it a new dynamism. He thanked delegates for the approval of the establishment of two WGs groups in January 2022 in Paris, each one composed of about 40 members of Parliaments/Chambers of the EU and the European Parliament to discuss these matters.

He stressed that, during approximately four months, these WGs met more than 10 times and that, on 14 June 2022, its Conclusions were adopted. He recalled the creation of a COSAC WG in 2015, under the Luxembourgish Presidency, which had met only once and did not adopt any conclusions. In this regard he perceived the French Presidency's WGs as a major innovation that enabled close cooperation between the members of national Parliaments and to draft proposals together. He referred to the honour of having chaired the WG on the role of national Parliaments in the EU, while adding that, in the context of the crisis Europe was facing, the French Presidency considered that this issue was crucial in the institutional framework of the EU. In fact, he mentioned that national Parliaments, as representatives of citizens, could not be omitted in this new political situation. Mr RAPIN then alluded to the fact that, after four months of work, the WG adopted conclusions by consensus of its members, remarking that the European

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<sup>2</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Parliament unfortunately had not joined the consensus. Finally, he noted that it was a demanding job to balance the different positions, traditions and legal systems, but acknowledged that the conclusions showed that, despite the differences, it was possible to have common proposals.

Mr RAPIN identified the two proposals that he considered as the most important. Firstly, he mentioned the initiative of the so-called “green card”, stating that it was not a new idea but the WG had come up with a concrete and directly applicable proposal in case the European Commission accepted it, for instance, via a declaration with that regard. He underlined the practical meaning of the proposal that would give national Parliaments an active role in building Europe. Secondly, he referred to the right of the Chairpersons of the European Affairs Committees of Parliaments/Chambers to ask written questions addressed to the European institutions, meaning that the members would have the right to address them directly. He reminded that this proved to be very useful for obtaining information on vaccines purchases during the health crisis.

Mr RAPIN also alluded to other proposals from the WG, namely the organisation of *ad hoc* interparliamentary conferences or inclusion of a brief summary of the contributions of national Parliaments in the introductory provisions of legislative proposals, the envisaged change in the threshold or prolongation of the subsidiarity check deadline, the access to documents from trilogues granted to the national Parliaments or the proposal to appoint the shadow rapporteurs to the most important legislative dossiers. Other proposals aimed at strengthening the cooperation between national Parliaments and the European institutions and more effective cooperation between national Parliaments themselves. He noted that all these proposals could be implemented quickly, reminding that national Parliaments had a very strong legitimacy and could contribute to improvement of democratic functioning of the EU and the involvement of EU citizens. He concluded by asking for political support for implementation of the conclusions, thanking those members who participated in the work of WGs or within the CoFE. He stated that new links and new contacts were established and that all this would contribute to the future common work. Finally, he wished success to the Parliamentary Dimension of the Czech Presidency.

Mr ANGLADE started by thanking his predecessor Ms Sabine THILLAYE, former Chairwoman of the Committee on the Affairs of the European Union of the French *Assemblée nationale*, for her work, and then presented the conclusions of the WG on the place of values at the heart of the sense of belonging to the EU. He recalled that the work consisted mainly of discussions between members of the group, experts and law professors on important concepts of European identity such as values, democracy, and fundamental rights. He said these concepts might seem obvious but can be very difficult to define. He added that this was the reason why one of the recommendations of the WG was to have a more comprehensive definition of the rule of law, also based on criteria such as freedom of the media or the fight against corruption. He underlined the importance of defence of European values, noting that the war in Ukraine reminded us that freedom,

democracy or the international order based on rules, peace and security could be called into question at any time.

