

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CHAIRPERSONS OF COSAC
Valletta, Malta, 23 January 2016

AGENDA:

- 1. Opening of the meeting**
 - Welcome address by Mr Angelo FARRUGIA, Speaker of the Maltese *Kamra tad-Deputati*
 - Introductory remarks by Mr Luciano BUSUTTIL, Chair of the Foreign and European Affairs Committee
- 2. Adoption of the agenda of the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC**
- 3. Reflection on Malta's EU Presidency**

Keynote speakers: Mr Louis GRECH, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for European Affairs and Implementation of the Electoral Manifesto and Mr Edward ZAMMIT LEWIS, Minister for Tourism
- 4. Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters**
 - Briefing on the results of the Presidential Troika of COSAC
 - Draft agenda of the LVII COSAC
 - Outline of the 27th Bi-Annual Report of COSAC
 - Letters received by the Presidency
- 5. Discussion on the European Commission Work Programme 2017**

Keynote speaker: Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice President of the European Commission

Speakers: Ms Danuta Maria HÜBNER, Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament and Mr Bastiaan VAN APELDOORN, Chair of the Committee on European Affairs of the Dutch *Eerste Kamer*

PROCEEDINGS

IN THE CHAIR: Mr Luciano BUSUTTIL, Chair of the Foreign and European Affairs Committee, Maltese *Kamra tad-Deputati*

- 1. Opening of the meeting**
 - Welcome address by Mr Angelo FARRUGIA, Speaker of the Maltese *Kamra tad-Deputati*
 - Introductory remarks by Mr Luciano BUSUTTIL, Chairman of the Foreign and European Affairs Committee

Mr Luciano BUSUTTIL, Chair of the Foreign and European Affairs Committee of the Maltese *Kamra tad-Deputati*, welcomed all the participants and invited them to watch a short video clip outlining the priorities of the Maltese Presidency.

Mr Angelo FARRUGIA, Speaker of the Maltese *Kamra tad-Deputati*, welcomed all participants to the first interparliamentary meeting of the Maltese Presidency, held in the smallest EU Member State, which was for the first time at the helm of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Mr FARRUGIA then continued by saying that Malta hoped to launch an eventful six-month programme of interparliamentary meetings focussed on addressing current challenges.

Mr FARRUGIA pointed out that due to the country's geographical position, it had historically served as a viaduct between Europe and Africa. More recently, these ties had been further

developed into a diplomatic tool to promote cooperation and regional development. Mr FARRUGIA then referred to the 1975 Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, which had taken place in Helsinki and during which Malta asserted that there could be no peace in Europe without peace in the Mediterranean. Mr FARRUGIA stated that that assertion still held true and that the Southern states needed to be included in the discussions. He added that the House of Representatives pledged to stay true to its Euro-Mediterranean vocation and to proactively engage with national Parliaments, both during and after the Presidency.

Mr FARRUGIA expressed his concern about the difficult challenges faced by the European Union: ongoing humanitarian crisis, unbalanced economic development, terrorist threats. He argued that those challenges posed an existential threat to the Union. He further acknowledged the perception that national Parliaments and national Governments had lost touch with challenges faced by the citizens, which ultimately undermined the European project.

In order to tackle these challenges, the Maltese Presidency had set out to address six priorities in a holistic manner: migration, the Single Market, social inclusion, Europe's neighbourhoods, maritime affairs and security. Mr FARRUGIA pointed out that the parliamentary dimension would endeavour to provide additional insights and promote unity, as well as dialogue. He then acknowledged COSAC as the appropriate platform to engage national Parliaments in fruitful discussions. While praising COSAC's role in facilitating parliamentary diplomacy, he stressed the need for its conclusions to be reflected in national policy.

He continued by emphasising that the main objective of the Chairpersons' meeting and the LVII COSAC plenary session would be to maintain a strong network of partners with a common goal. He then called upon the participants to move towards a united front and to leave the past behind.

To conclude, Mr FARRUGIA referred to the United Nations General Secretary António GUTERRES and to his plea to make the year 2017 a year of peace

Mr BUSUTTIL echoed Mr FARRUGIA's call for peace and unity. He further emphasised the importance of dialogue and mutual respect and the need for a common agenda in view of the current challenges.

