

Meeting of the Chairpersons of the Committees for Union Affairs (COSAC) 19 - 20 January 2020, Zagreb

Background Note

Session II – European Union, National Parliaments and COSAC in the new institutional term of office

Ten years after the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, and shortly after the start of the new European Commission's term of office, a new opportunity opens up to discuss the role of national parliaments and COSAC in the decision-making process at European Union level. The Treaty of Lisbon recognized national parliaments as factors in overcoming the democratic deficit and gave them a role in adopting European legislation independent of national governments.

In the reformed framework of inter-parliamentary cooperation, the role of COSAC, as the oldest and only institutionalized form of inter-parliamentary cooperation in the European Union as stipulated by the Founding treaties, has continued to be emphasized over the past ten years.

The Meeting of the Chairpersons of COSAC in Zagreb is the last one attended by 28 European Union Member States. The United Kingdom's withdrawal from European Union on 31 January 2020 is a unique event: the European Union is shrinking for the first time as the challenges facing the EU grow. National parliaments, the European Parliament and COSAC can make an important contribution to overcome these challenges successfully.

Conference on the Future of Europe

Among the topics that will characterize the work of the European Commission in the coming period is the Conference on the Future of Europe. In order for the Treaty of Lisbon to uphold its reputation as the "Treaty of Parliaments", national parliaments and the European Parliament should be appropriately represented in the work of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen in July 2019 presented an initiative to launch a Conference on the Future of Europe, with the aim of actively involving a large number of citizens of the Union in defining the priorities and level of ambition for the European Union. The Conference should start in 2020 and run for two years. The Conference should be well prepared with a clear scope and clear objectives, agreed between the Parliament, the Council and the Commission. Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography, is tasked with the preparation of the Conference in collaboration with the European Parliament and the



Council to determine agreements on the concept, structure, time table and scope of the Conference.

The European Parliament believes that, as the only direct democratic link with European citizens, it should play a leading role in organizing the Conference on the Future of Europe. On 16 October 2019, the Conference of Presidents of the European Parliament decided to set up a Working Group on the Conference on the Future of Europe tasked to define the European Parliament's priorities, inter alia, the objectives, the concept, the scope, the duration, the governance structure and the stakeholders of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

The participation of national parliaments in the Conference on the Future of Europe is not explicitly mentioned in any European Commission document.

In the Contributions of the LXII COSAC (Helsinki, 1-3 December 2019), COSAC notes that both the European Parliament and national parliaments should be fully involved in defining the objectives, organization and implementation of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Within the priorities of the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, in order to bring the Union and its benefits closer to its citizens, Croatia will encourage stronger dialogue, including through the Conference on the Future of Europe.

COSAC in the new institutional term of office

Parliamentary committees for Union affairs of the European Union Member States often play a key role in the exercise of the powers conferred on national parliaments by the Treaty of Lisbon. COSAC meetings allow for regular and institutionalized exchange of views between national parliaments and the European Parliament.

Since the establishment of COSAC in 1989, the number of European Union Member States has tripled, and the role and powers of national parliaments in the decision-making process at European level have changed. In order for COSAC to remain a relevant forum for exchange of views and communication channel between national parliaments, the European Parliament and the European Commission in the new decade as well, the possibilities of upcycling the format of meetings and bringing COSAC closer to citizens should be considered.

The format of COSAC meetings could be reinvigorated with accompanying programs involving interested delegation members. Following the good practices of the European Commission and its dialogues with citizens, similar events could be organized in the afternoon on the second day of the meeting of the chairpersons of COSAC and on the third day of the plenary meeting of the COSAC. Such "parliamentary dialogues" would open up the COSAC to the general public, especially to scientific and professional communities, and civil society organizations, while maintaining the existing format of meetings as a



forum for MPs in national parliaments and the European Parliament. COSAC plenary meetings cover a wide range of topics and key speakers, but time constraints and the large number of interested parties in the debate affect the quality of the exchange of views in individual sessions. One possible solution could be to designate part of the COSAC plenary meeting as time for holding parallel sessions, workshops or working group meetings, so that a smaller number of participants is given more time to actively exchange views on topics of particular interest to them.

Furthermore, having regard to the importance of COSAC's contributions as documents published in the Official Journal of the European Union, the delegations at previous COSAC meetings indicated the need to specify the procedure for their adoption. Given that the adoption of the proposals for a revision of the Rules of Procedure of the COSAC requires unanimity, it is worth considering other options that would make contributions more efficient and representative. On the eve of the COSAC plenary meeting, the Presidency Parliament usually draws up and sends to delegations guidelines on the COSAC's contributions and conclusions, which are then applied only on this occasion. In accordance with the provisions of the Rules of Procedure of the COSAC and previous practice, COSAC could agree on guidelines to be applied in all plenary meetings when adopting contributions.

The issues that should be addressed primarily relate to the handling of amendments to the compromised draft contributions. What needs to be clarified is what exactly COSAC can vote on - for example, whether all amendments can be voted on, or only those that the Presidential Troika decides not to accept, or whether and in which cases a part of the compromised text is put to the vote, or whether only the amendments can be subject to a vote.

Practice has shown that national parliaments have differing interpretations of the majority required to adopt the amendments, that is, the question arises as to whether the majority of $\frac{3}{4}$ of the votes cast according to the Rules of Procedure is required to accept the amendments or only the full text of the contribution.

The Croatian Presidency wishes to encourage discussion on these topics within COSAC and, in cooperation with the Presidential Troika, to open the way for resolving outstanding issues.