Mr ANGLADE said that one of the final recommendations of the CoFE was to hold an annual European conference on the rule of law after the European Commission had published its report on that matter. The conference would bring together representatives of national Parliaments, European institutions, governments, local authorities, social partners and citizens. It would also be a forum for a debate with legal experts on the content of the European values concepts. Mr ANGLADE noted that the next conference on the rule of law organised by the European Parliament in Brussels would take place in December and that it could be a prelude to the European conference mentioned in the conclusions of the working group. He reminded that the WG proposed to future COSAC Presidencies to have the rule of law as a permanent topic, either at the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC or at the Plenary Meeting. According to him such debates could be prepared by including questions on values and the rule of law in the questionnaires for the Bi-annual Reports. He further clarified that the report of the WG did not state that each Presidency should evaluate the theme of rule of law in a broad comprehensive way, but that the focus would be on one of these concrete aspects. Mr ANGLADE stated that, by including the topic of Current Challenges to Media and Democracy on the agenda of the Meeting of Chairpersons of COSAC, the Czech Presidency was already implementing one recommendation of the WG.

Mr ANGLADE considered that the most important proposal made by the WG was the creation of a permanent working group on the rule of law within COSAC. Such a group would consist of rapporteurs appointed by each European Affairs Committee and would be dedicated to following the rule of law issues throughout the year. He specified that the group could meet once a year within the framework of each Presidency, to discuss - for example - the European Commission's annual report on this subject, and could adopt recommendations by consensus to COSAC. Mr ANGLADE expressed his belief that such change would bring significant progress.

Mr SMOLJAK thanked the French delegates for their contributions but also for their work on the organisation of both WGs and for the whole French Presidency. He said he appreciated and respected the work of both WGs.

The Chair then moved to the point of any other business and gave floor to Ms Eva KJER HANSEN, Chairperson of the European Affairs Committee of the Danish *Folketinget*.

Ms KJER HANSEN thanked the French Presidency for the organisation of the WGs which, according to her, showed a new way of working together. She asked the Czech Presidency for a follow up, stressing the need to get closer to the decision process and the citizens as well, pointing out the fact that the members of national Parliaments are the closest to them. She expressed her will to discuss these matters together and proposed to get back to that during the LXVIII COSAC and try to inform each other about the different models of national Parliaments practices. She mentioned that the Danish Parliament was



very active concerning the monitoring of the legislative process and, for example, had very often used its right to ask the European Commission questions. She underlined the need for communication and exchange of best practices between the delegates.

Mr SMOLJAK thanked Ms KJER HANSEN and assured her that the Czech Presidency was definitely ready for the follow up on the results of the individual WGs as well as for the follow up in the Contribution and Conclusions of the LXVIII COSAC. He noted that many of the WGs' proposals required acceptance at the level of the EU. For that, the Contribution to be adopted at the LXVIII COSAC would first need to be addressed to the European institutions, inviting them to respond and only then could further consideration be given to the implementation of the proposals. He remarked that other proposals could be implemented by the Presidency, and those ones would for sure be addressed by the questionnaire.

Also following the prior request, Ms Marija GOLUBEVA, Latvian *Saeima*, presented a joint statement of Chairpersons of the European Affairs Committee of the Parliaments of Latvia and Lithuania regarding the need to counter foreign interference in democratic processes in the EU. She noted that many of the delegates had already signed the joint statement. She mentioned the [resolution of the European Parliament of 9 March 2022](#)<sup>3</sup> regarding the co-financing of political parties, including co-financing by third parties such as China or Russia. She stressed that the joint statement called on the European Commission to accelerate the implementation of the European Democracy Action Plan. The statement, besides others, urged the European Commission to follow up on the recommendations expressed in the above-mentioned European Parliament's resolution and to draw up a legal framework to prevent the foreign interference in electoral processes.