2. Adoption of the agenda of the meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC

Mr BUSUTTIL briefly presented the draft agenda of the COSAC Chairpersons' meeting, which was approved without amendment.

3. Reflection on Malta's EU Presidency

Keynote speakers: Mr Louis GRECH, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for European Affairs and Implementation of the Electoral Manifesto and Mr Edward ZAMMIT LEWIS, Minister for Tourism

Mr GRECH introduced his speech by recalling the context in which Malta was assuming the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. In this light, he referred to the challenges that the EU faced and the current times of uncertainty during which the EU needed to ensure sustainability and develop trust. In this context, he said that Brexit remained an undefined concept, but that the UK Prime Minister had made an opening pitch for the negotiations. While an *à la carte* approach would not be acceptable, a fair and balanced outcome would be expected. He underlined that resources should not be diverted towards the management of Brexit. He praised the EU for its achievements and for the benefits offered to the citizens, but he also referred to challenges such as the extreme nationalism, protectionism, xenophobia, geopolitical tensions, and the threat of

terrorism which put the EU project at a risk of derailment. He added that the current situation should serve as a wakeup call: extraordinary times called for extraordinary efforts with a return to the basics. The Presidency theme was “rEUnion” with sustainability and restoring belief to the European project at its core. He said that the EU must not accept the status quo: it should listen to its citizens and meet their expectations. Mr GRECH emphasised that reform was necessary and that the gap between word and action needed to be addressed.

On migration, the EU needed to deliver on its promises, he said. In this context, the principle of solidarity should be respected. The EU should also focus on its neighbourhood policy and be socially inclusive. The core values and the rule of law needed to be upheld. The EU should engage in job promotion and in developing growth. In addition, it should promote sustainable development, combat climate change and develop its maritime industry. The Deputy Prime Minister underlined national Parliaments’ significant role as they, together with the EU institutions, were the means through which citizens took part in the decision making process, while expressing his gratitude to Vice President TIMMERMANS for his job on the interinstitutional relationship.

Mr ZAMMIT LEWIS reiterated that the EU found itself in turbulent times, facing challenges that urgently needed to be addressed. In this regard, he said that the EU should observe the elections in France and Germany. He added that the EU citizen should be kept in perspective and also advocated for a more social Europe.

Focussing on the Maltese Presidency’s priorities, he first referred to the Single Market in the context of which the Presidency was committed to evaluating the related legislation focussing on the digital dimension, competitiveness and the SMEs. The Maltese Presidency would contribute further to the Digital Single Market Strategy. The Minister made specific reference to the creation of a Digital Tourism Network.

On ensuring citizens’ security - the main priority of the Presidency - he referred to the need for concrete action, cooperation and collaboration, as well as to the need for effective solidarity in combatting terrorism. The Maltese Presidency aimed to achieve significant progress on all initiatives aimed at better managing the Union’s external border.

As the Minister said, the Valletta Summit and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) (November 2015) enhanced Malta’s profile as a country of dialogue, shared commitment to security and mutual understanding. The Summit adopted a political declaration and an action plan designed to address the root causes of migration and forced displacement, and to enhance cooperation on legal migration and mobility. The CHOGM had shown Malta’s highest capability to provide the optimum forum to address universal issues: migration, countering violent extremism, sustainable development and climate change.

Social inclusion was also a top priority. The Minister expressed his appreciation of the “yellow card” procedure involving national Parliaments in the EU decision making. Such a positive development, he said, would bring the various European citizens within each Member State closer to the EU’s decision-making process and attract public interest towards the work done by the EU.

He supported ways for a more unified work that could be pursued also by COSAC, acknowledging the need to work for an EU that cultivated participatory democracy; to invest more in dialogue and effective discussion; and to work together in order to fulfil every new generation’s aspirations.

Finally, Mr ZAMMIT LEWIS stressed the need to ensure that national interests did not hamper the common interest of the whole EU bloc. In this context, the COSAC and the national Parliaments were a unique tool and platform to be fully exploited.

Sixteen parliamentarians took the floor in the ensuing debate.