### **3. FIRST SESSION - PRESENTATION OF THE PRIORITIES OF THE CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE EU COUNCIL**

**Keynote speaker: Mr Jan Lipavský, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Government of the Czech Republic**

Mr Jan LIPAVSKÝ, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Government of the Czech Republic, first addressed the plenary by thanking the participants for their interest in the Czech Presidency. He mentioned that its priorities were prepared in cooperation with the Presidency Trio, i.e.. France and Sweden, and that they had to reflect the current situation of the war in Ukraine and its impact on Europe. Mr LIPAVSKÝ emphasised that the task in the near future would be to find a single and clear consensus on measures that would mitigate the negative impact of the current crisis on the citizens as far as possible. He then introduced the Presidency's main motto: "Europe as a task", which was inspired by the legacy of the former Czech President Václav HAVEL. The motto was extended to three key slogans: rethink, rebuild, repower. The Minister explained that these slogans should

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<sup>3</sup> European Parliament resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation (2020/2268(INI)).

reflect tasks such as rethinking current policies, especially in the area of defence and energy transformation, reconstruction of infrastructure as well as institutional changes, and strengthening of Europe's defence capability.

Mr LIPAŤSKÝ then introduced the five pillars of the Czech Presidency which were in line with the above mentioned objectives. The first priority was *Managing the refugee crisis and Ukraine's post-war recovery*, which required unified cooperation of all Member States, EU institutions, other organisations and the civic sector. He proposed that EU funds should be mobilised and a focus on a successful incorporation of refugees should be ensured. He also stated that Ukraine being granted candidate status was a huge success, however it was only a first step on a long and difficult journey and the EU should assist Ukraine in its path to get closer to the Union.

Mr LIPAŤSKÝ then presented the second priority – *Energy security*, by stating that the current crisis revealed the importance of independence from countries that threaten the EU's security and that the focus should be on finding short-term alternatives before the decarbonisation could be put into practice. He also emphasised that each Member State must be able to choose its own energy mix that suits its needs.

On the third priority - *Strengthening Europe's defence capabilities and cyberspace security*, the Minister elaborated that significant investment in critical technologies and cooperation with NATO would be crucial as well as the Strategic Compass. He then stated that the Czech Presidency would work on cyber security and improvement of the digital resilience of the EU institutions, as well as on development of a so-called hybrid toolbox to combat digital threats.

Mr LIPAŤSKÝ then raised another major priority - *Strategic resilience of the European economy* and elaborated on the steps that needed to be taken. According to him, the EU must stabilise the supply chains through competitive production within its borders and deepen transatlantic cooperation through the EU-US Trade and Technology Council.

The final priority - *Resilience of democratic institutions*, was introduced by Mr LIPAŤSKÝ as equally important as the previous ones. The very foundation of what the EU institutions and our society were built on should be, in the Minister's view, protected from any hostile foreign interference.

During the ensuing debate, 33 speakers took the floor, expressing general support for the priorities of the Czech Presidency and its attempt to handle several crises at once. Mr Pieyre-Alexandre ANGLADE, French *Assemblée nationale*, emphasised the importance of unity regarding the top priorities of the EU in the near future - strategic autonomy, European defence and energy security. Mr Pyry NIEMI, Swedish *Riksdagen*, addressed three topics from the priorities that were important to Sweden. Firstly, women's representation in the labour market, secondly removing dependence on fossil fuels from the Russian Federation and moving towards a greener transition via the Fit for 55 legislative package, and lastly, free trade, an area in which new solutions with other democratic countries must be found. Mr Jean-Francois RAPIN, French *Sénat*, drew

attention to food security, preservation of the EU food production, the future of the Eurozone, exchange rate differences and preservation of democracy in the EU.

The majority of speakers elaborated on the current war in Ukraine in general, namely Raul BOUCKE, Dutch *Tweede Kamer* or Ms Emanuela Rossini, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*. Furthermore, there were also calls for the provision of more weapons for Ukraine (Mr Žygimantas PAVILIONIS, Lithuanian *Seimas*; Mr Anton HOFREITER, German *Bundestag*). Ms Ivana KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE, Ukrainian *Verkhovna Rada*, called for more weapon deliveries and said this was the best kind of humanitarian aid that could be given to Ukraine right now as it would help save lives. She also called for new sanctions against the Russian Federation.

The need for plans for the post-war period and mainly the reconstruction of Ukraine also resonated among speakers and was addressed by Ms Marija GOLUBEVA, Latvian *Saeima*; Mr Kacper PŁAŻYŃSKI, Polish *Sejm*. Mr Bogdan KLICH, Polish *Senat*, stated that the International Criminal Tribunal under international law should examine the war crimes and the crimes against humanity in Ukraine. He also emphasised that the process of integrating Ukraine into NATO should be encouraged. Lastly, he stated that it was the EU's duty to formulate plans for the reconstruction and rebuilding of a completely destroyed country and that some 750 billion EUR would have to be allocated for this purpose in this new "Marshall Plan" for Ukraine. Mr Ștefan Mușoiu, Romanian *Camera Deputatilor*, raised the topic of the refugee crisis. The other important issue in this context - mental health impaired by the war, was mentioned by Mr Malcolm Paul AGIUS GALEA, Maltese *Kamra tad-Deputati*.

Some speakers have taken the subject of the current war to the next level by drawing the attention to the importance to preserve peace and liberal democracy as well as the rule of law throughout Europe (Mr Harris GEORGIADES, Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*; Mr Dimitris KAIRIDIS, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*). They both warned about the threats posed by Turkey.

Energy security, self-sufficiency and adequate prices for energy commodities were among other important topics mentioned during some interventions. The need to find secure and reliable sources outside of Russian influence was emphasised (Ms Marija GOLUBEVA, Latvian *Saeima*; Ms Bojan KEKEC, Slovenian *Državni svet*). Mr Jani MÄKELÄ, Finnish *Eduskunta*, added that different circumstances of each EU Member State should be considered, thus the EU should not interfere in the national energy policies of individual countries.

Ms Samuel COGOLATI, Belgian *Chambre des représentants*, expressed his hope that the EU would reiterate its commitment around renewable energy sources. Mr Anton HOFREITER, German *Bundestag*, added that it would be very important for the EU to get rid of its dependency on fossil resources and accelerate the implementation of the Fit for 55 legislative package.

Several interventions concerned candidate and potential candidate countries. The general opinion expressed was that the EU should facilitate those who are seeking accession (Mr Ruairí Ó MURCHÚ, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*; Mr Davor Ivo STIER, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*). On top of that, Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Austrian *Nationalrat*, reminded that the EU should not forget Georgia and countries of the Western Balkans and, in this respect, Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIČ, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, and Mr Christian BUCHMANN, Austrian *Bundesrat*, supported him. As a follow up to this, Ms Maka BOTCHORISHVILI, Georgian *Sakartvelos p'arlament'I*, called for the chance to join the EU. Similarly, the representatives of the Albanian *Kuvendi*, Mr Kreshnik ÇOLLAKU and Mr Bardhyl KOLLÇAKU, emphasised that the integration of Albania should be accelerated. Ms Elvira KOVÁCS, Serbian *Narodna skupština*, stated that the enlargement policy should not be neglected, but evaluated on the basis of the individual progress of each candidate country. Ms Daliborka PEJOVIC, Montenegrin *Skupština*, called for an accurate, acceptable and credible roadmap to the EU. Ms Rrezarta KRASNIQ, Kosovan<sup>4</sup> *Kuvendi*, also expressed her country's desire to join the EU.

A number of contributions focused on the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE). Mr Othmar KARAS, European Parliament, stated that the next six months would be crucial in many ways. Among other things, it would be decided whether the implementation of the CoFE could be successful. He expressed his worries about the Conclusions of the European Council from 24 June 2022 and stated that the EU should be more ambitious. According to him, the credibility of the CoFE depended on the implementation of its results and that it should be in the interest of all national Parliaments to do so. Mr Reinhold LOPATKA, Austrian *Nationalrat*, added that it was important to discuss the outcomes of the CoFE as well as the COSAC WGs.