Many participants appreciated that the Maltese Presidency had set migration as one of its top priorities. Mr Václav HAMPL, Czech *Senát*, identified the problem as a joint one and as a sore point of the past, stressing the need for a solution that would be compatible with the requests of the citizens. He added that mass migration was related to security issues. Mr Richard HÖRCSIK, Hungarian *Országgyűlés*, called for a holistic approach underlining both the internal and external approach. He emphasised the need to protect the external border of the EU and the Schengen area, which should constitute the backbone of a common position. Mr Vannino CHITI, Italian *Senato della Repubblica*, referred to the need to ensure the EU's credibility and emphasised that common responsibility was still missing. He made specific reference to the need to tackle and stabilise the situation in Libya. Mr Domagoj Ivan MILOŠEVIĆ, Croatian *Hrvatski sabor*, stressed the need to differentiate migration issues and refugee issues. Mr Jean BIZET, French *Sénat*, welcomed the creation of a European Border and Coast Guard, calling for more efficient control of the EU external border. He invited the European Parliament to adopt the related proposed EU legislation, advocating for solidarity with Italy and Greece. On security, he referred to the threat of terrorism and emphasised the importance of a European legal framework for dealing with foreign fighters. Mr Anastasios KOURAKIS, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, called for coordinated action and welcomed the Presidency's commitment to ensuring the implementation of the decision on relocation with a concrete timetable for September 2017. He also supported the implementation of the decision on the resettlement scheme, as well as of the EU-Turkey statement. In addition, he stressed the principles of solidarity and fair burden sharing in the context of the reform of the Dublin system. Mr Anne MULDER, Dutch *Tweede Kamer*, asked the Presidency what it was going to do to reduce the influx of migrants in Europe, which results it wanted to achieve in this regard and when the results could be expected. Mr Nicos TORNARITIS, Cyprus *Vouli ton Antiprosopon*, supported strengthening and streamlining the Common European Asylum System, but also thanked the President of the European Commission and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission for attending the Conference on the Cyprus problem in Geneva and for the continuing support towards the efforts for a solution to the Cyprus problem.

Mr Jaak MADISON, Estonian *Riigikogu*, said that all three priorities of migration, neighbourhood policy and security were interconnected, adding that the Digital Market, as well as maritime policy would continue to be the Estonian Presidency's priorities.

Some participants referred to Brexit. Mr HÖRCSIK said the UK's decision had to be respected, but at the same time the unity of the 27 Member States should be preserved; a fair deal for both parties should be ensured at the end of the negotiations. Mr BIZET referred to a clear rupture observed through the intentions of the UK Prime Minister; the UK had made its choice and had to assume it. Mr Terry LEYDEN, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, spoke of the particularly strong relations between Ireland and the UK, emphasising the importance of working together to ensure its orderly exit from the European Union. He said that the UK was leaving the EU, but not Europe.

Mr Ľuboš BLAHA, Slovak *Národná rada*, welcomed especially the Presidency's priority for more social Europe and effective solidarity. He emphasised the need to fight the revival of fascism, far right nationalism and European 'Trump-ism'. The only cure, he said, was fighting against the economic and social consequences of neo-liberal globalisation.

Both Mme Danielle AUROI, French *Assemblée nationale*, and Ms Gabriela CREȚU, Romanian *Senat*, expressed their trust towards small Member States holding the Presidency. In addition, Ms

AUROI underlined that Malta as a Mediterranean multicultural country could bring EU Member States together and be a bridge with Africa and the Middle East.

Ms Danuta Maria HÜBNER, European Parliament, acknowledged the risk of an inward-looking continent facing among others nationalism, xenophobia and extremism and invited the participants to question whether it was Europe that was failing or national egoism that was blocking solutions; she was confident that by the implementation of its priorities the Maltese Presidency would speak loudly for Europe.

Mr Adrijan VUKSANOVIC, Parliament of Montenegro (*Skupština Crne Gore*), and Ms Elvira KOVACS, Serbian *Narodna skupština*, referred to the enlargement policy and its significance to their countries. Montenegro had opened 26 negotiating chapters and provisionally closed two, while it was hoping to close more in the course of 2017. Serbia had opened four chapters under the Slovak Presidency and hoped for this positive attitude to continue during the Maltese Presidency with hopefully the opening of three more chapters.

In his reply, the Minister, Mr ZAMMIT LEWIS, said the Maltese Presidency was well positioned to understand the real issues on migration, to be an honest broker in bringing the EU countries together and to make considerable progress on the issue. Working for more common responsibility, addressing national egoism and stabilising countries like Libya remained a priority for the Presidency. In fighting extremism, nationalism and xenophobia, he agreed that it was necessary to tackle the roots of the problem by promoting social cohesion and inclusion by focusing on more social-orientated initiatives. On enlargement, he explained that it was not a delineated priority of the Presidency, but that the Presidency would do its part in engaging with candidate countries. On Brexit he emphasised Malta's excellent relations with the UK, expressing the Presidency's intention to be vigilant as to the activation of Article 50 and the work of the Council and the Commission. In relation to the EU-Turkey relations, he expressed the Presidency's intention to support further engagement with Turkey who was a strategic partner of the EU. Finally, he agreed that a holistic approach was needed in dealing with migration, neighbourhood policy and security issues.

4. Procedural issues and miscellaneous matters

- Briefing on the outcome of the meeting of the Presidential Troika of COSAC
- Draft agenda for the LVII COSAC
- Outline of the 27th Bi-annual Report of COSAC
- Letters received by the Presidency

Mr BUSUTTIL briefed the participants on the results of the Presidential Troika meeting that had taken place the previous evening and presented the draft agenda of the upcoming LVII COSAC meeting in May. The LVII COSAC meeting's first session would address the priorities of the Maltese Presidency and highlight the achievements accomplished during the five months of the Presidency. The second session would focus on the role of national Parliaments in the European Union, building on the outcome of the 27th Bi-annual Report of COSAC, which would be presented by the Permanent Representative of the COSAC Secretariat. The third session would deal with the outcome of the UK Referendum in the context of the negotiating process. The fourth session would endeavour to address the EU integrated maritime policy, giving an overview of European action in the field. The fifth session would be dedicated to the topic of migration. Mr BUSUTTIL then highlighted the Presidency's intention to ensure that the discussion would be conducted in a balanced and respectful way and that the draft Contribution would be concise.

Mr BUSUTTIL then moved on to the outline of the 27th Bi-annual Report of COSAC and presented its sections: 1) scrutiny of government by national Parliaments over EU proposals, reports and implementation of EU law; 2) current challenges in reshaping the political debate of the future

of the European Union within the national Parliaments; 3) readmission agreements and the criminal aspect of human smuggling and trafficking. Mr BUSUTTIL announced that the questionnaire would be circulated by the 14 February with a deadline for responses set for 15 March 2017.

Additionally, the Chair reported on the Troika's decision regarding the letters received by the Presidency. Mr BUSUTTIL also reported on the discussion of the co-financing of the COSAC secretariat. The Maltese House of Representatives intended to send a letter to all European Affairs Committees in national Parliaments asking them to confirm their intent to maintain the co-financing mechanism for two years starting as of January 2018. To conclude, the Chair expressed the Presidency's commitment to forward guidance regarding the adoption of the Contributions to all national Parliaments/Chambers well in advance of the LVII COSAC.

Mr Terry LEYDEN, Irish *Houses of the Oireachtas*, called for the Brexit discussion to be firmly placed on the upcoming plenary agenda and welcomed its inclusion in the outline of the Bi-annual Report of COSAC. He called for discussions, which would take into account the viewpoints of national Parliaments since every Member State would be affected by this, Ireland in particular. He asked the LVII COSAC agenda item to include discussions about how the European Union would function after Brexit.

Ms Tamar KHULORDOVA, Parliament of Georgia, spoke about Georgia's aspiration towards the European Union and expressed her hope for a positive outcome of the vote to be taken by the European Parliament on 2 February on visa liberalisation. She welcomed the Presidency's focus on the Neighbourhood policy and hoped that it would focus on both the southern and eastern dimension.