Kim VALENTIN, Danish *Folketinget*, elaborated on the issue of high inflation. In his view, in order to decrease it, public spending should be reduced and fiscal policy reevaluated. The EU as a whole should look for ways to stop inflation without stopping the growth.

After the end of debate, Mr LIPAVSKÝ took the floor again stating that some of the topics that were not included in the presented priorities were, nevertheless, important. For example, the potential migration crisis and food security. He was of the opinion that the EU should find solutions in order to prevent further migratory pressure on the Mediterranean countries. Regarding the weapons for Ukraine, he mentioned that the EU had been able to agree on a package worth two billion EUR for military supplies, and should continue its support as well as the Member States. The Minister also elaborated on the topic of enlargement of the EU. He expressed his delight about the new candidate countries and stated that the EU should pay the same level of attention to the Western Balkan countries. Mr LIPAVSKÝ concluded his speech by reminding that the EU should

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<sup>4</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244(1999) and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

not forget the threat of COVID-19, as there had recently been an increase in the number of cases across Europe.

#### **4. SECOND SESSION - MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY: CURRENT CHALLENGES**

**Video message: Ms Věra Jourová, Vice-President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency**

**Keynote Speaker: Mr Othmar Karas, First Vice-President of the European Parliament**

**Speaker: Mr Michal Klíma, Commissioner for Media and Counter-Disinformation of the Czech Government**

In a video message that was played to the meeting, Vice-President of the European Commission, Ms Věra JOUROVÁ, introduced the topic. Ms JOUROVÁ began by saying that the Commission together with the Czech Presidency aimed to support the resilience of free and independent media. She continued, by saying that the Russian invasion of Ukraine made this action even more relevant and urgent, and praised the difficult task of journalists to report under the threat of Russian bombs. She reminded that, safety being the first priority, the EU had already dedicated around eight million euros for emergency support for journalists in Ukraine, including protective equipment, safety training, and relocation. An additional package of 15 million euros was foreseen to support the Ukrainian media.

With respect to protecting journalists in the EU, Ms JOUROVÁ noted that the European Commission had sent recommendations to Member States in September 2021 on improving the safety of journalists and that recently the General Affairs Council agreed to do more with that regard, on the basis of these recommendations. In addition, in April 2022, the Commission proposed legislation to protect journalists from spurious legal proceedings, the so-called SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation). Ms JOUROVÁ also spoke about the preparations of the forthcoming European Media Freedom Act, which should aim at enshrining, for the first time in EU law, common safeguards to protect media pluralism and the editorial independence of the media, against increasingly negative trends, for instance regarding concentration of ownership and lack of transparency in the media market.

Another aspect addressed by Ms JOUROVÁ were the changes driven by digitalisation, where traditional forms were losing ground to online media, a trend which had increased since the start of the pandemic. In fact, she noted that the media companies thriving were those driven by innovation and new business models, and that trust in the media remained comparatively low. She also acknowledged that young people consumed most of their news via social media. Ms JOUROVÁ expressed her concerns about disinformation groups, on issues ranging from antivax disinformation to a pro-Kremlin agenda. In this respect, she mentioned the importance of the new Code of Practice against disinformation, presented in June 2022, which envisaged a collaborative approach without limiting the

freedom of speech. This, together with the Digital Services Act, would increase the accountability of platforms. However, she also highlighted the importance of digital literacy to ensure societal resilience to disinformation. As part of the Digital Education Action Plan, Ms JOUROVÁ informed about the preparation of common guidelines on tackling disinformation and promoting digital literacy through education and training. She finally stated that she was confident that the Czech Presidency would be key to concluding all the pending legislative proposals and to implementing all non-legislative actions, as well as confirming that the European Commission took the opinions of the national Parliaments extremely seriously in both, the field of media policy as well as in all the others.

Mr Michal KLÍMA started his intervention by noting that solutions could be found to many pressing problems like the pandemic or energy crises after they had materialised, but independent media was of a different nature because democracy directly depended on it. If we would lose independent media, it would mean the end of democracy, he argued, and then it would be already too late to do something about it. As someone who had lived almost half of his life in a Communist regime where free media did not exist, he recalled the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, a situation similar to current circumstances in Ukraine where journalists were among the most persecuted. Mr KLÍMA mentioned that the Communists had imposed rigid censorship in former Czechoslovakia and blocked foreign radio broadcasts from the free world. For 41 years the country had no free media and no democracy, he added.

Turning to today, Mr KLÍMA expressed the view that the media in the EU countries was not threatened by foreign dictators, but primarily by economic problems. This situation has been misused by some politicians who would support media that were loyal to them and even prevent companies dependent on state contracts from advertising in media that criticised those politicians. To illustrate this problem, he used the recent example of a former Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, who had bought the biggest media outlets in the country and - in Mr KLÍMA's view - turned them into instruments of his political influence. According to Mr KLÍMA the media in former Communist countries was the most endangered, as free media had a relatively short time to establish itself there, while in countries with uninterrupted democratic development the media was able to establish a relatively strong position. He added that in the former Communist countries, weak media was unable to play its role and to contribute to strengthening democracy, and it had often become a tool of oligarchs on whom they had to depend for funding. Therefore Mr KLÍMA insisted on the need to have a system in the EU to support the media, in particular the actual functioning of the media, its development, strength and plurality.

Mr Othmar KARAS stressed that Parliaments were facing the “challenge of their lifetime” as democracy was under threat. He welcomed the priorities of the Czech EU Council Presidency and noted that the next six months would be crucial for the implementation of the proposals and recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Mr KARAS underlined that it was in the very interest of all the Parliaments to ensure a credible implementation and that the European Parliament was fighting for a European

Convention in order to update the common framework and the EU Treaties. He stressed that democracy lived from freedom, rule of law and values, separation of powers, and free and independent media. He recalled that the EU had a solid foundation to safeguard democracy and the media, including the European Convention on Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the EU Treaties, and the EU Court of Justice. He also mentioned the EU's toolbox, including infringement procedures for protecting EU law, the conditionality mechanism for protecting the EU budget, the Article 7 procedure for protecting EU values, the Fundamental Rights Agency, or the Annual Rule of Law Report issued by the European Commission

He elaborated on five areas of action with respect to media and democracy. Firstly, he mentioned safeguarding media freedom and pluralism, as no Member State was immune from risks to media freedom. He welcomed the forthcoming "Media Freedom Act" announced by the European Commission to be published in autumn 2022, and the fact that it had implemented the European Parliament's demand to report on both positive and negative developments, across the Member States. He added that political and financial independence from the private market was crucial and that EU resources should not be spent on media that was state-controlled or distributing propaganda.

As a second area, Mr KARAS mentioned the protection of journalists and the urgent adoption of the new anti-SLAPP legislation. Thirdly, he spoke of combating hate speech, including the evaluation, together with journalists, of the Code of Conduct on Countering illegal hate speech for platforms. Fourth, he highlighted the fight against disinformation and foreign interference. Mr KARAS stressed, in this respect, that it was necessary to invest much more in high quality journalism, media literacy and measures against foreign interference, and observed that the European Parliament had set up a dedicated Special Committee on this topic, which adopted key recommendations to pursue this work. On the fifth subject - ensuring a fair environment for platforms and online media - Mr KARAS referred to the recent adoption of the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act as milestones in the right direction. The First Vice-President of the European Parliament concluded his speech by underlining the need to strengthen interparliamentary cooperation, together with the European Commission and the national Governments, and to engage in a regular exchange on media freedom.

Following the speeches, 23 speakers took the floor to discuss the topic. The majority of the interventions underlined that freedom of speech was a fundamental element of democracy and that free media and information was a pillar to democracies.