Mr Paolo TANCREDI, Italian *Camera dei Deputati*, thanked the Presidency for the emphasis on migration issues. He referred to the letter sent by Mr CHITI regarding Italy's wish to welcome the COSAC delegation to places where the weight of migration was felt the most. He pointed out that the current relocation process was not a success story as described in progress reports but rather one of failure, in light of the actual figures of relocated persons from Italy and Greece, which were ridiculously low and affected EU's credibility.

Mr BUSUTTIL concluded by saying that he would meet with Mr CHITI in order to see how to make the visit happen. He then invited all parliamentarians to urge their governments to fulfil their commitments.

5. Discussion on the European Commission Work Programme 2017

Keynote speaker: Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice President of the European Commission

Speakers: Ms Danuta Maria HÜBNER, Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament and Mr Bastiaan VAN APELDOORN, Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs of the Dutch *Eerste Kamer*

In his intervention, Mr Frans TIMMERMANS, First Vice President of the European Commission, addressed the issue of institutional cooperation on setting the EU's priorities, the role of national Parliaments with regard to the Commission Work Programme (CWP), and the need to defend a European answer to the EU's current challenges.

The Vice President stressed that the Commission in office decided to limit its priorities to issues, which could not be tackled at the national level alone, a direction confirmed by the European Council. The consensus on the 10 political priorities of the Juncker Commission allowed the Commission and the European Parliament to closely cooperate and develop a new way of working. The agreement on the EU's legislative priorities in 2017 signed by the Presidents of the three

institutions focused on: tackling inequalities; providing security and addressing internal and external threats; supporting the digital single market; making the EU economy sustainable; and implementing the Energy Union Strategy.

The Vice President stated that the CWP2017 could work for citizens only if national Parliaments supported the position taken by their governments within the European Council. He stressed that dialogue involving national Parliaments with the Commission and the European Parliament was an approach which could yield results in the current political context. On Brexit, he stressed the responsibility of all Member States and national Parliaments to limit damages; he underscored the need to negotiate in good faith after the Article 50 notification, with the interest of all engaged parties in mind.

The Vice President warned about the dangerous choice of some politicians to provide citizens affected by the worst economic crisis since 1930 and in need for protection, with nationalistic answers based on protectionism and exclusion, which ultimately would limit the freedoms of all. He passionately defended the European Union's answer to citizens' legitimate concerns, an answer enshrined in Article 2 TEU and based on the commitment to work for all, to protect minorities, and to ensure that between and within states democracy was not the dictatorship of the majority. While welcoming the focus of the Maltese Presidency on migration, the Vice President argued that it would remain a challenge as long as its underlying causes were not tackled, especially in Africa, through development prospects, better border protection of the EU, and legal migration channels.

The Vice President encouraged national Parliaments to remain engaged in this debate and reiterated the availability of the members of the College for in-depth exchanges. He urged them not to fall in the trap of blaming Brussels for all wrongs and to take responsibility when needed. He concluded by referring to the collective responsibility to deliver on promises to citizens deceived by the EU's overpromising and under delivering.

Ms Danuta Maria HÜBNER, Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament, stressed in her intervention the importance of the interinstitutional framework for joint work on EU's priorities and the much needed involvement of national Parliaments. In her view, this would contribute to making the Union a working democracy with subsidiarity understood as a well-orchestrated effort for cooperation of all levels of the institutional architecture.

She expressed the view that efficient and democratically accountable institutional processes were as important as the priorities set in the CWP 2017; embedded in the multi-annual programme, the CWP should be monitored as a cycle from the preparation to the implementation phase.

Ms HÜBNER explained that the current successful interinstitutional cooperation process on programming and multi-annual programming was based on Article 17 TEU and on the Inter-Institutional Agreement on Better Law-Making (IIA) of 2016. The adoption of a Joint Declaration on the EU's legislative priorities and the decision to have joint conclusions on multi-annual programming at the beginning of each new legislature could become the set -up for future discussions on EU's priorities.

She mentioned the efforts undertaken by the European Parliament for the implementation and interpretation of the IIA involving both the political groups and the committees, and the recent changes to the Rules of procedure. Ms HÜBNER argued that in all its interinstitutional contacts the European Parliament sought to develop a feeling of common responsibility. She believed that the priorities reflected the concerns of EU citizens, which required EU solutions, and that the European capacities to identify solutions needed improvement.

She urged national Parliaments, based on their experience to decide how to influence the CWP, mentioning their unique position to influence governments. She also called on all Chambers to make use of the enhanced political dialogue with the Commission and of all the platforms developed by the European Parliament. The European Parliament, she stressed, was open to bringing national parliamentarians' political messages to the European level and to gathering their views on the implementation and on transposition of EU laws for which they had a unique responsibility. In the process of drawing up its implementation reports, the European Parliament would organise an increasing number of visits to Member States and their Parliaments.

Ms HÜBNER stressed that the European Parliament would continue to be a pragmatic and responsible co-legislator on major files, committed to making the EU legislative process more transparent. She urged national Parliaments to insist for transparency within their own governments.

In his intervention, Mr Bastiaan VAN APELDOORN, Chairman of the Committee on European Affairs of the Dutch Senate, presented: the benefits of early identification of priorities in the CWP; the procedure set up in the Dutch Senate; and the potential for cooperation on the CWP for strengthening the role of national Parliaments.

He argued that in the Dutch Senate, the CWP was a tool for effective scrutiny enabling the identification of priorities, which were communicated to other Parliaments and to the Commission. Mr VAN APELDOORN mentioned an overview of the priorities of national Parliaments prepared in 2015 and 2016 undertaken by the Dutch *Tweede Kamer*. He invited all Chambers who set priorities to support this initiative and explained that, although interest in further developing this practice was expressed, not all national Parliaments had contributed to the common table. He welcomed the decision of the Maltese COSAC Presidency based on an invitation by the LV COSAC Contribution to submit a combined list of priorities to the Commission in April 2017.

Mr VAN APELDOORN gave a detailed overview of the procedure of selection of priorities set up in the Dutch Senate: the priorities identified were the basis of the European Work Programme of the Dutch Senate for the upcoming year, adopted by the plenary; the proposals identified were automatically included on the agenda of responsible committees for scrutiny and the committees ultimately decided on how to proceed.

Mr VAN APELDOORN enumerated some of the benefits of selecting priority proposals for scrutiny: increased focus on the work of committees; support for part-time politicians with limited resources; focus on proposals at an early stage of the legislative process; automatic inclusion on the committees' agenda resulting in time gain. The latter was crucial in case of subsidiarity breach given the short 8- week deadline for reasoned opinions. He also mentioned that the priorities, shared with the government, functioned as an early warning mechanism at European and national level and as an incentive for the governments to communicate better on their stance in the Council.

Mr VAN APELDOORN argued that a combined list of priorities drawn up by national Parliaments could enhance interparliamentary cooperation and increase the legitimacy of EU legislative process and would allow stakeholders to give input at an early stage.

He invited national Parliaments to learn from each other's practices and see how they could act collectively through coordination in spite of challenges, as they had an important role to play in reinforcing the democratic legitimacy of the EU. While welcoming the Commission's focus on "big things", he stressed that the current CWP contained a cluster of initiatives with several proposals attached to them, which rendered the selection of priorities more difficult. Mr VAN APELDOORN mentioned that the 8- week deadline was too short for coordination of reasoned opinions among

Parliaments, and encouraged the Commission and the European Parliament to use the information from the combined list of priorities in their contacts with national Parliaments.

Twelve parliamentarians intervened in the subsequent debate.