A recurrent theme of the debate was the balance between freedom of speech on the one hand and propaganda and disinformation on the other. Mr Rubén MORENO, Spanish *Cortes Generales*, noted that even if freedom of speech could entail dangers, it was preferable to despotism, while media was the most effective and active instrument towards progress and civilisation. Mr Domagoj HAJDUKOVIĆ, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, stressed that there was a thin line between free media and deliberate misinformation and propaganda, something that Croatia and other countries had experienced with respect to

the war in Ukraine. Ms Marija GOLUBEVA, Latvian *Saeima*, noted that with some delay the EU had closed propaganda channels after the outbreak of war, but only after damage had been done, and she also noted that foreign interference found its way through social media platforms, for example from Russia and China, supporting anti-vaccine rhetoric. Mr Raimond KALJULAI, Estonian *Riigikogu*, agreed that protecting both freedom of speech and citizens from foreign interference was a sensitive matter but that it was important that national Parliaments and governments, as accountable to voters, should decide on these matters instead of corporations. Mr Jani MÄKELÄ, Finnish *Eduskunta*, supported the view that freedom of speech should be limited only if absolutely necessary and that it should also cover controversial opinions, while social media should not be forced to decide on this.

In what concerned specifically foreign interference, many speakers referred to dangers from Russia or China, such as Mr Anton HOFREITER, German *Bundestag*, who gave the example of propaganda from *Russia Today*. Mr Pieyre-Alexandre ANGLADE, French *Assemblée nationale*, referred to the need to protect our democracies and fight disinformation, from such sources as *Sputnik*, while he praised the important work done by journalists in Ukraine and against Russian disinformation. Mr Žygmantas PAVILIONIS, Lithuanian *Seimas*, stressed that the Baltic countries were constantly attacked from Russia, with the latest example of disinformation regarding the transit ban of goods through Lithuania's territory from Russia to Kaliningrad. Ms Karin BROUWERS, Belgian *Sénat*, informed participants that the Chamber had approved a report in 2021 on the fight against disinformation containing more than 50 recommendations. She highlighted those relating to fact-checking on a wider scale at the EU level and to extend those mechanisms to cover information coming from Russia and from all countries undermining democracy. However, Mr Davor STIER, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, stressed that one should be careful and not nationalistic, so that also the media sector would remain open to foreign investments as long as these are conducive to a free society. Both Mr Dimitris KAIRIDIS, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, and Mr KALJULAI stressed the importance of preserving citizens' trust in the institutions and the rule of law in this respect, noting that foreign influence could only be successfully spread where there was a low level of trust in a countries' own institutions, while Mr KAIRIDIS made clear that the worst thing to fear was the degradation of our own democracy.

In addition, many interventions focused on the independence of the media. Mr HOFREITER noted that free media needed enough independent money, which meant that the media's economic basis needed to be strengthened. Mr Bogdan KLICH, Polish *Senat*, noted that independent journalism was crucial and that, therefore, in some countries it was absolutely necessary to provide direct financial support from the EU to the institutions of the civil society that ensured independent information and monitored media freedom. Mr Kacper PŁAŻYŃSKI, Polish *Sejm*, spoke about fighting media oligarchs and the monopolisation of the media, giving some examples, and he praised pluralism that meant media could support or criticise governments without being punished. Mr Vlad Mircea PUFU, Romanian *Senat*, stressed that the economic



independence of the press was vital for free media and that the digital revolution required that the press would be supported by special funding in order for the media to be able to adapt to it.

Mr Rasmus NORDQVIST, Danish *Folketinget*, and Mr Ruairí Ó MURCHÚ, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, noted their concerns about minorities being attacked by media or governments using media against the opposition. Ms GOLUBEVA highlighted the example of small groups of people who created huge harassment practices on social media against Finish female politicians a couple of years ago.