A number of Members confirmed that their respective Parliaments were paying close attention to the intentions of the European Commission as set out in the CWP 2017, and for the most part welcoming its focus and ambition. Mr Anastasios KOURAKIS, Greek *Vouli ton Ellinon*, described it as ambitious and comprehensive, and at the same time stressed that more attention needed to be paid to the fight against long-term and youth unemployment, as well as to building a genuine common asylum system based on solidarity and responsibility sharing. Mr Zarko MICIN, Serbian *Narodna skupština*, also emphasised the need for a comprehensive solution to the migration crisis on an EU level, in which Serbia was willing and ready to partake. Mr Domagoj Ivan MILOŠEVIĆ, Croatian *Sabor*, who agreed that Brussels should not be blamed for what had not been done properly at regional or national level, listed as national priorities: migration and security, economic policy with focus on private –public – university partnerships, investments, the European Neighbourhood policy and the enlargement process, the energy union and the EU's leading role in the fight against climate change. Ms Anne LOUHELAINEN, Finnish *Eduskunta*, recalled that the European Commission found itself at a midpoint right now, and that while focus was logically shifting to implementation, important issues such as migration, security and unemployment still required a lot of legislative attention. Ms Regina BASTOS, Portuguese *Assembleia da República*, mentioned that migration, the Digital Single Market, the EMU and the new pillar of social rights were high on the national agenda. Ms AUROI inquired on specific initiatives of the Commission on the social pillar and minimum income schemes suggested by the European Parliament. She also recalled the importance of own-resources for all EU policies. Mr BIZET welcomed the Commission's effort to rationalise its work and supported the comments about the right of initiative of national Parliaments. Mr HÖRCHIK commended the Commission for its focus on cutting red tape; he mentioned the importance of social policy proposals and the need to avoid fragmentation, as the "Posting of workers" Directive had shown. Lord Timothy BOSWELL, UK *House of Lords*, expressed his support for the strategic approach towards simplification of efforts evident in the CWP 2017 and took the opportunity to inform colleagues that the UK *House of Lords* was open to debates and informal contacts on the issue. Ms BASTOS stressed the key role national Parliaments played in the success of the CWP, and mentioned an open debate on the CWP organised by her parliament with all relevant stakeholders.

A few speakers expressed certain reservations as to the CWP 2017. Mr Marc ANGEL, Luxembourg *Chambre des Députés*, while welcoming the majority of initiatives within the CWP 2017, expressed strong opposition to proposals concerning spending deductibles for defence expenses in the framework of the Stability and Growth Pact, as well as the role foreseen for the European Investment Bank on this issue. Ms Gabriela CREȚU, Romanian *Camera Deputaților*, warned about wrongly identifying problems or proposing inappropriate solutions to the right problems, referring particularly to the internal market, which, despite being, in her view, a major achievement, was not a tool in itself, and could not be relied upon to resolve other issues such as income distribution or to replace social programs. Mr MADISON pondered the question whether in light of the situation the EU found itself with Brexit, the European Commission was undergoing a risk in essentially maintaining the same policy direction as before. Mr BIZET called for the interconnection of digital and energy policies, the renewal of the competition policy, the strengthening and simplification of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), the need to reinforce Europol and set up an EU legal framework on foreign fighters; the need for an early association of national Parliaments to new trade deals. Ms AUROI deplored the lack of readability in the Commission's proposals of national Parliaments' input submitted via the two "green cards".

In their reactions to the debate, the panellists concentrated on a number of points. Mr APELDOORN stressed that cooperation of national Parliaments on the basis of the CWP 2017 was a work in progress. Furthermore, he mentioned that while there was currently disagreement within the Dutch Senate on the “green card”, he found that this could be a first step to a right of initiative for parliaments of Member States. Concerning Brexit, Ms HÜBNER welcomed the visits of national delegations to the European Parliament and the set-up of national parliamentary missions or committees committed to working with governments throughout the process. She further mentioned the current work in the European Parliament on major reforms within the EU which did not require treaty change, including reports on fiscal capacity for the Eurozone, the need for an overhaul of the own resources policy, the EU mechanism on democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights etc. on which discussions with national Parliaments could be envisaged. Finally, Mr TIMMERMANS agreed that the intention of the European Commission lay not only in putting new proposals on the table, but also heavily on reviewing what was already there in order to improve upon current standards. In this respect, he particularly mentioned intentions to reform the VAT action plan as well as data protection legislation, which could result in savings worth billions of euros. Mr TIMMERMANS expressed a rather critical position towards the “green card” mechanism, citing treaty provisions and therein-assigned respective roles and competences. In closing, Mr TIMMERMANS argued that a positive outlook was now needed in the EU, on the basis of a clear expression of the EU 27 to look for common ground.

In concluding the meeting, the Chair referred to Mr CHITI’s letter and his exchange with Mr CHITI on the matter. It was proposed that this should be a one-day visit in Sicily on 6th May 2017. The Italian delegation would be taking care of the practicalities as to what kind of meeting that should be and who should be invited. More information would be sent by the Presidency on their behalf.