A number of speakers referred to the necessity for an adequate legislative framework: the importance of the Digital Services Act and the responsibility of platforms (Mr Ó MURCHÚ, Ms GOLUBEVA), the online copyright rules (Mr Jean-François RAPIN, French *Sénat*, Mr PUFU), and the protection of journalists from SLAPPs (Mr RAPIN).

In addition, Ms Emanuela ROSSINI, Italian *Camera dei deputati*, supported the inclusion of pluralism and media freedom in the analysis parameters of the Annual Rule of Law Report issued by the European Commission, and noted that an annual conference on rule of law would be an important occasion to exchange data, to reflect on, and to raise awareness of the importance of pluralism. Mr HAJDUKOVIĆ suggested that the European Commission's annual Rule of Law Report should be debated in Parliaments and be used as an indicator on what needed to be done. Mr NORDQVIST noted that the report of the COSAC WG on EU Values and the recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe in this area could be followed-up and many steps could be taken without the need for Treaty change. Mr Raoul BOUCKE, Dutch *Tweede Kamer*, commended the work of Commissioner JOUROVÁ and of the Czech Presidency which prioritised protection of media freedom, and welcomed the fact that EU countries were united in a media freedom coalition.

From the side of non-EU countries, Ms Simonida KORDIC, Montenegro *Skupština*, paraphrased Václav HAVEL's quote, referring to "media freedom as a task" and she noted that since digital media was gaining a primary position from traditional media, focus needed to be directed to responsibility and fair and free information in digital media. Mr Adrian BĂLUȚEL, Moldovan *Parlamentul Republicii*, called in particular for support for small and independent journalists, in order to make free journalism more competitive and stronger. Mr Aukrust ÅSMUND, Norwegian *Stortinget*, talking about striking the right balance between freedom of speech and protection from propaganda and hate, raised the subject of the way the terrorist attacks in Norway and other attacks displayed on social media inspired more attacks. Finally, Mr Bjarni JÓNSSON, Icelandic *Althingi*, called on parliamentarians to focus on information literacy.

In his concluding remarks, Mr SMOLJAK recalled US President Jefferson's preference for "newspapers without government" over "government without newspapers", explaining that a society could function without government if there were strong institutions, civil society and a Parliament, but that without the critical role of independent

media such functioning would not be possible, something proven in autocratic countries where no independent media existed.

## **6. CLOSING REMARKS OF THE CHAIRPERSONS**

Mr SMOLJAK proceeded to the end of the meeting, giving the floor to Mr BENEŠÍK for some concluding remarks. He thanked all participants for the very interesting and constructive debates, highlighting the multiple challenges that the EU and the world currently faced, some of them unthinkable a few months ago. So far, economic and social affairs were addressed more in the EU while security and defence was taken as granted. The Czech Presidency wanted to focus on this. Mr BENEŠÍK considered that without common security there would be no prosperity, and that the EU should be capable of looking beyond its borders, to recognise the neighbours with the same values and offer them the EU perspective.

Mr SMOLJAK gave the floor to Ms Ivanna KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE, Chairperson of the Committee on Ukraine's Integration into the European Union of the *Verkhovna Rada*, who made reference to the initiatives taken, together with Mr Žygimantas PAVILIONIS, Deputy Chairman of the Committee on EU Affairs, Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Lithuanian *Seimas*, to put together an informal network of parliamentarians from the European and national Parliaments called "United for Ukraine" after the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Furthermore, she mentioned that they would like to commonly suggest that the Chairpersons of COSAC could consider a common visit to Kiev in the near future, which would send a strong signal of engagement, support and solidarity of COSAC with Ukraine. Ms KLYMPUSH-TSINTSADZE informed that, seeking the support of the Czech Presidency, she would formalise this proposal in due course, mentioning dates around the 24 of August (Ukrainian day of Independence) as one possibility to be considered.

Mr SMOLJAK thanked all participants for the very interesting debates and ended the meeting.